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Chávez, Comandante Presidente

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Chávez, Comandante Presidente

Bonn, 11 March 2013. For the last 14 years Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez meticulously built a regime that made the possibility of his absence unthinkable. This is the reason why his death last week is so significant. Assessing his political, financial, and cultural legacy will take many years; such is the size of the hole he left behind.

After he fell ill in 2011, Chávez disappeared for months to seek treatment in Cuba. The precise nature of his illness was never disclosed. No independent medical team was allowed to assess the status of his health, and the government restricted any verifiable information about the President's whereabouts. Official reports about his status came from the Science and Technology Minister – who happens to be married to Chávez's daughter. Even as these reports admitted that Chavez's health was deteriorating, they continued to reassure the Venezuelan people that the President was fully in charge, smiling and in combatant mood.

Before undergoing the last of several surgeries – and already sensing that the end was near – Chávez appointed Vice-president Nicolás Maduro as his heir. When Chávez's death was announced last Tuesday, Maduro – contrary to what is established in the Venezuela constitution – stepped up to succeed him. Questions about the legality of Maduro's rule were summarily dismissed by a Supreme Tribunal handpicked by Chávez, and thrown aside by Venezuela's chief prosecutor: the wife of Nicolás Maduro. Speaking on TV hours before announcing Chavez's death, Maduro went so far as to suggest that the President's cancer had been inoculated by the "fascist right". (In comparison, North Korea's carefully choreographed transition of power from Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un seems a model of transparency.)

The mysterious circumstances surrounding Chavez's illness and death are entirely fitting to his tenure as President. Venezuelans knew nothing about this young army officer until he tried – unsuccessfully – to stage a coup against the government of Carlos Antonio Pérez in 1992. On the night of 4 February, he famously pronounced the words that would launch his political career. Speaking defeated and about to be incarcerated as

a traitor, Chávez gave what appears rather as the patriotic speech of a victor: "Friends, *por ahora* (for now) our objectives could not be achieved". Released from jailed and pardoned in 1994, Chávez ran for office and easily won the presidency in 1998. He swore "upon this moribund constitution" that he would bring radical change to his country.

Change did come. Over the course of the next 14 years, Chávez radicalized his discourse and strengthened his grip on power. He is perhaps best known abroad for his fiery anti-US rhetoric and his political alliances with far-flung tyrants and political pariahs like Belarus's Lukashenko or Syria's Al-Assad. While (rightly) complaining about US interference in domestic affairs, he had no problem doing exactly the same by giving safe haven and political support to Colombia's FARC guerrillas.

But the real transformation was happening inside Venezuela. Hugo Chávez used the unprecedented revenue of his country's oil industry to fund one of the world's most ambitious and least sustainable social programmes. Chávez oversaw a radical redistribution of the vast country's oil wealth towards the poor, and his programmes reduced extreme poverty on a scale unheard of in the region. Chávez offered health care and pensions to people who until then did not even know such things could be had. The poor people in Venezuela love him, and with good reason: he improved their material conditions and gave them something that had been denied to them for generations before: a political voice.

As a result of his massive social spending, funded by oil revenues, many sectors of the economy suffered. Venezuela became a net importer of basic agricultural goods and the manufacturing sector shrank. Inflation rocketed and the value of the currency plummeted. But quite apart from the economic impact of Chávez's policies, what is most important for understanding his legacy and the consequences of his death is the fact that he had become a larger-than-life figure who occupied every inch of the political space in Venezuela.

Chávez was a great communicator. He strengthened the state TV channel by lavishing it with

money, and then spent hours on air dealing with problems big and small in a weekly television show he called "Aló, Presidente". In a single airing he could fire a minister and give practical advice to a farmer who was having trouble with his chickens. He sang, he danced, he recited poetry and taught about philosophy. And thus he became the indispensable decision-maker, who had ultimate say, at all levels, in Venezuelan politics.

Along with his charisma and formidable media presence, Chávez built a rock-solid coalition of government. His friends and relatives became governors, ministers and parliamentarians. The President made every effort to secure the allegiance of the armed forces, not to the state, but to himself personally. Chávez styled himself as *Comandante-Presidente*, a label which highlighted the fact that he was not just the head of a government, but the head of an insurgent force. He promoted a constitutional reform – approved overwhelmingly by referendum – that granted new sweeping powers to the Presidency, as well as extending the presidential term and, eventually, eliminating term limits. At the time of his death, he had been in power for 14 years, and had he not fallen ill, would have continued onto another 6-year term.

By accumulating such power in one person, Chávez blurred the necessary difference between the State and the government. The State should be the public good, the collective interest; it belongs to all of us and to no one person in particular. Governments, on the other hand, are the peo-

ple who happen to be running some part of the state institutions at a given time. By claiming triumphantly that "I am the people, and the people are Chávez!" he equated the collective interests with his own. In this way, improving housing in the slums, rather than being a policy of the State, became a personal act of kindness of the *Comandante-Presidente*.

Chavez's legacy is most troubling because he was ubiquitous and omnipotent. As a consequence the institutions of the state became relegated to a subsidiary role. His absence was unthinkable, and it was thus not thought about. Merely to consider the possibility that he could cease to exist would undermine the entire political project; Chávez was the project. This is why the regime went to such great lengths to cover up his illness and to withhold any information about his health. Chávez surely did care about the poor and did want to make the world a better place. But he also essentially collapsed the State into his person and government into a circle of friends.

Hugo Chávez wanted to be buried under the shade of a tree in the vast expanses of the great savannah of the Orinoco. But the government of his successors decided otherwise. His body has been embalmed and will be placed in a crystal urn inside a mausoleum for generations of Venezuelans to see. The public display of his body points to the continued presence, at least for now, of Chávez in Venezuela's political future. Even in death, Hugo Chávez remains larger than life.



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