

In Venezuela, Chavismo Is Dissected by Fans and Foes

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CARACAS, [Venezuela](#) — “You and I know that, as some people say, I’m only a lieutenant colonel, I’m not a summa cum laude doctor,” President [Hugo Chávez](#) casually told a few million viewers of his Sunday talk show, “Hello President.” “I modestly contribute a few ideas.”

Lately, those ideas have lurched leftward to include nationalizing companies controlled by foreign investors, strengthening ties with Iran and Syria, and ruling by decree for the next 18 months.

Mr. Chávez has also wheeled out a baffling array of influences on his political thinking, from Jesus and Marx to Trotsky and a Peruvian Marxist theoretician, José Carlos Mariátegui. In a speech this month, he lauded [Albert Einstein](#) for his theory of relativity and his 1949 essay, “Why Socialism?”

What exactly is Chavismo, the philosophical thrust inspiring Mr. Chávez? To get a glimpse, consider the brief of David Velásquez, the president’s new minister of the popular power for participation and social development — a real job title.

Mr. Velásquez, a bearded 28-year-old and the first member of Venezuela’s Communist Party to be named a cabinet minister, oversees one of Mr. Chávez’s most ambitious projects: the expansion of communal councils, local governing entities, to rival municipalities.

The councils are part of a plan to construct “socialist cities,” some from scratch in the empty interior, to be settled in part by cramped city dwellers in Caracas and Maracaibo. Mr. Velásquez says he wants Venezuela’s state apparatus, as it exists now, to become “unnecessary.”

Some of Mr. Chávez’s critics compare the project to [Pol Pot](#)’s emptying of Phnom Penh in his bloody effort to remake Cambodian

society in the 1970s. Mr. Chávez's supporters in Congress say inspiration for the councils actually goes back further, by more than a century, to the Paris Commune of 1871, a short-lived effort to govern Paris under socialist ideals.

The Paris Commune? In 2007? In Venezuela, which is booming thanks to more than \$30 billion in oil exports to the United States last year, no idea seems too fanciful to consider.

"It is like a bowl of minestrone soup," said Luis Miquilena, a former high-ranking adviser to Mr. Chávez, of the president's philosophy. "It is a series of arbitrary improvisations from a fellow obeyed by everyone in his circle."

Chavismo has long been a challenge to define, in part because Mr. Chávez — the son of schoolteachers whose formal education includes a degree in military science from Venezuela's military academy and graduate studies in political science — absorbs ideas from so many places.

"Chávez has an incredibly voracious mind," Edgardo Lander, a sociologist at the Central University of Venezuela and a prominent intellectual sympathetic to Mr. Chávez's government, said in an interview.

As evidence, Mr. Lander cited the president's admiration of István Mészáros, a relatively obscure Hungarian Marxist scholar, who argues that there is an alternative to capitalism in his 1,000-page book, "Beyond Capital."

Mr. Chávez's actions may speak louder than his literary citations. Mr. Lander recently touched off a firestorm among Chavistas with an essay questioning whether Mr. Chávez's attempt to build a single Socialist Party was premature when bitter memories linger of the authoritarianism that characterized socialist governments in the last century.

To Mr. Chávez's critics here, it is clear that his "21st century socialism" includes a large dose of autocracy. Why else, they argue, would Mr. Chávez request decree powers when his supporters

already control Congress, the Supreme Court and every state government but two? Alfredo Barrera Tyszka, the co-author of an acclaimed biography of Mr. Chávez, says it is because the president, a former army officer, is simply tired of waiting for subordinates to carry out his wishes.

Others put Chavismo in historical context. Yes, Mr. Chávez shocked financial markets when he announced the nationalization of Venezuela's main telephone company and the electricity industry. But Venezuela has been down this road before.

In the 1950s, the military strongman Marcos Pérez Jiménez nationalized the same telephone company. (Another government privatized it 40 years later.) Like Mr. Chávez, Mr. Pérez Jiménez undertook grandiose projects like the Humboldt Hotel, whose eerie shell sits atop the Ávila mountain above Caracas.

In the 1970s, the populist Carlos Andrés Pérez nationalized the oil industry and other "strategic" sectors. He also used an oil windfall to improve the lot of the poor, an effort that fell apart when oil prices plunged in the 1980s.

Of course, Mr. Chávez also differs considerably from his predecessors. His muscular foreign policy, including alliances with Iran, Bolivia and, now, Syria and Nicaragua, recalls that of [Fidel Castro](#). And though he describes critics in the news media as "putschists," it was Mr. Chávez who captured national attention in 1992 through a failed coup attempt.

Looking beyond his quotations from the Bible and the letters of Simon Bolívar, one finds other influences. There is the "Green Book," Col. [Muammar el-Qaddafi](#)'s treatise on rejecting liberal democracy, which Mr. Chávez devoured in his army days in the 1980s.

Several of Mr. Chávez's intellectual mentors have high-level posts in the government. Bernard Mommer, a senior official in the oil ministry, has helped guide Venezuela's energy policy, advocating a hawkish approach of production cuts within [OPEC](#) to keep oil prices high.

Another influence was Norberto Ceresole, an Argentine sociologist who was an adviser to Mr. Chávez in the 1990s. Mr. Ceresole, who championed the idea of a caudillo, or strongman, to rule Venezuela, was also known for his virulently anti-Semitic views. Mr. Chávez later distanced himself from Mr. Ceresole, who died in 2003.

Some here say Mr. Chávez's ideological shift is largely cosmetic, a continuation of the socialist talk that intensified after his brief ouster in a 2002 coup carried out with the support of the Bush administration. They point to the pragmatism of compensating owners of nationalized companies and covering the foreign debt of oil exploration ventures coming under state control.

But there are those who see Mr. Chávez's socialist ramblings more darkly. After hearing him resuscitate Che Guevara's idea to forge socialism through the creation of a "new man," the historian Manuel Caballero caused a stir recently by saying that a large part of the electorate voted for Mr. Chávez "because it wanted a dictatorship."