

# BLOWBACK

*Chavez, Oil and Revolution in Venezuela*



SUPRIYO CHATTERJEE



**THE TEZCATLIPOCA SERIES NR.3**

The destiny of Venezuela – “Little Venice” as it was baptized by the Spanish conquerors – has been shaped by two men, Simon Bolivar and Hugo Chavez, and by oil. Bolivar freed Venezuela from Spanish rule but did not achieve the dream of Latin American unity. The book explores what happened in the period following his death till the industrial drilling of petroleum. It looks at the impact of oil on Venezuela, how it destroyed agriculture and manufacturing and brought the bulk of the population to a few coastal cities. The oil economy created a political system based on a “pacted democracy” since 1958. It was replaced by a former soldier, Hugo Chavez, who won the elections in 1998 after having been imprisoned for organising a military uprising. The book describes and explains all these events. It then looks at the early years of the Chavez presidency, the military coup against him the petroleum strike in 2002, how Chavez consolidated his support base and ends with his death and legacy. It explains the ideology of ‘Chavismo’, the characteristics of the opposition, the movement towards Latin American unity in Chavez’s lifetime and how petroleum has cemented the new continental integration. It describes the events surrounding Chavez’s illness and death and examines his legacy for Venezuela and the consequences of his experiment for the continent and the wider world. Some of the more recent events, since Chavez’s death, are summarised in the epilogue.



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## **THE TEZCATLIPOCA SERIES**

Tezcatlipoca (Nahuatl name literally meaning "Smoking Mirror") is the most feared of all Aztec deities. He is the second of the four sons of Ometecuhtli and Omecihuatl, the parents of the four Tezcatlipoca: Xipe Totec (the red Tezcatlipoca), Tezcatlipoca (the black Tezcatlipoca), Quetzalcoatl (the white Tezcatlipoca) and Huitzilopochtli (the blue Tezcatlipoca). Tezcatlipoca is associated with night, discord, war, hunting, royalty, time, providence, sorcerers and memory. In a word, history, to which this collection is dedicated.

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**PERSONAL NOTES**


## INTRODUCTION

Two men cast long shadows over Venezuela's history. Or, more accurately, two men and oil. The first, Simon Bolivar, was born into an aristocratic family of fabulous wealth and is said to have been the richest child in the continent when his parents died early. He grew up to drive the Spanish out of Venezuela and much of Latin America and is revered as 'El Libertador', the Liberator. Having freed what is now Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, Ecuador, Bolivia and Peru from a crumbling Spanish empire, he died impoverished at Santa Marta, a small town in Colombia not far from his own country, disowned by most of his former companions and, so the legend goes, without even a shirt of his own.

The second, Hugo Chavez, was born to schoolteacher parents in the non-descript town of Sabaneta in the sweltering plains of Venezuela. He dreamt of becoming a famous baseball player and joined the army for the opportunities he might get there. Instead, he found his vocation as a soldier and quickly developed political leanings. As a counter-insurgency officer tracking down Left-wing guerrillas, he started reading Marxist literature to understand why young men and women, some of them from the finest universities, had taken up arms and found himself being drawn to them. Chavez led a failed military uprising in 1992, became a national hero, won the presidential elections in 1998, and died in office of cancer in March 2013. He brought Bolivar's thinking back from benign neglect and took a corrupt, decadent and economically failing nation towards "21<sup>st</sup> century Socialism". The legacy of his Bolivarian revolution frightens and inspires many people in equal measure within Venezuela and beyond its boundaries.

Venezuelans describe the abundant oil reserves that have shaped their history since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as "the Devil's excrement". It transformed a largely agrarian country, with a few very European cities grafted onto it, into a Las Vegas of sorts with a culture of easy money and rampant corruption. There's no reason not to steal in Venezuela, went a popular refrain. The instant wealth from petroleum destroyed local industries and agriculture. The country started importing everything from food to luxury yachts.

Though Venezuela never experienced the terror of Chile, Argentina or Brazil under military dictatorships in the 1970's and 1980's, it too had its own repressive state. Venezuela pioneered sadistic tortures such as "disappearing" political prisoners and throwing people from helicopters into the sea, which were later used in Chile, Argentina and Uruguay. Venezuela went into a sharp moral, cultural and economic decline before the Chavez years and was synonymous with oil, corruption, television soaps or telenovelas and the beauty industry.

But the Great Gatsby lifestyle of some overshadowed the poverty and despair of many. The country was tired of its thieving politicians, of staggering from one crisis to the next and without much hope for the young unless their parents were rich enough to send them to Miami or Paris. It was into this void that a young Army Lieutenant-Colonel stepped in, shaking up and cleansing his peculiar, stagnant, backwater country like a decade-long tornado. The western media and the foreign policy establishments of the NATO countries portrayed him as a mad megalomaniac who destroyed democratic institutions in his country and snuffed out all opposition in his lust for power, as a protector of drug lords, and as a military threat to his neighbours. He came across in this media filter as an uncouth and unpleasant individual, unpredictable, temperamental and untrustworthy in the extreme — like a reincarnation of Caliban but only worse: a monster with deep pockets and with his claws in the country's vast oil reserves. Many in Latin America, perhaps the majority, see him differently. They view him as a people's President who redistributed wealth in the direction of those who needed it the most, a legitimately and democratically elected leader who never lost his popularity with the Venezuelan people, a champion of Latin American unity and a doughty fighter against the big northern bully.

For all the propaganda crosswinds, Venezuela is an unsurprisingly normal country. People there do not give the impression of cowering in a totalitarian system: impoverished, starving, broken and forbidden to speak to outsiders. Nor are they to be seen marching in classic Communist poster-style harmony. Caracas is a bustling, chaotic city with fancy cars, wretched driving and shopping malls of ugly shapes and unsubtle colours. Slums rise precariously on the hills like endless labyrinths. There are large



shabby housing blocks like in many other South American capitals and it has many dangerous zones. But there are also things that are not normally seen in any other Latin American capital such as modern housing for the poor in the most expensive business districts, a gleaming monorail that connects not the financial centre but the slums on the city's outskirts, off-duty soldiers crowding bookshops and exuberant political graffiti. It is impossible to miss the music, the warmth, the hospitality and the borderline lewd humour of people. They are bemused by all this attention and curious about how others perceive their country.

It is equally impossible not to see the many new playing fields, schoolchildren with their free laptops and restaurants and shops filled with customers in the evenings. Eating out is commonplace, from clean pavement shops to the over-decorated and over-priced restaurants. Money is in the air. Venezuelans seem to have developed coping strategies for violence, inflation and shortages. But some of the most interesting changes barely register with the outsider. Power relations are changing among the social classes (or, as the Chavez supporters put it, there is a new geometry of power). There is a vast logistical network that delivers meat, vegetables and other food items at half the market prices to the people. At thousands of free healthcare centres in the poorer neighbourhoods, Cuban and Venezuelan doctors work and live among the poor. There has been an explosive growth in the university population. The popular grasp of the Constitution is astonishing. It was at one point a bestseller: which other country can say this? Women figure at the very top in almost every branch of government. Competing ideologies fight out with a vast array of media instruments, from megaphones to web pages.

Little of this comes across in the international media coverage. Had Alice been reading international news agencies on Venezuela before dozing off, she would have fallen down the rabbit hole into a world of a collapsing economy, runaway crime rates, hellish prisons, political prisoners, human rights abuses, drugs, inflation and a shackled media. On waking up, she might have recalled from her subconscious collapsing poverty rates, obesity rather than hunger as the major public health problem, diminishing crime rates, improving prisons where inmates get access to education, music and work skills, major drug seizures at all transshipment

points, above-inflation wage increases guaranteed by the Constitution and a biased private media for which truth is secondary to its political objectives. More than anything else, she would have seen one of the happiest people anywhere who cherish their democracy. Had she hopped over the border to Colombian, perhaps to see what life is like in a democracy that is sold as stable and exemplary, she would have seen millions of displaced people, paramilitaries who hold poor communities to ransom, mass graves, the influence of drug money in the deepest recesses of the state, regular assassinations of trade unionists and human rights workers, high unemployment and even higher poverty rates alongside gleaming cities and tourist resorts. But, of that, only faint murmurs cross the ocean.

There are indeed problems in Venezuela: inflation, crime, corruption, smuggling, thieving by the economically powerful and a wasteful consumerist culture that has struck root in all social classes. Why do these problems persist if Venezuela has had a decade and a half of Socialism? This question comes up later in the book. A short answer for now would be that it is precisely because the country did not experience a "Year Zero" approach, in which a new regime comes to power after an armed struggle, clamps down on all that is from the past, takes over the economy, banishes its opponents and sets its people to hard labour. Chavez's revolution got a foot in the system's door through elections. It has had free and fair elections ever since and has co-existed with a capitalist economy, with opposition parties that have not hesitated in taking violent shortcuts to dislodge it and with a hostile private media in permanent campaign. Behind them is the United States, financing their campaigns, putting at their disposal the techniques of regime change it developed in Eastern Europe and using every leverage it has in Venezuela to bring down the government. Almost two centuries ago, Simon Bolivar had warned, "The United States seems destined by Providence to plague America with misery in the name of liberty." The Bolivarian revolution has experienced at first hand the effects of this prophecy.

The revolution has been good for Venezuela. It has thrown up interesting innovations in governance and social organisation for those who seriously take the idea that another world is possible. But it is not a utopia and even less a template for those who

sympathise with the revolution. Changes have been incremental and patchy at times as the revolution walks the high wire between Socialism as its political goal and cohabitation with the dominant private economy as an immediate reality. The book explores the ambiguities, paradoxes and some of the certainties thrown up by the Bolivarian revolution.



**Simon Bolivar**

## CHAPTER I

### The Little Venice

Venezuela, on the northern tip of South America, is not a particularly big country by the continent's standards. It is little less than a million square kilometres in size and has a population of about thirty million with an average age of 27 years. Most of its inhabitants are of European descent or mixed-race mestizos; the rest are descendants of African slaves brought there as plantation slave labour or members of indigenous Amerindian tribes called Indians.

Venezuela's native Indian population did not have an empire like the Incas, the Mayas or the Aztecs that the Spanish had to defeat. But they lost even their country's name to the explorers. Venezuela, the first South American country to be named by Europeans, was baptised in a fit of nostalgia. Apparently, the Italian navigator of a Spanish expeditionary ship, Amerigo Vespucci, saw the houses the natives had built on stilts on Lake Maracaibo, which reminded him of Venice. Venezuela means little Venice. The Spanish ending 'uela', a diminutive suffix, can carry with it a sneer, like *mujerzuela*, a tart. The Italian ship must have rocked with laughter at their own little joke. Another version claims that it comes from an indigenous word that means a large body of water. The start of the Spanish colonisation of the Venezuelan mainland is dated to 1522, though Christopher Columbus sailed along the Orinoco earlier as did other expeditions. Before them, the Chibchas of the Andes, the Caribs and their descendents, the Mariches, the Arawaks and other less numerous tribes populated the land and some estimates put the population at half a million.

The indigenous resistance lasted a long time after their defeat around the mountains of Caracas when some Indians led the Spanish to the hideout of their own leader, Guaicaipuro. His long fight against the invaders ended with his death in 1568, but the Indians who allied with the Spanish were then themselves put to death. The resistance moved to the interiors and only in 1652 was Spain able to decree an end to its armed conquest. A lot of place names bear the imprint of Indian influence, the Caracas outskirts

of Baruta being one of them. The diseases that the European colonisers brought with them, the persecution and absorption through sexual relations also decimated the Indian population. Till well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the (mostly white) landowners organised furtive hunts against the Indian tribes as a sport. They were made to work as indentured farm labourers. Much like their ancestors did before them, the landowners till very recently smuggled in poor Indians from Colombia into the bordering Venezuelan state of Zulia. The "peons" were paid in kind and not allowed to leave the land without the owner's permission, who conveniently created the ritual of Indian women having to spend their pre-nuptial with their lordships.

Chavez was an enthusiastic defender of Indian causes. The Bolivarian Constitution of 1999 he pioneered gave them a set of new rights. It recognises their languages, their social, political and territorial forms of organisation and collective, inalienable and non-transferable land rights with the guarantee that the state will not extract resources from their territory without their consent and without sharing the proceeds with them. Indians have seats in the National Assembly and the indigenous intellectual property rights are recognised by the state. Hundreds of thousands of hectares have been transferred to the tribes and the state has provided health, education and housing, respecting their traditions, like never before in Venezuela. October 12, which in the past was celebrated as Day of the Races, has now been renamed Day of Indigenous Resistance, with an Air Force flypast as part of the ceremony. Meanwhile, Columbus' statues have all but disappeared although a major avenue in Caracas is still named after one of the most bloodthirsty enforcers, Francisco Fajardo, the son of a Spanish conquistador and his Indian wife.

Venezuela under the Spanish remained a largely agricultural country. Though the first colonial city in South America is said to have been Cumana, overlooking the Caribbean Sea, the capital Caracas was the last of the major cities to be built on the continent (Brasilia came later). Luckily for Venezuela, the royal court in Madrid was more interested in the mines of Peru and Bolivia. There were smaller gold mines in the Venezuelan provinces but nothing to match the riches of the Inca land. The Spanish did get their hands on the abundant natural pearls off the Venezuelan islands

on the Caribbean Sea, with their distinctive yellow stain and depleted the entire stock and devastated the indigenous population within a few decades. Jacqueline Kennedy is said to have been gifted with a Venezuelan pearl necklace when she and President Kennedy visited the country in 1961. The Spanish took cacao seeds from which chocolate is made and copper from the country. A big part of Simon Bolivar's family wealth came from their ownership of copper mines. The Amazonian jungles hid the gold mines where illegal makeshift mines still flourish. Venezuela has vast untapped gold deposits bordering Brazil and Guyana and, unsurprisingly, the Brazilians control much of the illegal gold trade.

Venezuela figured so low on the list of Spanish priorities that in 1529 it was ceded to the German banking family of Welsers in exchange for unpaid loans. The Germans and the Spanish settlers soon fell out and the concession was effectively revoked in 1540, and legally so after another 16 years. There are some Germanic settlements in Venezuela that now ply their trade as tourist attractions. The Spanish settlers turned Venezuela into livestock, plantation and farming country. The sugar, and later cacao plantations, brought African slaves to Venezuela and with them came the drums, dances like the *Diablos Danzantes* (Dancing Devils) and cuisine like the main Christmas delicacy, hallaca, in which scraps of chicken, pork and beef are put in a maize dough, wrapped up in plantain leaves and boiled or steamed. The recipe is said to have originated in the slave quarters when they prepared the dish with scraps that the plantation owners left for them after their own Christmas meal.

Jose Ignacio Cabrujas, dramatist and script writer for some of the country's most successful television soaps, tried to crack the national identity of Venezuela:

"What is this embarrassing, chaotic, incoherent but beloved country? It is the consequence of three exiles, of three provisional characters... the indigenous dweller, the Indian, who was expelled from his territory, from his beliefs, from his life...The other character is the Negro, uprooted from the Ivory Coast, from his land, from his love of everything that could arouse a sentiment in him. He

was put on a boat, brought to this land and told — work. The Spaniard came to an exile: reaching America signified a punishment for him, a misfortune, doom; it was to live in a country of second-class citizens. The first-born did not come here, the younger one did, he who was useless, the adventurer. Did he come to work? No, then for what? He came to become rich: the real life was in Spain; this was a country he was passing through.”

Venezuela was never fully pacified. After the initial wave of Indian resistance, it was the turn of the slave labourers to challenge both the Spanish authorities and the local white and mestizo elites. There were at least three notable localised and violent uprisings before the war of independence. The slave known as Negro Miguel, brought to the province of Yaracuy to work on a gold mine, led one of these early uprisings against the Spanish rule in 1533. He fled to the nearby mountains, joined by Indians and the Negroes, who saw him as their king. He appointed his own Bishop and attacked mines and the city of Nueva Segovia de Barquisimeto but was defeated and killed. Two centuries later, there was another uprising in the same state led by Andresote with links to the Dutch. The Basque Guipuzcoana Company had received monopoly rights on all items of trade, including humans, with Spain for standing by the Spanish king Ferdinand VII. The company tried to crack down on smuggling that benefited the island of Aruba controlled by the Netherlands. Andresote (Big Andres) fought the Company from 1730-33 with his army of free Africans, indigenous people, mestizos and Europeans opposed to Spanish monopoly control. The Spanish never captured Andresote and he fled on a Dutch boat to the island of Curacao. Aruba is still a Dutch colony, which led Chavez to ask what kind of geography makes Venezuela a neighbour with a European country. The most overtly political of these three revolts was the one led by Jose Leonardo Chirino, who was influenced by the French revolution and Haiti's example in overthrowing its colonial slave masters. Chirino was the son of a black slave and an Indian mother and married a black slave woman with whom he had three children. He worked on a trading ship that did the rounds of the Caribbean islands and, on a voyage to Haiti, was inspired by the first free black Republic. Chirino organised an armed rebellion in 1795 and demanded an end to slavery and the



creation of a Republic. He was captured after being betrayed by a close associate and hung and quartered. His body parts were displayed in different parts of the country as a warning to the slave population and his children sold into slavery.

The war of independence started in Venezuela in 1811 but its prime mover was in France, moving towards Spain – Napoleon Bonaparte. Napoleon dethroned the Bourbon King, Charles IV, crowned his son Ferdinand VII, and finally gave the throne to his brother, Joseph Bonaparte, in 1808. The Bourbons were the butt of the famous observation by Talleyrand, the prince of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century diplomacy, “They had learned nothing and forgotten nothing”. The Spanish resorted to a guerrilla war to fight the French occupation, with the town of Cadiz at the heart of the resistance, setting up its own junta and ruling in the name of Ferdinand. The French lost their first battle in the province of Andalusia and the Spanish general Pablo Morillo, who made his reputation there, would later resurface in Venezuela at the head of a large invading force against the colony’s own war of independence. The Spanish war presaged some of its continent’s difficulties. Many of the partisans who fought the French army wanted to displace the old order. After their victory against the French and the restoration of the monarchy, Spain experienced conflicts between the conservatives and the liberals of the kind that would occur in Latin America while the term guerrilla (little war) itself emerged from the irregular warfare that the Spanish employed so effectively against the French.

Word of developments in Cadiz reached Caracas after some months and the city’s municipal council decided on April 19, 1810, to go the same way as the Spanish city, without authorisation from the Spanish junta, setting up its own government till Ferdinand VII was restored to the throne. When the Spanish Captain General, Vicente Emparan, asked the crowds at the main plaza in Caracas, now known as Plaza Bolivar, if they wanted him to keep ruling, they shouted their disapproval. Emparan resigned and left for Spain. The Spanish colonial authority was substituted by a group of mantuanos, rich Venezuelans descended from Spanish settlers, who were itching for independence from Spain and only keeping up pretences in their sudden concern for the deposed Ferdinand. The new ruling group needed an acceptable public face for their

regime and Bolivar, along with his former tutor and the greatest polymath of his times, Andres Bello, were sent to London to request Francisco de Miranda to return and take charge in Venezuela.

Francisco de Miranda, born to a wealthy Caracas family in 1750, fought in the Spanish army in North Africa and later against the British in Florida during the American War of Independence. In Florida, he thought of the idea of a united South America like that of the United States with the name of Colombia. He then set off from the Spanish colony of Cuba to Barbados to fight the English and negotiated the surrender of the island. He was accused of helping an English General to spy on Spanish army installations in Havana and arrested but was freed at the intervention the Spanish General on the island under whom he had served. He fled to the United States and stayed there for 18 months, acquainting himself with the leaders of the new country. From there, he moved to London. For four years, he travelled extensively in Europe and made a big impression on Empress Catherine in Russia, with whom he was said to have had an affair, and where he was given the right to wear Russian military uniform. He returned to London but the Inquisition had taken an interest in him, and Spain tried to trick him or have him kidnapped and taken back to Madrid to face trial.

Miranda travelled to France where he fought for the French Revolution and in the revolutionary army as a General. He was jailed twice by Robespierre and argued his way to freedom the first time and was lucky the next time around as Robespierre died before Miranda was to be executed. He was disillusioned with the revolution and is later said to have conspired with the royalists. His name figures on the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, the only one from the Americas. Returning to London, Miranda tried to enlist British support to free greater Colombia. At first, the British saw some merit in his idea as a way of harassing the Spanish but were reluctant to put in the resources. Without either British or American support, which he sought from Jefferson and James Madison, he raised money from his acquaintances and hired three boats. He named one of them Leander after his eldest son born from his marriage to his housekeeper, the Yorkshire-born Sarah Andrews from the town of Market Weighton, where the local sites of interest include a duck pond and the post office. Weighton was the hometown of William Bradley, the tallest Briton ever at seven feet

and nine inches, who would have been alive at the time Miranda was in London. Leander survived a Spanish attack en route and Miranda landed on Venezuelan soil, at a place called Vela de Coro, on August 3, 1806, where he raised the national flag for the first time. It is said that the flag, gold, blue and red with seven stars, was inspired by Empress Catherine's blonde hair, blue eyes and red lips. When Miranda raised the flag, the local population was not inclined to support him and, realising that he could not hold out for long, left Venezuela. Years later, when he finally received British support for setting up an expeditionary force, he was a victim of bad timing as Napoleon had then just invaded Spain and the British force was diverted to fight the Peninsular War.

Miranda agreed to the entreaties from Bolivar and Bello on October 10, 1810, at his London residence of 27 Grafton Way and on December 10 that year reached Caracas. Andres Bello stayed back in London, devoted himself to studying and teaching and migrated to Chile where he made a name for himself as an academic and jurist. Miranda was a man of great learning who knew six languages and translated from Greek and Latin. There was no one with more prestige among the Venezuelans and international acceptance to lead the new nation. It was no accident either that the young Bolivar was among those entrusted with the vital mission of getting Miranda to head the Venezuelan independence war. Simon Bolivar (he had a really long name, Simón José Antonio de la Santísima Trinidad Bolívar y Palacios Ponte y Blanco) was orphaned by the age of nine and put in the charge of his uncle, a disciplinarian, with whom he had a difficult relationship. He was taught by some of the best minds of the time but the man who made the biggest impression on him was his 25-year-old tutor, Simon Rodriguez. The two Simons got on well and travelled the country, Rodriguez encouraging him to question and think for himself and teaching him about the ideas of the Enlightenment and the natural sciences. Rodriguez had to flee Caracas when Bolivar was aged fourteen for participating in a plot against the Spanish Crown. The young Bolivar went to Spain for his education. Simon Rodriguez changed his name to Samuel Robinson (after Robinson Crusoe) in Kingston, Jamaica, and came to Europe after a stint in America. He stayed on for twenty years, working at a printer's in Rome and at a chemist's in Austria and even managing a small village school in Russia. The two met up in Spain in 1804, the older

Simon accompanying his student on a voyage across Europe and the two witnessed Bonaparte's coronation. In the presence of his tutor in Rome, Bolivar took the famous pledge of Monte Sacro: "I swear before you, I swear on my parent's God, I swear on them, I swear on my honour, and I swear on my motherland, that I won't give rest to my arm, nor repose to my soul, until I have broken the chains that oppress us by will of the Spanish power". Chavez and his co-conspirators in the army would take a modified version of this oath before their failed uprising in 1992.

Simon Rodriguez was the continent's most prominent advocate of critical pedagogy and returned there with his old name, setting up his style of workshop schools in Colombia, Chile, Ecuador and Peru, where mixed race children studied together with children of the streets, boys and girls together, to the horror of the conservative church, learning to work with their hands instead of memorising facts. Bolivar invited his teacher to Peru to become Bolivia's director of public education but Simon Rodriguez was so incendiary that Antonio Jose de Sucre, Bolivia's first President appointed by Bolivar himself, asked him to resign. Simon Rodriguez said, "He who knows nothing, anyone can fool. He who has nothing, anyone can buy." Rodriguez the loco (mad), as his enemies called him, argued that the conditions in the Americas were unique and its government and institutions had to be original as well. We either invent or we fail, he said. Chavez took this from Rodriguez to argue that the Venezuelan form of Socialism could not be copied from elsewhere, that there was no manual to follow blindly in creating a Socialist state and society in Latin America.

The Venezuelan War of Independence started formally on July 5, 1811, when the Caracas junta declared independence after public debates in which Miranda and Bolivar argued for full independence. The junta established a Republic, accepted Miranda's tricolour as the national flag, named him to head the coming battles and Bolivar as a Colonel. Not all of Venezuela responded to the declaration of independence. It was heeded by the mantuanos, despised for their overbearing ways and cruel exploitation of slave labour, and ignored by the rest of the population. The loss of the cacao trade with Spain, then Venezuela's principal export, in the war of independence hurt its economy and turned the black slaves against the Republic, which the Spanish exploited. To make

matters worse, a devastating earthquake struck Caracas on March 26, 1812, exactly a year after the junta in Caracas had been established on a Maundy Thursday. The Archbishop of Caracas said the "terrifying and well-deserved earthquake" was a sign of divine displeasure for the wicked declaration of independence. When an enormous landslide hit Vargas, on the outskirts of Caracas, on December 15, 1999, killing tens of thousands on the day a new Constitution was being voted in a referendum, the Archbishop of Caracas said it was divine retribution against the changes Chavez had brought about. The Catholic Church hierarchy has been as hostile to the Socialist revolution as it was to the war of independence.

The royalists regrouped and soon surrounded Caracas. Realising that he had lost the battle, Miranda sought an armistice with the Spanish forces on their terms, with the condition that he and others be given safe passage to leave. Miranda wanted to return to London. Within the independence camp, Bolivar, it is said, wanted him to be sent to the firing squad for what he saw as dereliction of duty but others were ready to hand him over to the Spanish. Miranda was sent to a prison near Cadiz where he died on July 14, 1816, and was thrown into a mass grave. Bolivar's detractors have used this episode to accuse him of betraying Miranda to save his own skin though it was never clearly established as to who decided exactly what about Miranda. The First Republic lasted just two years, from April 19, 1810, to July 30, 1812. When the First Republic fell, Bolivar escaped to what is now Colombia with the help of a royalist friend to start the second battle of independence. With Miranda in Spanish prison, Bolivar became the driving force in the fight for independence. While he remained the main protagonist, there were others on the Republican side with considerable military might such as Santiago Mariño and Manuel Piar who controlled large parts of the country and who refused to accept him as the sole leader. From Colombia, then known as Nueva Granada, which too had broken off from the colony, Bolivar analysed the defeat in the 'Cartagena Manifesto', saying that the main weaknesses of the First Republic were the federal nature of the new state that encouraged the rise of local warlords or caudillos, the adoption of a currency that the population did not understand, the bureaucracy, the earthquake and the hostility of the Catholic Church. Bolivar enlisted in the Colombian army and

after some time received authorisation to march into Venezuela again when it seemed like the Venezuelan royalists were about to move into Nueva Granada. His military incursion came to be known as the "Admirable Campaign". Setting off on May 14, 1813, Bolivar entered Venezuela through the Andes that rises moderately in the country. He was proclaimed as the Liberator in the Andean town of Merida. The Spanish forces were quickly routed in this lightning campaign and Bolivar, by now Brigadier, entered Caracas in triumph on August 6 at the head of a small army. The Second Republic was born.

An interesting aside in this campaign was the birth of a canine legend that has had a later revival. Bolivar was presented with a dog of a particular Andean breed known as Mucuchies and with it came the Indian Tinjaca who had joined the Republicans. Nevado (Snowy), the dog, would remain by Bolivar's side in all the campaigns and at one time was said to have been captured by the royalists along with Tinjaca. They did not kill Nevado or Tinjaca, hoping to use them as a bait to capture Bolivar but the duo escaped and met up with Bolivar again. Bolivar's pet and mascot died in the final major mainland Battle of Carabobo in 1821. The Nevado legend was re-born almost two centuries later on March 6, 2013. Hugo Chavez had died the day earlier and his funeral cortege was moving through the streets of Caracas when a Mucuchies started running ahead, weaving in and out of the cortege. The dog accompanied the funeral procession till the very end and was adopted by the soldiers, not unmindful of the legend, and named Nevado in honour of Bolivar's companion. It was a street dog that literally ran to fame and into history. Chavez himself was sensitive to animals. Street dogs would not be chased away if they strayed into his official programmes. He had a parrot that stayed with him after it was freed from his cage and which could mimic him. A popular demand went up to set up a "mission" (an alternative to the official bureaucracy, used in Venezuela for specific purposes such as health, agriculture or eradication of illiteracy) for street animals and pets to be named after Nevado, the one before and this one. Today, Mission Nevado works for the welfare of street animals and pets, setting up veterinary hospitals, providing free medical care and reducing the prices of pet food. Mission Nevado's motto is a Chavez quote, "The capacity for love is infinite".

The Second Republic (1813-14) was born like the First with fatal flaws. Bolivar's campaign gave him control over Caracas and the central part of the country, but his hold over the rest of the territory was tenuous. The mestizo royalist, Jose Tomas Boves, a convicted smuggler, merchant and livestock trader, challenged him in the plains from 1814. Boves played on the traditional dislike the plainsmen, the blacks and the Indians had for the mantuanos of Caracas. War broke out in almost every part of the country but it was the royalists who prevailed in the end. Fearful of bloody revenge, which proved to be accurate, twenty thousand civilians fled Caracas for the east of the country, with Bolivar and his soldiers protecting them from the rear. By some estimates, about twelve thousand of them died in this long march from snakebite, illnesses and hunger. The survivors either dispersed throughout the country or fled to the nearby Caribbean islands. Boves had a great reputation for cruelty, slaughtering civilians and Republican soldiers who had surrendered to his forces, after promising them amnesty. He forced mantuano women to sing and dance to celebrate his massacres. Boves was killed in battle but succeeded in destroying the Second Republic by December 1814, allowing the royalists to regain control over most of Venezuela. Among the Republican officers killed in that time was Jose Felix Ribas who had married Bolivar's aunt. He was captured by the royalists, his head severed, cooked in oil and sent to Caracas and his body parts displayed in various parts of the country.

By 1815, Napoleon had lost in Spain allowing Ferdinand VII to regain his crown. The king sent Pablo Morillo, the General who had beaten French troops in Andalusia, to Venezuela with a huge, well-equipped and well-trained force, to deal with the rebellious Venezuelans. Morillo mopped up the remnants of the resistance in the centre of the country and took territory right up to Bogota. Bolivar was once more forced into exile, this time to Jamaica, where he sought British help and found none. His famous Letter from Jamaica, addressed to the Scottish physician Henry Cullen and written at the age of 32, is Latin American political literature at its best, in which he spoke of the Spanish cruelty that "appear to be beyond the human capacity for evil". He foresaw the coming independence because "the destiny of America has been irrevocably decided; the tie that bound her to Spain has been severed. Only a concept maintained that tie and kept the parts of

that immense monarchy together. That which formerly bound them now divides them. The hatred that the Peninsula has inspired in us is greater than the ocean between us. It would be easier to have the two continents meet than to reconcile the spirits of the two countries". Bolivar evoked the devastation left in the trail of the first two waves of the independence war to say that he royalists were ruling over a desert. Venezuela was reduced to "frightful desolation and almost absolute indigence" in which, by some estimates, a quarter of the adult white male population was killed. By the time of this letter, he had developed a continental vision, mapping out the continent-wide resistance and the impossibility of a Spanish reconquest. Bolivar pleaded for help from Europe: "And shall Europe, the civilized, the merchant, the lover of liberty allow an aged serpent, bent only on satisfying its venomous rage, devour the fairest part of our globe?" The answer was yes. Europe did not care enough to help him, but Bolivar found assistance from an unexpected quarter, free Haiti.

Haiti, the world's first free black Republic, was astonishingly generous to this indigent white aristocrat. President Alexandre Sabès Pétion gave him ships, arms and even a printing press that Bolivar used on his return to Venezuelan soil to counteract the media propaganda of that time, setting up the *Correo del Orinoco*, a newspaper that has been revived in the revolution. He reached the island of Margarita, which had remained in Republican control, and then proceeded along the coast to mainland Venezuela, but the royalists were after him. Seeing that he would be defeated, Bolivar fled to Haiti again but not before proclaiming the end of slavery, the only condition that President Pétion had put to him in exchange for help. The Republicans were still divided and unwilling to accept Bolivar as their sole leader. Among them were Jose Antonio Paez and Manuel Piar (whom Bolivar would later execute on suspicion that he was trying to carve out a separate force for himself), who had stayed back and carried on hit-and-run attacks from the fringes of the royalist territory. By the end of 1816, Bolivar returned to Venezuelan territory once more for a war of attrition.

The Amazonian state of Guyana was in rebel hands from 1817 when the Third Republic was formed (it lasted till December 1819). In 1819 Bolivar installed the Congress of Angostura, which also provides the name for the bitters concocted by the German doctor



Johann Siegert, surgeon general in Bolivar's army, who used the formula to treat stomach disorders of the Republican troops. Siegert was one of the many Europeans, mainly English, Irish and German but also some Poles, who enlisted in Bolivar's army. Some were mercenaries, others adventurers, and some like the Oxford dropout Richard L. Vowell were idealists who wanted to fight the cruel Spanish empire. Another colourful character was Gregor MacGregor, who sold his small Scottish estate and headed for Venezuela on hearing of the independence war. He married Bolivar's cousin and in one of his many adventures stormed the Spanish fort in Florida, declaring it a Republic for a predictably short period. He returned to London in 1820, claiming to be the "Cacique" (chief) of the fictional land of Poyais and pulled off an elaborate hoax on settlers eager to find wealth in this new land.

Bolivar came to know that General Morillo was making overtures to him at the insistence of the Spanish Crown. The two met, embraced, and signed a six-month armistice in November 1819 along with documents to humanise the conduct of war. Bolivar set off for Colombia and defeated the Spanish army at Boyacá. The armistice ended in April 1820 and on June 24, 1821, the Spanish were defeated at the Battle of Carabobo, on the plains of central Venezuela. A victorious Bolivar reached Caracas at the end of June. Spain organised a naval armada that appeared off the island of Margarita in 1823, but the flotilla was defeated by Venezuelan and Colombian ships. That effectively was the end of Spanish rule in Venezuela and Madrid recognised the independence of its former colony in 1845. The Congress of Angostura reassembled in the town of Cucuta in 1821 and proclaimed the formation of Gran Colombia, a new country involving modern-day Venezuela, Colombia, Panama and Ecuador, ratifying Bolivar as the 'Liberator' and military chief of the new political formation. Once Venezuela was liberated, Bolivar set off for military campaigns in Ecuador and Peru, taking these countries from Spanish rule. Bolivia became an independent country and was named after him. Bolivar never returned to the country of his birth again.

There were others in this continental fight as well but what Bolivar achieved on the battlefield seemed to be lost in the political squabbling that broke out in the newly independent countries. Bolivar's dream of South American unity was ahead of its times.

Local strongmen fought over territory and there were ideological differences that marred the Congress of Panama in 1826, in which all the South and Central American countries were invited to look at a potential confederation, as were the USA and Britain, but not Haiti. These divisions were more pronounced at the constitutional convention that Bolivar called in 1828 for Gran Colombia. There was an assassination attempt on him later that year but he was saved by his lover, Manuela Saenz, who he named "Liberator of the Liberator". He resigned as President of Gran Colombia in August 1830 and left Bogota but ill health finally took its toll and he died in the small Colombian town of Santa Marta. Bolivar instructed his aide-de-camp, Daniel Florence O'Leary, to burn all his papers, but that was the only order that the loyal Irishman disobeyed. Years later, Manuela Saenz died impoverished, her beauty gone but not her dignity and her rage (she fed a pack of dogs, each with a name of Bolivar's enemies). Her love for Simon remained intact. In Latin America, Manuela is being given a historical makeover, not just as Bolivar's lover, to challenge the whitewashing of women's contribution in the wars of independence in which they fought, fed the troops, transported supplies and suffered as prisoners at the hands of the Spanish. Bolivar was understandably despondent towards the end of his life. What can a poor man do against the entire world? Those who have served the cause of revolution have ploughed the sea. The three greatest fools of history have been Jesus Christ, Don Quixote and myself — all these are attributed to Bolivar in the final days of his life. Chavez strongly disputed that tuberculosis killed Bolivar. Bolivar's body was taken to the national pantheon in Caracas in 1842 and was exhumed in 2010 to ascertain the cause of death. Traces of arsenic were found in his remains but not tuberculosis germs. Was it the arsenic he used in self-medication that killed him or did his enemies poison him?

As with Chavez, Bolivar was never short of critics. One of them, who developed a personal allergy to him from a great distance, was Karl Marx. He described Bolivar as "the dastardly, most miserable and meanest of Blackguards" whose fight for independence was nothing but "dreams of attaching half a world to his name". Marx's diatribe did a world of good for Latin American revolutionaries; it cured them of blind faith in everything that Marx had written. Pablo Neruda's poem, *A Song for Bolivar*, patterned on the Lord's Prayer and which he recited at University of Mexico

in 1941, has a certain prescience that the Liberator's legacy would make a comeback:

Our father who art in the earth, in the water, in the air  
of all our great and silent breadth,  
all bears thy name, father, in our land:  
all that is ours comes from thine extinguished life,  
thy heritage was rivers, plains, bell towers,  
thy heritage is this day our daily bread, father.

Liberator, a world of peace was born in thine arms.  
Peace, bread, the wheat of thy blood were born,  
from our young blood, come from thy blood,  
will come peace, bread and wheat for the world that we  
shall make.

I came upon Bolivar, one long morning,  
in Madrid, at the entrance to the Fifth Regiment.  
Father, I said to him, are you, or are you not, or who are  
you?  
And, looking at the Mountain Barracks, he said:  
"I awake every hundred years when the people awake."

After a century and a half, Hugo Chavez retook Bolivar's banner. Venezuela's official name is the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and the revolution that Chavez set in motion calls itself the Bolivarian revolution.



**Caracazo, February 1989**



## CHAPTER II

### THE DEVIL'S EXCREMENT

Simon Bolivar's dream of a greater Colombia was coming unstuck even before his death in 1830. His one-time ally and fellow guerrilla fighter, Jose Antonio Paez, had decided to break from the federation and declare Venezuela's independence once more from 1830 when the Fourth Republic was decreed, and Bolivar was effectively banished from his country of birth. Once secure in power, Paez realised that Bolivar remained popular with the people and had the Libertador's remains brought to Caracas in 1842 to rest in the national pantheon. Once a year, the ruling elites paid their respects to Bolivar with extravagant praise but for the next century and a half they did this not so much out of love as to reassure themselves that the great man was secure in his coffin and congealed in the bronze and marble statues springing up all over the country.

The Fourth Republic lasted till 1998 but took on a different character in 1958 when a military dictatorship was overthrown and a two-party system established which would take the country to the edge of economic ruin and social explosion. For a lot of time in between, Venezuela was ruled by a succession of strong men, or caudillos. The country was devastated by the independence wars. It remained essentially rural, ruled by the traditional agrarian oligarchs and those who had enriched themselves from the war. Paez himself fronted for the oligarchy but broke the Church's power and its stranglehold over Venezuelan society. He spent his last days in New York and died there. There was a major internal war from 1859 to 1863, known as the Federal War, in which some 200,000 people were killed. The conflict, brought on by the pauperisation of the small landholders and with the demand for agrarian reforms, was led by Ezequiel Zamora, who organised a guerrilla war in the countryside. One of his co-fighter's son, known as Maisanta, would later lead another armed rebellion against the government early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and die in prison. He was also Chavez's great-grandfather.

Another President of the Fourth Republic, who gained notoriety and has been subsequently hailed as a nationalistic hero, was Cipriano Castro, nicknamed the Little Corporal after his idol, Napoleon. He organised a military campaign to defeat the then President and marched into Caracas after a number of field battles in the country with the slogan, "New men, new ideals, new procedures". Castro found the state was as good as bankrupt and with a suffocating burden of loans contracted by earlier Presidents. He went after the powerful bankers who raised money in Europe for a counter-attack but these attempts failed. Many of the international businesses were directly in league with the Venezuelan banking houses trying to foment an internal revolution. Castro would not pay European businesses the damages they sought for their losses in Venezuela's past internal turmoil and they decided to teach this pesky little country a lesson. The British, the Germans and the Italians, with the support of other European nations like Belgium, Holland and Norway, retaliated with a naval blockade and bombardment of the country at the end of 1902 but did not have the force to set foot in the country. Thousands of Venezuelans joined the call to take up arms if the foreigners came ashore and a continent-wide solidarity movement developed that was strikingly similar to the sympathy for Chavez later on. The conflict ended in 1903 with a treaty signed in Washington (drafted in the languages of all parties to the dispute except Spanish) in which the Europeans bowed to U.S. pressure not to pauperise Venezuela with their claims. Venezuela still had to pay some of the demands in stages, with 30% of all customs tax going to that end. In 1908, Venezuela had another row with U.S.-owned and European businesses in the country and the dispute led Cipriano Castro to break diplomatic relations with the United States and France. In 1904, the U.S. ambassador in Caracas suggested that his government land Marines in Caracas, kidnap the President and replace him with someone pliant. Castro went to Germany for medical treatment in 1908 and was promptly overthrown by his deputy, Juan Vicente Gomez, that someone pliant sought by the Americans. The deposed President spent his last days in Puerto Rico with spies of his former deputy keeping a close watch on him. His remains have now been placed in the national pantheon.

Oil began to flood the country within a decade of Castro's overthrow. Local legend says that something black and viscous started bubbling to the surface in 1875 after an earthquake in

Tachira, an Andean state that borders Colombia. A local priest was summoned to control this strange apparition but his chants and prayers did not work. The owner of the farm wisely decided to set up the country's first tiny oil field and refinery, Petrolio del Tachira, processing it mostly for kerosene, which was much sought after as a source of illumination. This first prosperous Venezuelan oil company would later be deliberately run to ground to make way for the large foreign oil companies. Though this was the start of the oil industry in Venezuela, the Amerindians knew of the existence and the usefulness of oil, which they called 'mene'. They used it for illumination, medical treatment and for waterproofing their canoes. The Spanish conquerors too knew that it existed but did not have the technology to extract it. As early as 1535, the Spanish historian, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés, said, "on the western tip there is a fountain of an oily liquor next to the sea...some of those who have seen it say that it is called stercus demonis [devil's excrement] by the naturals." The first barrel of Venezuelan oil was sent as early as 1539 to Spain to treat the son of King Carlos V for his gout. The oil industry arrived in Venezuela about half a century after the world's first industrial oil drillings in Pennsylvania, United States, in 1859.

Exports during the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Venezuela were dominated by cocoa; the 19<sup>th</sup> by coffee and the 20<sup>th</sup> undoubtedly belonged to oil. With the nationalist Cipriano Castro out of the way, his replacement, Juan Vicente Gomez, started handing out oil concessions to his cronies from 1908 onwards who, in turn, sold it to the Western oil companies, the first of which were British. The Americans came later, in 1913, but were quick to recognise the many advantages of Venezuelan oil, especially its "freight advantages". In between, the Anglo-Dutch company, Royal Dutch Shell, and Standard Oil of the United States dominated oil exploration in Venezuela. The first oilfields were close to the seaports, much closer to New York and the Pacific coast of the United States than Mexico and the Panama Canal from where petroleum could be sent to Europe and the Far East. Production costs in Venezuela were substantially lower and the number of barrels extracted from each active well much higher than in the USA. The cheap Venezuelan oil could be sold for higher American prices in the old continent. The nearby Dutch islands like Curacao soon had large refineries where the crude could be processed and

exported. The biggest advantage was that the Venezuelan President as good as allowed the oil companies to draft the petroleum laws and Venezuela remained for a long time a vast and cheap petrol station for the northern empire. Venezuelan oil was a secure and prolific supply source during World War II while asphalt from that country paved many of the streets of New York and other American cities after the war. It is not that the Venezuelan state never attempted to regulate or take control of its oil riches. In 1918, it decreed that the oil companies would have to pay between 8% and 15% of their earnings to the state. In 1920, the first legislation tightened the laws by saying the state would get a minimum of 15% and that when the concessions ran out, the oil fields, machinery and all would revert to the state. In the process, the minister who drafted the law lost his job after lobbying by the angry petroleum companies and their local collaborators and, in 1921 and 1922, they took part in drafting the new laws. The situation changed with the death of the dictator Gomez in 1938 when the state gave itself legal powers to participate in petroleum activities. Petroleum finally came under state control in 1975 through a curious form of nationalisation in which the oil companies were paid off more than what they were owed and later allowed to sneak in as partners into the giant state-owned company, *Petroleo de Venezuela* or PDVSA (pronounced *pe-de-ve-sa*). The final, authoritative nationalisation would have to wait until 2001 when Chavez was in power. The costs this time were much higher as the management of the PDVSA declared a lockout, left Venezuela without oil for two months and tried to impose its will by subjecting the state to penury and the people to starvation. Venezuela lost a fifth of its GDP in this sabotage but the workers and the armed forces defeated the strike, without almost any violence on their part.

The first large oilfield, Mene Grande, started functioning in 1914 though the start of the war delayed foreign investments till 1918 when petroleum figured for the first time, modestly, in Venezuela's exports. But, within the next 20 years, oil production grew so rapidly as foreign companies flocked there, that Venezuela emerged as the second largest producer after the United States and the largest oil exporter, holding this position till the 1970's when the Middle East came to the fore. Between 1920 and 1935 the share of oil exports grew from 1.9% to 91.2%.



Venezuela's dependence on extractive industries goes back more than three centuries and has produced a highly distorted economy and peculiar cultural traits. The effect on the country was wrenching; Venezuelans refer with reason to their petrol as the devil's excrement. An agricultural country in the past, it fell victim to the 'Dutch disease', in which a country that experiences a sudden and unprecedented source of income from a single commodity loses its other productive parts of the economy. Agriculture and livestock that one point contributed a fifth to the national economy dwindled to a tenth of its size. The incentive to grow food or produce industrial goods was gone; it was cheaper to import. The countryside emptied as impoverished farmers flocked to the cities, building shacks and shanties wherever they could, but mostly on the steep hills that ring Caracas while the richer Venezuelans took over the more stable valleys. Today less than half a million of Venezuelans are farmers and agricultural skills that died with the migrating generations are proving hard to replace as the country struggles to reach food self-sufficiency.

The one leap from rural backwardness to oil wealth also meant that local industries never developed. It also brought in the periodic devaluations of its currency and the high inflation rate. What came in its place of a national bourgeoisie was a parasitic capitalist class that lived off oil wealth, negotiating with the State to win contracts and happily corrupting those who had in their hands the power to administer the fabulous riches. The capitalist wealth in Venezuela also came from trading: buying goods abroad and selling them dear in their own country where there were enough people with money to say, 'That's so cheap, give me two'. It created a crude materialistic society, where conspicuous consumption and corruption were, and are, a way of life and where the ruling class had so much for itself that it did not recognise that the majority of the country was sinking into poverty and despair. The umbilical ties with the Americans devastated its cultural landscape, its culinary traditions and, as the Cuban revolution and other armed struggles started to take shape in the continent, turned its elites into ferocious anti-Communists and unquestioning American allies. The Venezuelan anthropologist Fernando Coronil in his book, *The Magical State: Nature, Money, And Modernity in Venezuela*, quotes Jose Ignacios Cabrujas: "With the development of the oil industry, a cosmology was created in Venezuela. The state acquired a

provisional hue. From a slow evolution, as slow as everything that is related to agriculture, the state underwent a “miraculous” and spectacular development... the state is a magnanimous sorcerer... Oil is fantastic and induces fantasies... The announcement that Venezuela was an oil country created the illusion of a miracle; it created, in practice, a culture of miracles... Oil wealth had the power of a myth.”

While the oil flowed abundantly and happily translated into dollars for the foreign companies and revenues for the state, a corpulent army General with a fluffy face, Marcos Perez Jimenez, grabbed the country’s presidency in 1952 after being part of a military junta that four years earlier had ejected a civilian President and one of Venezuela’s pre-eminent writers, Romulus Gallagos, from power. Perez Jimenez was a cruel and ruthless military dictator but he was the first President to develop large public works in the country, from housing and highways to waterworks and industries. There was more to the military dictator’s period in power than benign public works. Corruption was institutionalised in the bloated bureaucracy. Civilian parties like Acción Democrática (Democratic Action, AD), Copei (a Christian Democratic party, almost exclusively white) and the Communist Party (PCV) were kept out of power by severe repression and prisons were filled with individuals whose crime was to demand democratic reforms. The petrodollars did not dry up during Perez Jimenez’s rule because of the natural high demand for oil after World War II, the crisis in Iran in 1954 and the Suez Canal nationalisation. Between 1950 and 1957, Venezuela earned more foreign exchange than any other country other than West Germany and treasury revenues tripled. The country’s per capita gross democratic product (GDP) grew at 6.8% annually and, by 1970, Venezuela was the richest Latin American nation, with a higher per capita GDP than Spain or Greece.

Perez Jimenez scored some spectacular own goals. He cut down on social spending and subsidy for industries. His favourite construction projects were handed over to his cronies and became the most important source of illegal enrichment and industrial problems. Labour’s share in the national income dropped and 12% of the population earned as much as the rest. Perez Jimenez sought to maintain himself in power indefinitely and to overcome financial

mismanagement by selling more oil concessions to foreign companies. The mass sentiments against the dictatorship began to gather steam by 1957 when a young reporter for one of the country's major newspapers, Francisco Ojeda, in his other avatar a secret conspirator against the Perez Jimenez regime, put together a Patriotic Junta with himself at the head. By the middle of the year, street protests broke out in many of the large cities and on New Year's Day 1958 Air Force planes strafed the presidential palace and some army units joined the uprising. It failed and the conspirators were imprisoned, but the people of Caracas kept on the streets till the General realised the game was up on January 23, 1958, and fled the country aboard his presidential plane, baptised with typical Venezuelan humour as the 'Sacred Cow'.

The interim government that followed was neither free from military officials nor functionaries of the earlier regime but the suffocating dictatorship was at least gone. Many of the political leaders of that time were exiled abroad and the ones that remained had mostly gone underground as the popular anger against the dying regime gathered speed. The Communists bore the brunt of the regime's repression and were the most prominent organisers of the street protests while Ojeda was the leader and public face of the popular alliance. There was a real possibility of a radical, free-minded civilian government taking charge in Venezuela for elections slated in October that year. The United States, then in the grip of the Cold War ideology, would not want that in its traditional backyard and needed to put an acceptable Communist-free government and political alliance in place. The man who stepped forward to earn the trust of the Americans was Romulo Betancourt, the "father of Venezuelan democracy". Betancourt was a militant Communist in his youth and was expelled from Venezuela for his radical politics. He joined the Costa Rican Communist Party, talking the talk against the dictatorship of millionaires and the putrid bourgeoisie and speaking of national liberation. But with age, he had waltzed to the other side of the room, developing an intimate friendship with the very bourgeoisie he once despised. Betancourt became a leader of Democratic Action and, with the Perez Jimenez regime tottering, he started negotiating with U.S. State department officials in Washington and the Secretary of State, Foster Dulles, on the blueprint of the new Venezuelan era.

Once he reached a broad agreement, Betancourt called his coalition partners from Copei and another smaller party, URD, that has all but disappeared over time, to Washington where they signed what is known as the New York pact, the mould for the Punto Fijo pact (named after the house in Caracas where it was inked), basically an agreement to stabilise the country in the interests of capital and the Americans. The signatories were the big three establishment parties in Venezuela in December 1958. The Communists and radicals were excluded.

The next four decades are disparagingly called the 'Cuarta Republica' or the Fourth Republic by Venezuelans, though technically it goes back to 1830 which too started with another exclusion, that of Simon Bolivar. Venezuela's history crystallised in these 40 years till it experienced its biggest social, political and economic transformation with Chavez winning the presidential elections in 1998 and inaugurating the Fifth Republic. Revolutions do not happen unless the old order becomes unbearable for the people and its ruling class turns utterly decadent. The Fourth Republic saw a dozen presidential terms and ten Presidents, two of whom won two terms each. One of them, Carlos Andres Perez, from the Andean state of Tachira, where oil was first drilled and had the country's first indigenously owned drilling company, figures prominently in this period, scripting the decline and ultimately the fall of the very bourgeois Republic. In between, the country primarily lived off oil and fell into a prolonged crisis once the petroleum boom was over. To start with, it had abundant oil money but it was precisely this money that, in the words of Juan Pablo Perez Alfonso, one of OPEC's founders, went to its collective head and caused severe economic indigestion. Alfonso also coined the memorable warning about the over-reliance on petrol money, "We're sinking in the Devil's excrement".

Like all other OPEC countries, Venezuela's oil revenues rose dramatically once the foreign oil companies were nationalised, however imperfectly, and prices were set by this oil cartel. With the oil crisis of 1973, Venezuela was flush with funds as prices rose and \$10 billion came Venezuela's way in 1973-74. It had a population of only 12 million but its President was Carlos Andres Perez, or CAP as he was called with exasperation. In his first presidential period, he sold the dream of 'Grand Venezuela',

promising and inaugurating large infrastructure projects and social welfare programmes. CAP's dream was for Venezuela to modernise at such speed that it would before long move into the neighbourhood of developed nations and even be welcomed there. But he was never known for economic prudence or efficient management. The state came to be seen as a huge milk cow, with money being spent to keep up appearance of modernity and for buying political support. It was as profligate as a state could be and the country started calling itself 'Saudi Venezuela'. The consequences were predictable. Agriculture declined. Large numbers of Venezuelans moved to urban peripheries from the countryside and were uprooted from land that passed into the hands of large landowners known as latifundistas. The new owners were less interested in producing as the prices were uncompetitive; they did not need that little bit of extra income anyway. They were more interested in fitting their country houses with swimming pools and stables for thoroughbreds and having airstrips on their property while the workers were kept in slave-like conditions. Rural Venezuela changed from a productive entity to a barely disguised slave camp. Food was imported, as much as 80% at times, and foreign companies acquired large tracts of land for herding animals. Much of this land was acquired with violence and by bribes. Peasants trying to reclaim their rights were put in place with extreme violence. National industries did not grow in any significant quantity in these four decades. The vast oil industry remained the dominant source of earning. Resources shifted from agriculture and low value-added manufacturing to the production of consumer durables that benefited the richer Venezuelans. Inequality grew, as did poverty, and illiteracy remained almost unchanged. Inflation was rampant and in some years of this period, it reached between 80% and 100% without a matching rise in the minimum wages. Tax dodge was a favourite pastime among both individuals and companies, an attitude that seemingly had presidential sanction with one of them, Jaime Lusinchi, saying, "In Venezuela, only the stupid pay taxes".

When Venezuela's luck finally ran out after the oil price crash of 1979, it had nowhere to turn other than to the international lenders to keep the economy going. The state did not curtail wasteful expenditure even as income dropped because political loyalties were bought with the spoils of the state. By the end of the 1980's,

the country was paying back 40 cents for every dollar it earned towards debt repayment. The rest of the money was going into big projects or was being lost to corruption while the lives of the people became infinitely worse in the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. If in 1976 Venezuelans had a per capita fiscal income the same as that of West Germany and double that of the Italians and enjoyed the highest wages in the continent, by 1995-96, 41% of them were living in extreme poverty and 80% worked for the minimum wage. The top 10% of the population grabbed half the country's earnings while the decline in per capita income was among the most severe in Latin America. The percentage increase in income inequality, poverty and informal employment was among the highest in the continent. Real purchasing power declined by 35% between 1989 and 1995 and in 1996 72% of the household income was spent on food and beverages compared to 28% in 1970. The GDP declined by 15% between 1973 and 1988. Between 1990 and 1999, its industrial production declined from 50% of the GDP to 24% while in the rest of Latin America it declined from 36% to 29% in the same period. Hunger, malnutrition, crime, homelessness and school dropout rates increased in these two decades. In some years, unemployment rose to over 40% while a big part of those employed worked in the informal sector. The middle class was shrinking fast and the poor started to buy dog food to make up for meat they could not afford. Dog food tins carried pictures of smiling humans rather than contented dogs and animal food manufacturers proudly announced in newspaper interviews that their food did not affect human health. The state schools, which had provided free education, now started asking for donations from their students as government help dried up and patients at state hospitals were forced to buy medicines, and even bandages, if they wished to be treated.

It would be wrong to say that there were no improvements in the social indicators in the Fourth Republic. Venezuela was never as desperately poor as neighbouring Colombia or the Andean nations of Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador ever since oil was discovered. But the improvements tended to taper off when periodic economic crises hit the country. Towards the end of the 1980's, many of the advances in the decades earlier were lost as the governments ran out of money. This led to the 'Caracazo' of 1989, a huge uprising of the urban poor of Caracas that spread to other cities, which was

put down by the worst massacre in the country's modern history. In 1994-95, whatever little remained in the system's pocket was lost in a banking crisis when 18 commercial banks failed and 53% of the system's assets were lost. The government bailed out the banks, taking on their debts in a bailout that represented between an estimated 18%-31% of the GDP and somewhere in the range of \$12 billion. Foreign banks moved into the site of carnage and gathered among themselves 40% of the bank deposits.

If ordinary Venezuelans were being driven to despair by the unprecedented economic hardship, they found no relief in the political system. The Punto Fijo agreement of 1958 had set up an elite agreement of rotating power between the two major establishment parties, AD and Copei, whom the Venezuelans call *adecos* and *copeyanos*. An old Venezuelan joke about these two parties is that God, once he had realised he had given Venezuela oil, gold and other precious minerals, fertile land in abundance and large rivers, mountains, forests and pristine beaches, decided that he had to counteract this with the curse of *adecos* and *copeyanos*. These two parties set up what came to be known as a pacted democracy that excluded political forces which had not been co-opted into this binary system. It was a political arrangement in which the two major parties controlled access to political power and the economic resources which were deployed, not in the national or popular interest but for keeping these two parties in power, buying loyalty by distributing patronage and maintaining their elite privileges. The blueprint was developed by the *adecos* in 1945-48 when it formed a civilian government preceded by a military dictatorship and followed by another. Rightly fearful of another coup, the *adecos*, who had come to power at the end of World War II with military help, used the abundant oil money to create loyal working class and peasant organisations and other organised interests with large-scale subsidies. Union leaders, from oil workers to agricultural workers, rose up the party hierarchy in a country without a functioning bureaucracy or a tradition of democratic political parties, key elements of a liberal democracies, but with a long tradition of *caudillos* or strongmen who ruled the country as their personal fiefdoms by dispersing patronage.

This was fine-tuned till the old order collapsed. A party card became necessary for most things in life, including government

jobs, subsidised housing, scholarships for higher education, diplomatic appointments or even getting the trade union to attend to the demands of its members. A particularly vicious demand of sexual favours was imposed on women workers and white-collar female administrators who either wanted their grievances addressed or to rise through the ranks of the institution. Even military officers had to go to the leaders of the two parties for their promotion after a certain stage. There are stories of how high-ranking military officers reported to a President's mistress and of a General who was presented with one of the country's highest awards after he dived into the swimming pool to rescue the dog of a presidential mistress. Signing up to the party in power was the key that allowed indigent farmers to secure a plot of land in the precarious hillsides of Caracas and the basic material to build a ramshackle house. As the economy began to haemorrhage, so did political support for the established parties. Whereas the two main parties controlled at least 70% of the seats in the national Congress at most times, other non-traditional political groups secured about 50% of the seats by 1993. Popular confidence in the established parties dwindled to about 11% by the 1990's and voter abstention rose to 40% in the presidential polls and even higher in the local elections. The entire political establishment was seen by the Venezuelan population for what it was: corrupt and self-serving. Corruption has a long history in Venezuela and is woven into the fabric of national life. In the Fourth Republic, as in the Chavez years, the bulk of corruption lay in robbing the state from within. The flagship national airlines was run to the ground and sold off cheap to the Spanish airlines, Iberia, without even paying the workers their dues. The petroleum industry was riddled with corruption, as were the currency control organisations, and petty everyday corruption took a life of its own. President Carlos Andres Perez was forced out of office after the Supreme Court found him guilty of corruption. Private and foreign organisations avoided taxes and bought their impunity by paying off public officials, the judiciary and the political leadership. Corruption turned into a thriving national industry drawing its practitioners from a wide range of social classes.

Feeding into popular disquiet of this period was the dire human rights situation. The Fourth Republic was touted as a stable liberal democracy and indeed it was one if that means the peaceful



transfer of power from one faction of the ruling class to another, especially when they had a cartel-like agreement. But it was a different story altogether when it came to the government dealing with the malcontents. As disillusionment set in with the Punto Fijo agreement, there were limited outbreaks of armed rebellion led by Leftist guerrillas in different parts of the country, from almost the very beginning. Fabricio Ojeda, the head of the Patriotic Junta that had overthrown the military dictatorship in 1958, was elected to the Congress but resigned in 1962 to join an armed group. He was captured in 1963 but escaped. He was recaptured in 1966 and "found hanging" in a holding cell of the armed forces intelligence services. The first President, Romulo Betancourt, had set the tone for the state's response with his chilling order to the armed forces, 'Shoot first and investigate afterwards'. Later, CAP would tell his forces that they were permitted to use force to extract information from detainees. There were several massacres of middle class Leftist guerrillas, the most emblematic of which were in Yumare, Cantaura and El Amparo during the 1980's. U.S. officials actively aided the Venezuelan military and many of the worst counter-intelligence doctrines that would be used on a massive scale in Chile, Argentina and Uruguay during the military dictatorships of the 1970's were first put to practice in Venezuela almost a decade earlier. These included 'disappearing' people, usually radical organisers, that is killing them and disposing off their bodies secretly, throwing prisoners from helicopters into the sea and torturing guerrillas in the army's forward operation theatres.

There were disturbingly large numbers of prison killings in this time. These were not just the usual murders and gang warfare in the premises, as had become the norm for some time in the prisons of the Fourth Republic, but state-sponsored killings. There were at least three major incidents in this period: 63 deaths at a prison in Catia, Caracas, in November 1992, an estimated 100 deaths in Sabaneta prison in 1994 and another 29 in notorious El Dorado prison in the state of Bolivar that borders Brazil. The prisons at this time were overcrowded, bristling with weapons in the hand of prison gangs and corruption was rampant among the staff. These were also the dumping grounds for the poor and the black population. No one was immune from state violence, not even members of the Congress if they happened to be from the Left or were Communists, and certainly not the university students if they

took on the government. Venezuela's Central University (UCV) bore the brunt of police and military raids throughout the period. The university was raided and occupied by the military and the police and forced to close down for stretches, in one instance for a year and a half, while the government worked out how to deal with the militant student movement. Sometimes the students were teargassed, fired upon or arrested. Some were killed sporadically in the violence, but, more dangerously, radical student leaders sometimes "disappeared" or were killed by the police without any pretence at hiding the fact to frighten off other protesters. The militarised police forces terrorised the barrios, as the slums and poor neighbourhoods are known, as also middle class residential areas with impunity. Human rights violations were a commonplace occurrence.

In the full economic crisis of 1989, and with the citizens lacking confidence in the political class, Carlos Andres Perez became President for the second time after conducting a populist election campaign. He had criticised the IMF during his campaign the year earlier, likening it to a neutron bomb that kills people but leaves buildings intact and calling its economists genocide workers. He assumed power in a very elaborate, almost regal, inaugural ceremony that the locals dubbed as the coronation. CAP had bankrupted the nation the first time around, which the people wanted to forget in their desperation, but in his second innings he did more of the same. By the mid-1980's, business groups and an influential think tank called the Roraima group — Roraima is Venezuela's fabled tabletop mountain in the Amazonian part, the setting for Arthur Conan Doyle's novel, *The Lost World* — was baying for a dose of neo-liberalism. The Berlin Wall had come down; the Soviet Union was on way to becoming history; and there was no reason, they argued, to persist with these quasi-Socialist doctrines. Lukewarm social policies were not bearing fruit and the country should opt for full-scale privatisation and neo-liberal economics, they argued. CAP appointed technocrats and apolitical figures with business school backgrounds as his ministers after assuming office on February 2, 1989, to the surprise of his own party, Democratic Action. On February 16, he announced the 'Great Turnaround' in a televised address to the nation, putting a positive spin on his U-turn and asking people to understand that Venezuela needed loans from foreign lending agencies and

therefore had to do their bidding. He went back to the IMF and World Bank recipes. Currency regulations were lifted and prices freed for food items other than the basic ones. Interest rate restrictions were lifted, petroleum prices were doubled and transport charges raised by 30%. Public service charges were to be increased gradually as with telephones, electricity and domestic gas.

The President had not gauged the public mood or the anger simmering dangerously just below the surface. At first, nothing seemed to happen. The university students were, as ever, restless, trying to expand their support base and draw in the rest of the country against these measures. The security services thought there would be another round of street fighting, nothing more. They wanted to round up the usual suspects anyway but did not receive permission for it. The President himself had no idea, and no one else either in or outside the government, or even in the radical movements, that things would unravel within days. For the next ten days or so, there was sullen silence on the streets but nothing much else though, ominously, graffiti began appearing on walls against the new measures. On February 27, the President left Caracas for a tour of the west of the country. That morning, without any prior plan or preparation, passengers refused to pay the increased bus fares in a suburb of Caracas called Guarenas and the conductor asked them to get down. The passengers began to protest and were joined in by passers-by around them. Within moments, a small local protest turned into a full-blown riot, occasioning a seismic break in Venezuela's history that came to be known as 'Caracazo', which can be loosely translated as the Caracas upheaval. People poured onto the main streets from their modest barrio houses and the precarious slums on hillsides and barged into food shops and departmental stores. Food and items of everyday use had disappeared from the shelves because of hoarding in the expectation of a new round of price rise. They were close to starving and decided to take back what was theirs. From the shops they dragged out meat they could not afford to eat, television sets, furniture and other household goods they could no longer afford to buy but kept their hands off jewellery or money. Not everyone was a despairing proletariat forced to rob shops to stay alive. There were the usual opportunists who move in when authority is lost but there was also another type that Cabrujas

describes: "On February 27, Venezuela experienced an ethical collapse that left many people stupefied, it is an explosion that translates into pillaging, but it is not a revolutionary plunder, there isn't a slogan, it is a dramatic pillage, people attacked shop in the midst of a delirious happiness... An image remained with me, that of a Caracas man happily carrying half a cow's carcass, but he was not a famished bloke looking for bread, he was a wicked Venezuelan, that grinning face with a very specific ethic: if the President is a thief, me too; if the state lies, me too; if power in Venezuela is a clique of troublemakers, then what law stops me for entering a butcher's and carrying off half a carcass?"

Taken aback at the scale of the events, the police held back from attacking the civilians who were quickly emptying stores and confined themselves to preventing street fighting. There was a reason for their passivity. There were not enough of them to deal with the situation in Guarenas as most of them had been deployed around the university and they did not have either enough vehicles or riot control equipment. Motorcyclists joined the street protests and it began to spread throughout Caracas, with major thoroughfares being blocked. By afternoon, the protests had spread to the country's interior. Even after a full day's rioting, the situation worsened as night fell. The media, meanwhile, began reporting in shrill accusatory tones against the "looters", playing on the negative stereotypes of the poor as lazy criminals. As both the state and the media had lost legitimacy with the people, rumours became rife and have since then become part of the country's political communication. The President was forced to rush back to Caracas. At a late night meeting, he accepted the Generals' proposal to call in the army and set in motion 'Plan Avila', a military contingency plan to deal with extreme emergency in the capital.

That night, troops set off from the military barracks around Caracas to take up positions in the city. The soldiers were present on the streets but would not act aggressively until the President declared a suspension of constitutional rights on February 28 at 4 p.m., which the Interior Minister announced on television. The troops had taken up positions where the barrios met the city to cut them off and prevent the people coming down. Now they started firing into the crowds and arresting people. Soldiers moved into residential highrises and started firing into the barrios from there, showering

homes with bullets. They moved into the barrios next, arresting and killing at will. Many of these soldiers were young nervous recruits who had been given blanket powers to use whatever force they wanted. It is estimated that 4,000 soldiers came into the city to start with and their number peaked at 9,000. The military fired no less than four million bullets over the next few days as curfew was imposed on Caracas for the first time in its modern history. No one knows how many people were killed that week. The official figure of 400 deaths is widely disbelieved and locals put the figure at perhaps 3,000 or more civilian deaths in a week of bloody military repression. Many of those arrested subsequently disappeared or were tortured in police cells. As the pitiless repression started having effect, the main television stations put on their own propaganda show with alternate bouts of class rage and sermons on how the people and the government had to stick together as a team. A magazine article said the military's objective "was not to control the situation but to terrorise the vanquished in such a way that they would never ever wish to try it again. It was a punitive action against an enemy, not a deterrence directed at citizens". The objective against the vanquished "that week was to make them cower at the point of firepower, not like the day when they took ownership of the streets and took things without paying, but like a terrible and interminable night completely defenceless". It was one of the worst massacres in Latin America in living memory.

The killings over, no one was held accountable or punished for it and the President himself refused to take blame for the events, saying most of the deaths were caused by shards of glass and infighting among the 'looters'. The people, however, were less willing to forget what they had just been through. The Venezuelan intellectual Luis Britto Garcia has a very interesting analysis of the events. The Caracazo, he says, dispelled several myths in one stroke. The first was that the people were and would always remain passive. The second was that representative democracy had a popular character; it did not represent anybody other than powerful commercial interests. It dispelled the myth of Venezuela being a shop window of democracy in the region or that its democracy would not suffer from corruption, inequality, injustice and foreign debts. It also became clear, says Britto Garcia, that class collaboration could not continue indefinitely in the country.

The Caracazo was a process of spontaneous collective learning in which the people drew valuable political lessons by themselves. It has also been described as the first uprising against the International Monetary Fund. In the short term, the Caracazo destroyed the neo-liberal reform programme, and with it CAP's career. He was convicted on corruption charges by the Supreme Court and stripped of his presidency by the Senate in 1993 as the ruling elites sought to distance themselves from his disastrous rule. Few mourned CAP's disappearance from the political scene but the social fabric of the country began to disintegrate rapidly and crime increased as a direct consequence. But what was not publicly visible was the enormous public appetite for a more just social order. Within the military, the events of that February provoked anguished self-searching, among whom was a young army Major, Hugo Chavez, who was down with flu that day and could not be sent out to quell the riots. Was it the military's role to go out on the streets and kill unarmed civilians, even if they were carting things off shops, which they could not buy? The country was sitting atop the dynamite of mass resentment and someone was bound to light the fuse. On February 4, 1992, the country found someone who promised salvation: that young army officer, Hugo Rafael Chavez Frias.

## CHAPTER III

### **MILITARY DEFEAT, TELEVISION VICTORY**

Venezuelans awoke on Tuesday, February 4, to startling television news: there had been a failed military uprising against the President the night before in Caracas and three other big cities. The government was in charge in Caracas but the rebels in the cities of Maracay, Valencia and Maracaibo, in the centre and west of the country, were still holding out. In Valencia, university students were flocking to the garrison and collecting weapons from the soldiers. As the country waited for the situation to unfold, television channels replayed the tapes of the night before: tanks racing towards the presidential palace of Miraflores, one of them crashing through its gates, armed soldiers crouching outside the palace gates, rival soldiers shooting at one another, the presidential residence, La Casona, pockmarked with bullets and under siege. President Carlos Andres Perez had taken refuge at a private television station, looking haggard and without his customary bluster. By dawn, television footage was showing dead soldiers on the streets, the surviving rebel soldiers in Caracas being rounded up and taken away in buses as small groups of people cheered them on. None of them seemed repentant and some were even giving defiant clenched fist salutes from the buses.

Many Venezuelans had been worried that this was a Right-wing coup attempt, of which they had heard rumours for a while. At 11:50 a.m., the officer who had masterminded this uprising, Hugo Chavez, made a brief statement to the media, asking his men to lay down weapons. He did not look defeated or scared. Speaking calmly and looking serene though understandably tired, he spoke impromptu for about a minute but what he said was imprinted in the minds of the viewers. "Unfortunately, we have not achieved our objectives in Caracas for now... we here in Caracas could not control power... it is time to avoid more bloodshed... it is time to reflect; there will come new situations and the country has to head to a better destination... I assume responsibility before all of you and before the country for this Bolivarian military movement." Two things stood out for the viewers: here was a young officer assuming responsibility in a country where no one ever took blame for

anything going wrong and his famous '*por ahora*' (for now) moment which told the people that he would not give up his fight. With this, fears of a Chile-like coup, of "the gorillas coming out of their cages", dissipated. The people now had someone they could believe in. The Chavez legend was born.

Where did Hugo Chavez come from? He was a child of the Venezuelan plains where, when it is hot it is suffocating, and when it rains, the rivers swell up like an anaconda that has just devoured a prey and move into the small towns and villages. Chavez was born on July 28, 1954, the second of six sons, one of whom died early, to two hard up primary schoolteachers, Hugo de los Reyes and Elena Frias, from the small provincial town of Sabaneta. A schoolteacher's pay those days did not go far and Hugo senior, as the story goes but which his wife denies, also sold meat atop a black donkey. That is how he met his future wife in an even smaller village in the interiors of the state of Barinas. Between them, Hugo junior's parents had white, Indian and black blood. Chavez was a mestizo, like most of his countrymen, or at least those who were not part of the economic and governing elite. While still quite small, Chavez and his older brother, Adan, went to live in the house of their grandmother, Rosa Ines, who was even poorer. It was a common family practice among the poor those days to send their young to their grandmothers while both the young parents worked. Rosa Ines, or Mama Rosa as her grandchildren called her, lived in a ramshackle house with mud floors and walls and a roof made of palm leaf that let water in when it rained. She was widowed early, never remarried and lived a life of poverty from her childhood right almost up to the end of her days when her two grandchildren started buying things for her that she could never afford. She never drank or smoked though she would die of lung cancer. A photograph of her that time shows a stern woman of mixed Caucasian and Indian features (her father was Italian and her mother of mixed African and Indian blood) but her two grandchildren remembered her as an affectionate woman who never tired of looking after them.

Sabaneta had the luxury of electrical power for two hours a day. At eight o' clock every night, punctual as clockwork, Mauricio Herrera would pass Mama Rosa's house on his bicycle to turn off the electricity. There goes Mauricio, she would sigh, and fetch the



candles. The first time he turned off power was to tell everyone to get ready; there were two quick switching off after that, followed by the third and final one. The candles and the kerosene lamps had already been lit in Mama Rosa's house and the children settled down for their nightly stories with their grandmother. Mama Rosa nurtured in them the love for history with her nightly tales and spoke to them of Zamora, the peasant guerrilla leader, who had passed through the place, but not of Maisanta, who was Elena's grandfather. She was a little wary of ghosts and little Hugo had to tell her that some of his friends went out at night with white sheets and made shrieking noise to frighten the town folk while they stole fruit from the trees. Mama Rosa also taught the two children to read and write before they went to school. It was from her, Chavez said, that he developed the love for reading and writing. She also observed from very early on that Chavez was drawn to adventure and trouble. He liked climbing the many trees there, for the llanos or the flat lands of Venezuela are very green and numerous rivers crisscross the plains. Mama Rosa knew where little Hugo was hiding when the health workers came with their injections for the children. She was by all accounts a stoic person and the only time people saw her weeping openly was when Hugo was sent back from his first day in school because his only pair of old shoes had come open.

Mama Rosa's house had one luxury: a large patio with many different vegetable plants and fruit trees. She and her two grandchildren lived off these trees when they ran out of money. For Chavez, this was his enchanted universe, "the patio of daydreams", where he learnt to walk, to recognise the different flowers and trees, taste their fruit, sow maize and harvest it. This is where he learnt to work almost from childhood and also earned his nicknames "Bachaco" or fire ant and Tribilin (Goofy). Rosa Ines cooked *arañas*, fried sweets made from shredded papaya blended with sugar. She was the only one on the street to make them, "clearly a monopoly" as Chavez would say. The *arañas* get their name from their spindly, spidery shapes and the brothers stuffed them into jars, selling them in their schools and outside. Chavez loved selling sweets; it was his way of knowing the streets, "an excuse to be on the streets". He sold *arañas* at Plaza Bolivar, the central square in every town or city in the country, outside the cinema, and in places where the men played a local version of the

bowls. Pretty girls with names like Hilda or Coromoto got their sweets for free. Sales were brisk during the fiestas when the traditional joropo songs were sung with harps, four-string guitars called cuatro and maracas but when Mama Rosa was ill, which was not often, the brothers had to buy things on credit from the local grocer's. They paid back their dues and it taught Chavez the valuable lesson that the poor value their honour and repay their loans. Hugo loved films but his father, who was also his teacher for a year, put a strict condition. He would be allowed to go to the cinema hall only if he scored very high in his school subjects. Hugo junior complained that all he wanted was equal treatment but his father would not have it. There were films he missed although he would never miss the circus when it came to their little town.

Chavez developed an interest and an obsession from an early age. He liked painting and practiced it all the time, learning to draw and use colours. He would paint later on in his hectic adult life whenever he could: during his free time in the army, when he was in prison, and then during the final illness in between his rounds of chemotherapy. His obsession was baseball. He listened on an ancient radio in his grandmother's house in the evenings to live commentary of baseball games, especially if it involved his team, Magallanes. "This game's driving you crazy, child," his grandmother told him. While Hugo was glued to the radio, straining to hear if his favourite team was winning, Mama Rosa would tiptoe behind him and whisper in his ears, "It's zero for Magallanes". "Leave me alone, grandma, we'll lose if you don't stop." She would then come up behind him once more, "It's zero for Magallanes." At the start of his teenage years, Chavez became an avid follower of possibly the most outstanding baseball player of his generation, also a Chavez but not related, Isaías "Latigo" Chavez (Chavez, the whip), nicknamed for the ferocity with which this young pitcher launched the ball. His baseball idol died in an air crash when Chavez was a little younger than fifteen. The little Chavez of the plains of Barinas heard the news on the radio while having his Sunday breakfast. It devastated him. He could not go to school the next two days and it was then the idea stuck in his mind that he would become a professional baseball player. It was the moment when the obsession with baseball displaced his interest in painting.

The small town of Sabaneta did not have a secondary school and the two brothers went to Barinas, the eponymous state capital, to the house of a relative there. Soon Mama Rosa moved in with them. At the end of their secondary school, the elder brother Adan went to the Andean town of Merida that has a prestigious university with a sprawling campus. Hugo thought he would follow his brother to Merida but gave up on the idea once he learnt that he would not get the opportunity there of becoming a professional baseball player. He then decided to enlist in the army without telling his father. This was the only way he imagined he could hone his baseball skills and perhaps become a professional great like his childhood hero, Latigo Chavez. Mama Rosa and his mother Elena were unhappy with him. Elena wanted him to be a priest; after all, he was an altar boy and Gabriel Garcia Marquez says he played the church bells so melodiously that people would say, "Ah, that must be little Hugo playing". Adan says the great Colombian writer was spicing his text with some of his magical realism; that, in fact, his younger brother was only briefly an altar boy and that too because he wanted to learn something new. Mama Rosa lit candles before the many statues of Christ in the house to ask him the favour of changing her grandson's mind. When Hugo asked her why she was upset, Rosa Ines told him, "Hugo, you are rebellious, and some day you might get into trouble". A few years later, he would prove her right. He came to visit her with his friends from the military academy. Once they had put down their rifles, Chavez put on the songs of Ali Primera, a rebel singer and member of the Communist Party. At that time the army was hunting down Leftist guerrillas. When his friends had left, Rosa Ines warned his grandson once again, "You're going to get into a right big mess". When he received his first pay cheque after graduating from the military academy as a regular officer, he came to Barinas and bought a fridge, a bed, some furniture, a fan and a large radio for his grandmother. Mama Rosa died in 1982 but Chavez could not be there when she passed away. He was at the military academy in Caracas, trying desperately to come home. The year before, Chavez by then married and with children, spent the Christmas in Sabaneta with Mama Rosa, making the Christmas Crib as in his childhood. His grandmother was very ill and wracked with pain. As he prepared to leave, he knew he was saying his final goodbye to the woman who was a mother to him. Mama Rosa tried to console him saying, "With all these pills, why I might just get better". He knew

otherwise and by his own account he cried all the way as he drove back to Caracas. Chavez missed the moment Mama Rosa died but did manage to come back for her funeral and, dressed in his military uniform, helped bury her. A picture of that taciturn woman, her looks fixed at a distance as vast as the plains of Barinas, stood on his bookshelf in the presidential office till the end.

Chavez, by his own admission, discovered his vocation as a soldier as soon as he enlisted in the army. He felt he was in his environment, enjoying the academic studies in the Military Academy and learning to use rifles. He understood that from the moment on he would remain a soldier rather than become a baseball player. On his second free day – the first was spent with his parents – he took some flowers to the grave of Latigo Chavez in the sprawling cemetery in Caracas and apologetically told his childhood hero that he would have to abandon his dream. On the surface, there was little to indicate that this young officer from the provinces would turn out to be such a historic character. Chavez graduated as an officer, receiving his officer's sable from President Carlos Andres Perez. At the age of 19, he had a diary entry: "Watching him (CAP) pass, I imagined myself walking there with the weight of my country on my shoulders". Those were only faint stirrings. Meanwhile, he performed his assigned duties conscientiously, participated in the military parties, married Nancy Colmenares of Sabaneta and had three children with her, struggled to make ends meet, commanded tank and parachute regiments and rose up the ranks.

What radicalised him? The army at that period was one of the few institutions where young men from poor families could enter if they had merit. Luckily for Chavez, the year he entered the military, the officer training programme was upgraded to university level. Officers were encouraged to study specialised subjects, often in civilian universities alongside many radical young students. There was no military caste like in some other Latin American countries. As the Venezuelan military developed its own training courses and faculty, it stopped sending its cadets to the School of the Americas where the Americans tried to impregnate them with the anti-Communist ideology. But the forces were poorly equipped, badly paid and shabbily treated by the civilian leadership. Money for buying weaponry or vehicles was siphoned off by the political

leadership and top Generals. The young soldiers, themselves from poor families and well aware of the social inequalities, were sent out into the countryside to mop up the remaining pockets of guerrilla groups. The insurgents had little strength left and there were few firefights. The young officers did not see many guerrillas but did see the poverty and how the peasants and the countryside were abandoned by the government. They were given funds to use in hearts-and-mind operations which brought them closer to the civilians and allowed them to hear the other point of view. The Caracazo of 1989 was the tipping point in the military and produced a lot of disquiet. Many officers were unhappy that they had been used to kill unarmed civilians forced to the point of despair. The Venezuelan military had always prided itself on being Bolivar's creation and the Libertador's warning, 'Accursed is the soldier who takes up weapons against his own people', ricocheted in their minds.

A storm was brewing inside me, Chavez said of his military days, but not even he could put a specific date to it. Within two years of his being inducted into the army, Salvador Allende of Chile, elected in a popular vote and the world's first elected Socialist President, was overthrown in 1973 by his country's military. Chavez first heard of it, and Fidel, over a military radio by accident during field training operations. The next year, he visited Peru with other cadets for the celebrations of the Battle of Ayacucho where Bolivar had won a decisive victory against the Spanish forces. The President of Peru, Juan Valesco Alvarado, was a nationalist and radical reforming military officer who gifted the Venezuelans with books about his reform programmes. As the guerrillas gave up on their dream of capturing power by force, newer and radical Leftist parties and groups were springing up all over Venezuela, nowhere more than in the plains of Barinas and in the university town of Merida. Some of Chavez's closest childhood friends were joining these groups like the two sons of Jose Ruia, who had been imprisoned for being a Communist. The young officer would go out for a drink with them where talk would sometimes turn to politics. Chavez listened in silence to their radical ideas. Once, someone taunted Chavez saying he was sporting the uniform of parasites. He rose to defend his army honour but friends separated the two. In Merida, Adan now had long hair and a beard and had been infected with Marxist ideology. Hugo would go out with his brother

and his friends, again listening to their passionate political talk in silence. Later, he said Adan had influenced him much more than what either of them realised. But none of this was decisive in turning Chavez into a subversive soldier and then, as he proudly said, into a subversive President. He began to be radicalised as he started reading Bolivar's original writings during his officer's training. Night after night, he remained at the library till 11 p.m. when it closed, sometimes sleeping there over half-opened books. His reading of Bolivar convinced him that the Libertador had been betrayed and Venezuela needed changing.

At this time, Chavez began investigating the life of Maisanta, his rebellious great-grandfather. He had heard from his mother's family terrible things about Maisanta, one of which was that he was heartless killer. Chavez felt a great curiosity about him: was his great-grandfather really what he was made out to be? Was he a killer's great-grandson? In his search for the truth about Maisanta, he started reading up about him, retracing his footsteps, contacting his common relatives and putting together different parts of Maisanta's family who had never met as the old man had fathered many children with many different women. One of Maisanta's daughters, Ana Dominguez, had his talisman, a sacred relic for the family. The family decided to give it to Chavez in prison in February 1992 and he always had it on him since then. Once, while retracing Maisanta's movements, he accidentally crossed into Colombia and was arrested with a camera, a recorder, maps and military equipment. He was interrogated as a possible spy and the more he tried to explain his mission, the less his interrogators understood him. Tired by night and sat in a bare room with a large portrait of Bolivar, he told his interrogator: "See, how things turn out in life. A hundred years ago, we were part of the same army and look who is staring down at both of us right now. How could I be a spy?" Luckily for him, the Colombian army officer was a Bolivarian as well. Interrogation gave way to a night's drinking at the border post canteen and Chavez was escorted back to the border bridge and given back his things. The two departed with a hug and a shared hangover.

Chavez was posted in his home state of Barinas after graduating as an officer. His sporting abilities attracted the attention of a local baseball team. They wanted him on their side for a special match

and asked him to get the permission of his superiors. I won't get it if I ask for it, said Chavez, and turned up to the match without permission, hoping nobody would notice. What he did not know was that the local radio station was doing a live commentary that was being heard in the garrison. He was taken to the commander the next day where he argued in his defence that being without permission at a sports meet was infinitely better than being at a prostitute quarter as some of the officers of that garrison were known to do. Besides, it was improving the image of the army and helping in the counter-insurgency, he claimed. Chavez when allowed to speak was always very persuasive. During his time in Barinas, he displayed prodigious energy: building a stadium, writing a weekly column in a local newspaper, speaking at Radio Barinas, standing in as an announcer at a bingo, emceeing at a beauty contest and becoming the army's main recruiter at high schools, all the time speaking of a union between soldiers and civilians. At the same time, he was angered by corruption within the military, the poor quality of food given to the men or the boots that did not last the first expedition. The young army officer also saw for himself how the traditional parties stole the votes of smaller parties. At one electoral centre where he was on guard, the two traditional parties were claiming for themselves the votes for the Communist party – the party has a rooster as its symbol – which did not have a witness, with the mocking cry of 'cucuru-cucuru-cu, one vote for me, one vote for you'. Later, while working for a time at the Miraflores presidential palace, he was witness to the moral debauchery at the regular weekend parties where whisky and champagne flowed and the elites congregated. He witnessed a drunken President Lusinchi being taken away by his bodyguards on the orders of his mistress who exercised real power, his feet off the ground and kicking, while he kept shouting that he wanted to stay.

Chavez was radicalised not just by words but also by his military experiences. After his stint in Barinas, he was sent to the east of the country to crush the dwindling guerrilla bands. On a night of heavy rain, a Colonel of the intelligence branch turned up with some prisoners at his post seeking shelter. At night, the Colonel and his men started beating the skinny peasant boys with baseball bats wrapped up in cloth so as not to leave marks on their bodies. Awakened by the prisoners' screams, Chavez snatched the baseball bat from the Colonel and threw it away, asking him either to hand

over his prisoners so that they were not mistreated or to leave the camp at once, telling him nobody was allowed to practice torture on his watch. He was threatened with trial for "interfering with intelligence work" but nothing much came out of it other than being put under observation for some time. A few days after this incident, Chavez was buying provisions for his men at a garrison when a helicopter landed with soldiers who had been shot at and wounded in a guerrilla ambush. He carried one of the wounded soldiers, a young boy who was crying in fear, "Please don't let me die", to a car but the others did not survive. That night on his hammock, Chavez had his first existential crisis, asking himself what he was doing in the army. What sense was there in peasant boys in military uniforms torturing other peasant boys while peasant guerrillas were shooting at uniformed peasant boys when the war was as good as over? It was time, he decided, for something drastic.

Chavez decided he would go over to the guerrillas and started looking for the local guerrilla leader. The latter, afraid that this new officer was really out to get him, fled deeper into the mountains, followed by an equally determined army officer who only wanted to ask him if he would be accepted if he changed sides. When Chavez became President, that former guerrilla leader, Ali Rodriguez, became his most trusted Minister and trouble-shooter. In 1977, he formed his first conspiratorial group in the army called the Liberation Army of the Venezuelan People with no clear idea of what to do other than to be ready in case something happened and with not even ten members. A prominent Leftist leader of that time with great moral authority, Alfredo Maneiro, advised Chavez that he could do more staying within the institution than by deserting it. This helped him make up his mind. The Liberation Army dissolved faster than the ghosts on the plains of Barinas when it gets light. As part of his counter-insurgency training, Chavez was allowed to read Marxist literature. He found a big stack of these books in an abandoned bullet-ridden Mercedes Benz at an army forward outpost. He was also reading and distributing Bolivar's books among his friends and discreetly meeting Hugo Trejo, who had led the army mutiny against Perez Jimenez in 1958, and civilian radical leaders. In 1980, he was posted as a sports instructor at the military academy in Caracas, where he later gave lectures in history and politics. He was there till 1985 and it gave



him the opportunity to win over a generation of young officers, many of whom would join him in his 1992 uprising.

In 1982, the commanding officer of the parachute regiment asked him to speak to the soldiers about Bolivar. Chavez was supposed to bring a written speech so it could be checked. Instead, he spoke without notes, asking the men how the continent could be mired in such poverty and injustice after it had been liberated by Bolivar. The commanding officer heard of this subversive speech and reprimanded Chavez, saying he had spoken like a politician, the worst insult at that time. Before Chavez could react, Felipe Acosta, who was in the audience, squared up to the commanding officer, telling him to his face, "Chavez is no politician. When we Bolivarian officers speak these days, it is like how he spoke and if you hear what he said you'd wet your trousers". Acosta was a big man and a known hot head. The commanding officer swallowed his pride and told the men that Chavez had in fact cleared the speech with him the night before (nobody, Chavez says, believed that) but in any case it should not be spoken of outside the garrison. Their heads still buzzing, Chavez, Acosta and two other converts to the Bolivarian cause, Baduel (who become head of the armed forces, was imprisoned for corruption and then turned against Chavez) and Jesus Urdaneta jogged up to the tree of Samán del Güere, which is where Bolivar is said to have rested, and took an oath on the lines of the one the Libertador had taken at Rome: that of not resting until the chains that held down the people were unshackled. From then on, every officer who joined the Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement (in Spanish, MBR-200, the 200 to indicate the bicentenary of Bolivar's birth the following year) had to take this oath. The next day another officer, who would be an important figure in the revolution that was to follow, Roland Blanco la Cruz, came to join them, hidden in a yellow sports car.

Chavez was getting troublesome and, in 1986, he was transferred to the backwaters of Apure, a state that borders Colombia, with a large Indian population and a pastoral economy. It was one of the best things that could have happened to him, said Chavez, a happy accident. In Apure he discovered people who had seen Maisanta and remembered him with a great deal of affection. More importantly, he became aware of the terrible prejudices against the Indians and their sufferings. He heard how the white landowners

hunted them for sport and once even burnt them alive without any fear of being punished by law. The Indians feared and hated the military and once they attacked him and his soldiers when he tried to approach them. Another time, they came upon an Indian woman carrying a child across the river with a knife in her mouth. A fellow soldier told Chavez to fire on the woman, saying these were not humans really. Deeply troubled by such attitudes, Chavez contacted a sociologist who had studied them for a long time, grew his hair long, and went into an Indian hamlet in civilian clothes passing himself off as a student and spending several days with them. A fortnight later, he went to the same village in his army uniform, called the chief by his name and started a process of reconciliation with the indigenous population. But he was under watch and the movement in the armed forces was not picking up steam. He was far away from the centre of action and cut off from his co-conspirators. One day he picked up a newspaper to read that three Air Force jets had crashed on the same day. Two of them were Bolivarian pilots, among the very few who were with him. There goes the Bolivarian Air Force, Chavez told himself.

As with everyone else, Caracazo caught Chavez and the MBR-200 unprepared. Chavez took Napoleon's saying that a battle was often decided in a second's strategic brilliance. He broadened this to say that a triumph needed the historical hour, the strategy of the minute and the tactics of the second. We failed because of the deficient strategy of the minute, he told Gabriel Garcia Marquez the only time the two met. In Caracazo, he also lost his staunchest defender, Felipe Acosta, who was shot in the chest when he went on a patrol into the slums that day in February 1989. The armed forces were deeply unhappy with the Caracazo killings and the flagging Bolivarian movement regained momentum within the young officers in the Army and the Air Force. Chavez's link to the rebellious Air Force officers was through his childhood friend, Luis Reyes Reyes, who had trained as a fighter pilot. As their numbers increased, they had to decide on the time of their uprising. They had anticipated that by the halfway mark of the presidential term, some time after mid-1991, the President would lose popularity, or whatever little that remained after Caracazo. Chavez and his fellow conspirators worked hard to cover up their tracks from military intelligence which suspected that they were up to something. He started using the pseudonym of Jose Antonio. His friend Reyes

Reyes received a list at the embassy in Washington, where he was seconded at that time, of people under watch and Chavez's name appeared right at the top. Chavez started contacting radical Left-wing groups who might provide them the civilian volunteers they would need during the uprising. But the radical movement was splintered into small groups seemingly more interested in fighting one another than in taking on the regime. One in particular, the Bandera Roja (Red Flag), began pushing the soldiers to act quickly and some of the younger officers were won over with this argument, but Chavez was not sure. Bandera Roja then started spreading rumours that Chavez had sold out and that it was necessary to kill him so that the rebellion could go ahead straight away. Chavez got to know of this and had to convince his co-conspirators not to proceed without his permission. He was not going to jeopardise the plan by acting before time. He thought the Red Flag group had been infiltrated and was being used by military intelligence.

After Chavez became President, Bandera Roja claimed he was a false Socialist and it was necessary to join his Right-wing enemies to defeat him. Today, whatever little remains of that group marches with its red flags together with some of the most virulent anti-Communists of the continent. Chavez was right to suspect their intentions. Plans were drawn up to kidnap the President at an Air Force parade in December 1991 but the Air Force officers said they were not confident of carrying out the operation and Chavez vetoed the plan. However, early 1992 seemed the last remaining window of opportunity. He was aware that military intelligence was closing in on him and also that his tank unit would soon be sent to the Colombian border. His batch had by then moved up to taking regimental commands at some of the most potent military units. MBR-200 put itself on alert from January 30, 1992, but they needed the President to be in Venezuela when they struck.

On the midnight of February 2, Chavez received a coded call from a rebel soldier at the presidential office that the President was to return from Davos on the night of February 3. He also gave Chavez the precise timings of the President's arrival. This was the moment when the uprising, codenamed Operation Zamora, would be activated. Chavez held a final meeting on Sunday, February 2, at

a petrol station to finalise the operation with Luis Reyes Reyes and General Visconti, also of the Air Force and who was to take charge of the junta once power had been seized. They agreed on the date and the form of the uprising but the Air Force officers told him they would not participate as they did not command the loyalty of enough men. Instead, they would make sure that their Air Force base would not be used against the rebels. A sophisticated communication truck had been despatched to Fuerte (Fort) Tiuna, the military headquarters in Caracas, a few days earlier on the pretext that it needed repairs. The order was that the soldiers would wait for the signal to take the truck to the rebel headquarters, which was to be at the military museum overlooking Miraflores. This would allow them to communicate with different units in the capital and with the other cities where the uprising had been planned. The next night, Chavez bid goodbye to his wife and his sleeping children, took money out of his bank account and gave it to her along with a cheque in case he did not come back.

On the night of February 3, the rebels distributed red berets and armbands with the national colours to their men. That night at 8 p.m., after the base at Maracay had been seized and he had spoken to his men, Chavez set off from the parachute regiment with five army units in a fleet of hired buses to take them to Caracas, hoping to capture power and realise a plan that had been brewing for a decade. "It was going to be a night of relentless lightning," Chavez told himself. The soldiers parted in two directions just before reaching Caracas, each going for specific objectives. The plan was to detain the President when he landed at the airport. Failing that, they were to try and take him at a road tunnel before Caracas by placing a burning car there. The presidential house, La Casona, the Defence Ministry, the state television station would also be taken, as would the Air Force base in the city, La Carlota.

What they did not know was that they had already been betrayed. An Army Captain, who was to have captured the director of the military academy at Fuerte Tiuna in Caracas, went into his office and confessed that a military uprising was in the offing, though he did not give any name. He had started courting the director's daughter a month ago. The director informed his superiors and alerted military intelligence. The army high command now knew of the uprising but not where the attempt would come from. However,

this crucial information gave them the opportunity to take precautionary measures. How was it that the plan that was leaked on the eve of the uprising could not be detected in a decade? The most probable answer is that the military intelligence unit was not just thoroughly incompetent but also that it was so involved in the dogfight for top jobs in the army, with ambitious generals conspiring against one another to grab the offices of their choice, that it overlooked the threat from the middle-ranking officers.

General Fernando Ochoa Antich, a bumbling old-style military officer from a wealthy family, whose father was a friend of the President, was the Defence Minister. He found out that night that things were rather serious after this telephone conversation:

"Good night, this is the Defence Minister. Who am I speaking to?"

"Captain Arteaga Paez, my General."

"Captain, can you put me in contact with General Ferrer Barazarte?"

"I can't. He is prisoner in a cell."

"What are you saying, Captain?"

"What you heard me say, my General, General Ferrer is prisoner in a cell."

"Captain, do you know what you are doing?"

"Perfectly, my General."

"Have you taken into account, Captain Arteaga, that you could drive Venezuela to a bloodbath with unpredictable consequences?"

"Yes, my General. If you want to avoid a bloodbath, take charge of the movement."

"Captain, you don't make this offer to a man of honour."

"Then, my General, we have nothing more to speak about. Fatherland or death."

In his account of events, General Antich says he was at his desk at the Defence Ministry at the time of this conversation. He thought over things for some time. General Ferrer was at the head of the powerful armoured division in the centre of the country. He tried to get in touch with at least two other Generals but they were not picking up their phones. He feared the worst. General Antich's capacity of not knowing what was going on right under his nose

was truly astounding. The day before, he was in Maracaibo, meeting the provincial governor, offering him the army's logistical support for an anti-cholera drive and then "accepting the very pleasant invitation from some old friends" for a cordial get together. On reaching Caracas the night of February 3, the General in charge of the National Guards told him of rumours the rebel soldiers might try to kidnap the President at the capital's airport, something that military intelligence confirmed to him. They also told him they had fortified security at the airport. General Antich set off to meet the President and tell him of the coming danger. When the President emerged from the aircraft at 10 p.m., he was surprised and worried to see his Defence Minister, who told him of rumours that rebel soldiers might try to capture him at the airport. In Antich's account, the President was annoyed and told him, "Minister, rumours and more rumours. These rumours harm the government," and asked him to meet him at his office early next morning and start an investigation. The General kept quiet for the rest of the journey after the snub and the President reached his official residence. Antich left for his own residence and had supper with his wife. He was getting ready for bed when a military officer called him and told him that insurgent units were heading for the city of Maracaibo, something the caller's wife there had told him. The General called the presidential residence but the President was unwilling to take the call as he already retired for the night after his heart-warming Davos trip. Antich was told on another telephone that the Army chief had decreed an alert in the afternoon. Antich was miffed that nobody had let him know of it. Antich kept telephoning the President until he came to the phone and, when told of the events in Maracaibo, ordered Antich to go to the Defence Ministry while he went to Miraflores. Antich then telephoned the governor in Maracaibo who did not have any notion of what was happening in his city. The President called Antich back from Miraflores to say that his family house was under attack from the rebels and that his wife and grandchildren were in there. Antich promised to send reinforcements though he had no way of doing so straight away. He realised he might be a target at the Defence Ministry and hurriedly took his wife with him in an unmarked car and fled past the checkpoints being put up by the rebels.

The insurgents had failed in their attempt to capture the President at the airport, the tunnel on way to Caracas or in his home where

the guards put up stiff resistance and the rebels ran out of ammunition. The only remaining way of getting the President was at the palace that was being attacked by the insurgents' tanks and men. One tank tried to break through the gate. The president escaped by an unguarded tunnel accompanied by a small group of armed escorts and headed for a private television station from where he told the nation of the military uprising. The television broadcast was a body blow for the rebels. It became obvious to them that their prime objective was no longer in their reach and that they had lost the element of surprise which, in truth, had gone as soon as the plot was betrayed. The President's appearance on television helped rally the loyal troops although they had no great affection for him. Chavez reached the military museum at about 1 p.m. that night, fifteen minutes before the rest of his men and talked the soldiers there to join him. He set up base but soon came under machinegun fire. The communication truck, which was crucial to the operation, could not come out of Fort Tiuna as orders had gone out not to let anyone go out of there. The officers became suspicious of its presence and arrested the crew. The authorities jammed the communication equipment of the rebels and from that moment on Chavez and his men lost touch. Truckloads of guns awaited civilian volunteers but neither did they turn up. Before dawn, when the President took to television, Chavez knew he had lost. He decided to hand himself in but his men were unwilling. We have lost our careers and who knows if we will ever meet our families again, they told him. It is better to die with our boots on than be captured and humiliated. Better times would come and there was no point in shedding blood now, Chavez told them. Reluctantly they agreed. General Antich telephoned Chavez and asked him to surrender. He said he would only if his rights and those of his men were respected. The Defence Minister agreed and Chavez said he was ready to give himself up.

It was a short distance from the military museum to the Defence Ministry on a day with very little traffic. General Antich had sent a trusted official, godfather to one of his sons, General Ramón Santeliz Ruiz, to escort Chavez to the ministry. Taking another official with him, General Santeliz, who had gone to the military museum twice before to persuade Chavez to surrender, set off in a private car to bring Chavez straight to the ministry. It is a minor miracle that Chavez left the military museum alive that morning.

General Santeliz told Chavez once he had given himself up that the President had given orders that he had to be killed there. Jets were flying low overhead and snipers were shooting into the museum. The loyal officers who had come to get him and the director of the military museum took measures to evade sniper fire and sent out a decoy car while they took their prisoner to the military headquarters in another vehicle, making sure that Chavez reached there alive. They came back after an hour and a half whereas the journey could not have taken more than 15 minutes. It turned out that General Santeliz made a detour allowing Chavez to say goodbye to a battalion that had risen up and then shave, have a bath and change into a clean uniform, all the while keeping his sidearm with him. Why did he give such privileges to a mutinous officer? The reason, Chavez revealed years later, was that the General was on their side though he kept a low profile. Meanwhile, the other garrisons were still not willing to give up without hearing from their commander. They cut off all telephone contacts with the cry of 'fatherland or death'. Chavez was in the office of the Inspector General of the armed forces, Elias Daniels, where they discussed how difficult it was getting the three garrisons to give up. The authorities did not want another bloodshed and suggested that Chavez send out a televised message asking his men to give up. The President wanted Chavez to read out a written statement but he refused and the soldiers did not get back to the President. The army officers detaining Chavez decided on their own to let him speak unscripted. Generals Santeliz and Daniels later held important positions in the Chavez governments. Antich thought Daniels too had gone out of his way to help Chavez. There were three types in that conspiracy, he concluded, the ones that conspired but did not join in; the ones who did not conspire but helped the rebels; and the ones who conspired and participated in the action. In a brief but memorable speech of just 71 seconds and with no more than 179 words, Chavez achieved a political victory at the moment of a crushing military defeat. The phrase 'por ahora' (for now), he said, had come to him in a flash. It was the strategic inspiration that Chavez had not been able to use during the Caracas uprising of 1989. Fourteen soldiers were officially said to have been killed in the rebellion and eight civilians died in crossfire while scores more were injured, relatively light casualties considering the scale of the revolt.



The February 4 uprising was not the first of its kind in the post-1958 Republic and neither would it be the last. There was a military uprising in the city of Carupano on the Caribbean coast in 1962 with Marines and National Guard contingents around the city rising in rebellion against the government demanding democratic renewal. The Communist Party and the MIR, another revolutionary group, were involved in the act. The military rebels were defeated within a day and the Communists and the MIR banned. An estimated 400 people died in the uprising. A month later, there was a much larger military uprising in the port city of Puerto Cabello, a little more than 200 km from Caracas and also situated on the Caribbean coast. Navy rebels took over the base briefly and moved into the city and civilians joined them in the armed resistance. The government of Romulo Betancourt swiftly sent in the Air Force to bomb the rebel positions while Army units surrounded them from all sides. There was fierce fighting in the city before the rebels surrendered. The casualties this time was far higher than in Carupano and included many of the young civilian fighters. The Interior Minister during both these incidents was Carlos Andres Perez.

The last act in the "trilogy" of events that would bring an end to Carlos Andres Perez's second presidency – the first being Caracazo of 1989 and the second the February 4 army mutiny – was the November 27 Air Force uprising. After Chavez's military adventure had been crushed, life in the armed forces and in the country quickly returned to normal, as if nothing had happened. The regime did not learn any lesson and nothing changed. The conditions of the soldiers and their disquiet with the rampant corruption in the country were ignored. By July, the intrigues and factional fights to secure promotions had started all over again and General Visconti and Luis Reyes Reyes started conspiring a little more cautiously. This time, they sought and received support from civilian groups such as Bandera Roja and individuals who promised to take up arms once the attack started. Some of the more radical elements wanted to kill the President in a missile attack and others wanted the rebellion for July. Finally, the date for the next uprising was set for November 27, the day that most aircraft assembled at the large base in the city of Maracay, 116 km from Caracas, to prepare for the annual December flypast on Air Force day. The rebel plan was, again, for the Marines to capture the President in Miraflores and

install a civilian-military government while fighter jets provided them with cover. Plans were drawn up to capture the state-owned television station, VTV, broadcast their call to the people to join the rebellion and attack the presidential palace. This time, too, the military intelligence got wind of the plan thanks to their agents in the Bandera Roja group. At the dawn of November 27, several aircraft took off from an airbase in Maracay and attacked the palace, firing rocket into it, Rebel units at La Carlota, the air base in Caracas, managed to gain control of it. However, loyal officers also succeeded in taking off from Maracay in two F-16s and began to harass the rebel pilots. The rebel aircraft broke through the sound barrier low over Caracas as a way of announcing their uprising to the people and as a signal to the absent Marines to start the attack. They were also trying to shake off loyalist aircraft pursuing them. But the Marines did not turn up to fight on their side. Two Hercules aircraft sent to fetch them from Puerto Cabello, which 30 years ago was the epicentre of a Navy-led uprising, returned empty. Some armed civilians directed by demobilised and experienced guerrillas of the past and National Guardsmen attacked the president's palace on their own and managed to get past two security rings before being trapped in crossfire and losing their numbers one by one.

Rebel soldiers had taken over VTV and secured control over the broadcasting towers of other private channels except one and by early morning were ready to transmit their message. But there was a mix-up with the tapes in the confusion and they ended up broadcasting a message that Hugo Chavez had prepared in prison, unwittingly cementing the Chavez myth. President Carlos Andres Perez used the one private channel, whose signal was not in rebel hands, to speak to the country. Soon, the regime mobilised its military forces and the rebellion ended, being crushed like the one in February. Many of the participants decided to fight till the finish. For the first time in the country's history, there were real dogfights over the skies of Caracas between aircraft that were part of the same Air Force. The casualties were far higher in the November rebellion. At least 171 soldiers and civilians were reported killed in the official figures. Some of the soldiers involved in taking over the state television channel were killed inside after being captured by the intelligence agents. One of the last acts of the short-lived abortive revolt was the mass escape of General Visconti and others

from the air base in the capital on a Hercules aircraft. As army tanks broke through the perimeter of the La Carlota airbase and started firing at rebel positions, the order was given to evacuate. Helicopters quickly landed and the pilots sprinted to the Hercules as it began to taxi ahead of the incoming fire. Suddenly, it started raining which impaired the vision of the tank crews and allowed the airmen to clamber aboard. The Hercules took off in blinding rain and three Mirage fighters from the rebel side protected it while in Venezuelan airspace. Luis Reyes Reyes flew one of the protective fighter jets. He returned to base in Venezuela after the Hercules had reached safety and gave himself up. The rebels turned off their radio, flew across Colombia undetected, turned on the radio just before they reached Iquitos, a Peruvian air base in the Amazon forest, and said they had an emergency aboard. They turned off the radio as soon as they received permission from control tower. Once they landed, 93 of them sought political asylum in Peru. They were later pardoned and allowed to return to Venezuela after the collapse of the Perez regime. November 27 is now celebrated as Air Force day in Venezuela.

A sideshow in the November uprising was the attempt to storm the Yare prison where Chavez was being held and carry him away. The government had tightened the defence around the perimeter of the prison and the surrounding hills and even planted mines near it. There were plans to spirit Chavez away in a helicopter. That plan fell through and, instead, a group of soldiers and civilians attacked the prison but were repelled by the guards. Inside, the prisoners had access to a small radio smuggled in by Chavez's son, Hugo, and they listened in to the conversation among the rebels. But there was not much they could do about it. The screening of the wrong video brought political costs for Chavez. He was accused both by the government and by some of his own colleagues of harbouring personal ambitions. He did not agree with some of the trigger-happy methods of the Bandera Roja mutineers either and, as he had rightly feared, the blame rebounded on him. Chavez retreated to his cell for a while, almost never leaving it, and concentrated on reading, writing and meditating. Frustration set in among his fellow prisoners, knowing that there would be no more rebellions and that neither would they be freed anytime soon.



## CHAPTER IV

### FROM PRISON TO PRESIDENT

After the brief but memorable television appeal, Hugo Chavez and his fellow officers were detained at the San Carlos military prison in Caracas. But for the next 20 days, they were taken one by one to the military intelligence headquarters, kept in the basement cells and interrogated at length. The cells were cold as the air-conditioning came down; there were no beds and they had to sleep and eat on the floor. The lights were on all the time and they met no one other than their interrogators. At the back of their minds was the worry they were going to be killed. Chavez was lucky to leave alive; after all, Venezuela had developed the system of 'disappearing' prisoners long before others in the continent. Then, as happens with almost everyone in the first days of prison, he became depressed. What had the uprising achieved? Had it all been a waste of time and of lives? How would he carry on his conscience the deaths of his men and the imprisonment of others? What if nothing were to change and the people did not care? Had he thrown away the career he loved? He confined himself to his cell, not speaking to anyone, until a military chaplain came up to him, apparently to give him a Bible, but then turned his back to the surveillance camera and whispered into his ears, "Come on, get up, the people love you, you don't know what is happening outside; you have no idea, son; on the streets you are a national hero".

That certainly was no exaggeration. Popular support for his action during the first days of that February touched 90%. Almost immediately graffiti started appearing on the walls of Caracas with the distinctive red beret of the rebel comandante. The Chavez myth took a life on its own, spontaneously and without a guiding hand. Thousands of people started gathering outside the prison. At times, the military guards would drive them away with teargas but they came back stubbornly, again and again. Soon, it was carnival time in Venezuela and hundreds of young boys, some as young as three, dressed up in military fatigues with a red beret as Chavitos (little Chavez) or Chavecitos (this usually refers to a balancing Chavez doll that came to the market later), an army of Chavez look-alikes. In one commando operation, Chavez had inserted himself in Venezuelan popular imagination. He mentions this in one of his prison letters:

"Those were the days of being born. Those were the days... that children were dressed up. I remember very clearly we were at the San Carlos barracks; it was the carnival and there we could watch television and there was a journalist speaking with a child. It is not easy speaking to children, but they were on the streets and the child with his mother, the child dressed as Chavecito or Chavito. Then the journalist arrives and comes up to the child, you know how the journalists are like, and tells him:

'And you, what's your name and what are you dressed up as?'

"The child with a beret tells the journalist:

'Are you a fool? Don't you see that I am Chavez?'

"And then the journalist tells him:

'Sure, I know that you are in disguise. But who is Chavez?'

"The child gives a beautiful reply:

'Chavez is there among the trees. He walks there and I'll go with him.'

"Those were the days. You know that Chavez is something more than Chavez... I'm merely a human being of flesh and bones, no more than anyone of us. In truth, this is what we are as individuals: dragged, pushed and impelled by the revolutionary hurricane."

An estimated 10,000 soldiers in four major military bases were either arrested or came under suspicion for being involved in the coup. Not everyone could be arrested. The ordinary soldiers were either reintegrated, briefly punished or thrown out of the army, sometimes literally in their shorts and regulation white tee shirts. The army was reluctant to keep under arrest the 300-odd officers taken into custody because they did not have sufficient prison infrastructure in the garrisons. The San Carlos prison was an old building that housed the usual army bad eggs and was no way prepared for this influx. They gradually let go half of them. In charge of the prison was an officer looking forward to a quiet time before his retirement in six months, unprepared for this bedlam. Chavez refused to recognise the tribunal that would judge him, saying it was biased, and did not attend his trial. The people would

not stop coming. The imprisoned young officers were challenging the prison authorities all the time. The guards secretly sympathised with their prisoners. The prison commander asked Chavez to help him out. His family was keen to meet him but nobody should find out, he told his prisoner. His wife and two children came from their quarters to meet Chavez, asked him for his autograph, and took pictures with him. Chavez met the junior officers who had been lodged in different floors based on their rank and, little by little, they started to impose their will in the prison until there came a time when they had taken effective control of it. The prison authorities gave in and began to allow them visitors who came in almost uncontrolled, some with gifts and others with papers, requests for autographs or musical instruments. The cells were full of people and the prisoners discovered they had very little privacy. Chavez could not even meet his family and hug his children without an admiring audience the first time they came to meet him. In effect, the San Carlos prison became a symbolic parallel power centre, rivalling Miraflores if not in resources and in pomp, then at least in political activity. No state could let this continue and after some time, the National Guards were sent to storm the prison, take Chavez and nine other officers out of San Carlos and send them to Yare, about 30 km from the centre of Caracas, where common prisoners were housed. The rebel soldiers were put on one floor of the notorious prison. The other officers were dispersed to different locations or kept at the old prison.

Chavez stayed for just two years in prison but these were intense years of intellectual formation and political organisation. The Bolivarian army officers put down their guns for typewriters and pamphlets. Chavez started from the most obvious question: what was it that they wanted to achieve? He read, discussed, and debated with his colleagues and wrote down his ideas that were to form the core of Bolivarian Socialism. For someone who later declared himself a Socialist, there is no mention of him reading the original writings of Marx. Instead, he read him through interpreters like the scholar Istvan Meszaros, who had fled his native Hungary after the Soviet invasion and settled down for an academic life in the United Kingdom; Oscar Varsavsky, an Argentinean economist who spent some years in Venezuela; and Carlos Matus, who was a minister in Salvador Allende's government in Chile and lived till his end in Venezuela after the coup in his country. Bringing these

authors to Chavez's notice as he tried to define his economic policies was Jorge Giordani, an academic who was a prominent minister in his governments and was credited with developing the new financial architecture in Venezuela. Giordani is the author of several books on the Venezuelan path to Socialism that influenced Chavez. Years later, then a Minister, Giordani told Chavez he was a difficult person to work with. The President's reply was brief and instantaneous, "So are you, Jorge". Giordani fell out with Chavez's successor, Nicolas Maduro, amid mutual recriminations and no longer figures in the post-Chavez presidential team. In prison, Chavez discovered the writings of Nietzsche, somewhat contradictory for a devout Catholic, although towards the end of his life, when afflicted with cancer, he would try to reconcile the German philosopher's rejection of God and his own strong religious belief, saying Nietzsche was really against the idea of God sold by organised religion. Chavez wrote several tracts in prison, including the 'Blue Book', its title perhaps influenced by Mao's famous Red Book, but also marking a difference with it. The Blue Book defined the three ideological inspirations of the Bolivarian revolution: Simon Bolivar, his teacher Simon Rodriguez, and Ezequiel Zamora, leader of the 19<sup>th</sup> century peasant rebellion. It described the revolution as a tree with three roots. The South Commission chaired by Julius Nyerere of Tanzania had published a report in 1991 and Chavez was deeply influenced by it, reading and re-reading it and developing several practical ideas from it. There were awkward bits in the prison thinking like when he asked for a reduction in public spending, an "understandable contamination" as Chavez later described it. On the other side was the idea of a constituent assembly that would establish the new Fifth Republic. The Fourth Republic was too corrupt, too far gone, to be reformed. The constituent assembly was not his original idea and had been promoted by various Left-wing groups over the years but it was something Chavez took up in the prison, brought it to public attention, and pushed for it from the very first day of his presidency.

Prison was also a time for the soldiers to practise the very different art of political organisation. Most political leaders of the Left came to visit Chavez in prison as the popular mood outside was overwhelmingly in his favour. These were parties like Causa R and the Communist Party who sought out his views. Chavez did not



have a very high opinion of these parties, seeing them as cadre-based outfits rather than as mass parties. Many individuals, not linked to any of these parties, who met him in his prison cell, were convinced by his argument of developing a peaceful electoral alternative. One of these visitors was a bus driver and young trade union leader of the Caracas underground railway system. He had no doubts about Chavez's heroism or his sincerity, but did the Comandante have a vision, he wondered. He was part of a delegation and they had to wait till the other visitors left. Chavez then spoke to them for about an hour, dispelling their doubts and sealing their loyalty. The young man was Nicolas Maduro, who became President after Chavez's death and was his closest ally during his lifetime. The Fourth Republic was so rotten that it was not worth losing another life in fighting it violently, Chavez told Maduro, whose own position was to organise another civilian-military armed uprising. There was an electoral window of opportunity which they should take, not just for tactical reasons but because he wanted to come to power with a democratic version of Socialism. For two decades, Maduro was by Chavez's side and has said he wants to be remembered as the most loyal disciple of Chavez.

The enthusiasm for Chavez at home was not matched on the continent. The Latin American Left saw him as a military adventurer, someone who wanted to take power by violent undemocratic means and, therefore, was not to be trusted. The continent had just seen off a long line of military men who grabbed power for their own benefit and Chavez was seen as another one of them, if not a Fascist then no better than a demagogue. Carlos Andres Perez practised IMF policy at home but he maintained a semblance of progressive foreign policy. He was an important leader of Socialist International and was seen by the Latin American Left as a progressive, even if a corrupt, President. No one wanted to know of Chavez. The only invitations they had in prison were predictably from the Right, one in Mexico to which he sent his brother Adan who came back and reported that this was an extreme Right-wing group. The other ones to show interest were the "pintacaras" (painted faces) of Argentina, so called because these were former Special Forces soldiers with a violent Rightist mindset and recognisable by the camouflage paints on their faces. The only one in the Latin American Left to understand

that these imprisoned Venezuelan soldiers represented something new was that wily old Cuban, Fidel Castro. He refused to denounce the Bolivarian movement though he was on very good terms with Carlos Andres Perez. Chavez recognised Fidel's studied silence and took heart from it. Cuba invited Chavez after he was freed and he was received by Fidel at the airport with honours reserved for heads of state. Chavez's speech at Havana University in Fidel's presence marked him out, at least for the Cubans, as an important leader of the continent. Fidel's endorsement of Chavez helped dissolve much of the hostility towards him in the continent and he has now joined the pantheon of Latin American greats.

Few individuals were as influential in promoting Chavez as he was bursting on the national scene as Jose Vicente Rangel (JVR), journalist, human rights defender during the worst atrocities of the Fourth Republic and presidential candidate more than once for the Venezuelan Left in those years. JVR had a popular television interview slot and he had a small camera smuggled into the prison – in a priest's cassock – and edited it to make it look like a face-to-face interview. This is an abridged transcript of the interview:

**JVR:** A little distance from Caracas, in the Valley of Tuy, in the municipality of Simon Bolivar of Miranda state, is the small town of San Francisco de Yare, a welcoming town, hot and famous for its Devils, its Dancing Devils, the Devils of Yare, who gather the magic of the rituals and, every time they dance, many people from different parts of the country and, including foreigners, join in the spectacle. Very near San Francisco de Yare, hardly six kilometres, is the penitentiary centre, which is a jail for common prisoners. Currently, there are 116 common prisoners, but also are ten officials of the Venezuelan Armed Forces, among them this man... not seen on television since about six months.

Comandante Hugo Chavez Frias, leader of the military uprising of February 4 of this year, is locked up in this prison. It is a prison that does not fulfill the conditions to detain them there. This what you see are the stains of the prisoners' excrement; the environment, the smell, is unbearable... the physical inconveniences of the place add to the very intense, very hot weather of the zone... Hugo Chavez is today a mix of legend

and reality. He is the man who rebelled, the military rebel; he is at the same time a man of training and culture; he is a man who has a great artistic sensibility: for example, he plays the cuatro and sings the songs of the plains like a good plainsman but at the same time Hugo Chavez is a painter, natural, rustic, spontaneous... and at the same time is a man who likes theatre... Also Hugo Chavez writes poems. For this, I tell you that in Hugo Chavez is a very interesting mix of a man of action and an artist. He is a complex personality, who undoubtedly has a popular projection in this moment in the country...

**JVR:** The impression is that you have deflated, that you are no longer news... In this programme itself, analysing the Chavez case some time ago, Jose Luis Vethencourt said that nobody could live all his life in white heat... What do you think?

**Chavez (CH):** A few days ago, an international news agency asked me a similar question. But, Dr Rangel, this isn't about the figure of a soldier like myself inflating or deflating, being news or not; this certainly could worry any election candidate and his image advisory team but we the men of the MBR-200 are more worried by other things. Fundamentally, we worry about the country... This is what really worries the men of MBR: the country... the future, the difficult reality that our people live in; the necessities of the millions of Venezuelans who today suffer this terrible historic crisis into which we have fallen; this certainly worries the Bolivarian movement. We think that the national situation has descended into such a state of decomposition that to be thinking now of image, of an image that inflates or deflates, is blasphemy; it is a tremendous lack of respect to the hope and morals that beat in the heart of the Venezuelan people. Now, I have to share today, certainly, the opinion that this programme broadcast some months ago of the eminent psychiatrist, Dr Jose Luis Vethencourt, when he referred to the temporariness of the incandescence of a personality; especially when this personality is swept along, as Bolivar said in Angostura, by the revolutionary hurricane. This is a scientific truth... but I insist, the current reality, the current situation of the nation cannot be simplified; it cannot depend on two, three or five shining, blazing figures passing through the national scenario. What is true is that today there is a

general incandescence in civil society, in the Venezuelan Armed Forces. The incandescence, Dr Rangel, has covered the entire national panorama and it spreads; nothing and nobody will be able to detain it till the changes that this current situation requires do not really happen... There is something even more important still; there is a profound combustion that has invaded the Venezuelan's soul — the conscience of being Venezuelan. That incandescence, that internal blue flame, has been aroused and it will be difficult to detain it just as, for example, the incandescence of the Sun cannot be contained in the planetary system.

**JVR:** Perhaps you have unknowingly contributed to wearing out your image. It is possible that an endless number of declarations that you have given, some of them contradictory, have contributed to the situation... being laconic is a virtue and is very important in the military field, as in everything that has to do with the politics of power.

**CH:** This observation reminds me, for sure, of a dear friend who in the days of the San Carlos prison advised us to maintain silence. But let me insist, Dr Rangel, that neither Comandante Hugo Chavez Frias nor the officials of MBR-200 have seen this process, so complex and where at play is precisely the fate of millions, of up to 20 million Venezuelans, of human beings who suffer the reality, from the viewpoint of maintaining or improving an image before public opinion. This is not the viewpoint of the Bolivarian movement, of its men. We certainly believe that the social convulsion, the storm, is of such magnitude that people like you... like us have to face up to the storm. The storm is of such magnitude, through which the ship of Venezuela is passing through, that we should come out, accept our responsibility; we should hoist our sails even at the risk that it might snap... we are aware... of the disinformation campaigns, of the laboratories of the dirty war; that they will be on the lookout for expressions of the diverse actors to try and take apart their discourse, their intent, their hope, that is anyway the hope of the entire people of Venezuela. We cannot hide, Dr Rangel... we have to face up to the storm at the risk that not only the public image but also the image of flesh and bones could shatter, could collapse. But there is a fundamental objective, which is to take the ship out of the storm, and the

men who we think can collaborate, even if with a grain of sand, should come out, hoist our sails; we should move the ship together with all of Venezuela, in a national collective towards a direction, the blue horizon of hope.

**JVR:** Nevertheless, for many you are limited, you are a prisoner; you don't have force at your command; you don't have the opportunities that you had before February 4. Are you aware of the situation? Or do you think that the situation is different?

**CH:** Leadership brings with it the idea of vigour, of strength. Today, after almost seven months of the military insurrection of February 4, the men who drove that feat, the Bolivarian movement as a civil-military organization, the tree with three roots as the philosophical-doctrinal inspiration, based on the thinking of Simon Rodriguez, Simon Bolivar and Ezequiel Zamora; we adhere with the tremendous force that the Venezuelan people give us to the vigour, the validity of all the components of that force that burst out as if from the subsoil of that night and that day of February 4. The validity we stick to is a force that comes from the soul of the people and is a force that will die out with difficulty because it is enmeshed with the people's hope and validity. And there are no people in history who have lost the strength that give them hope. Now, it is evident in my specific case, that I don't directly lead any military unit. I'm in this cell of hardly six square metres, with very strict measures, together with my companions.

Nevertheless, as much as you, Dr Rangel, as the great majority of the compatriots observing us now in these moments, is aware that a situation has two levels of analysis: a superficial level, the level of phenomena, in which the facts are observed, the phenomena... and a geno-situational level (*a concept that Chavez borrowed from the Chilean economist Matus which roughly translates as a genetic, dialectical analysis*) in which the hidden structures of the situation exist and precisely is here, at this deep level, where real changes take place in any situation like the one which the country is living through now. Any careless observer can be surprised by the hidden currents

of Arauca (*a river that starts in Colombia and merges into the Orinoco in Venezuela*) in winter, Dr Rangel.

**JVR:** Admitting that what you say is true, is another February 4 planned?

**CH:** A commentary, to bring here the universal thinking of our teacher Simon Rodriguez, when in his work 'Light and Social Virtues', published together with the other great work titled 'American Societies' in 1840 in Valparaíso (Chile), the maestro indicated that the natural course of things is a torrent that sweeps away all that it encounters and overturns all that opposes it... if the ruling political class continues to stick to its privileges; if this political class isn't capable of understanding the evolution of the Venezuelan political process, it will be inevitable that the Venezuelan society as one will utilise the right to rebellion enshrined in Article 250 of our national Constitution. If the Robinsonian torrent (*referring here to Simon Rodriguez who took the name of Samuel Robinson after fleeing Venezuela*) produces this situation, it could well degenerate into a conflict of grand proportions similar to that of the last century known in history as the Federal War; well it won't be because of the wishes of the Bolivarian movement and it is worth clarifying it in this occasion. We... are not in any way promoting a violent exit. We certainly have been following the daily national events. The torrent of a violent situation will be the product of the stubbornness of the political class, of the style of deception with which they have handled their own interests behind the national clamour. They will be truly to blame for an expanding and generalised violent situation. Now nobody can prophesise here the form of action that would be concretised in the national panorama. We can't say whether it would be a military action similar to the one driven by us on February 4 or a popular action similar to what developed in Caracas on 27 and 28 of February of 1989. There's even an algebraic expression that's been developed where the sum of 27 February plus 4 February equals 31 February, to symbolize a third option, a third route in this tricky game. This form would be the combination of the civil element with the military element to produce a civilian-military insurrection.

**JVR:** Experience tells us that almost always military governments start with democratic promises and that of change but generally they don't fulfill these. In truth, the Venezuelan people don't associate February 4 with the possibility of installing a military dictatorship in the country, that's true. But, on the other hand, the people consider that you don't count with a team capable enough of carrying forward an important action of government. What really is the situation? What could the situation be in future in relation to a team of men and women capable of taking forward important changes in Venezuela?

**CH:** We are falling here again into the false dichotomy of dictatorship-democracy with which the theoreticians of the populist and pseudo-democratic regimes of Latin American have sought to manipulate public opinion and hide the grave deficiencies and the degeneration of the false democratic systems into authentic tyrannies like the one that Venezuela lives now. It is good to say, in the first place, in this game of dichotomy, that MBR-200 did not look for a military dictatorship... we did it because really there was no other way, there was no other option to break the regime's blueprint of domination. We rose up in arms to complete moreover with a constitutional obligation... to make use of the right to rebellion. True, on February 4 we could not definitively break with the scheme of domination but certainly we fractured it; we did crack it open in a very evident manner. We put into motion on the night of February 3 the operational plan Ezequiel Zamora, the military action plan, with the military and political objective of overthrowing the current regime, the current government and convening a provisional government, a government with the broad participation of the most diverse sectors of Venezuelan civil society, a government of transition with new actors to put in action a programme of an emergency government to sow the bases of a profound evolutionary process of transformation. And here then is our proposal that we have made public after February 4. Before that date, for obvious reasons, we couldn't do it. This proposal, for the discussion of the Venezuelan civil society, is what we have termed the Simon Bolivar National Project... it is not another huge tome... The project starts by defining a new model of a

future society in the long term, which we have referred to as the an original Robinsonian model... I affirm before the country that the Bolivarian movement certainly had, and has, a project but it is a long-term project – I repeat – and not another tome.

**JVR:** How do you spend your time in prison?

**CH:** What we lack here is time for so many activities that we engage in. Above all, we devote ourselves a lot to studying, to reading about the development of the national situation. But, we also have time to attend to our families on the visiting days, Thursdays and weekends; to read, write poems and even to paint.

If Chavez was feeling stifled in his prison cell, the President himself was not in the best of political health. His unpopularity was obvious and it was clear to everyone except him that there would be more social explosions. His own party, Democratic Action, was angry with him. In 1993, the Supreme Court found the President had reasons to answer charges of corruption and the Congress voted to impeach him. A caretaker President was appointed to last out the rest of the term till fresh presidential elections the next year. But not everybody was keen on elections. Venezuela had its first taste of urban terrorism. There were mysterious explosions outside the homes of journalists, embassies and institutions of the state and letter bombs were posted to different offices. It was rumoured that the interim Defence Minister was involved in what came to be known locally as the dry coup. Former police and intelligence officers, financed by powerful businessmen, carried out the blasts. It was reported that the head of the country's biggest bank and a former President and his mistress were involved. The planned coup fell through and the next elected President was Rafael Caldera, one of the co-founders of the Punto Fijo agreement and a member of Opus Dei. Caldera had already served one presidential term from 1969-74 and disappeared from the political scene but had the reputation of being a clean person. In his first term, he had earned fame for pacifying the guerrillas by offering them space in politics but also raiding the nation's elite Central University to weed out troublesome student radicals. The former sociology and law professor played a nimble political game in his second campaign. He was quick to understand that the 1992 rebellion enjoyed



widespread support among the people and tapped into it. "It is difficult to ask the people that they sacrifice themselves for liberty and democracy when they think that liberty and democracy are not able to give them food or impede the exorbitant rise in the prices... when (they) have not been able to put a definitive end to... corruption... it would be naïve to think that it (the 1992 'coup') is only to do with an adventure of some ambitious types... There is a setting... there is a grave situation in the country". He broke with his party, the Christian Right Copei, predominantly that of the white elite. The Venezuelan poet Andreas Eloy Blanco, himself from Democratic Action, had a memorable ditty about the rival party:

Things that aren't the law (ley)  
Always end in a fiasco  
A woman urinating in a perfume bottle (frasco)  
And a black man enrolled in Copei.

Caldera created a new political grouping called Convergencia (Convergence) and, as the name suggests, it was an alliance of disaffected smaller parties from the Left and the Right. It worked for him as the major Leftist groups, including the Communist Party, rallied round him. Some from within MBR-200 supported Caldera who won by a narrow margin but there were persistent rumours, and indeed some evidence, of a stolen election. At one stage, Andres Velasquez of one of the Left groupings, Causa R, was ahead in the counting but the Election Commission stopped giving out vote counts at night and declared in the morning that Caldera was the victor. It was a classic Venezuelan case of "mata votos" (killing, or robbing, votes). Velasquez did not challenge the result and is still politically active, but now as an ally of the most radical sections of the Right. Chavez called for abstention in the elections saying the country needed a constituent assembly. Abstention reached unprecedented levels though it had more to do with the general disillusionment with the system than with the imprisoned military rebel's urging. The new President, who would turn out to be the last of the Fourth Republic, had given the impression that he would not blindly follow the IMF diktat as Perez had done and that his regime would be somewhat more nationalistic than that of his predecessor. He had promised to pardon the rebel soldiers and kept his word. Before that, he sent his son to the prison to get Chavez to meet him at the palace and thank him for the gesture.

Chavez refused to do so and turned down offers of a plum diplomatic posting, a post-graduate in any foreign university of his choice, nomination for a governor's post or working with the new government in its programmes, even when some of his closest allies in MBR-200 accepted the tempting offers.

On the streets, the clamour for releasing Chavez was inescapable. The new President, on his visit to the national pantheon the day after his victory, heard the crowds chanting for the Comandante to be released. That freedom came on May 26 with the condition that Chavez would have to resign from the military, which he accepted. Not all his imprisoned comrades wanted him to walk free. Some felt it would be better to remain prisoners and reap political rewards but their leader wanted to feel the pulse of the people. He told the authorities he would be the last to leave, only after every soldier had walked out of prison. The night before, the Comandante was understandably nervous. How would the people react? Would there be any takers for him on the streets or would he be set free and forgotten? He need not have worried. As he left the military academy at Fort Tiuna, changing his army tunics for an olive green 'liqui liqui', a Venezuelan shirt design popular in the plains, he was greeted by a sea of people and journalists asking him what would be his next move. "MBR-200 goes to the streets, on the offensive, to take political power in Venezuela," he told them, though it was a heterogeneous group with all kinds of ideologies clashing within it, from former guerrillas to ex-soldiers who were varyingly nationalists, moderate Right-wingers or extreme Leftists.

Chavez was undecided for at least two years after walking out of jail if he would participate in elections. The ruling class would have to change its ways and, if it did not, there would be popular resistance, even if it were to be another armed uprising. But, first, it was more important to meet the people that he did not have with him in 1992. He had no money, no bank account, and gave his meager monthly pension to his estranged wife and children, living on what his friends collected for him. Straight away he started touring the country, explaining his position to the people, living practically in an old Toyota that came as a gift. It was painted and decorated with banana leaves and people would gather to appreciate the "black donkey" which spilled so much petrol and oil that the next meeting was often decided depending if the local

population contributed for the fuel. Later on, he received another gift of a flatbed truck that was designed to have a place for him to sleep in which the people baptised as Chavez mobile. Secret service agents burnt it one night in Caracas. He lived in the backyard of an architect's house in Caracas and later moved to a tiny flat of a political ally. He initially had the "mad plan" of starting a march from Sabaneta, his birth place, to Caracas and take down the government but his friends persuaded him against it. There was little contact between him and the social movements at that stage. There were not many of them around and the few existing ones were either uninterested in him or could not get in touch. His plan was to position himself as the real opposition to the government with the simple slogan of power to the people. More audaciously, he wanted to reposition a utopia in the collective mind, of a country with greater equality and less corruption. His mission was to create in popular imagination a concrete utopia, the dream a country that could be realised, for as Chavez said quoting Victor Hugo, the utopias of today are the realities of tomorrow.

While his contact with the people in the large cities and small towns was telling him that they were willing to listen to him, his experience with the parties of the Left, splintered, fighting among themselves, more interested in gaining a mayor's or a governor's post than in taking up the broad issues, disillusioned him. You could fit them all in a bus, he said, these were parties without people and it would be impossible to change the system with them, with or without arms. This was his first political lesson: the traditional Left parties would not deliver change. Instead of wasting his time in endless meetings and factional squabbles, he had to build up his own organisation with a clear political line. The Left parties, all of them without exception, were playing a game with him. They professed to support him but in reality they wanted to wean away his group's emerging leaders and isolate him. At a May Day rally, the organizers would not let him either be on the stage or speak till the crowd started shouting that they wanted to hear Chavez. The traditional parties of the Left were demoralised after the fall of the Soviet Union and the Berlin Wall. They thought they could change the system from within but the opposite happened. This was the second lesson for Chavez: if you don't change the system when you are in it, the system will change you.

After the first national tour, he decided to explore his contacts in other Latin American countries to try and develop a continental Bolivarian movement. His first destination was Colombia, where he met a former guerrilla leader who had joined the political process. He gave him a vital third lesson. The two were sat at a table with a flowerpot on it. The former guerrilla told Chavez: "Comandante, if you achieve a constituent assembly in Venezuela one day, don't commit our error. What we did was to caress the vase, tried to tidy it, paper over the cracks, make it prettier. You take a hammer and smash it." He visited Panama, Argentina, Uruguay and Chile but in each country he was met with hostile media that portrayed him as a coup-monger bringing trouble to their country and few people were willing to listen to him. In Uruguay, Eduardo Galeano, author of the celebrated 'Open veins of Latin America', refused to meet him. That was the book Chavez gifted to Obama the only time they met in person at a summit of Latin American and Caribbean nations. Almost accidentally, he received an invitation from Cuba in December 1994. He had met the Cuban ambassador to Venezuela at a conference hall in Caracas and told him he wanted to visit his country. The Ambassador promised to relay the message to his country. The invitation came soon afterwards and when he landed in Havana, he was asked to disembark first. Fidel Castro was waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs. He now understood why Fidel had refused to criticise him for his insurrection although he had telephoned to support President Perez in 1992. He spoke at Havana University to an overflowing audience and with Fidel in attendance. In Venezuela, Caldera's advisors were ecstatic. This was the embrace of death, they said, and the national media started smearing him as a Cuban agent.

Fidel endorsed Chavez but not even with that was he allowed to speak at the World Social Forum in El Salvador the following year. He was a continental pariah. Meanwhile, alarm bells were ringing in the Colombian establishment after Chavez's second visit there. The then Colombian President, Ernesto Samper, accused him of leading a platoon of Colombian guerrillas who had killed 14 Venezuelan soldiers. Incensed, Chavez slipped unnoticed into Colombia, contacted a television station, and asked the President to speak to him directly. Samper did not respond so Chavez visited the military headquarters demanding that they start a trial against him and prove their charges. Some time later, the Colombian

authorities acknowledged that the report was a lie and President Samper apologised to Chavez when the latter was President, saying he had been deceived by his intelligence services. But the damage had been done. Chavez realised that without a strong support at home, nobody in the continent would take him seriously and he would never be able to escape his overwhelming solitude. Once more, it was back to the streets of Venezuela "to create ideologically a critical mass of Bolivarians to have more weight within the country".

Caldera's government was floundering. In 1994, major banks went bust and the government chose to bail them out with about a fifth of the country's GDP. There were spending cuts. Foreign debts soared and so did inflation. In 1994, it was 70.8% and two years later it rose to 103.2%. Unemployment increased and the prices of basic food were more than what the poor people could afford. Faced with the crisis, Caldera in the style of President Perez unleashed 'Agenda Venezuela', just the neo-liberal recipe he had promised to avoid. State industries began to be privatised and the oil sector was sought to be opened up to foreign investors. Transport costs multiplied as impoverished state governments set up tollbooths to charge motorists. Many small businesses were ruined and consumer consumption in 1998 was lower than that of 1994. Drug money began to infiltrate into Venezuela in a noticeable way and corrupt the institutions. Legitimising drug money was a tempting choice amidst the economic hardships and death squads financed by Colombian cartels found a foothold in Venezuela. Once more, the people were restless, losing their fear of the government, and the traditional political parties were widely hated at this point. Chavez maintained old friendships in the military, meeting them in secret and in disguise, but his comrades told him they were under close watch and suspect units were sent far away from Caracas to the borders with Colombia. Even Chavez's driver was an informant for the military intelligence. As the crisis worsened, and violent student and workers' demonstrations broke out in the country, the people began to see in Chavez the leader who would definitively break with the old order. Chavez sensed from the beginning of 1997 that an opportunity had opened up in the elections due next year and that the military option was unviable. He sought out sociologists and university professors to do a professional opinion poll of tens of thousands of people. Seventy per cent said they

wanted Chavez to contest the elections and just over 56% said they would vote for him, which was the margin with which he won the elections.

The problem was convincing his radical comrades in MBR-200 who would not have anything to do with elections. Even his own bodyguards told him that though they admired him a lot, they would not be party to campaigning in the elections. Twice he tried to convince his party and both times it refused to listen. He then faced his third existential crisis – the first was in the Army during the counter-insurgency movement and the second during his time in prison – and retreated to his father's small farm, thinking over his future on the banks of the river by his home town. He asked himself if he was selling out the ideals of the movement and if his comrades were right in thinking that he was doing a U-turn like other opportunistic politicians before him. He felt he had been put in the dock but his instincts kept telling him that not contesting the elections would be a terrible mistake. He was on the point of retiring from politics but then decided he would return to give battle. Finally, MBR-200 agreed to a national convention and after a heated debate accepted his position and put forward his name for the elections. He learnt the fourth political lesson. "Politics is not always for the pure. It is human (activity) in the most terrible sense of the word. The only ones who think that perfection is possible in politics are the fanatics." His doubts did not fully leave him but he took the words of the Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius, to heart: "The secret of all victory is in the organisation of the non-obvious". As the laws did not allow any political grouping to use Bolivar's name, the new party called itself the Movement for the Fifth Republic (MVR in Spanish) for two reasons: first, it sounded similar to MBR and second it put at the centre of national debate the idea of a constituent assembly that would change the structure of the state. Together with it was the key concept of a "protagonist democracy", where the people would do more than vote once every five years. This was the bridge, Chavez said, that took them from democracy to revolution or, to put it more accurately, to a revolution without discarding democracy. Later in his life, he spoke out against the concept of "dictatorship of the proletariat", asking why it could not be "democracy of the proletariat".

Chavez launched himself as a candidate for the December elections but was ignored by the media and the opinion polls that were mesmerised by another candidate, the former Miss Universe Irene Saenz, who was mayor of an affluent suburb of Caracas and an independent candidate. His other challenger was Henrique Salas Römer, a former Yale University student who had moved into business and then politics as the governor of Carabobo, a state not far from Caracas and with a strong industrial and agricultural base. He exuded wealth and old class whom Chavez nicknamed frijolito (the little fried bean). While the Caracas elite ignored him, the comandante picked up he had solid support among the poor. "I will be the next President... My candidature is the only viable alternative to the diminished political cabal swallowed up in corruption," he declared as early as May. He toured the country and befriended the regional media when the national newspapers and television blacked him out. As the latent support for him became too obvious to ignore, he began to appear on television screens. He was invited to address Venezuelan businessmen in the United States but the embassy in Caracas would not give him a visa for taking part in the 1992 insurrection. I don't need a U.S. visa to be President, I already have one, he retorted, taking out his visa card. He was, however, invited to the U.S. embassy in September before the elections and told the ambassador, as Wikileaks has revealed:

"I am the hope of the people, and without me democracy will not last. Venezuelan politics is characterized by corrupt politicians, failed institutions, and popular despair. The history of the last decade, from the 1989 social uprising to my own candidacy, has been a series of efforts by the "people" to make an increasingly isolated and insulated political class respond to the needs of the country. The unwillingness of the traditional political parties to respond to the "cry of the people" has driven Venezuela dangerously near the brink of social chaos and civil war. My candidacy has reignited hope that meaningful political change could be achieved through democratic means. If that hope is frustrated Venezuela would face a dark and foreboding future."

Afterwards, Washington congratulated him on his "impressive victory" and his visa was delivered to him by hand the day after his victory.

The traditional parties, Copei and Democratic Action, were so alarmed at the prospect of Chavez's victory that they manoeuvred to move forward the elections for state governors and the Congress where the MVR put up a strong performance. Now Chavez looked the winning candidate and a week before the elections the two traditional parties decided to switch their support to Römer. It did not work and Chavez ended up with a victory margin of 56.2%. The beauty queen was left far behind; the beast had won. This is how a Venezuelan newspaper article of the time summed up the change:

"The outgoing Caldera symbolises, together with his wife, the venerable tradition of well-off Caracas families of the first half of the century: education in private schools, ample university courses, learning languages and the universal classical culture, Christian democratic political activism, a stable and only marriage with a characteristic number of children, elegance, moderation and savoir faire. The incoming Chavez symbolises, on the other hand, as much in his origin as in his mestizo physical appearance, the popular imagery of families of modest means from the country's interiors, dignified and educated, who have gradually experienced a social rise: teacher parents, a childhood lived in the joyous freedom of small towns, education in public schools, a military education as an insurance, tempted to outspokenness, flamboyant gestures that moreover do not express minimum signs of elegance and moderation of the affluent classes, two marriages and questioned by the elites for the evident absence of savoir faire instituted as a mark of distinction."



## CHAPTER V

### **NEW CONSTITUTION, OLD ENEMIES**

Hugo Chavez did not storm to power on a tank turret. Caracas was not taken like Moscow, Peking, Saigon or Havana. Instead, the President-elect was on a charm offensive after his electoral victory, meeting priests, businessmen, editors and the U.S. Ambassador. Before taking office formally, he set off on international tours. His first stop was the neighbourhood giant, Brazil, and then to the other Latin American countries before heading for Europe. He wanted to break the dependence on the United States, seek out new allies and to counteract his own terrible image. In his first three years in office, he visited 71 countries, spending 170 days abroad, countering diplomatic isolation and widening trade relations. It was the Americans, no less, who gave him an early lesson on why he had to look beyond them. Chavez was to travel from Spain to Cuba and then to the United States, but an American State Department official telephoned him in Spain, telling him to skip Cuba as it was in his interests to do so and, besides, Washington might call off his visit if he did not. Chavez ignored the threat but in Washington found that his way to the White House was through the back door where he was met by President Bill Clinton not in the Oval Room but in a smaller annexe. The American President strolled in with exaggerated casualness in jeans and tee shirt, soft drink in hand. It was meant to let Chavez know who was the top dog in the hemisphere.

Chavez did not offer a radical economic programme straight away; there would be no wholesale nationalisations. If anything, his government took a conservative approach, expanding the tax base to head off impending bankruptcy, looking for foreign investments, moderating wage increases, cracking down on tax evasion and incorporating the minister of economy of the previous government into his own. His was not a statist project; the state would be used as much as necessary and the market as much as possible. Chavez claimed neither to be Marxist nor anti-Marxist, Communist nor anti-Communist. He put himself politically as a believer of the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair's third way and economically his

project was located somewhere between neo-liberalism and state control. He told the U.S. ambassador:

"I recognize the importance of foreign investment, and I want more of it. I know that foreign investment is vital to economic growth and well-being. I will do everything possible to assuage the concerns of domestic and foreign investors. My position regarding economic reform and investment has been misrepresented in the press. I support the ongoing privatization of state assets, with the exception of PDVSA. I will recognize all contracts and financial commitments made by the previous government... my god, my government's success will depend on attracting investment. I have more interest – both personally and politically – than anyone else in a good investment climate... I will surprise you with my cabinet members... A lot of people will breathe easier."

But he was not converting to neo-liberalism either. Like communism, neo-liberalism almost wanted the state to disappear but it was indispensable for social justice, he argued. He had a big role for the state in making productive investments in agriculture, housing, roads and bridges. He would revive public investments and the money the state invested would generate a chain reaction from private businesses, he thought. He set down to readjusting his meagre budget, providing more for the priority areas of literacy, education, health, housing and universal pension, asking the young to contribute more for the elderly. Public hospitals were told to stop charging patients. People with less had the same right to be treated with dignity. His government started promoting cooperatives, low-cost eateries and food distribution, trying to juggle investment in science, technology and infrastructure for a productive economy with social justice. This would be the bridge for Venezuelans to escape poverty's hell.

But he was unyielding on the question of a constituent assembly. Even before taking oath, he had told the U.S. ambassador:

"I will reform the state through the constitutional assembly. The state needs to be "re-legitimized" and the confidence of the people won back. The only way

to do this is through a constitutional assembly. The popularity of the concept of such an assembly is proof that it represents a profound longing of the people... The consensus forming around the idea of a constitutional assembly, however, hides the strong opposition to the idea in narrow but still powerful sectors of political society. If the parties were to frustrate the strong desire of the people for a constitutional assembly, I might have to break with the current constitutional order to create a new order. Whatever path is taken to such an assembly, it would not be a revolutionary junta, but an elected body with sharply defined responsibilities. Perhaps my most revolutionary idea, in the context of Venezuelan politics, is the demand that elections for the constitutional assembly be direct, and candidate and geography-based, and not party list-based."

Chavez took oath and assumed office on February 2, 1999, amid the lengthening shadows of the century. The last revolution of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first of the 21<sup>st</sup> could not be baptised in a stifling ceremony and the President himself set the tone with a blistering attack on the old order. With his hand on the old Constitution, he took the oath: "I swear before god, before the country, I swear in front of my people on this moribund Constitution, I will complete, push forward the necessary democratic transformations so that the new republic has a magna carta fit for the new times". The outgoing President, Rafael Caldera, could not bring himself to administer the oath to Chavez or even to look at him. The first act of his government was to sign a decree calling for a constituent assembly. Later that night he told thousands of his supporters, "The people want a constituent assembly; they will have a constituent assembly." The referendum was set for April 25.

The President's inaugural speech was unlike anything the Venezuelans had seen. He spoke extempore for more than 100 minutes, alternating between outspokenness and expansive calls for national unity. Venezuela was Bolivarian territory; quoting Bolivar was not rhetoric but an "imperious necessity", the key to escaping from the labyrinth the country found itself in, he said.

Venezuela was an example of what a country should not be like where wealth drained away without trace and the people were left impoverished and demoralised. He was clear that his presidency was the start of a resurrection, a new epoch, but the old Constitution and the political order had to die so that another model could be created. On this he could not be dissuaded, he told his adversaries. He had an immediate and audacious plan to deal with the inherited crisis. The President announced that a good part of the armed forces would leave their barracks and head to the barrios and the streets, this time not with tanks and machineguns but with shovels and stethoscopes, to help the people under Plan Simon Bolivar. On February 27, a decade after the spontaneous civilian uprising in Caracas that the military put down with innumerable killings, the army was ordered out on to the streets on the side of the civilians, to regain the trust and honour they had lost a decade earlier.

There were disagreements in the U.S. foreign policy establishment on what exactly Chavez represented but the grudging admiration for him in the diplomatic cable of February 9, 1999, from the embassy in Caracas comes to the surface:

"No Venezuelan president has brought such expectation to office. No Venezuelan president has set such a high standard for himself and his administration. No Venezuelan president has ever anticipated such dire results should he fail. Given this, Chavez's (sic) is off to a decent start... Chavez's three-day inaugural celebration was dramatic. His energy, and willingness to speak endlessly... was in marked contrast to the aged president Caldera. Not since Carlos Andres Perez's 1989 inauguration had Venezuelans seen a President with such a commanding presence. But Chavez's inauguration was unique in several ways. First, it was a popular celebration. The crowds massed around the Congress, and the crowds which awaited Chavez... for his public speech, offered large and vociferous evidence that Chavez is a political celebrity whose persona and message resonate deeply among the Venezuelan people. Second, Chavez's call for forgiveness and his challenge to Venezuelans to

improve themselves and to get to work was innovative political rhetoric to which all Venezuelans responded. It marked Chavez as different. Chavez's inauguration has left little doubt about who is President, electrified Venezuelans, and dealt a blow to the solar plexus of his adversaries, leaving them, for the moment, gasping and bent over. Meanwhile, Chavez, aware that he must capitalize on his momentum, is putting in eighteen hour days working on constitutional and economic reform and molding his government."

Another embassy despatch sums up his first five weeks in office. The tone is almost affectionate but towards the end there are forebodings of possible friction:

"President Hugo Chavez's first five weeks in office have been characterized by dramatic and confrontational advancement of his agenda of political and institutional change, administrative fumbling as he attempts to install his governing team, and continuity of economic policy from the Caldera administration... his popularity continues to grow with each slashing attack against traditional political parties and corrupt practices. Chavez's greatest threat comes not from his political enemies, but from an economy which cannot pay the government's bills, generate employment, or provide the additional revenue necessary to address pressing social needs. The first five weeks like Pecos Bill (an American cowboy character) riding the tornado, President Hugo Chavez has strapped himself to the back of Venezuelan democracy and vowed to ride it towards profound political and institutional change... Chavez has pushed his agenda in a pugnacious and confrontational fashion.

"Chavez was elected to bring about significant political change in Venezuela. He understands that he is the consequence, and not the cause, of change in Venezuela. He also understands that his political agenda is moving through a narrowing economic

space. He might not be able to complete his immediate political agenda before he is caught in an economy in deep crisis. However, he intends to get as far along the path of political change as possible. At the least, he hopes to have a constitutional assembly in place that supports his political agenda.”

There would be problems with Chavez, the cable concluded, “around the issue of the constitutional assembly. We still have several months to work on him regarding the means of establishing an assembly, should he continue to maintain his lead in the polls and win the elections.”

The referendum for a constituent assembly on April 25, 1999, was marked by an abstention of 60%. In the elections to the assembly, the Chavistas took more than 90% of the seats and, once installed, it moved swiftly to curb the powers of the existing Congress and remove corrupt judges. The people were encouraged to offer their suggestions and assembly members fanned out all over the country to hear them. The new Constitution was not drafted by a committee of experts alone; it incorporated some of the thousands of suggestions that the people put forward in neighbourhood meetings. Once the Constitution was finalised, it was put to popular vote in December and ratified by more than 70% of the voters on a much higher turnout. The Fifth Republic was born. Chavez put in his papers to the constituent assembly while it was debating the new Constitution and in 2000 he faced another election against his old comrade, Francis Arias Cardenas, who had fallen out with him. Towards the end of his life, the two old friends made up and Cardenas has returned to the Chavista fold. The Constitution has been part of political debates ever since. It comes in all shapes and sizes, from a pocket edition to an illustrated one for schoolchildren and has in some years topped the bestselling list.

Venezuelans claim it is the most advanced Constitution in the world and, though that can be put down to nationalist pride, there are certain striking provisions in it. It invokes Bolivar and the indigenous pre-Columbian civilisation in the preamble: “The people of Venezuela, exercising their powers of creation and invoking the protection of God, the historic example of our Liberator Simon

Bolivar and the heroism and sacrifice of our aboriginal ancestors and the forerunners and founders of a free and sovereign nation..." It forbids: foreign military bases or facilities on Venezuelan soil, forcible military recruitment, toxic and hazardous waste from entering the country, manufacture and use of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, discrimination based on social standing, defence on grounds of following the orders of a superior when it violates constitutional rights, forced disappearances even during a state of emergency, and monopolies, speculation, hoarding, usury and cartels and the predominance of large land estates.

It guarantees: justice free of charge, punishment for human rights offences by the authorities, reparations for victims of such abuse on part of the state and the participation of people in managing public affairs. It allows for referendum if the President or Assembly or if 10% of all voters want one. It allows for revoking the terms of the President, magistrates and other offices based on popular vote through a referendum if the recall votes are more than that originally polled. It recognises the family as a "natural association in society and as the fundamental space for the overall development of persons". It protects "motherhood and fatherhood" from "the moment of conception, throughout pregnancy, delivery and the puerperal period". It also guarantees the right to "adequate, safe and comfortable, hygienic housing... to humanise family, neighbourhood and community relations", recognises health as a "fundamental social right and the responsibility of the State" which then "creates, exercises guidance over and administers a national public health system that crosses sector boundaries... governed by the principles of gratuity, universality, completeness, fairness, social integration and solidarity". It puts water in public ownership. It recognises work as a "social fact" that enjoys the protection of the state. It makes labour rights "inalienable"; says that "in labour relations, reality shall prevail over forms or appearances" and "when there are doubts concerning application or conflicts among several rules, or in the interpretation of a particular rule, that most favourable to the worker shall be applied". For some reason, Spanish geography and history are also compulsory subjects in education and the Constitution says, "The folk cultures comprising the national identity of Venezuela enjoy special attention". The Bolivarian Constitution is generous in recognising the rights of the indigenous people. It recognises their

"social, political and economic organization... cultures, practices and customs, languages and religions, as well as their habitat and original rights to the lands they ancestrally and traditionally occupy", gives them the "right to maintain and promote their own economic practices based on reciprocity, solidarity and exchange" and guarantees the "collective intellectual property rights in the knowledge, technologies and innovations of native peoples".

Chavez could not savour the triumph of the new Constitution. It had been raining steadily in December, which is a dry season in the country. On Venezuela's coast near Caracas, the mountains rise almost alongside the beaches. By the afternoon of December 15, the mountains had received so much water that they started crumbling. The mud, the water and huge boulders headed for Vargas state bordering Caracas at a ferocious speed and carried away cars, entire housing blocks and thousands of people with it to the sea. The dormitory town was reduced to rubble on a "day the mountain advanced up to the sea". That night, the President was in crisis mode in the palace and did not appear on television to celebrate his victory. The opposition spread the rumour that Chavez was on one of the islands drinking the night away with Fidel Castro. The Armed Forces, already working on Plan Bolivar, moved in early. The next morning, the President made a dangerous helicopter trip to Vargas as heavy clouds came down from the hills and he personally took charge of the rescue operation. It is still not known how many people died in the landslides. Thousands of bodies were buried forever in the thick mud but the figure of 15,000 is most commonly mentioned. Foreign observers were impressed with the quality of the relief and rescue work. Behind his back, the Defence Minister had requested the United States to send ships and soldiers to help with the relief. When Chavez learnt of it, he told the Defence Minister he would be sacked the day the situation improved and had to tell President Clinton that Venezuela would not accept foreign military help.

A multitude of dispossessed Venezuelans thronged the gates of the presidential palace crying out for basics like food, schooling for the children, medicines and shelter denied to them in the previous administrations. Chavez himself opened up direct communication with his people through 'Alo Presidente' (Hello President), a weekly radio programme that quickly switched to television where



listeners could call him with their problems and he would try to sort them out. Workers pleaded with him to get back their pension funds robbed by the bosses, youth organisations wanted books from the state to distribute to poor students and peasants were phoning in to say they were being hunted down by landowners. His administration was almost penniless; the only way he could lay his hands on more money to meet all these urgent needs was if the oil prices were to increase and PDVSA, which was behaving like a state within a state and not contributing enough to the national treasury, were to come under state control. First, he set about reviving OPEC that had become almost defunct. Venezuela was the worst quota buster of them all, keeping oil prices down. His confidant Ali Rodriguez, a former guerrilla leader, was elected OPEC secretary and the President started visiting the member nations to call them to a special conference in Caracas in September 2000. One of his destinations was Saddam Hussein's Iraq, an OPEC member, where he called for an end to sanctions against the country. The Americans were livid but domestic public opinion was behind him. From his first presidential speech, Chavez had emphasised regaining the self-esteem the Venezuelans had lost and the sight of the exotic Arab delegations arriving in Caracas impressed the local population. At this time, the Venezuelan President started attracting attention from the anti-globalisation groups. He was beginning to speak their language. Because he was not an Arab, the feuding Gulf nations had no reason to suspect him of taking sides and he convinced them to stick to the quota norms, promising them that Venezuela would set an example. Saudi Arabia had the largest delegation. Chavez quoted Napoleon to the visitors, telling them that just as the French emperor had exhorted his troops to triumph in Egypt and become part of four thousand years of history, OPEC should take the historic step of sticking together and fighting for higher oil prices. If the West doesn't like high oil prices, why don't they sell us their products for less? he asked at the summit and the Arab oil producing nations were pleased to hear it.

Days after the Arabs had left, and much to the fury of the Americans, Fidel Castro was in Caracas in October 2000. The Cuban leader's first visit outside Cuba was to Caracas in 1959 when he was greeted by large adoring crowds and when he first met the Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda, who recited his poem on Bolivar. Forty years later, he came for Chavez's presidential swearing-in.

Unhappy with the bourgeois types dotting on the newly-elected Chavez, he came up to him, told him with characteristic sarcasm, "so is this what the Fifth Republic is all about" and dropped out of sight. The third visit went off much better. The two Presidents travelled to Sabaneta, where Fidel said with some prescience that people would visit the town one day to see where Chavez was born, played a game of baseball and travelled through the Amazonian forests in a canoe. They appeared together in an 'Alo Presidente' which was renamed on that occasion as 'Alo Presidentes', in which they discussed the military strategies of Bolivar and Jose Marti, the Cuban independence hero, and climate change. The two countries signed an agreement to provide Cuba, reeling from the collapse of the Soviet Union, its main trading partner, with a third of its oil needs on preferential terms and Havana agreed to repay part of it with goods and services, specifically by sending Cuban doctors to Venezuela. Seeing Chavez's workload, Fidel had to remind him that he was not the mayor of Venezuela and that he needed to delegate responsibilities. The two reminded their people of their shared history through Bolivar and Marti and the idea of continental integration. They became closer friends in the years to come and when Chavez died, Fidel called him the best friend Cuba had ever had and that "he (Chavez) himself did not know how great he was".

In 2001, Chavez struggled with the little money his government had to set things right. He focused on education, building new Bolivarian schools, repairing existing ones and preventing schools from taking money from students. Hundreds of thousands of poor children, who had left school for work, began returning to the classrooms, now that free food was being offered to them. His government built libraries and playgrounds in the poorer areas. The new government tried improving the rundown state hospitals. In between, he tried to shore up international alliances. He travelled to Quebec, Canada, where the United States and Canada had invited the Latin American heads of State to create what they hoped would be the world's largest free trade zone. The Latin American leaders were not convinced but none dared to publicly oppose the idea, except Chavez. His enemies at home were regrouping to take him down and his stance at Quebec convinced the Americans that the Venezuelan President could not be tolerated for one more day. That view was reinforced after the United States attacked Afghanistan. Within days of the first U.S. bombings,

Chavez went on television to say that while it was necessary to fight terrorism, it should not be countered with more terror. He held up pictures of Afghan children killed in the bombings and asked the USA to mend its ways. The Americans were furious and recalled their ambassador. They sent her back with a letter that she was to read to him asking him to publicly retract his statements. When she met him and started reading the letter, visibly nervous, Chavez told her she was speaking to the head of a state and that if she could not understand that, she better leave the room. The ambassador had not anticipated the response. She asked permission to read the rest of the letter and then left. That year, Chavez lost two important domestic battles. He tried to clean up the state schools that would allow the government to get rid of corrupt and slack teachers but parents from the richer eastern part of Caracas took to the streets, many for the first time in their lives, arguing that this was a plot to indoctrinate their children. Chavez was forced to back off. His second defeat was in the elections of the national trade union group CTV that was controlled by his adversaries. They did not want elections and, when it happened, defeated the Chavista candidate. The old order sensed that the President was weak and that it was time to get rid of him.

Leading the charge against the government were the media houses, each more hostile than the other. Initially, the television stations were welcoming of Chavez. They were owned by some of the richest men in the country with strong business links to the United States. Among them was Gustavo Cisneros, owner of Venevision, which has the highest audience ratings. Cisneros, a billionaire in the Forbes rich list, has like the world's second richest man, Carlos Slim of Mexico, powerful media presence all over the continent. The other controversial television station was Globovision, a complete stranger to truth, a ferocious critic of Chavez and an active participant in the coup of 2002 and every other attempt to topple the government. The third major national television station was RCTV, set up by an American ornithologist and businessman, William H. Phelps, and his son Phelps Jr. who was born in Venezuela and followed his father's footsteps as entrepreneur and ornithologist. Marciel Garnier, who married into the Phelps family, inherited their business empire. The regional television stations were almost equally hostile as were the radio stations, not all of which were legal either. Union Radio, a chain of

AM and FM stations, commands the largest radio share and, though it provides airtime to pro-Chavez views, loses no opportunity in attacking the revolution. With the major circulation among the newspapers was *Ultimas Noticias*, then owned by the wealthy Capriles family who also controlled several other sports and regional newspapers. *El Nacional* was the other popular family-owned newspaper which had the reputation of defending human rights and was in 1961 almost driven to bankruptcy after an advertising boycott for siding with the Leftists and taking on the state. It formed a generation of Venezuelan writers and journalists and its editor, Miguel Otero Silva, was a member of the Communist Party at one time. By the time of the Fifth Republic, the editor was Miguel's son, Miguel Henrique Otero, who inherited the business but not his father's politics. He initially sought business favours from Chavez and turned into a fierce critic after being rebuffed. He earned the nickname of "bobolongo" (a worthless fool) from Teodoro Petkoff, born to a Bulgarian father and a Polish mother who had emigrated to Venezuela. Petkoff, once a Communist guerrilla, had made his peace with the government and drifted to becoming an ideologue of neo-liberalism and was a Minister in the government of Rafael Caldera. He founded the newspaper *Tal Cual* that has always been hostile to Chavez and the revolution.

The commercial media developed a dangerous mindset. Chavez was so dangerous that journalists could no longer afford to be impartial. The media would no longer publish information judged by the normal standards of journalistic ethics. News would be published, or not, only if it contributed to overthrowing the government. It no longer had to be confirmed, be newsworthy or even be true; only did it do enough to show the President in a poor light? The media became a trick mirror, showing bits of the reality that it deemed useful. The new philosophy induced deep paranoia in society, a mass blindness, but its principal victims were the opposition supporters. It blinded them to the changing reality of the country, the support that the government had and that they were a minority movement. One opposition journalist admitted, "We didn't manage to overthrow the bastard: all we did was fatally undermine our own ability to understand the society we live in, to "think straight" about the political moment, and to agree on strategies of resistance that make sense." Chavez tried to drill some sense into the media owners, to end the manipulation and

the "irrational criticism" as he called it, but without any effect. When a newspaper published a front-page photograph of an empty refrigerator with the headline, There's no food, Chavez asked its owners why they were more interested in exploiting the problems than trying to help those who were going hungry. But the media remained fixated with bringing him down, and behind the campaign was the support of the bosses of the petroleum industry.

A curious friendship blossomed among the Catholic Church, big business and the trade union establishment aimed at bringing down the government. The Church hierarchy had never taken kindly to Chavez, not even when he was a presidential candidate. The archbishops warned of an apocalypse under the new President. Unsurprisingly, in a country where more than 90% of the population practises Catholicism, the Church has an important influence on public perception. It had its own dirty secrets such as paedophilia and corruption and had never recovered its influence on the state that it had lost a century ago under Juan Vicente Gomez, successor to and betrayer of Simon Bolivar. The Jesuits were the most active among the Church in building an anti-Chavez alliance. They offered their establishments for hosting discreet meetings with the business and trade union leaders and the rector of at least one Catholic university, which caters to wealthy students, played a more public role in cementing this new grouping.

The anti-Bolivarian leadership of CTV (Confederation of Venezuelan Workers) was in the hands of Carlos Ortega, the son of a Colombian father and Venezuelan mother who worked – or at least was employed in – the petroleum industry at the time of the standoff with Chavez. Trade unions in Venezuela became powerful during the time of Democratic Action governments which used them to develop a complicated system of patronage and control. A big part of the movement, especially in the construction and in the heavy industries sector in the state of Guyana, was involved in extortion rackets. Within the trade unions, it was a norm that female workers had to provide sexual favours to their leaders if they were to achieve their rights such as fixed employment. The CTV worked on a "consensus" approach. Every five years, it held its conference and rubber stamped the leaders named by the trade union bosses. The two major parties had a consensus about sharing posts and

the government; capital and labour had a consensus in which the CTV leadership decided on pay rises in a meeting with business leaders and the government. During Caldera's presidency, they looked the other way when state-owned enterprises were run to ground and the workers robbed of their savings. The businesses paid a part of the union costs and this made the union leadership amenable to the bosses. The unions had quotas in the hiring of workers who had to fork out money for getting a job. This created armed trade union mafias fighting over money and contributing to a large number of murders. The Chavistas were divided on whether to work within CTV or set up a different trade union organisation. The new government forced CTV to hold elections that were marked by an abstention of between 60-70%, violence and allegations of fraud. The Chavista candidate lost but the basis had been laid for a Chavista trade union movement. The newly elected CTV head, Carlos Ortega, moved to forging close ties with big business and became an active participant in the coup of April 2002. The CTV had old ties with AFL-CIO, an American trade union that has always closely worked with the government in containing Left-wing movements in Latin America and the rest of the world. The CTV was an active participant in the U.S. flow of funds to anti-Sandinista fighters in Nicaragua during the revolution there. It could hardly sit still when its own interests were threatened at home.

The third part of this troika was big capital represented by business federations like Fedecamaras and by one man in particular, Pedro Carmona, who had negotiated with the Chavez administration at first but broke off negotiations later with him. The American embassy in Caracas spoke of Carmona as a business leader of great prestige and influence who had always supported U.S. interests in Venezuela. Diplomatic cables from the U.S. embassy spoke of him as the right man for the right moment. When Carmona travelled to the United States weeks before the coup, the Caracas embassy made sure that he had ready audiences with the top State Department officials. There were other disgruntled groups like serving and retired army officers who were willing to provide the muscle power for ousting Chavez. The Chavez government had asked the U.S. military to move its unit out of Fuerte Tiuna but the Americans took their time, doing so only after four years. Meanwhile, it used its training programmes to keep in touch with

high-ranking military officers, one of whom was Chavez's first Defence Minister. The National Endowment for Democracy, a bipartisan quango created by the U.S. Congress, increased its funding for Venezuela ten-fold in 2001 compared to a year earlier

Hovering behind the domestic actors was the United States, moving its pieces in Venezuela. There is an old joke in Latin America that the USA has never had a coup because it does not have an American embassy on its soil. Whereas the Clinton administration was undecided on whether to mount a coup or engage with Chavez, George W. Bush was clear that this Venezuelan nuisance had to be sorted out. In 2001, the U.S. embassy hosted anyone inimical to Chavez and, if it did not explicitly tell them what to do, at least worked as a midwife for the new alliance of the Right. Bush's Latin American policy was a throwback to the Reagan years, and that of earlier presidencies, whether Republic or Democrat, when inconvenient Latin American governments were violently overthrown. Bush Jr. brought into his administration some of the old discredited Reagan hands, reinstating people like Otto Reich, diplomat and arms lobbyist, Elliot Abrams, architect of the U.S. dirty wars in Central America and a close associate of Col. Oliver North of the Iran-Contra affair, and John D. Negroponte who was in Honduras when the 'Contras' were armed and financed to sow terror in Nicaragua to defeat the Sandinista revolution. Bush appointed Charles Shapiro, who had cut his teeth in El Salvador, as ambassador in Caracas. Overthrowing Chavez should not have been a problem. The United States had ample experience of getting rid of democratically elected governments in Latin America and the Caribbean islands with a mix of subversion, sponsored civil unrest and invasion when necessary. Its list of casualties included: Cheddi Jagan of Guyana, who was forced to resign in 1953 after a CIA-backed British intervention, Jacobo Arbenz of Guatemala, who was taken out by force in 1954, Juan Bosch of the Dominican Republic, who was overthrown in a U.S.-supported coup in 1963 and died in 2001 just as Chavez was facing a similar danger, Salvador Allende of Chile ousted in a military coup in 1973, Maurice Bishop of Granada, shot dead by a firing squad in 1983, Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua, first subjected to a brutal insurgency and then defeated in an election in 1990 in which the USA actively intervened, and Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the Haitian priest and president who was ousted in a

military coup in 2004. In between, the United States had helped install military dictatorships in Brazil and Argentina.

Common to almost all these leaders, but especially with Arbenz and Juan Bosch, was their attempt at land reform or challenging the powers of the economically powerful classes. As if in a repeat, Chavez made use of the “enabling laws” given to him by Parliament (which enables the President to create new laws, a common practice in Latin America) to issue 49 decrees in November 2001 that tried to reform land holding in which 1-2% of the population owned 60% of the best land. Much of the land was occupied by violence and by bribing officials and kept fallow, serving as a country retreat for the wealthy elite who flew in during weekends for their parties while ill-paid farm workers looked after the estate. The Caracas elite raised the outcry that this was an attack on private property. They should not have been surprised. Chavez had argued that Venezuela needed to become self-sufficient in food and drew inspiration from the peasant guerrilla Zamora whose slogan was ‘free land and free people’. The other important decree related to PDVSA, which made it obligatory for the company to have at least a 51% share in all joint ventures. The royalties to the state were increased from 16.7% to 30%. In 1981 the state received 7 cents a dollar from every barrel of oil; in 2000 it was only 3.9 cents. The decree outlawed the privatisation of the country’s oil industry. Another decree pushed back mechanised trawling from Venezuelan waters.

The local elites decided that they had had enough; it was time for Chavez to go. Big business, the Church, CTV, disgruntled soldiers, the media and “apolitical” non-governmental organisations rallied together as some Chavista leaders defected to their side. Generals, business tycoons, political leaders, trade union leaders and civil service bigwigs flocked to the Caracas embassy, which had never been busier. In 2001, as Eva Golinger, the Venezuelan-American attorney and author of *The Chavez Code*, a book that lays bare U.S. patronage of the coup, later found out, dollars began to flow into Venezuela through the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). They put their expertise and money at the service of anti-Bolivarian “civil society” groups. Washington had realised that the old parties would not be



up to the job and they focussed on a new youthful party, Primero Justicia (Justice First, PJ), to lead the charge against the President. The party, PJ, was formed with a multi-million dollar cheque from PDVSA just before Chavez came to power, a gift to Leopoldo Lopez, a prominent leader of the new party, from his mother who worked in the petroleum company. Lopez and his political partners were young men from wealthy Venezuelan families and, in their brief political lives, had won some important electoral victories in the wealthier parts of Caracas and its surrounding regions. Experts from NED, USAID and IRI trained them to step into the vacuum left by the old discredited opposition parties. Their party, PJ, was neo-liberal and willing to step outside the bounds of legality. The Americans also generously contributed to any "civil society" group that wanted to oppose Chavez with dollars and with training on overthrowing the government. The USA had notched up an easy victory against Slobodan Milosevic in Yugoslavia and the experience of the Gene Sharp-inspired method of using non-military means of harassing governments hostile to the West was put into practice in Venezuela.

The groundwork was being laid for taking out Chavez by force. The opposition thought his popularity was slipping and that the people were turning against him. In Washington, the National Security Agency, the Pentagon and the State Department held a two-day meeting to fine-tune U.S. policy towards Venezuela. The opposition floated the idea that Chavez was mentally ill, and leaders of Democratic Action asked the Supreme Court to investigate the President for insanity, which was turned down. The international media picked up on the story at once. The President had to be discredited if he was to be defeated by unorthodox – and undemocratic – methods and Chavez's enemies were confident they could unseat him this time. The character assassination preceded the actual attempt to kill him.



## CHAPTER VI

### Timeline of A Coup Foretold

After Hugo Chavez had signed the enabling laws, the wealthier Venezuelans, the executives of the petroleum industry and the traditional parties were impatient for him to go and were prepared to use any means for it. They estimated that the stridency of the Bush administration would make it impossible for him to survive. They also overestimated their strength, having swallowed their own media propaganda. The coup, when it finally came, did not happen because a group of soldiers suddenly emerged from the shadows to bring down the President. The military top brass took position against the constitutionally elected President after political tension had reached breaking point. The weeks of confrontation preceding that were neither spontaneous nor leaderless. There were increasingly bitter skirmishes from the end of 2001 and events moved almost daily from that point.

**December 10, 2001:** The first step towards the ousting of Chavez was the general strike called on Monday by the unusual coalition of business groups, trade unions and the Catholic Church, which found enthusiastic support in the media. That day provided the first glimpse of two Venezuelas. Shops and businesses remained closed in the affluent parts of the city but functioned more or less normally in the barrios. In mixed neighbourhoods, shops stayed open for a part of the day and then shuttered down to please both sides. Soldiers kept guard in Caracas while wealthy Venezuelans took to the streets, most of them for the first time in their lives, in their branded clothes and expensive sunglasses, sweating Chanel, as the Chavistas joked. It was Air Force day and fighter aircraft flew in formation over Caracas. Chavez signed the land reform law at the site of the Battle of Santa Ines, where Zamora as the leader of peasant guerrillas had defeated the army of the conservative landowners. The strike was the first major skirmish between the two sides and a turning point early in the new century. The opposition had decided to take down Chavez using all possible means: that could only mean a coup, but it was not a typical military takeover. Instead, the opposition put into practice a more sophisticated operation with a broad civilian alliance supported by

the mainstream media, creating a chaotic situation through marches, strikes and street violence into which the Armed Forces would step in to “rescue” the country.

It was necessary to create public opinion that Chavez was a dangerous and demented man who was ruining Venezuela economically and installing a Cuban-style Communist dictatorship. The next step was to encourage the middle class to join the traditional elites against Chavez, knowing that the poor still supported him, encourage desertions from the Chavez camp, use the media to create the impression that the government was not going to survive, work on soldiers to turn them against the regime and engineer a decisive “event”, euphemism for a civilian massacre, for which Chavez could be blamed and ousted from power. Meanwhile, over the next few months, the two sides measured their forces with street mobilisations.

**December 17:** Chavez called on the Bolivarian circles for a huge national rally in Caracas and asked them to mobilise urgently. Some of his closest advisers asked him to relent and moderate his programme of government. One of them, his political mentor Luis Miquilena, told the Cuban ambassador, “Either he moderates his policies or the Bolivarian government goes: simple as that”. Chavez refused, saying he was not in the business of running a reformist government or betraying the poor.

**January 1, 2002:** The President signed the law of hydrocarbons at the site of Petrolio de Tachira, Venezuela’s first oil drilling well. The elites were incensed and the middle class began to have doubts.

**January 23:** This was a symbolic day when the military dictatorship was defeated in 1958. There were equally large marches on either side that came close to each other but the rival demonstrators traded nothing more than insults. By this stage, some Chavista legislators and judges loyal to Miquilena had switched sides; the first of the defections had begun.

**February 4:** On the day of the military uprising in 1992 that had propelled Chavez to national attention, there was a huge march in Caracas. The people seemed to understand the approaching

danger better than Chavez. He warned the opposition against any adventure, asking them to descend "from the cloud". His allies were telling him that the streets were rife with rumours of a coup. One of them reminded him on television that the Spanish Republic was defeated more by the fifth column than Franco's forces. "Let us not overestimate the barking of the dogs. There will be no coup here," the President told him; the country was as far from a coup as "from here to the Sun". He was sounding as complacent as Carlos Andres Perez did on the night of the military insurrection that Chavez led against him. What made him ignore the danger from the massing forces? Chavez underestimated the power and the reach of the opposition. He overestimated the loyalty of the armed forces. He was from the military and thought he knew the institution inside out. He had kept to institutional conventions, promoting officers on the basis of seniority. They swore loyalty to him in return but betrayed him nevertheless. His military intelligence was either deficient or they were misleading him.

**February 7:** The first military desertions were announced at the office of El Nacional, the newspaper that once supported Chavez but had turned against him after he refused to give them loans to build a luxury hotel.

**February 13:** Chavez sacked the majority of the board of the petroleum company, PDVSA, which had been developing links with disgruntled military officers, accusing them of running down the company and awarding themselves obscene levels of perks and salaries. The top executives earned something like \$24,000 a month, 150 times more than the average worker. He spoke of their chalets in the Andes where whisky and champagne flowed. The hen that laid the golden eggs for Venezuela was eating up most of them, he told the country.

**February 18:** Rear Admiral Carlos Molina Tamayo, secretary of the national defence and security council, who was to be posted to Greece as an ambassador (perhaps because the government had got wind of his activities), openly called for Chavez's resignation. This was necessary to prevent "the imminent possibility of unnecessary bloodshed" that was apparently to be instigated by the Bolivarian circles, the Navy officer claimed. Aware of Molina Tamayo's limited intellectual capacities, many thought others (the

Americans) had crafted his speech. He said Chavez was endangering relations with the traditional allies (the USA); the President had links with Colombian guerrillas; he had polarised the country and politicised and Cubanised the armed forces. It later emerged that the Rear Admiral was paid \$100,000 for speaking out against Chavez. At about the same time, Colin Powell, Secretary of the U.S. State Department, and George Tenet, CIA chief, questioned Chavez's democratic credentials and said he was acting against U.S. interests. The media hugely played up these comments and for many affluent Venezuelans used to a lifetime of holidaying in Florida and shopping in Miami, it was a sure sign that the Americans were telling them that the regime had to be defeated here and now.

**February 25:** The petroleum company executives struck back with a media blitz against the reorganisation. The President's mortal combat with the national oil company turned out to be the spark that lit the fire. The Venezuelan middle classes had long believed that the PDVSA held their country's economy together; for them, any attempt at state control was the first step towards a totalitarian regime and economic ruin. In their way of thinking, PDVSA was Venezuela. The offensive against the petroleum executives made up the minds of thousands of Venezuelans to flock to opposition marches. A new U.S. ambassador, Charles Shapiro, reached Caracas and quickly got down to meeting opposition leaders and the media owners. Shapiro had form: he was in the U.S. embassy in Chile at the time of the coup against the democratically elected President Salvador Allende in 1973.

**February 27:** On the anniversary of the Caracas killings of 1989, the opposition marched past the National Assembly. Many of the demonstrators were dressed in black and shouting 'there's nothing to celebrate' while the Chavistas marched in the opposition part of the city. This was the last time the two sides publicly measured their forces before the coup.

**March 5:** The Catholic Church brokered an agreement between the business leaders represented by Fedecamaras and workers in the CTV trade union to topple the government. The same day, the CIA station in Caracas sent a report to Washington saying that a coup would not be easy to organise as the opposition leaders were

fighting among themselves and they did not have a common strategy.

**March 6:** The PDVSA executives drew up a 125-point plan to confront the new board. They were looking for allies and to buy time while pretending to negotiate with the new board.

**April 4-5:** The PDVSA managers announced they were pulling out of the negotiations. They began shutting down the company. Thousands of white collar employees stayed away from work and closed the gates of the oil installations. Two of the five main oil export terminals were paralysed.

**April 6:** The CIA sent a report saying that a coup was in progress and suggested that the opposition needed to exploit violence during the street demonstrations to effect a coup. They lacked "political cover" for a coup, the report said. The diplomatic cable mentioned that Chavez and ten other high officials would be arrested. As Eva Gollinger says in her book, *The Chavez Code*, the depth of details in the cable can only mean the CIA not only knew of what was to happen but also that it must have been involved in the events. The same day, the CTV called for a day's general strike on April 9.

**April 7:** Chavez decreed pay increases and, in a televised address, sacked some of the PDVSA directors, blowing on a referee's whistle, calling out their names, dismissing them while saying "offside" and giving them "many thanks for your services". This was an intolerable insult for his enemies; never in their lives had they been humiliated in public. Chavez mentioned for the first time the "subversive attitude" among his opponents and spoke of the "decomposition" of the media but played down the prospects of any "adventure". Fedecamaras and PDVSA supported CTV's strike call, saying the strikers would receive their salaries. This was an illegal strike without any labour demands. The CTV said the government had just "committed suicide". The President summoned the military high command to the presidential palace that night and asked them if they were ready with the emergency plan to safeguard Caracas. Traditionally, this has been codenamed 'Plan Avila', named after the mountain that rings the city. The General in charge of the plan, Manuel Rosendo, told the President he was fully prepared. In

reality, he was one of the coup leaders working behind the scenes but he liked playing both sides. For some time now, pro-Chavez officers were being transferred from Caracas to the Colombian borders and told to hold mock drills of a war with Colombia. When they asked their superiors about the strange timing of the drills with such a volatile internal situation, they were not given any explanation and instead told to follow orders.

**April 8:** There was a mix-up of identity at a luxury hotel that showed that the Americans were, in fact, planning to provide military backup for the coup. The diplomatic corps in Caracas had been invited to the Chinese military attaché's farewell party. A group of Venezuelan Navy officers was standing in a circle in their shiny white uniforms when an American Marine officer, David H. Cazares, approached them and let out a friendly greeting to lighten the mood, "Hello, white mafia". In the group he spotted an Army General identified by his badge as 'Gonzalez', deputy director of the Defence Institute for Higher Studies. Cazares went up to Gonzalez and asked him why he hadn't been in touch yet about the three boats and the submarine the United States had kept ready off Guaira, the county's main port just outside Caracas. This had an operational cost, he told Gonzalez, who replied that he would have to ask his superiors. Cazares had confused the General with his brother with the same surname who was part of the conspiracy. Meanwhile, the Cuban embassy summoned its officials and reassigned them to three points for their protection. When the ambassador called up Cubans working in the health clinics asking them to take precaution, they told him they felt protected by the people. As the Cubans left the embassy, an opposition journalist fed the lie they were carrying suitcases with weapons to hand them out to the Chavistas.

**April 9:** The CTV asked Chavez to take back the laws he had promulgated and reinstate the dismissed PDVSA directors. The strike was only about 30% successful in Caracas and other major cities though private televisions went all out to support it. Newspaper failed to appear and private television channels carried anti-government messages in the guise of "public service advertisements". They gave back-to-back coverage of the strike, failing to report from places where it had had no impact. That was left for the state television, VTV, to report but it had a limited



audience share. The private television talk shows were occupied by virulent anti-Chavista commentators. At the bottom of the screen, they scrolled the message of 'Not one step back', a call made famous by the mothers of Argentines 'disappeared' by the military dictatorship. At the main plaza in Buenos Aires this unlikely group of women, armed with nothing more dangerous than white handkerchiefs, defied the military at the height of the terror, demanding to know the whereabouts of their missing children. Opposition supporters gathered outside the PDVSA headquarters shouting, 'Not one step back'. The strike was extended by another day. The Cuban ambassador called the President who told him he had not asked for counter-mobilisations to avoid bloodshed. The strike was petering out, Chavez said, and we don't want to give them a pretext for violence. The Cuban embassy and the ambassador's residence were attacked that night with Molotov cocktails and shots rang out after dark. At night, Chavez spoke to his supporters outside the palace and told them the military was with the government.

**April 10:** The strike was faltering but the private channels would not show it. When the President invoked powers that allowed for mandatory transmission, called *cadena* (chain), the television stations parted their screen in half, an illegal act, but it allowed them to continue with their propaganda. The CTV now called for an indefinite general strike. The U.S. ambassador went to the offices of the Caracas mayor, Alfredo Peña, a one-time Communist who was now a key member of the opposition. While reporters waited outside to ask questions of the ambassador, an embassy official approached them and spoke of Chavez in the past tense, saying he had had time to rectify but did not. When Shapiro came out, the reporters asked him if his country still supported the Chavez government. We support democracy, he answered, telling them that if Chavez didn't govern as a democrat, he would have to leave sooner rather than later. While the Chavez supporters had not formally called for any counter- demonstration, thousands of them gathered around the presidential palace.

The opposition announced a big march for the next day. The Cuban embassy sent a message to Chavez saying that a coup would be organised within the next 24 to 48 hours. The television channels started running advertisements every ten minutes exhorting the

people to join the march. Chavez was due to go to Costa Rica the next day for a summit of the Organisation of American States but that night another General went on television calling for the President to resign; if not, "he will see what happens". His television appearance was intended to make sure that Chavez cancelled his visit so that the coup could go ahead. When a reporter asked the General if he was calling for a coup, he responded with an enigmatic smile and did not deny it. That night at a meeting of the Council of Ministers at the palace, top Generals kept unusually quiet and seemed to look uncomfortable. The Defence Minister went on air to say the indefinite strike was a leap into the unknown and an act of "unlimited stupidity". The CNN correspondent in Caracas, Otto Neustald, received a call from a local television colleague, telling him the march would proceed to the palace the next day, that there would be deaths and that 20 high-ranking soldiers would demand the President's resignation. As night fell, thousands of Chavez supporters from the hills around Caracas made their way to Miraflores to throw a ring around the presidential palace and defend their President.

**April 11, morning:** The major dailies came out with screaming headlines like 'Total conflict' and 'The final battle will be in Miraflores'. The non-stop television advertisements had had their effect. Thousands of people in the wealthier eastern part of Caracas, whole families together, headed for the PDVSA headquarters. The gathering was immense, about half a million strong. Many in the crowd were shouting, "Today is the day". What they left unspoken — that there would be a coup sometime during the day — was not a secret to anybody. The mood among the crowd was a mix of rage and triumphant ecstasy. The moment they had been waiting for, the fall of Chavez, they sensed was only hours away.

**Mid-day to late afternoon:** The U.S. ambassador had been invited to a lunch in his honour hosted by Gustavo Cisneros, the wealthiest Venezuelan and owner of Venevision television, at the latter's luxury home in the country club. The other guests were religious leaders, including the leading lights of the Catholic Church, media owners and defectors from the Chavez camp. The guests kept up with the unfolding events on a giant television screen as they sipped quality whiskey and champagne. At 1 p.m.

they got wind that the plan for the coup was to be activated. Cisneros and his guest left for his television station.

Outside the PDVSA headquarters, the opposition had set up a big platform. Carlos Ortega, the CTV boss, went on stage and called on the crowd to march to the palace. This was met by a loud roar from the hundreds of thousands of people gathered there. As the government found out of this change of route and plan, the Defence Minister, Jose Vicente Rangel, who was a leading journalist with his own television show before he took up the post, called up the television owners. They listened to him and promised to use their influence to detain the plan. In reality, they did nothing as they were very much part of the plan. Caracas was witnessing the world's first media coup. A senior army officer, Lucas Rincon, called up the head of the business association Fedecamaras, Pedro Carmona, asking him not to take the march to the presidential palace as a lot of people were gathered there, which could lead to a confrontation. The conversation between the two was brief, with Carmona hanging up at the end:

Gen. Lucas: "Let's have negotiations, not a confrontation."

Carmona: "The time for negotiations is over".

Gen. Lucas: "There's always time for negotiations."

Carmona: "There's no going back and I don't have time to talk."

Carmona adjusted his tie, climbed up to the podium like a victor, and repeated the call to march to Miraflores. Rear Admiral Tamayo appeared on the stage, working the crowds to a frenzy as he too gave the call to head to the presidential palace. Groups of extreme anti-Chavistas and plainclothes policemen made up the vanguard of the march as it set off for the palace, 11 kilometres away, at around mid-day. The demonstrators were shouting, 'This is the route/This is the route/This is the route/To take the son of the bitch out'. At 1:20 p.m., two demonstrators were shot and lightly injured by silencer-fitted long-range weapons. Nobody knew who was responsible but the television stations did not broadcast the news, not wanting to frighten the demonstrators into leaving the march that was dwindling anyway. The prospect of a long walk was taking its toll on many of the wealthy participants not used to such demanding physical activity. The mayor of the western part of

Caracas made a television appeal to Ortega, asking him not to be irresponsible, as thousands of Chavistas were gathered around the palace. Two hundred metres from the palace, National Guard forces took up position with riot control equipment.

The CNN correspondent received another call, asking him to record a statement that some top-ranking military officials were to make. The address was that of a posh office. The Generals and the Admirals turned up individually but their leader, Ramirez Perez, who was to read out a written and signed statement, was extremely nervous, his legs shaking. At 1:15 p.m., Perez read out a statement anticipating the day's events. Snipers posted by the government, he said, had killed at least six people. Given this, the armed forces could no longer support the government and the President had to go. He did another take of the statement, but when he read it out, there had been no sniper fire and nobody had been killed. It happened soon afterwards but how did he know of it unless it had been planned? Was this the "political cover" the CIA had been speaking of? If so, did the agency have any hand in drawing up the plan?

Chavez was told of rumours that he had resigned or had been taken prisoner by the military. He instructed the military high command to clarify the situation and they went on air at 2:10 p.m. to express their support for the President, all except one, the army chief, General Velazquez Vasco, who locked himself in a bathroom at the army headquarters rather than lie on screen. He had reasons for doing so for he was deeply involved in the plot though outwardly he professed loyalty to the President. At about that time, Chavez decided to activate Plan Avila which allowed the military to take control of Caracas but he could not get through to the General who was to implement it. A loyalist General, Garcia Carneiro, who was in charge of the powerful Third Division, picked up the phone and offered to do so himself. Chavez agreed but General Carneiro found that the roads outside Fort Tiuna, the military headquarters, had been blocked by parked cars and buses and that the roads inside the military installations were intransitable as well. The army reinforcements could not reach the palace even as the demonstrators kept advancing towards it.

By 3 p.m. the march divided into two, intending to encircle Miraflores in a pincer movement. The march of half a million had dwindled to a few thousand by now. A line of armed policemen in full riot gear under the control of the opposition-supporting mayor blocked their way but they let the marchers through without any resistance. Fights broke out between them and the Chavistas on the other side behind the palace, who had painted red lines under their eyes to distinguish themselves from the other crowd, but there were no casualties. The fight was a distraction organised by the coup plotters, whose leaders had by then left the demonstration, changed into formal attire and were waiting at the Venevision studios.

The demonstrators coming to the palace from the front retreated before teargas fired by the National Guards who held back the Chavista supporters on the other side itching for a fight. At around 3:20 p.m., while the two sides were in a stalemate, shots rang out from the roof of a high-rise hotel near the palace. The opposition-controlled police took up position, turned their water cannons on the Chavistas and started shooting at them. The snipers picked off targets on either side. They seemed especially keen to pick out the photographers so that there was no evidence of the killings. The Chavistas took their dead and injured to the palace while a large group of them on a bridge ducked for cover. Some of them on the bridge started firing back at the police and the snipers. The police advanced behind their vehicles and water cannon truck but were held up by firing by the Chavistas from the bridge, the last line of defence against the storming of the palace. The firing ended as the snipers withdrew. Seven of them were caught while trying to escape and were handed over to the presidential guards who, in turn, asked the secret police, to take custody of the prisoners. Among the snipers were Colombians and an American citizen and there were rumours that Israeli, Panamanian and Salvadorian death squad members trained by the U.S. military were among the snipers who had evaded capture. The snipers were put up before a judge who set them free on April 15. A radio message from one of the policemen at the police control room mentioned "American Zeus 32" asking for information about how the operations were going. The American in question was later revealed to have been ambassador Charles Shapiro.

At 3:45 p.m., Chavez took to the air with a *cadena*, the only programme that the television stations were legally permitted to screen once it started. He tried to transmit a message of calm and orderliness but there was violence outside and the television stations split the screen in half, illegally, showing the violence and interfering with the audio quality of the President's programme. Chavez ordered the main television stations to be taken off the air for disobeying the law but it had no effect. The private television stations had prepared for it by linking up through satellite and they managed to keep broadcasting. The President's rambling televised address not only had no impact but also showed him to be out of touch with reality. Chavez then called his army high command over to Miraflores but the army chief did not come in the helicopter that transported the other officers. Chavez asked one of General Garcia Carneiro's assistants to send some tanks to the palace only for the army chief to order them back.

**Evening to night:** Once Chavez's programme ended, a number of Generals went on air with the pre-recorded statement holding him responsible for the violence and asking for his resignation. At 7:25 p.m., Venevision aired a report that showed Chavez supporters on the bridge firing at targets that could not be seen. There was only one camera and it was pointed at the red shirts. The news report claimed that the Chavistas were firing at unarmed opposition demonstrators. It showed pictures of the dead and the injured being taken to a field hospital in the palace, which it said, has been set up to deal with the planned massacre. The report was doctored and a brazen lie. The Chavistas were indeed firing but not at the opposition march that had never arrived anywhere near the bridge. They were firing at the snipers and the police who had been shooting at them with long-range weapons. The field hospital was set up days earlier to treat the Chavistas massing around the palace for heatstroke. But this was not discovered straight away. Instead, it appeared to be a horrific act of killing defenceless civilians. The newscasters shed all pretence of neutrality and accused the Chavistas of a massacre. The report was screened insistently to whip up public opinion. Most Venezuelans were glued to their television sets and were aghast at what they had just seen. They made their minds up that Chavez really needed to go for the good of the country. This was the 'political cover' the coup needed. Soon afterwards, the state television was raided and the staff fled

for their lives. The President's supporters tried to go on television through a mobile unit in the palace but at about 9:30 p.m. their signal was cut off. There was only one television narrative now, that of the private media intimately linked to the evolving coup.

Once the afternoon tape of officials speaking of deaths was aired on television, the army chief appeared on television to demand that Chavez resign. The loyalist Generals started losing control in the garrisons and, more importantly, at Fort Tiuna. Chavez could not get through to them except to Maracay, a garrison that was still loyal to him but more than an hour's drive from Caracas. There were a few hundred loyal troops and several thousand unarmed civilian supporters outside the palace. Chavez was isolated, without control over his armed forces and unable to communicate with the people. He changed into combat uniform, strapped his pistol to his thigh and contemplated his next moves. He had three options: he could give in to the rebels; he could try and flee from Miraflores to Maracay and start resistance there; or he could hole up at the palace and die like Allende during the coup in Chile. His brother, Adan, and the Defence Minister, Jose Vicente Rangel, argued for a last-ditch stand. Rangel's son was with him. He asked him to go back but his son refused. The elder Rangel then rang up his wife to say he had bad news for her: she was going to be a widow and would lose her son that night. Chavez rang up his wife and asked her to escape from the capital. He did not want an attack on the palace. Thousands of his supporters would stand their ground and die for him as would his men and as a military commander he has been trained not to put the lives of his men (and now the civilian women) in unnecessary danger. The option of an escape was unworkable. There were no tanks to escort them. They could be captured en route and easily killed at an isolated spot with a staged firefight.

**April 12:** At 12:38 a.m. Fidel Castro somehow got through to Chavez on the telephone and asked him what forces he had. Chavez told him of the situation and said he was ready to die at the palace. Fidel told him not to do it: unlike Allende, Chavez still had support in the military and he was too young to invite death at this point. He advised Chavez not to resign but to negotiate with the rebels to secure a safe passage and honourable conditions for himself and his staff. Fidel told him Cuba was ready to send aircraft

with diplomats to take Chavez to safety. Chavez paused briefly and accepted his advice. He then rang up the Cuban embassy, asking them to gather other diplomats and come to Miraflores to ensure it was not attacked. I'm ready for all eventualities without giving up my principles, he told the ambassador. The Cubans tried to contact the diplomats and received support from the Brazilians and the Algerians but the Spanish ambassador was not interested. In any case, events moved too quickly for the diplomatic mobilisation to happen. Chavez began negotiating with the rebels. He appointed two officers as his emissaries who travelled back and forth from the military headquarters to the palace or spoke to him over the phone.

As the negotiators went back and forth, Chavez put four conditions for his resignation: guaranteeing his physical safety and that of his collaborators and top officials, handing over power to his Vice-President in the National Assembly as laid down in the Constitution, the right to a live telecast to the people explaining the circumstances of his resignation and being allowed to leave the country with his family and close collaborators. He awaited word from the rebel officers. About 40 of his closest collaborators were in the palace and none of them was sure of leaving it alive. Chavez asked to be left alone for a while to reflect. His brother, Adan, told the Cuban ambassador that Chavez had a capacity for intuition that "lights up extreme conditions". That night was Adan's birthday. Lucas Rincon, Chavez's negotiator, informed him soon after 3 a.m. that the rebels had accepted his conditions and Chavez told him that in that case he would resign. At 3:35 a.m. General Rincon went on television to make a carefully worded declaration in which he said that given the day's events the President had resigned. The television stations began to broadcast it and later used it to float the notion that there has been no coup but a "power vacuum". Fifteen minutes later, the rebel officers said they were not going to honour the conditions they had agreed to. Instead they faxed the President a resignation letter, asking him to sign it. Chavez stuck to his original conditions. While he was contemplating his grim situation, his mother Elena opened his office door. What are you doing here now? Chavez asked. You should go to Barinas. His mother said, "How can we go? Your father is outside and we'll be here till the end. The people love you." "How I have made you suffer," Chavez said. "Don't say it," Elena told him, "the suffering



has been little and the pride of having you as a son is great". She turned round and left so that he would not see her tears.

Immediately after General Lucas' television appearance, the rebels sent word that if Chavez did not resign or hand himself in by 4 a.m. they would bomb the palace. The President was left without options. Army officers came to the palace to take him prisoner. He put his pistol on the table. There was a plate of cold sandwiches on it. He walked out of the doors, hugged his staff, his Ministers and his political comrades, saying a few words to each of them. His guards were close to tears. At the age of 70, Jacainto Perez Arcay, his teacher at the military academy who still worked at the palace with his office next to the President's, handed Chavez a blue cross. Chavez told him they would speak again. His supporters spontaneously started intoning the national anthem and the crowd outside began to shake the palace gates with impotent rage. As he stepped into the car at 3:55 a.m. to be driven to Fort Tiuna, his mother tried to get in but she was pushed away by the soldiers who had come to fetch the President. At 4:50 a.m. Pedro Carmona announced on television that he was installing himself as President. Champagne corks began popping in the wealthy eastern part of Caracas and in the homes of the rich all over Venezuela.

At the military headquarters, Chavez faced his captors. They still treated him with deference but asked that he sign the resignation paper they had thrust at him. I'm not going to sign or even read the paper you have put before me, he told them. You can imprison or kill me, he told them, but you will not get away with this. We're not discussing anything, one of the coup plotter shouted. Someone behind him yelled, kill him. Do what you wish, Chavez told them and fell silent. In the crowd interrogating the President was a young Venezuelan tycoon and arms dealer, Issac Perez Recao, who had financed the coup. Afterwards, when they raided his home, investigators found a cache of weapons, military uniforms, night vision binoculars and an underground shooting range. The officers retired to a room and began arguing about what to do with Chavez. After some time, they emerged to tell him he was being imprisoned and that he would be tried for his 'crimes'. Chavez was taken to a holding cell and made to change into the clothing of an army recruit to humiliate him. Some of the officers taunted him by addressing him as Lieutenant Colonel. He opened the small suitcase his guards

had packed for him but there were no books in it. I have always been surrounded by books in prison; how am I to spend time without books, he asked himself. He was given a television set so he could see what was happening while imprisoned, to see that his power was slipping away.

That morning, it was time for gloating in the media. One newspaper ran the headline, Chao Chavez. Soon after daybreak, a talk show host on Venevision announced with a smug smile, "Good morning, we have a new President". He dangled what he said was the resignation letter with the President's signature but did not show it to the camera. Publicly on television, those who planned and organised the coup, soldiers and civilians, explained the workings of the plot with a great deal of pride: how they forced Chavez to stay back in the country; how the armed forces used the civilian demonstrators as a cover to get rid of him; how the media was a willing accomplice in all of this. Listening to them, Chavez told himself, they're going to kill me to cover up their fiction of resignation. Luckily, his guard gave him his own cell phone for Chavez to use. He tried calling his parents but their phones were switched off. He then called his wife and asked her to tell the world he had not resigned and that his life was in danger. He next called his eldest daughter but she kept crying and handed over the phone to Maria Gabriela, her younger sister. Maria was calmer and he told her to get out the word that he had not resigned and was being held against his will. Maria's phone did not let her make international calls. She called up the palace. The switchboard operators had remained loyal to the President and they put her through to Fidel. The Cuban President got a Cuban television presenter to call Maria who described what had happened to her father. The Venezuelan television stations had blocked all information about him. This was the first time someone had breached the wall of silence, even if the information did not reach the country straight away.

After Chavez had spoken to Maria, two women soldiers come to check his health. They appeared to be friendly towards him but held themselves back when a scowling Colonel turned up in his cell. They completed the formalities and got him to sign the paper. After leaving him, one of them wrote at the bottom of the page Chavez denies having resigned and faxed it to the Public Prosecutor who

realised the television stations would not broadcast the information. He called a Press conference to tell them he was resigning. When the cameras started to roll, he read out from the document that Chavez had denied resigning, which made the military takeover an illegal coup. The journalists tried to interrupt him but he carried on. Within minutes, the Press conference was blanked out and flustered announcers tried to get back to normality, saying things like, 'Well friends how are you?' But the word had got out that Chavez had been kidnapped and the people, who had gone back to their homes dejected, were now seething with anger.

The hard men were back in power and they got down to hunting down the Chavistas, breaking into their homes and taking them away without any legal niceties. Among those arrested was the Interior Minister who was led through a baying mob and a battery of television cameras. He was attacked by the violent crowd, among them his neighbours who had given him away. A Chavista legislator was put on a truck but shouted out that Chavez had not resigned. The live broadcast could not blank him out. The secret police began looking for the Chavista defenders on the bridge near Miraflores, barging into their homes, assaulting their families and spiriting them off. Their photographs were shown on private television and announcers asked people to come forward with information about their hiding places. The secret police chief was taped in a telephone conversation saying he would hunt down the Chavista leaders whichever embassy they might hide in and threatening to have the wife of the Cuban ambassador raped. The Bolivarian leaders were in the crowded barrios where the police of the new regime still did not dare enter, changing their residence every so often. Others stayed at home, resigned to being taken away at any moment. Two governors were arrested but when the police come to get the governor of the state of Lara, the people come out on the streets to thwart them.

The Cuban embassy was under threat from dawn. Some people tried to scale the walls at daybreak but a burst of submachine gun fire deterred them. Early in the morning, the embassy received a threatening phone call that it would be stormed. Molotov cocktails were being thrown into the embassy compound from the roofs of the nearby residential houses. There were women and children in

the embassy. Crowds of rabid anti-Cubans began to gather outside, banging on the gates, throwing stones and destroying the diplomats' cars outside. The embassy asked for help from the local mayor and the police, few of whom turned up and, when they did, remained passive before the frenzied crowd. Fidel Castro was on the phone to the embassy. Outside, the leaders of the mob threatened to cut off the electricity and water supplies and soon kept their word. They thought important Chavista leaders were inside, including the Vice-President, Diosdado Cabello. The crowd gave the embassy an hour to open the gate or they would storm it. The ambassador repositioned the armed guards and prepared for the worst. At some point during the frenzy, the ambassador heard through a loudspeaker some in the mob asking for talks. At first, he thought it was a ruse for them to open the gates. He rang up Fidel, who told him to start talking to the mob and let their leaders in with a ladder but not to open the gates. The ambassador helped the representatives to scale the walls and, with television cameras rolling, they began to talk. Among those who scaled the embassy wall was Capriles Radonski, then a mayor and later Chavez's challenger for presidency in 2012.

The delegation promised to respect the sovereign status of the embassy but asked the ambassador to let them check inside to see if there were really any Chavista leaders in there. The Cubans told them they had never allowed the Americans to do any such thing and they were certainly not going to let the Venezuelan opposition do it either. There were no Venezuelans inside, the ambassador told them, and even if they were inside and had asked for asylum, it was for the Cuban government to decide what to do with them. When you have a party, you do let people wander inside, the delegation told him, why not now? You have not been invited for a party, the ambassador responded. What about restoring the power and water supply? he asked. Meanwhile, a senior police officer, who had joined in the discussion, told the delegates that trouble was brewing in the city and there were more important tasks for the police that day. The delegation withdrew, the crowd thinned out and power and water services were restored. The danger had not fully passed. Molotov cocktails were intermittently thrown at the embassy from the neighbouring buildings that night. Early in the morning, a member of the embassy went out and spotted a young couple deep in conversation. He asked them why the embassy was

attacked. At first, they told him what the media had reported about Chavistas hidden in there, but when he asked them if they had realised there were children inside who were being denied food and water, the pair was shocked. They went away and returned with several hamburgers and soft drinks for the children.

While the witch-hunt against the Chavistas intensified that morning, Pedro Carmona, who had told the nation he was to swear himself in, received a telephone call from Carlos Andres Perez, former President, advising him to replace the presidential guards at the palace. But Carmona paid no heed to it. He was confident that his adviser, coup financier and arms dealer, Perez Recao, would ensure his safety. Soon after 10 a.m. Carmona's elite supporters turned up in their limousines at the palace to savour their victory. The palace swarmed with business tycoons, media owners and rebel generals who had come looking for promotions and better postings for their part in ousting Chavez. Executives of the PDVSA, leaders of 'civil society' organisations funded by the USA and senior members of the Catholic Church, among them the archbishop of Caracas, made up the numbers. The trade unions turned up as did the opposition members of the National Assembly but Carmona had a nasty surprise for them. He refused to meet the parliamentarians, having been advised that the Assembly could legally derecognise him if he kept it intact and that it needed to be dissolved. The CTV leader, Carlos Ortega, was to have been in the governing troika along with Carmona and a General but the self-styled President had also been advised that keeping a General alongside might stop other nations from recognising him and he had no intention of sharing power with a trade unionist. Carmona, after all, was a business tycoon. Ortega left in a huff on a private aircraft for his home state. The soldiers began sorting out the papers in Chavez's office, among them letters from Fidel, Saddam Hussein and Gaddafi. Carmona read one of these and asked the officer to keep track of them. A Carmona aide asked the officer to give him these letters so that he could send them to the U.S. embassy as proof of Chavez's links with terrorism. The officer refused, saying he was answerable only to Carmona. He hid these documents under a pile of other papers, put them in black bin bags and sent them to the military headquarters for safekeeping.

In the room where Carmona was to be sworn in, Simon Bolivar's portrait was taken down and put in the adjoining bathroom. Carmona had been depicted in the international press as a conciliatory figure but his first 'presidential' decree dismantled all existing legal structures. He abolished the National Assembly, the Supreme Court, the Election Commission, the Ombudsman's office and every other Constitutional office while his well-heeled supporters let out whoops of joy shouting, 'De-mo-cra-cia, De-mo-cra-cia'. He changed the name of the country to take out the messy 'Bolivarian' bit. The elites went into a frenzy. Finally, he told his supporters he had the support of the people, which gave him greater legitimacy than any constitutional referendum. He asked those present in the room to sign the decree as a show of support. The first one to do so was the Archbishop of Caracas. The United States defended the ousting of Chavez, saying it was his fault, but the Latin American nations at the summit of the Organisation of American States in Costa Rica that Chavez was to have attended rejected the military action. The people, meanwhile, were getting out on the streets facing armed police firing at them. Outside Fort Tiuna in the capital, where Chavez was being held, and in Maracay the people came out to ask the soldiers to give them back their President. General Garcia Carneiro had returned to the military headquarters and saw soldiers and junior officers getting angrier by the hour. The senior officers were unhappy that Carmona had not rewarded them for their efforts. The junior officers were angry that the new decree had abolished all pretence of a constitutional order. After all, they were told to act against their commander-in-chief because he had abused the Constitution. Chavez could hear the clamour drifting into his room but was not told what was happening outside and neither was it being shown on television. The army decided to shift him elsewhere. At this point, Chavez started thinking he would be killed.

At nightfall, Chavez was taken on a helicopter while in the slums the people were banging their pots and pans in protest. He could make out they were travelling along the coast and heading towards the naval base of Turiamo, not far from Maracay. When the helicopter landed, he was taken to a small room. A truck pulled up and turned off its lights. He was told to get up on the truck because they were taking him to better accommodation. He was sure by now that these were his last moments; that the truck would stop

at some point for him to be shot. He took the cross that General Arcay had given him at Miraflores in his hand and told himself he must face death with dignity. The truck started moving on the dark road and suddenly stopped. Chavez was asked to get down and a couple of soldiers moved behind him. He turned around to face them. Are you going to kill me? he asked them. At this point, the other soldiers took off their rifles from their shoulders and told those who had moved behind Chavez that they would fire at them if they touched him. His would-be assassins backed off. Chavez was put in his new austere quarters. His daughter Maria had learnt that Chavez was being shifted elsewhere and she called up Fidel Castro. The Cuban President quickly put her through to a Cuban journalist and word got out that Chavez had been taken to an unknown destination. Soon the news reached Venezuela through the community media and spread through text messages and mobile phone calls. The simmering anger began to boil over.

Chavez began to wonder if his efforts have been worth it. Would the people for whom he has staked his life react to his kidnapping? He began to despair and his will to live started fading. As he slipped into a dark mood, a young nurse dropped in to check his health. I have always wanted to meet you, she said, but never like this. My mother thinks the world of you, Mr President, she told him. What will happen now with my son, his future, what will happen here? she asked him, tears streaming down her face. Chavez gave her a hug and tried to comfort her but could not contain his own tears and went into the bathroom to weep. This outburst gave him back his famous will to fight in adversity and he came out of the bath determined to live. Then, sat outside very near the beach, he told himself, "Take it easy, Hugo, the people and the lads from the military will not put up with this outrage. Something has to happen. It cannot be that so much effort will be wasted like this; it cannot be that the effort of all this time and of so many people that gave birth to the Bolivarian Constitution and the Fifth Republic will disappear at the stroke of a pen, as easily as that. It cannot be."

**April 13, morning:** At dawn, Chavez wrote on a piece of paper: "I return to prison, once more like 10 years ago, for the same cause, the irreversible commitment with the people, betrayed a thousand times by opportunists and cowards... the cause is the same, the circumstances, in turn, are different." Soldiers began

coming into his room under different pretexts and asked him if he had resigned. I'm being held prisoner, he told them, I'm still your commander-in-chief. One of them, a sergeant from Barinas, the home state of the President, asked him to write that down and put it at the bottom of the bin so he could take it out of the base. He also wrote 'I have not resigned' on a small card for the soldier who tried to go out of the base at 6:30 a.m. to get five gas cylinders as his excuse. He was not allowed to leave. The soldiers guarding him asked Chavez if he wanted to go out for a jog. He agreed and while running observed a helicopter land but no one got out. Soon the helicopter took off again. A little later, a Navy officer approached him respectfully, addressed him as President, started filming the conversation and told him he had learnt that he would be taken to the island of Orchilla, a little over 180 km from the Venezuelan coast, and then flown abroad. Chavez asked to be left alone for a few moments while he got changed. Inside, he quickly penned the note:

"Turiamo, 13 April 2002 at 14:45 hours  
To the Venezuelan people/ (And to whom it might  
be of interest)  
I, Hugo Chavez Frias, Venezuelan,/ President of  
the Bolivarian Republic/ of Venezuela, declare: I  
have not resigned from  
the legitimate power that the people / gave me.  
Forever!!  
Hugo Chavez F."

He folded the slip of paper and put it at the bottom of the bin. He had no option but to get into the helicopter. The young soldier from Barinas quickly entered the empty room and took out what Chavez had written in the piece of paper tucked at the bottom of the bag. The sergeant made another effort to leave base after Chavez had been taken away. He went to the checkpoint at the gate and told the guards he needed to get five replacement gas cylinders at the orders of the commander of the base. The guards waved him through. He did not know the way to Maracay but had a woman friend who owned a small underwear shop. He told her to drive at once to Maracay without telling her the real reason. Once he reached the military base, he approached the guard and told him to put him through to the commander as he had an important message from President Chavez. He was let through. The



commander of the base, General Baduel, was speaking to the crowds thronging outside the garrison through a loudspeaker, when his assistants passed the slip to him. He looked at it and read it out to the people outside who let out a cheer as loud as a tropical thunderclap and began chanting, "Cha-vez, Cha-vez, Cha-vez". The officers began faxing the note straight away to the other garrisons. Word finally got out despite the media blackout, where the order has been given, "zero coverage for Chavismo on television screens", that Chavez had been kidnapped. The Jesuit radio station, Fe y Alegria (Faith and Happiness), was about the only radio station covering the Chavista version of events. At a press conference called by a human rights organisation, an opposition journalist asked the director of the Jesuit radio to join in the media blackout of the Chavistas. He refused.

Meanwhile, at 9 a.m., the U.S. and Spanish ambassadors met Carmona and his self-styled Foreign Minister, an arch-conservative and member of Opus Dei, and advised them to keep up democratic appearances as international opinion was turning against the coup. This was not their first meeting. On April 12, Shapiro had met Carmona and told him to be careful with dissolving the Assembly. This was an 'instruction' rather than a 'suggestion' on the part of Otto Reich, Under Secretary of State for the Western Hemisphere. In Carmona's account, he told the U.S. ambassador not to worry; he knew what he was doing. At about the time of the meeting, Venezuelan military radars registered three American ships that had entered the country's territorial waters and a helicopter that had taken off from one of the ships as also an American plane in the country's airspace. They were all concentrated near the island of Orchilla. The media owners had been meeting that morning as well but were undecided what to do when they got a call from Carmona asking them to attend an emergency meeting at 11 a.m. At mid-day, Carmona invited them to a briefing along with a small group of his officials. Carmona said the situation was delicate and asked the media owners for understanding and help. His 'Defence Minister' gave a bleak assessment. He told them Chavez had not resigned but they would try their best to get him to do so, allowing him to leave the country. The military situation was getting more complicated by the hour. Then he said, "If on April 11, civil society offered the deaths, from this moment it is the armed forces that will do so..." The media moguls exchanged nervous glances. They

became more nervous when he told them that the Bolivarian circles were fully operational. When he finished, the posh audience began to shout out their suggestions, ranging from restoring the National Assembly to holding elections quickly, while making sure that Chavez did not come back to power, and silencing the actions of the military and the people supporting the deposed President.

**Afternoon to late evening:** By afternoon, a sea of people began heading to the palace. As the police pressure on them eased, the Bolivarian leaders in hiding started moving around, mobilising the people from the barrios overlooking the city. The police were still firing teargas and live bullets at them but could not stop the surging crowds. Near the palace, a line of National Guards held up a march and the officer in charge threatened to fire at the protesters if they advanced. Some in the crowd unfurled the national flag and asked the soldiers on the line to join them. Some of the young soldiers went over to the demonstrators and one of them told the officer, "I'm not going to fire on the people. I was born in the slums, not in a country club." The marchers then pushed past the line. They soon reached the palace gate with flags and placards, insulting the palace guards for failing to protect the President and asking them to act against Carmona's men inside. As in Caracas, it seemed that the whole of Maracay was out on the streets and the opposition supporters went indoors. General Baduel in Maracay held a Press conference and announced his support for the constitutional process. The commanding officer in charge of the presidential guard of honour got in touch with Generals Baduel and Garcia Carneiro. The latter ordered him to take the palace and to lock up the Carmona crowd.

At 1 p.m. the guards began the operation, moving through tunnels to reach the main palace. Carmona was set to swear in his Ministers when suddenly the order went out that it has been cancelled. Outside, the noise was getting deafening. The new government decided to flee the palace. Crowds from beyond the gate could see elegantly dressed men in their suits and ties and women in high heels run in panic as guards began moving in from the different directions. The order was given to evacuate the palace. Carmona fled in a car in a moment of confusion and headed for Fort Tiuna, thinking he would be safe there. The coup financier and arms dealer, Issac Recao, drove straight to the airport from the palace

and returned to Miami where his fiancée, a journalist with a private television station, joined him two days later. Others were not so lucky, including Daniel Romero, once private secretary to President Carlos Andres Perez, who had read out Carmona's decree. As others began to take any route out of the palace they could, he kept shouting, "Nothing has happened here. We have control. We are still the government." Nobody was listening to him and soon he was taken prisoner. Some of his colleague made the mistake of asking the guards if it was safe to go out. The soldiers told them it was too dangerous outside and offered to take them to a safe place which turned out to be the holding cell for the coup plotters. A group of soldiers went up to the palace roof and unfurled the national flag as their colleagues at the gate began celebrating. The multitude outside realised at the moment that the coup had been defeated. The Bolivarian revolution had returned from the brink.

When Carmona reached Fort Tiuna at 2:50 p.m., the Generals and mid-ranking officers were gathered in a room, arguing their positions. Some at the top still supported the coup but the younger officers were angry. The army commander, Vasquez Velazco, was asked to leave the meeting while they took a decision. Velazco was also angry with Carmona for not having given him a promotion he thought he deserved and ignored Carmona's order to meet him so that they could draft a new document together. He sent another officer who, in Carmona's own words, looked at him with contempt, told him he would let General Velazco know of it and then did not get back. After an acrimonious debate, a document was drawn up and General Velazco was to read it out to the Press. General Garcia Carneiro took advantage of the confusion to erase parts of the document that still expressed support for Carmona. The army said it wanted the democratic institutions restored and the social programmes to continue but maintained that the government of Hugo Chavez was to blame for the killings in Caracas. Meanwhile, Carmona drafted another decree that reversed most of the decisions of his first one. He called for an emergency meeting of the National Assembly and promised that the existing institutions would function like before he dissolved them. In Maracay, 14 Generals and high-ranking officers who between them commanded some of the strongest units of the armed forces, including the Air Force, and with 20,000 men under their command, drew up a charter of demands that called for protecting the physical integrity

of Hugo Chavez and recognised him as the President. They asked for an end to police operations in Caracas against the Bolivarians, the restoration of constitutional order, immediate resignation of the Carmona government and avoiding an armed confrontation between military units. They also demanded access to the media that "at this moment is not fulfilling its function of being the main defender of the right to accurate information". The media blocked out their manifesto.

General Garcia Carneiro, aware of the developments in Maracay and seeing the growing crowds outside the military headquarters, decided to go in for the kill. A line of tanks was holding back the demonstrators outside the military installation. A particularly fiery Chavista parliamentarian had in her hands a copy of the faxed note from Chavez and she read it out to the people over a loudspeaker. The crowd responded with shouts of "Hungry or without jobs, we are with Chavez". General Garcia Carneiro mounted on a tank and told the people over a loudspeaker that the army had decided to side with Chavez. The tank did an 180° turn and headed into the Fort along with the crowds. He then ordered a junior officer to capture Carmona who was hiding in a bedroom, confused and fearful. Another loyal General called Carmona's 'Defence Minister' and told him that if he tried to take Chavez out of the country, he would have to bear the consequences. The officer then called the U.S. ambassador, Charles Shapiro, and asked him why American ships and aircraft were in Venezuelan territory. Shapiro, a fluent Spanish speaker, kept mumbling in English, I'm sorry, and promised to find out and let him know, something he never did.

By evening, the Chavista ministers started returning to the palace. The Vice-President, Diosdado Cabello, had at first gone into hiding at a friend's farm in the mountains near Caracas with a bodyguard from the secret services. He did not fully trust his guard and sent him to get some provisions. With the guard gone, he packed his bag, took his gun, and drove to the house of a businessman who had helped Chavez in the first election campaign. From there, he followed the developments on television but did not make contact with anyone so as not to reveal his hideout. He saw Globovision transmitting live CNN programmes. He called up the CNN headquarters in Atlanta and told them the coup was being defeated. By now, he was in touch with military officers who told

him he was urgently needed at Miraflores to clear all doubts of a "power vacuum". He decided to fly to the palace in the helicopter of his businessman friend but there was not enough fuel to take him there. In its place, he was given a powerful motorcycle for his journey. At about 7 p.m. he set off on the motorcycle but the people had set up barricades all along the highway that connects the capital to the rest of the country. Traffic was stalled as the roads were blocked. At one barricade, the Vice-President took out his gun and pointed it at the head of the driver of the first car in front of the barricade and ordered him to give him the keys. The driver was an old military hand who was in prison with him. My Lieutenant, it is I, he told the Vice-President and together they set off in the car. At the first barricades, Cabello had to identify himself. Later on, those manning the barricades sent their motorcycle riders to escort him to the next barricade where he had to sprint to a waiting motorcycle. On the outskirts of the city, he was caught up in a firefight while a mob was looting a store. For the final leg, he was bundled into an ambulance. Accompanying him in the ambulance was the CNN correspondent, Otto Neustald. Guards fitted him with a bulletproof vest and then, for extra security, sat on him as he was taken to the palace. Now I'm going to die, the Vice-President squeaked from the ambulance floor and everyone in the vehicle burst out laughing. He did reach the palace alive for a meeting of the Council of Ministers. The staff of the state television had re-entered their building as crowds stood guard outside and resumed services. The people now had the other version of events. The private television stations had worked out the coup was not going well and kept showing comics and films, saying it was too dangerous for their journalists to go out. Cabello's first phone was to Baduel asking him to get Chavez. General Baduel said he would do it the next morning but the Vice-President was not willing to wait. We need him now, he told the General. His next phone was to the president of Venevision. We're going on air in 15 minutes, he told him, and you will transmit the proceedings live. If you don't I'll send tanks and you'll be left with nothing. The head of the television canal told him it was technically impossible to do a live broadcast in such conditions. That's your problem, Cabello replied, and put the telephone down. Cabello was sworn in as interim President and constitutional order was restored. Venevision was among the first to broadcast live the brief ceremony. The order

went out to rescue Chavez and a team of 60 soldiers set out in three helicopters for Orchilla to escort him back to power.

Chavez himself could not savour the triumph at Miraflores. From around 5 p.m. he was being held prisoner at the island of Orchilla though he was being treated with greater respect. He was put up at a small house for visiting Presidents. He knew the commander and the soldiers at the island from an earlier visit when he had listened to their complaints and made sure they were resolved. Waiting for him was the team sent by the Carmona government, among them the Archbishop of Caracas, Ignacio Velazco, the first to sign the Carmona decree, whose code name among the coup plotters was "black fox". It was the Archbishop's idea to appoint Carmona as President and many of the preparatory meetings for the coup were held in the cellar of his residence in Caracas. They had drawn up his resignation letter dated April 11 and promised him a plane would take him out of the country as soon as he signed it. Chavez realised the new regime was in some kind of dilemma since they were so keen to get him to sign the paper. After all, hardly two days earlier, they had told him it did not matter whether he signed the paper or not. Chavez played for time while trying to find out what was happening. At the start of the negotiations, he asked Archbishop Velazco how was that the Church supported a coup that went against the precepts of Christ. Velazco looked away.

Chavez could see that his captors were nervous. The soldiers, armed with rifles and grenade launchers, kept looking at their watches. The officer, who brought him to the island, was walking in and out of the room, talking on his mobile phone. Chavez explained to them the constitutional provisions but left out some bits. Resignation depends on me and killing me depends on you, he told them. There was a real possibility they might kill him in their nervousness, and so he gave them a way out. I could be removed from power without resigning, he told them. The delegation thought Chavez had relented but when they rang up Caracas, they were told that such a separation from power had to be approved by the National Assembly that has just been dissolved. That's your problem then, Chavez told them. He then wrote down that he had decided to separate himself from power. A Colonel in the delegation thought that would do and asked a soldier to type it out. The soldier deliberately fumbled on the keyboard and kept

making mistakes and retyping the document while the Colonel shouted at him to hurry up. The guards suddenly took up defensive positions. They had seen on television that the coup had been defeated in Caracas. Chavez realised the situation had changed dramatically in this short period of time and asked to be left alone for a few minutes. The naval commander in charge of the base came in and whispered to him, don't resign President, the garrisons are with you and the situation is under control. I won't, Chavez told him, and decided he would not sign the paper that was being typed out. He asked the typist not to continue and told the delegation of his decision. Many thanks for your visit. You can spend the night here if you wish. This is quite a luxury prison, he joked with them. They were no longer able to argue with him. They told him they accepted his decision and rushed out to get on the private aircraft of a Venezuelan tycoon that had brought them to the island. But it had taken off without them when the pilot got wind of the approaching rescue team. The naval officer came in and told him the news and gave him a phone, saying the Defence Minister was calling. I don't want to speak to any of that lot, said Chavez. No, it's not them, it's your Defence Minister calling from Miraflores, he told the President. Chavez grabbed the phone and learnt that his team was back at the palace and that resistance had dissolved.

**April 14, 2 a.m.:** The three helicopters landed on the base without any resistance. An aircraft with U.S. registration was on the base but not the pilots and nobody could explain to the rescue team what it was doing there. The aircraft, in fact, belonged to a Paraguayan banker and its destination, with Chavez on board, was to be Puerto Rico, American territory. On the way back, the young soldiers on the helicopter were excitedly telling him of all that had happened and Chavez had to ask them to keep quiet so he could get some time to think. The lights from the helicopter lit up the palace helipad around 4:30 a.m. The crowds outside the gate were shouting, "*Volvio, volvio, volvio*" (*He's back, he's back, he's back*). Chavez walked to the salon with his Ministers, embracing them one by one, and meeting up with his loyal comrades. At 4:40 a.m. he went on television to speak to the nation. He took out the blue cross that General Arcay gave him as he was being taken out of Miraflores and called for peace. "I haven't come back charged with hate or rancour towards anyone. There will not be any persecutions here; there will be no abuses here; and neither will there will be

disrespect for freedom of expression or thought, or of human rights in general.” He told the media owners that they needed to reflect on what they had done. “Sadly, it has been demonstrated once more that there are two countries here: a virtual and a real country. You saw the virtual country here in the same salon only a few hours ago. The virtual country launched a conspiracy... But the real country finally imposed itself...” This country was theirs too, he reminded the media owners, and they could not destroy it. He asked the people to return home. He was aware that if he did not douse passions, there would be terrible vengeful violence against those who had conspired to get rid of him. Latin America learnt with astonishment that for the first time in the continent’s history an unarmed people had defied a coup and that a majority of soldiers had supported them. The coup evaporated but Pedro Carmona remained with a nickname he will never be able to shake off: Pedro the Brief.

It was later revealed that the coup plans had been hatched at least nine months before April 2002, that is, before the September 2001 terrorist attacks in New York. The CIA and the U.S. embassy in Caracas had detailed information of the coup before it happened but did not inform the Venezuelan government. The United States has always denied it had anything to do with the coup. It was only keeping track of events there, it claimed. Along with the Americans, Spain was the other active participant. Journalists have claimed that it had a fund of half a million dollars, donated by Spanish big business present in Venezuela, to finance the strike preceding the coup but the information was never confirmed. The Spaniards were looking forward to the PDVSA being privatised.

The Venezuelan media was not just a biased source of information; the media owners were active promoters of the coup. Chief among them was Gustavo Cisneros a fishing companion of George Bush. During the coup, the U.S. ambassador and Cisneros were together a lot of the time and Venevision’s doctored video of the events on the bridge near the palace was central to discrediting Chavez and encouraging the coup. An opposition National Assembly member, who was once a censor for President Carlos Andres Perez, said the coup was manufactured in the studios of Venevision. The owners of print and audio-visual media met Carmona during the coup and used their newspapers, magazines and television to mould public



opinion against the Chavez government. The Venezuelan and international media have never apologised for their role during the crisis.

The people mobilised against the coup within eight hours. The relentless and ever-expanding nature of the popular mobilisations throughout the country unnerved the coup leaders and helped make up the mind of wavering soldiers. There was no way so many people could be killed and no one was prepared to do it. The best antidote against coup attempts is popular support. Salvador Allende had civilian support in Chile in 1973 but not the military's. Chavez's military background, that had made many on the Left suspicious of him at the start of his movement, saved both him and the revolution. Had Chavez been killed or had the presidential guards gone ahead with their plans of surrounding the authors of the coup at the presidential palace and machine-gunning them, as they had decided before being dissuaded by their officers, the country would have been plunged into a bloodbath and the conflict would have spread beyond its borders. Carmona's political mistake in dissolving all constitutional powers and reverting all of Chavez's popular measures contributed to his failures. His was a technocratic coup and his closest advisers were from the very upper crust of the Venezuelan and international elites who had not understood that the country had changed in the short time that Chavez was in power.

In August 2002, the Supreme Court, whose judges had defected to the opposition, passed a judgment that the events of April 11-14 did not constitute a coup but was a "vacuum of power" and that the soldiers had acted "impregnated with good intentions". Carmona was put under house arrest from where he escaped to the Colombian embassy after bribing his guards. He sought asylum in Colombia and was allowed to leave Venezuela. Some of the Generals involved in the coup escaped to the United States while others remained in the country and joined the opposition ranks. One of the very few people imprisoned for the killings was Ivan Simonosis, a high-ranking police officer, who was sentenced to 30 years in prison. He has become a cause célèbre for the opposition and is now under house arrest. General Baduel became the army chief but was convicted on corruption charges and sent to prison. He too has joined the opposition ranks. General Garcia Carneiro is

the governor of Vargas state that adjoins Caracas and has penned his recollections of those days. The soldier who triumphantly waved the national flag on the palace roof after the coup was defeated has since defected to the United State. The media have continued acting as if nothing ever happened. But the armed forces have changed their doctrine and now openly declare themselves as an anti-imperialist, Socialist and Chavista force.



**"I'd rather be a whore than a Chavista"**

## CHAPTER VII

### **STRIKING OVER OIL**

The aborted coup of April 2002 led to few convictions. The rebel officers were dismissed but they and their civilian allies were mostly free to do as they pleased. In July, Chavez appointed the former guerrilla leader 'Comandante Fausto', Ali Rodriguez Araque, as head of the oil company PDVSA. That month, a prominent opposition leader suggested that the country had to be paralysed to topple Chavez. In September, the new head of the business group, Fedecamaras, Carlos Fernandez, spoke of state terrorism against the private sector. The armed forces had come under Chavez's control and the Venezuelan opposition had to look for other ways of getting rid of him. Their response was to create the Democratic Coordination, a broad grouping of anti-Chavez political parties and civil society groups, on October 17. The cast of characters was almost unchanged: Fedecamaras, the business group, media owners, the Catholic Church, trade unionists of the CTV and students from private and autonomous universities.

The April alliance that had conducted the aborted coup was broadened and became more determined. The offensive began straight away with a 12-hour strike on October 21 called by the CTV and supported by Fedecamaras and the opposition parties. The petroleum industry was not affected. The next day 14 military officers, most of them dismissed for their part in the coup, headed for Plaza Altamira located in the affluent eastern part of Caracas and announced they were beginning a 'legitimate civil disobedience' against a government they refused to recognise. They cited Article 350 of the Constitution, which gives Venezuelans the right to defy orders that act against human rights and which they had violated only months ago, to justify their action. Plaza Altamira was declared 'liberated territory'.

Opposition supporters rallied in support of the disgruntled military officers, as did the political parties, the CTV and business groups. The head of Fedecamaras said the soldiers were acting as a consequence of Chavez's political project that civil society rejected. Plaza Altamira became a carnival site, a spectacle, for which there is always a great demand in Venezuela. Elegant men and women

waved the national (and American) flags, hugged and kissed the military officers who were given rock star treatment. We are having a most entertaining coup, said one of their leaders. "Every day," the New York Times reported, "the generals and admirals who have rebelled against President Hugo Chavez descend from the high ground of the Plaza Altamira here and take to the barricades to sign autographs.

"Thousands of their admirers, mostly upper-class residents deeply distrustful of Mr. Chavez's leftist populism, have flocked to this plaza since last month to demand the president's resignation. As the officers give speeches on a stage nestled in the plaza, their supporters sit politely on metal bleachers. Nearby is a large digital display that marks to the second the occupation of this plaza, which the Chavez opponents call "liberated territory"... "These are the real men of Venezuela," said Mercedes Jimenez, as she waited for an officer to sign her flag at the Plaza Altamira. "They have values and honesty. They have everything. The other side is just shameless thieves." While the tents and tables lend the plaza the air of an encampment, most of the officers sleep in donated apartments in the luxury high-rise condominium buildings that ring the square. They take to the stage in perfectly pressed uniforms and dazzlingly shined shoes and warn the crowds that Mr. Chavez wants nothing less than a Cuban-style government. Capitalism is definitely on display here. The well-heeled crowd buy flags, lanyards for whistles and even frying pans with clappers to make a racket at protests. Some vendors even sell a recording of the pan protests. "I have my own cassette of it," said Armando Lefmans. "You put it on at high volume so you do not have to bother hitting a pan."

At its peak, 135 military officers joined the 'civil disobedience', among them 24 Generals and 19 Colonels, but it started to wane with time. The crowds dwindled from tens of thousands to only a few hundred. The rebels of upmarket Altamira observed 1,000 hours of their 'rebellion' on December 4, "1,000 heroic hours

without arms”, but by that time it was fizzling out. Soon there were more morning walkers at Plaza Altamira with their dogs than disgruntled military officers. The Defence Minister called them clowns. The reconstituted military high command wanted to move in to clear the plaza. But Chavez did not want to give the opposition the martyrdom it wanted. Let them stew in their own juice, he said. These were Generals without troops but some of them were dangerous men, like Felipe Rodriguez nicknamed the Raven, who was said to have ordered the killing of two soldiers and one of their girlfriends, suspecting them of being government informers. The Raven was also said to have been behind a string of bomb attacks on Spanish and Colombian embassies in Caracas in February 2003.

Another strike was called on December 2 and this time the petroleum sector joined the stoppage. The strike was enforced in areas dominated by the opposition but had little impact in the poorer, Chavista zones. It was petering out the next day but there were worrying signs. In Lake Maracaibo, the main centre for oil exports, small boats tried to block the navigation channels and crowds clashed with National Guards outside the PDVSA headquarters. Opposition supporters had to be chased away from outside the state television station. The strike was extended by another 24 hours and the leaders called for an ‘active’ stoppage. It was a coded call for their supporters to take to the streets, block them and enforce the strike. Shops and businesses that stayed open in opposition areas were told by roaming mobs banging pots and pans that if they did not shut it down themselves, they would do it for them. Hundreds of thousands of people marched for and against the strike. Chavez cancelled a scheduled trip to Brazil and international airlines cancelled most of their flights. This was the prelude to a total business lockout that would be enforced from then on. The business associations announced they would keep up pressure on the “authoritarian regime” till they achieved an electoral solution. The strike was not only for the present, a business leader said in a newspaper interview, it was about the country’s future. It was to get rid of a mistaken ideology; it was in defence of free trade. The National Election Commission called for a non-binding referendum vote. This was one of the three options the opposition was presenting as a way out of the crisis of their making. The other two were either that Chavez resign or that there

be early elections. The President had no intention of giving in to any of these demands. The Constitution had a provision for a recall referendum but only after the halfway mark of his term. It was not due till 2004 and any call for him to go before that was illegal. It was a coup by another name. In 2004, the opposition did go for a referendum, which they lost and then claimed they had proof the referendum had been rigged. The promised proof was never made public.

Tensions escalated dramatically on December 5 when the captain of a giant oil tanker Pilin Leon, named after a beauty queen, anchored his ship in the navigation channel of Lake Maracaibo without authorisation, blocking the shipping route. It was eight-storey high and had more than 280,000 barrels of oil aboard. The reasons that the captain gave were clearly political: "This worn out and even devilish slogan of the revolution has left as a consequence the division of a marvellous country, with more poverty, insecurity, impunity and total anarchy which we neither identify with nor share." The government was moving Venezuela towards the Cuban model, the striking captain said, and asked his colleagues to join him. On cue, the rest of the PDVSA's 13 ships either put down anchor at sea or refused to sail from the ports. Smaller tugs and boats of the oil company joined the blockade as did some ships flying foreign flags. Chavez called this an act of piracy but the ship's captain became a hero for the opposition and a fleet of small boats kept guard around it while the beauty queen Pilin Leon came down to cheer on the striking crew. There was enough oil on the ships to blow up the city of Maracaibo with more than 100,000 residents.

In 1970, President Nixon had ordered that the CIA make the Chilean "economy scream" to prevent Salvador Allende from coming to power and to overthrow him if he did. The same formula was applied for the 'civic strike' of 2002 in Venezuela. An opposition analyst outlined the plan in chilling details: "The civic strike that includes, among other things, the suspension of economic and commercial activities, production, agriculture and finally petroleum, constitutes a novel collective action politically expressed by individuals, guilds, civil associations, trade unions, social organisations, that acting like a large group – civil society – exercises an absolutely rational collective action..." The ports were to be paralysed so that imports, including food and other essential

items, would not reach the people and stocks would run out. The wholesale markets would have to be closed down so that small shops and businesses could not function. This would induce a shortage and lead to black market, inflation and corruption and hurt the government's revenues. Individuals and businesses would go bankrupt and later public finances would collapse. As a large chunk of the private sector lived off the state, smaller businesses would be unable to operate and unemployment would rise. Public bonds would crash and increase the risk assessment of the economy. This would lead to a financial crisis, the fiscal and political cost of which would be incalculable.

The economic sabotage would culminate with the paralysis of the oil industry, which brought the government about \$52 million a day at that time. Without the money, it would have to dip into its meagre international reserves and soon would be unable to pay the wages or maintain the services. If the industry was paralysed, the country had no way of producing petroleum either for exports to earn the dollars that kept the economy afloat or to use oil and gas for its transport and cooking. A former head of the company, Luis Giusti, in a newspaper interview, publicly described the scenario. Exports would be the first victim. Supplies to the distribution centres would dry up and transport would come to a halt. The petrol stations would go dry. Without petroleum and gas, it would be impossible to generate electricity. Water pumping stations would not function. The country would remain without electricity, water, food and medicines while transport would go off the road. Panic would set in and the country would collapse in a week.

The opposition expressed the scenario publicly as a 'dissuasive' argument to force the government to retreat. It was also to intoxicate opposition supporters with the dream of an early victory, even if the price they would have to pay was enormous. This gave rise to the doctrine of "impossible choice". Not only would the economy scream but also the most vulnerable sections of society would be made to pay. Their rage, the opposition thought, would be directed against the President. Without their wages, the military would move against the government and hopefully do the opposition's work. "Venezuelans are faced with an impossible choice," argued an opposition analyst. "They can support the continued presidency of Hugo Chavez, who was indeed elected in

a fair vote; unfortunately, this option seems to have the country headed for economic collapse. The other decision Venezuelans could make is to depose Chavez, through strikes, pressure, or an extra-constitutional vote. That would mean going outside the duly established procedures for selecting and removing the President." As life became impossible for the people, they would give up on Chavez if only to stay alive. If he resigned and called for early elections, or submitted himself to a non-binding referendum, he would lose because the oligarchy would repeat the same threat in case the people voted the wrong way. The 'civic' strike would achieve without spilling blood what the military coup of April had failed to do. The opposition had already triumphed, they boasted early in December. It was impossible that Chavez would be able to cling on to power. They mocked the President's statement that the oligarchy would run out of steam before the state did.

On December 6, a mentally unbalanced Portuguese taxi driver who had come from Lisbon the day before, fired on opposition demonstrators at Plaza Altamira, killing three and wounding 28 others. He did not try to run away and was caught by the police. This was the "political cover" the opposition was waiting for. Private television and newspapers started a frenzied campaign against the "armed Bolivarian circles", saying they were the killers. False photographs were circulated of the taxi driver in the company of Chavista leaders in demonstrations days earlier. He could not have been there; he was not even present in Venezuela. That did not prevent the newspapers or television stations from blaming the government. "Terrorism, massacre in Altamira, The night of the dead, Glory to the fallen, Blood attracts blood," the headlines screamed across the columns. By this time the media had shed all pretence of neutrality. The Venevision president identified himself publicly with the objectives of the strike. It and other stations were running advertisements for the opposition in the guise of public service broadcasts, encouraging people to join the marches and take to the streets. They made it seem the strike was total and had public support, both far from the truth. A Molotov cocktail was thrown at a bus and its driver badly burnt. Coincidentally or not, a television reporter was at the scene and she quickly asked him if he had been attacked for not heeding the strike call. It was a message to others what might happen if they ventured out to work. The attack and the television coverage certainly boosted the



opposition. "It's going to fall, it's going to fall, the regime's going to fall," became their triumphant rallying call. Even the President's estranged wife, Marisabel, went on television asking him to listen to the clamour. Many educational institutions shut down in support of the strike, or to avoid the opposition mobs, and soon the banks, including foreign ones, joined in the strike. The National Banking Council kept the banks open from 9 a.m. to 12 noon ignoring the protests of the small clients left without money.

Heading to the middle of December and with Christmas approaching, the government began to fire striking PDVSA directors and executives who responded by saying the strike would continue till the President resigned. The Supreme Court asked the oil workers to return to work but they ignored it, invoking like the April coup plotters Article 350 of the Constitution. The President decided to mobilise the military to guard the oil installations and petrol pumps. The foreign oil companies, among them Shell, Exxon Mobil, Chevron-Texaco and BP, put out a statement rejecting the "militarisation" of the oil industry. Chavez asked people to encircle the oil installations so that the opposition could not harass the workers wanting to return to work. He also began dismissing the striking oil executives and workers. By the end, 18,000 of them lost their jobs and the company, by one estimate, lost 87% of the finance department, 84% in human resources, 80% in the planning department, 79% of the exploration staff, 68% in marketing and supply, 62% in audit and 59% of the maintenance staff. They had an average age of 41 years and between 15 and 20 years in the company.

The PDVSA management and executives had meticulously planned the strike, assuming that a week's paralysis would bring down the government. Returning workers found documents of how the stoppage had been planned in advance. The first step was terrorising the loyal workers, threatening them with dismissal if they sided with the government. Some of them were attacked and even shot at. Others were told that the government would fall in a week and those who stayed at work would be dismissed. The company's entire production and distribution system was automated and computerised. Anyone with control over the data servers and the computer network could blind and paralyse the PDVSA. The information system was controlled by Intesa, in which

PDVSA had 40% of the shares and SAIC, an American company, the rest. SAIC was based in the United States with close links to the Pentagon and U.S. security and intelligence apparatus. It employed high-ranking former military, CIA and NSA officials. With their control over Intesa, the striking staff and their American colleagues ground PDVSA to a halt.

As the loyal workers started returning for work, they found that the automated delivery systems for unloading oil from the terminals onto ships and lorries that supplied petrol to the pumps in the country had been taken down. The passwords had been changed to prevent them from accessing the computers. Intesa would not give PDVSA physical control over the servers. All manuals had been taken away or hidden. The government called on retired workers and volunteers to help it take control over PDVSA. Thousands joined in, including hackers and information technology university professors, to restart delivery and production. But they faced an invisible enemy, an army of computer experts operating from remote locations, accessing the PDVSA network through modems, gaining control over its routers and computer networks and sabotaging every attempt at reviving the automated systems. Giant computer screens went blank, passwords were not recognised, databases vanished, vital parameters were changed and traps set in the system. The maximum permissible temperatures at refineries, which were pegged at 600°C, had been changed to 800°C, making an explosion inevitable if undetected. The hackers for the revolution were struggling to understand the system. Then, on the evening of December 26, a worker lifted the carpet at a regional office of Intesa looking for modem connections and found a whole stack of manuals. With these in hand, the willing workers got down to securing the modems through which the hackers were taking control of the PDVSA system and securing the company's information system. Early in 2003, the Supreme Court ordered Intesa to hand over physical control of the servers to PDVSA and all software control with it. This allowed the government to retake control over the information system and PDVSA.

The situation was as bleak at the refineries. At one of the world's largest refineries in Paraguana on the Caribbean coast in the west of the country, Ivan Hernandez, who had joined the refinery as an

office cleaner and worked his way up to become its director, was called up from retirement. When he reached the sprawling complex there was not one person inside: it was lit up but completely deserted. The first to join him were his two pregnant daughters and his son. He put together a team and eventually the refinery started producing, but without the Fire Brigade which had joined the strike. Volunteer firemen took their place and the risk. In 2012, just before Chavez's last election, there was a huge fire in the refinery and Ivan Hernandez was among the first to offer his services. The explosion was investigated with the help of international experts who reported that it was the result of sabotage. The saboteurs were never caught.

Petrol pumps, meanwhile, were drying up as production was paralysed and stocks began to dwindle. People queued up for days, and sometimes all night, to get petrol, guarded by soldiers. They started cooking with wood fire. For the first time in the country, wood was being sold on the streets. The President recounted how one day that December he saw a poor woman in a barrio on the hills of Caracas cooking on a fire with wood that had come from her only bed. "Chavez, we are cooking with wood, but this doesn't bother us, my son, don't surrender. If we have to cook with wood for another 20 years, we will; nobody can strip us of the nation's dignity," she told him. Venezuela asked for international help for oil supplies and ships from Brazil and Iran came with the much-needed supplies. It was the first time that Venezuela had imported oil. The Navy sent ships to Colombia to bring back food. Other Latin American nations sent food and essential items to help Venezuela.

The government decided that December 16 to 21 would be the crucial days in defeating the petroleum strike. Pirin Leon, the oil tanker with its deadly cargo, was the first target. Early on the morning of December 16, National Guard soldiers scaled the ship even as opposition supporters on small boats tried to stop them. The crew of the stalled oil tanker refused to leave, saying they would not return to work and neither would they leave the ship unattended or in the hands of untrained staff. The government asked retired PDVSA sailors and the crew of an Indian ship berthed in Lake Maracaibo to reactivate Pirin Leon. As in the PDVSA, the striking sailors had tinkered with the computer system that made any attempt at restarting the ship an imminent risk. The whole

country was watching on television if Pilin Leon would set sail again on December 21 or if she would explode and destroy the country's second-largest city. If that happened, Chavez would be held responsible for the tragedy. By late afternoon, the ship started to emit smoke and move but it was overheating quickly. The captain moved the ship to the other shore as a precaution. The engineers managed to control the overheating and now it had to move under a bridge across the lake, the longest in Latin America. If it hit the bridge, the ship would explode, the bridge would be destroyed and the principal petrol producing region in Venezuela would be isolated from the country. Pilin Leon picked up speed and passed under the bridge without any incident. The government now had several million litres of oil in its hand to resupply the petrol stations and get essential services going. The oil tankers that started leaving with oil supplies had a new message painted on them, The new PDVSA now belongs to the people. The other ships were boarded and taken to ports where they were unloaded. They were rebaptised and beauty queens lost out to the heroines of the independence struggle. Pilin Leon was renamed Negra Matea after Bolivar's wet nurse.

Though the opposition lost hope of a quick surgical victory, they were still convinced that the impossible economic situation would topple the government. Their leaders asked supporters to block roads while business owners tried to make sure that the people were left without food and other essentials. They began hoarding stocks and throwing away milk. The baseball season was suspended as part of the strike. The government responded by raiding warehouses and distributing the confiscated stock among the people. The brother of Felipe Acosta, Chavez's first convert who was killed in 1989, or murdered as the President believed, led one of these raids. He opened a bottle of soda, drank from it and belched before the cameras in a Chavista version of a two-finger salute. Middle class society was aghast at this Bolivarian crudity. When they marched to the General's house and banged pots and pans in protest, he appeared on the roof, clapping and dancing to the rhythm of the noise. The rich from the eastern part of Caracas had other disagreeable tasks: for the first time in their lives they started shopping at the markets in the poorer western half of the city. Neighbours clashed over blocked streets and, in some places, came to a compromise: half the street was blocked and the other

part left open for traffic. In one street, Chavistas and *escualidos* (this is how the Chavistas disparagingly called the opposition supporters, meaning people without flavour or personality) played a game of football to sort out their differences in peace.

The CTV and business bosses asked the people to make "sacrifices". Their reward would be the defeat of Chavez and the promise of better times. The poorest bore the brunt of the enforced sacrifice. They were almost at the point of starving. People died because there were no ambulances to take them to hospitals which were running short of medicines. Children could not go to school because the opposition had closed them and their parents had no money because they were without work and the banks were barely functioning for them to access their savings. The main trade union leader, Carlos Ortega, tried to blame Chavez: "The impoverishment of the people is something secondary to the ambition for power of the barbarian who is in Miraflores... this is a devilish strategy for creating chaos." "The sacrifices we make this Christmas will be remembered with infinite gratitude in future. The losses that we suffer today will be transformed in a sea of work, a responsibility that we're ready to assume passionately," business leaders said. Their slogan was, 'A year without Christmas for a future without Chavez'. The result of the sabotage and the strike was a \$20-billion loss for the country. Inflation shot up while employment dipped as thousands of small businesses went bankrupt. All social indicators, health and literacy rates principally among them, worsened and the GDP contracted by about a fifth.

In the run up to Christmas, the opposition threatened that they would not allow Chavez to open his presents in peace. They banged pots and pans on Christmas Eve and turned down the call for a Christmas truce. The government arranged big street parties with music and dancing that allowed people to have a break from the pervading gloom. Informal street traders made a killing with Christmas gifts smuggled in from Colombia, shouting 'Don't mess with my Christmas' to attract shoppers. Chavistas organised Christmas barbecues outside a particularly strident television station. Meanwhile, the President was on his own television show, *Alo Presidente*, celebrating the occasion in the presence of children. "Baby Jesus," he told his audience, "is the spirit of the fight for equality, peace and all our happiness". The two sides mobilised

their supporters in numbers in this period and Carlos Ortega, the trade union leader who liked to keep the company of the richest businessmen, called for another march to Miraflores, saying if they (the government) wants to kill us, let them kill us all. There was no appetite in the opposition ranks for a repeat adventure.

The strike was not going well in the New Year. The opposition called for a "victory march" in Caracas that degenerated into a fight with the National Guards and the Chavistas behind them. At least two people were killed and, once again, the opposition-controlled police and armed men fired on the government supporters. Armed policemen in civilian clothes stormed the funerals of the Chavista victims and fired on the mourners, injuring many of them. A contingent of National Guards had to go to the cemetery to restore order. By this time, reporters of the two most hostile television stations, Globovision and RCTV, started referring to the Chavistas as "criminals, cowards and bastards". Businesses were growing restive and the strike leaders had to concede to their demands that they be allowed to open shop at least for part of the day. The omnipresent duo of the Fedecamaras boss Carlos Fernandez and the head of the CTV Carlos Ortega suddenly vanished from television screens during the festive period of little cheer. They were filmed returning to the country from Aruba, an idyllic Caribbean island and Dutch colony, where they had gone for a hard-earned holiday while their supporters and the Chavistas were being asked to make "sacrifices". The students were loudly protesting against the forced closure of schools. In response, Chavez threatened the teachers who had gone on strike that he would sack them as he had done with the disloyal PDVSA workers and replace them with retired teachers and volunteers. Educational brigades with students, parents, sympathetic teachers and lecturers sprang up all over the country as they began reopening schools.

Carlos Ortega announced early in January that Chavez would go in 25 days as the election commission had suggested the date of February 2 for a non-binding referendum which the President had not accepted and which the Supreme Court later described as unnecessary. The opposition called for a boycott of sales tax but the march from which this call went out was comprised by those who never paid the tax. The opposition supporters were now going

for desperate measures, trying to block oil supplies as Chavistas escorted the tankers and brawls and firefights broke out between the two groups. Soldiers and civilian volunteers started guarding pipelines that brought oil to Caracas after these were sabotaged. There were armed attacks on the homes of PDVSA managers who had defied the strike and were reviving the production in the refineries. The President announced that the state would treat the "public service announcements" aired by private television stations as advertisements and include these in their earnings for which they would have to pay tax. In the middle of all this, the former U.S. President, Jimmy Carter, turned up in Venezuela at the invitation of Gustavo Cisneros. He was in Venezuela on a fishing trip with Cisneros, he said, but later retook his role as a mediator in the conflict.

Hundreds of thousands of Chavez supporters gathered in Caracas on January 23 with the memorable cry of 'Uh, ah, Chavez no se va' (Uh, ah, Chavez is here to stay, their take on the English football terrace chant of 'Ooh, aah Cantona'). By February, the strike fizzled out, PDVSA began producing and exporting petroleum and Chavez was more secure in power than ever. The ringleaders of the strike tried to save face by claiming that the strike had not been called off, only "made flexible". Chavez explained his victory with a military metaphor. In Latin America, he said, we have stood military doctrine on its head. Normally, an army places its heavy artillery in front and the cavalry behind; here they had won by deploying them the other way. The cavalry was the people and the heavy artillery the economy. The people with their political action opened up the way for the state to retake political and economic control. Every time the enemy opens up a flank, we move in, he said. The April coup attempt allowed the Chavistas to take control of the army while the petroleum strike gave them control over the petroleum industry, the mainstay of the economy.

The two months of hardship also taught the Bolivarians many vital lessons. The first was that the only form of ending poverty was by giving power to the poor to take decisions in place of charity. Theirs would be participative democracy in place of a representative one with an economic democracy that allowed an equitable distribution of national resources. In parallel, Chavez promised to crack down on fiscal evasion. In 20<sup>th</sup> century an amount equal to fifteen

Marshall Plans had disappeared, he said, money that the country received through oil sales. Chavez estimated that fiscal evasion cost the country more than what it earned by selling petroleum. This money would now be put towards social and economic projects and in the interest of the poor Venezuelans. The Constitution was a political, ethical and anti-neoliberal project. They would break the old model of economic domination that allowed a small group of Venezuelans to control the national wealth: its petroleum, its abundant minerals and its rivers and fertile valleys. They were known as the "owners of the valleys" for appropriating the best land in the country for their neighbourhoods, their own beaches, their holiday homes and their farmhouses. He quoted U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt: "The liberty of a democracy is not safe if the people tolerate the growth of private power to a point where it becomes stronger than the democratic state itself. That in its essence is fascism: ownership of government by an individual, by a group, or any controlling private power."

Chavez's response to the strike was to deepen and radicalise the revolution. "The revolution is not up for negotiations; there is no negotiations with the Constitution's principles in any way," he made clear. As part of the deepening of the process, he announced that land would be redistributed to the peasants and big unproductive landholdings would be broken up. The poor would get their land title deeds in the cities. Never again would the people be made to go hungry and currency control would be established so that the multimillionaires could not spirit away their vast wealth outside the country. He estimated that in the past four years these groups had taken out as much as \$35 billion from the country at a time when its GDP was around \$100 billion. Chavez was aware that his enemies would strike again at the very next opportunity. He quoted another American, Gabriel Jackson, author of *The Spanish Republic and the Civil War* (1931-39), who had warned that a dominant class that thought of itself a natural elite and felt threatened economically and defied by the people made for some of the cruellest people. "It is a terrible, and repeated, human dilemma," said Jackson, "that at times men have no choice between submission to tyranny and a war which will in all likelihood destroy many of the institutions they set out to defend."



The opposition had lost two of its most potent weapons, the military and the oil industry, but it still had the mass media on its side and powerful international backers, principally the USA. Communication in Venezuela, Chavez said, was a form of tyranny worth studying, including with the help of psychiatry. A large section of the population was suffering from "psychiatric dissociation" induced by the media. He compared the four major television stations to the horsemen of the Apocalypse. These stations had unleashed the historical hate that the Venezuelan oligarchs felt for the poor, the President said. He spoke of his conversation with Kofi Annan, United Nations General Secretary, in which he had told him: "... there isn't a democratic fight here (*in Venezuela*), no, here we the men and women of democracy are fighting against a party of terrorists, of Fascist coup mongers... over there in the United Nations walks a Fascist, a coup plotter, who is the owner of a television station here in Venezuela who is called Gustavo Cisneros... Mr Cisneros has said over there at some meetings in other parts of the world that he will not rest until Hugo Chavez is out of power... have to thank them, they are opening up opportunities we did not have before."

These were harsh words, very much in Chavez's combative style, but a press conference called by the owners of the four major television stations (the four horsemen), two major dailies and the federation of private radio station was revealing for both the questions the foreign journalists asked, none of whom could be described as a Chavista, and the replies of the media owners. A Wall Street Journal reporter asked the first challenging question: "Isn't difficult for you to behave as an independent media at the same time that you as owners and your journalists and stations are many times playing a direct part in trying to get rid of President Chavez? How can a media be independent and at the same time a principal actor in the national landscape?" Marciel Granier, owner of RCTV and rabid anti-Chavista, answered: "Frankly, I don't understand the question... here what is being attempted is to look for a democratic exit... Here there is no attempt to take down the government..." The president of Venevision, Victor Ferrere, said, "The petroleum workers are risking their careers, we are risking our licences for only one reason, which is fundamentally to defend the concept of democracy in our country; that even if President Chavez was elected democratically he has been losing the

characteristics of a democrat ... in the last four years, since he was elected in 1998. The basic things, the basic principles of a democracy, are absent... we have a position of profound differences with the national government." A Financial Times reporter asked him how many advertisements his canal had put on air. On December 13, hardly 11 days into the strike, Ferrere admitted putting out 7,200 free advertisements which, had they not done so, would have given his canal 25 million bolivars.

**FT:** Why did you put the advertisements?

**Ferrere:** Because we are in a strike and we have joined the strike.

**FT:** Then you are participating in an act against the government?

**Ferrere:** We cannot stop transmitting information but we are not producing our soaps, our variety programmes, we certainly have joined the strike just as different franchises of the country and industries, practically all of the industrial parks and a large number of multinational companies.

**FT:** You think you can objectively cover the strike that you are contributing to?

**Ferrere:** We will always cover it one hundred per cent objectively and we also are saying who are not on strike.

A reporter of the opposition newspaper, El Nacional, asked: "You say you are on strike. Then why are there advertisements of Democratic Coordination, of women, of Women's Alliance for Liberty, Project Venezuela and even of Democratic Action I saw an advertisement.

**Garnier:** "And of the government too."

**El Nacional:** "Well, I haven't seen any of the government. I've only seen these, if you are on commercial strike, you see the advertisement of these people."

**Ferrere:** "These are absolutely donated by the institutions and civil associations and NGOs, it is for these that we're transmitting them."

The Financial Times journalist then put out a general question: Who among you wants to objectively inform of what is happening in the country and who among you accepts being part of a political

process into which the media has merged? "Objectivity is something very difficult, as all of us who have practised journalism know," Garnier replied. A New York Times reporter, Francisco Toro, no Chavez sympathiser, quoted an article in the WSJ that spoke of the Venezuelan media not so much covering the opposition as doing propaganda on their behalf. "I feel that for the majority of the questions put here, the answers have been some kind of attack on the government — and certainly there can be many good reasons to attack the government, or not, depending on each person's position — but I think that this position of responding by attacking the government, however well founded, restricts self-criticism that some of the media could make that one notices when one comes from abroad: that the private media is practically saturated with criticisms of the government with very little journalistic balance. I think... there is a very strong feeling that it is difficult to have confidence in a media that doesn't have any type of balance and that speaks exclusively of one side."

**Ferrere:** "Excuse me for a moment. How much time do you have in Venezuela?"

**Toro:** "I'm Venezuelan."

**Ferrere:** "You are Venezuelan... I have the feeling that one of you is seeing half the movie... we criticise the government because the government has cornered us in many ways... because it doesn't have a democratic disposition... we're living in a tense moment where... we could lose democracy as there will be a surge of violence that we're trying to avoid at all cost. There is a confrontation... we have a confrontation that has our conscience very calm. The executive organised and initiated it against us... Are we going to remain with our arms crossed? It is for this that we answer the government, take a position, it is not going to terrorise us."

The editor of El Nacional had a similar answer to another related question. "The fact that more than 20 television station, more than 50 newspapers and more than 250 radio stations have joined the national civic strike... is a political position of all media businesses (that) has to do with a situation in Venezuela where authoritarianism... insults, aggression, the organisation of para-governmental squadrons that attack the media and the journalists

and the kidnapping of political power has led to this situation of the media...”

The Wall Street Journal reporter asked the media owners about their conduct during the April coup attempt.

**WSJ:** And on April 12, what happened that day?

**Ferrere:** April 2?

**WSJ:** April 12. What happened that day when you did not cover anything, when you had children’s and sports programmes when the people were coming down the hills to retake Miraflores?

**Ferrere:** Ok, look, the problem wasn’t on April 12, it was April 13. Many important things happened on April 13 that prevented a large part of the media from operating. On April 13 midnight or towards the late part of morning, this chaos started, many of us who were at a meeting at Miraflores, where we went to communicate our worries about what was happening... that of the famous Carmona decree... We expressed our rejection... from there, the last meeting in Miraflores, we went to our canals. Immediately afterwards the Bolivarian circles arrived at our canals and where they were present from the afternoon till President Chavez returned once more to Miraflores. Don’t fall for the manipulation about the Venezuelan people; neither the Venezuelan people took him out nor did they put him back. He was sacked and put back by the armed forces. At that moment our journalists were absolutely terrorised; they could not go out; we did not have sources of information; we could not communicate with the government...”

A reporter of a Catalan newspaper asked of El Universal, a rabid opposition daily, if he stood by the report in his newspaper that the military was trying to burn down the newspaper’s installation. The newspaper’s representative said he stood by everything published in his paper because he trusted the sources. When the journalist pressed him, asking if the army was institutionally involved in the plan, he backtracked saying he had no indication of that. Ferrere, himself of Catalanian origin, said the Armed Forces were perhaps

were not part of it as an institution but like all institutions it was under attack from the executive and there were factions within it that could be linked to the plan.

Was the United States involved in this "civic strike" that lasted 64 days and knocked out almost a fifth of the country's GDP? Unlike that of the April coup attempt, Washington could not be directly linked to the events and most evidence was circumstantial, like milk on the cat's whiskers. The timing and the name of Democratic Coordination, the umbrella opposition grouping, were interesting pointers to U.S. influence, as Eva Gollinger says in her book, *The Chavez Code*. The United States had helped cobble together the Nicaraguan opposition against the Sandinistas and defeat them in elections with a similar name. The U.S. Secretary of State, Colin Powell, met Pedro Carmona on December 13 in Bogota where he had been granted political asylum. Carmona travelled freely to the USA during this period and his U.S. visa was cancelled only after growing international pressure. The U.S. government took a public position that the way out of the crisis was to hold early elections. Its ambassador in Venezuela, Charles Shapiro, made public pronouncements during the strike that he was worried about the possibility of violence. The United States kept a lower profile after the fiasco of the April coup attempt but the discretion was not because it had lost its appetite for removing Chavez. Instead, it made a tactical change, concentrating on building up a new generation of political leaders from outside the old discredited parties who would work as the opposition spearhead against Chavez's government with the doctrine of constitutional means when necessary and direct street action whenever possible.



**Venezuelan opposition newspapers celebrating Chavez's ouster the day after the coup: 'It's over', 'Chavez surrenders', 'Chavez falls'**

## CHAPTER VIII

### Health and Education For the People

With two epic victories that gave the government control over the military and the petroleum industry, Hugo Chavez turned to the social disaster he had on his hands. The health system was on the point of collapse, unemployment was at a peak, hundreds of thousands were illiterate and state schooling was dysfunctional. In the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most Latin American countries had moved to a market-friendly healthcare model, viewing public health as a commodity rather than as a right and the state provided only minimum low-cost services for the poor. Venezuela was a late convert to this model and had enjoyed a reasonable public health system in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but a decade of neo-liberal reforms had dried up investments and driven the state hospitals over the edge. The earnings from petroleum were not as plentiful as before and, as the country sought loans from the International Monetary Fund, it was forced, or seduced, into accepting a more privatised model.

From the 1970's, the health budget had almost halved. Most doctors worked in expensive private clinics, had their own practice or sought better paid employment abroad. They were not interested in going to the dirty, smelly, dangerous barrios. Medicines were scarce in the state hospitals and the patients had to buy most of it, often even band-aids. The hospitals were short of doctors and much of the equipment did not function. Hospital mafias took control of supplies and equipment and sold them to private clinics. There was a shortage of at least 20,000 doctors and 70% of the people lacked basic medical attention. The population was going hungry and many children suffered from malnutrition. The new Venezuelan Constitution recognises free quality healthcare as a universal right, something that the state has to guarantee. It prohibits public health from being privatised and obliges the state to create and direct a participative and decentralised public health system. The Constitution also obliges the state to finance public health system through taxes, public spending and oil revenues and it is allowed to regulate both the public and private components of the system. The Bolivarian Constitution gives organised political power the right to be part of

the decision-making and in the planning and execution of health policies and control over them.

The government realised that changes would have to be rapid, but the existing state structure was so incompetent and corrupt that it was impossible to depend on it. Instead, it decided to create Bolivarian "missions". The missions were created and funded by the state but these were not parallel bureaucracies. They were designed to bypass the existing bureaucracy and help create a new social structure within a new "geometry of power", in which the people would be given resources and the power to take decisions on issues affecting them. Each mission had a specific task and political orientation. It was the building block of the new state that guaranteed rights and brought justice to the excluded. The working document on the missions stated that "Those who were excluded are now included... studying, getting qualified, organising, working with a new culture, with a new conscience... the missions are generating a new reality, even in cultural, psychological, ideological and philosophical matters..." It described them as "extraordinary efforts to cancel the social debt that no other government had never paid off". "We will continue expanding and deepening them and above all creating a new institutional order for the new social state with rights and justice." The missions were designed to bring in new actors, the people, in place of the politicians, the bureaucrats and the law-enforcement and judicial agencies which controlled the old state.

The violent opposition attempts at toppling the government had convinced the Chavistas to take a more radical route. "Venezuela has changed and it has changed not for a day or a year: Venezuela has changed forever and we are in charge here so that this be a truth today, tomorrow and always," said Chavez. "There is no going back; there is no return; we are leaving the burial ground behind... we are returning power to the people; the Bolivarian government has come to give back power to the Venezuelan people without any exception." The missions were a concrete expression of the old slogan of power to the people. Their fundamental aim was to "confront the causes and consequences of poverty and exclusion with the decisive participation of the people". Chavez was convinced that the only way of ending poverty was by empowering the people so that they could do it for themselves. They would be



the ones to overcome poverty, not us, he told the country; the missions would be the first institutional step in this direction, bypassing the corrupt bureaucracy.

In 2000 Chavez and Fidel signed an agreement that Venezuela would initially provide 53,000 barrels of desperately needed oil to Cuba at preferential prices. Cuba would, in turn, help Venezuela with its human capital: doctors, nurses, agronomists, teachers, sports trainers and technicians. "We don't have many resources but we have worked to create human capital," Fidel Castro told the Venezuelans, "and with human capital one can do what one can never do with all the financial capital of the world". About 450 Cuban doctors and nurses came to Venezuela within days of the mudslide that killed thousands near Caracas in December 1999. They had stayed back after the initial emergency, working with the poor communities of that zone. Even during the petroleum strike of 2002, the government was planning the first health mission and named it Barrio Adentro (Inside the Neighbourhood). The doctors would not only attend to patients in the poor neighbourhoods but also stay there, which was how the mission got its name. In developing their health policies, the Chavistas were following the advice of Rudolf Virchow, German public health activist and father of modern pathology, that "health is politics and politics is health" and that the physicians are the natural attorneys of the poor.

Soon after the opposition strike collapsed, the Chavista mayor of Caracas started a small project in the city, sending the first batch of 54 Cuban doctors to the slums in April 2003. The Cuban government paid their wages at home and the Venezuelan government gave them a small spending amount. When the Cuban doctors first arrived, there were no structures from where they could work and nowhere for them to stay. People in the slums formed health committees to interact with the Cuban doctors and looked after them. They put them up in their rooms and any available space, from a garage to someone's front room, became a 'consultorio popular', a walk-in doctor's chamber or surgery. The Cubans looked after patients in the morning and paid house visits in the evenings. One such patient was Richard Dorta who left home for work one day in 1997 and was attacked by the police in a case of mistaken identity. He was beaten, detained and tortured so badly that he lost consciousness. When he came around, he found

himself in a city hospital and nobody would tell him who were responsible for his situation. He was partially paralysed on his left side. The hospital said after some days there was little they could do for him and advised him to use a walking stick. Richard could only hobble on his right foot. If he accidentally moved the other foot, he would fall down. He lost his job, his wife left him and he returned to his mother's house. When the Cuban doctors arrived, they visited him at home and had him sent to Cuba for more treatment. Doctors and therapists there told him fear was inhibiting him from using his left leg. They used physiotherapy and counselling till he could start walking again, though slowly and tentatively.

Like Richard, thousands of barrio residents confined to their homes now began to receive free and caring attention from the Cuban doctors. Unlike their middle class Venezuelan counterparts, the Cubans integrated with the residents they were looking after, and the barrios provided them with security. Groups of neighbours escorted them so that the slum gangs would not target them and soon the gangs themselves escorted the doctors during their visits. Some of them did find their experience traumatic, having to treat drunks, drug addicts and injured gang members at night or childbirths and heart attack victims at home. Barrio Adentro, as intended, became an engine for popular organisation, mainly among the neighbourhood women. For many of them, activism in the health committees was the first step towards broader political involvement. It was also their first taste of Socialism in action.

The poor in Caracas had never known doctors living with them in such sparse conditions: in one room, with a fan, a chest of drawers for their clothes and belongings and a house manager to look after them. The Cuban doctors had worked in poor countries elsewhere but they still found the levels of malnutrition and violence shocking. They also found preventable diseases that had long been eradicated in their country. The Cubans avoided taking any political position and instead concentrated on their patients. Each one of them was assigned around 225 families but in reality, at least in the early years, they were looking after many more. They took extensive notes on patients of whom simply no records existed in the past: the poor in Venezuela had long become invisible. Towards the end of 2003, three Cuban dentists started a pilot project in

Caracas. Private dentistry was so expensive that most poor people had never been to one. Soon, thousands of Cuban dentists made their way to Venezuela and dentistry became part of the mission. It also gave rise to 'Mision Sonrisa' (Mission Smile), with its slogan of 'Give the barrio a smile', that attends to the needs of the Venezuelan poor, providing free dental care and prosthesis. Hundreds more doctors soon arrived to work in the barrios in Caracas and the government decided it could replicate the model nationally.

By the end of 2004, thousands of Cuban doctors spread out all over the country and soon they were present even in the remote regions of the Andean mountains and the Amazonian forest areas where many people had never been to a doctor. The Barrio Adentro centres received medicines bought centrally by the state to be given free to the patients. In the next few years, tens of thousands of Cuban doctors helped revive and expand the primary health care network on a scale never seen before in the country and in a remarkably short period of time. Once the mission stabilised, small plots of land were found to build small two-storey structures ("built to Feng Shui specifications") with the consultation rooms on the ground floor and the doctors' quarter above. The Cuban doctors live and work out of these distinctive buildings, of which there are thousands now all over Venezuela. Credit for the astonishingly quick turnaround in the health of the population also goes to the thousands of 'feeding homes' that were set up alongside the primary health care centres. These are not soup kitchens though they provide freshly cooked food to people who are either indigent or too sick or old to cook for themselves. The state supplies the ingredients and the food is cooked by small groups of women in the kitchen of one of their homes or in donated spaces. They know who need food in their neighbourhood and allow it to be taken up to homes if the beneficiaries are unable to walk to the centres. The diet is monitored for nutritional standards. At one point, at least a million people benefited from the programme, though the numbers of these centres is slowly dwindling as extreme poverty diminishes. The women volunteers are now paid the minimum wage and many of them have organised themselves politically and economically.

As the country earned more with higher petroleum prices, and kept hold of more of it than before, it also found resources to take

medical care beyond the primary level. Barrio Adentro had encountered some striking needs. There were very few diagnostic centres. People with disabilities had nowhere to go and whole families were dragged down into poverty because of this. The poor did not have access to specialised and advanced medical care. Barrio Adentro was renamed Barrio Adentro I while Barrio Adentro II was established to create diagnostic and rehabilitation centres as well as more advanced technology centres with a small number of hospital beds. Within three years, Barrio Adentro II centres were established in all Venezuelan states and are still being built. The Barrio Adentro III programme began in 2005 to improve state hospitals and build new ones to deal with major illnesses and provide palliative and specialist care. Barrio Adentro III has had major problems in modernising old structures, physical and managerial. Corruption, lack of public oversight, bureaucratic wrangling and delays by private contractors, who often took the advance money and disappeared, affected many of these projects. Many of the doctors in the state hospitals have a conflict of interest. They are allowed to practise privately and it is a common complaint that they do not adequately treat patients in the state hospitals so that they are forced to seek private treatment in health clinics where the occupancy charge for one room can sometimes be more than that of a five star hotel room. The programme was hit by a dip in revenues after petroleum prices crashed in 2008 but luckily the recession was brief.

Barrio Adentro IV was set up to build at least 15 new specialist hospitals in the country to handle the most difficult cases in hospital settings. These were to function as referral, teaching and research centres. Its flagship hospital is the children's cardiology centre in Caracas, the biggest in Latin America, established in 2007. About 4,500 children in Venezuela are born every year with heart problems. The new hospital now has the capacity to treat them and has cleared the backlog of several thousand cases by strengthening children's cardiology units in state hospitals all over the country. The Caracas centre attends to children from Latin American and African countries. All treatment is free and for children from the continent and Africa and their airfares are paid for by the Venezuelan state. At one point, Chavez offered the hospital his presidential plane to transport African children who

have to return to their countries via Europe using commercial flights although Africa is much closer to Venezuela than Europe.

Petroleum revenues go to paying for this modern health system that very few other developing countries have. The Venezuelan health system could never have been developed so rapidly without Cuba's help or without the fact that the two countries speak the same language. At the beginning, thousands of Venezuelans travelled to Cuba – and still do – for life-saving operations, cancer care and rehabilitation, including for drug addiction. Cuba has an outstanding record in each of these fields. One of the most famous cases is that of Diego Maradona, the Argentine football idol who was cured of drugs but found himself infected with the virus of Socialism. The agreement with Cuba allowed Chavez to send some of the worst cases he found as he travelled in the country to Havana. He often mentioned a young girl, Genesis, who had presented him with the national flag at a public event. Genesis suffered from brain cancer and the doctors had given her a year to live. Chavez spoke to Fidel and arranged to send Genesis to Cuba so that she would find some happiness there in her brief life. Towards the end of his own life when diagnosed with cancer, Chavez unfurled the flag that Genesis had given him and which he kept by his desk.

The two countries also founded Mision Milagro (Miracle), initially with Cuban doctors and Venezuelan funding, that carried out minor eye surgeries like cataract and restored the vision of people who could not afford private treatment. Planeloads of poor Venezuelans were flown to Cuba and operated in the country. The programme was extended throughout the continent and patients now travel to both these countries for treatment from Argentina and Brazil, even though these countries are richer than Cuba and Venezuela put together. One patient of interest in Bolivia was Mario Teran who had retired as a non-commissioned officer and was living in poverty with his miserable soldier's pension. He had no way of affording a cataract operation and was losing his sight. The Cuban doctors did not know that it was Teran who had executed Che Guevara in October 1967 at a tiny school in the nondescript village of La Higuera. The fact came to light only when Teran's son publicly thanked what the Cuban doctors had done for his father. In 1977,

Sergeant Mario Teran narrated his experience of shooting Che to the French magazine, Paris-Match:

"I doubted for 40 minutes before executing the order. I went to see Colonel Perez with the hope that he would annul the order but the Colonel was furious. This is how I went in. It was the worst moment of my life. When I came in, Che was sat on a bench. On seeing me, he said, "You have come to kill me". I felt ill at ease and lowered my head without answering. Then he asked me, "What have the others said?" I answered they had said nothing and he replied, "They were brave!" I did not dare to shoot. At that moment, Che seemed large, very large, enormous. His eyes were shining brightly. I felt they were on me and when he fixed his looks on me, he made me dizzy. "Be serious!" he said, "and point well. You are going to kill a man!" Then I took a step back, towards the doorstep, closed my eyes and fired the first burst. Che, with his feet wrecked, fell to the ground, began to twitch and a lot of blood started to ebb away. I recovered my spirits and fired the second burst that hit him in the arms, in the shoulder and in his heart. He was dead."

Mission Milagro till 2014 has treated more than three million people throughout the continent and in Africa. In 2013, President Nicolas Maduro presented a project to the Pope asking the Vatican to cooperate with the two countries in extending the programme to the poorest parts of the globe.

At one point at least 20,000 Cuban doctors and nurses were staffing the Barrio Adentro programmes. This cannot be sustained for very long and Venezuela has to become self-sufficient in doctors. Venezuelan doctors from the traditional universities do not want to work in the slums. Most of the new doctors come from the non-elite social classes, with the commitment to working in public health and serving their communities. Several hundred students were sent to the Latin American School of Medicine in Havana that trains people from all over the world, mainly from the developing countries but also from the United States. But this would never be enough; the need was for thousands, not hundreds, of doctors. Planning started almost immediately in 2003 for a course adapted

to Venezuelan realities and one that could be taught in the country. The result was the Integrated Community Medicine course that was put together by a large team of Cuban and Venezuelan doctors and educators.

The new course is rigorous but departs from the Western model in that the students are encouraged to work with trained doctors from the first year and the curriculum is more inter-disciplinary than its Western counterparts. It also uses a wide variety of teaching aids like DVDs and videoconferences. Thousands of these doctors are integrating into the public health system as Venezuela moves towards self-sufficiency. But even in this, the Cuban doctors have played a big part, helping teach the Venezuelan students in the Barrio Adentro programme, acting as their supervisors and teachers. There is a Latin American School of Medicine in Caracas that trains doctors from Palestine, Africa and South America. A new university of health sciences is being developed with its headquarters in Caracas but with interconnected branches in several Latin American nations from where the students will be drawn. Thousands of Venezuelan doctors are given scholarships for post-graduate and specialist courses. There are more than 13,000 Barrio Adentro centres in Venezuela, of which 7,500 are neighbourhood consultation centres. Eighty-two percent of the population uses the public health service and 7.5% of the GDP is spent on health. The government estimates that the Barrio Adentro programmes have saved 1.7 million lives in the first ten years and carried out over 700 million consultations.

The Barrio Adentro programme is not without its shortcomings and neither was it universally welcome in Venezuela. Some of the infrastructure deteriorated over time for lack of maintenance and at times the famous Venezuelan bureaucracy comes in the way of regular supplies of medicines and equipment. Despite this, the majority of the users value it and have little in common with its critics, the fiercest of which has been the country's medical federation whose members work in the private sector or in the state hospitals, sometimes combining the two to earn astronomical amounts. The federation accused the Cuban doctors of being incompetent and poorly trained and of putting Venezuelan lives at risk. The major newspapers took up this accusation and ran a sustained campaign against the Cuban doctors. They were accused of not being doctors at all but Cuban spies in disguise and, worse,

military trainers for Bolivarian guerrillas just as they later claimed that energy saving light bulbs were actually concealed spy cameras being monitored from Havana. They were accused of taking the jobs of Venezuelan doctors but the local doctors were unwilling to do the jobs that the Cuban doctors did. Their common excuse was that their spouses would not let them live in the barrios. "There is malpractice, but it is media malpractice that we sadly have in this country," Chavez said. This was not the only line of attack. Soon the media campaign tried to make out the Barrio Adentro centres were rundown and lacked medicines and that the health system in Venezuela was actually worse than that before Chavez. The opposition accused the government of promoting a parallel "mission state" and of using these to fish for votes. But come elections and the same opposition rediscovers its love for the medical missions, saying their government will make them more efficient and "reinstitutionalise" them, a euphemism for putting them under the control of the state bureaucracy. The opposition first threatened to send these doctors back to Cuba if it came to power. When the Chavistas said this would destroy the programme since the Cuban doctors in the majority staffed it, the opposition changed tack, saying they would offer Venezuelan citizenship to any Cuban doctor who wanted to stay behind. The majority of doctors, even in the state hospitals, remain sympathetic to the opposition and are hostile to the new doctors from less privileged social backgrounds.

The Cuban medical programme in Venezuela became a target of the Bush government that modified immigration laws under the Medical Professional Parole Program to encourage defections from Barrio Adentro. The Cuban medical staff could now ask to enter the United States at any embassy. Some of them crossed the border into Colombia by land but their numbers were never high, a few hundred at the most from among the tens of thousands working in Venezuela. Passport control was almost non-existent at the land border crossings with Colombia and the smugglers had their own routes. The Cuban doctors did not stand out with their Latin appearances. They headed for the U.S. embassy in the Colombian capital, Bogota. The Lancet medical journal reported on one such case:

"Andres — a 36-year-old Cuban physician — decided to get out even before he had got fully in. When Cuban



medical authorities tapped him for a medical mission in Venezuela, he did not see an opportunity to help the poor of an allied nation, but rather an opportunity to make his way to the USA. "I didn't arrive in Venezuela to work; I arrived and deserted right away", he said while waiting for his US visa in Bogota, Colombia... Andres said that he could not stand the conditions in Venezuela, where he lived in a crowded house with a leaky straw roof which he shared with fifteen other Cuban doctors waiting to be put to work."

The defections were not publicised as the Colombian government did not wish to offend Venezuela and affect trade with its neighbour. Life did not turn out for the Cuban doctors exactly as what they had imagined. They were promised they would be given permission in two weeks' time but it often took much longer. In Bogota, they lived in squalid conditions, waiting for their chance to make it to the United States. Even when they reached American shores, they found that their medical qualifications were not accepted and they had to re-sit examinations that cost thousands of dollars unlike in Cuba or in Venezuela where students receive free education. Their language skills were not up to the mark to get jobs in U.S. hospitals which, they found, preferred their own students to the defecting Cubans. Many of these highly qualified doctors reconciled themselves to working as nurses or health assistants or did other less attractive jobs. Neurosurgeons ended up working in warehouses and former anaesthetists were lucky if they found jobs as medical secretaries. They were sold the dream of instant riches and ended up being used as pawns in a diplomatic game.

On the other side of the middle class Venezuelan doctors, for whom their profession is a road to instant riches, is the "army of white jackets", also Venezuelan doctors, with "science and conscience". This is how the new generation of public health doctors describe themselves, trained under a new curriculum and with an awareness of medical internationalism. The first relief plane to land in Haiti after the earthquake of January 2010 was a Venezuelan Air Force transport aircraft with rescuers and doctors from "Battalion 51". They took their name from the first batch of 51 students that had been sent to Cuba for medical training. They decided to develop a

Venezuelan version of the Cuban international health missions. Once in Haiti, the Venezuelan rescuers and doctors went straight to work without armed escorts. This time, the barrios of Haiti looked after their security just as the barrios in Caracas had escorted the Cuban doctors. Long after the western media circus had departed, and unlike the NGOs operating from the best hotels of the capital Port-au-Prince, the Venezuelan doctors, along with colleagues from Cuba, Argentina and other Latin American nations, stayed in the camps with the displaced Haitians. The United Nations brought cholera to the island, for which it never apologised or made amends, and it was left to Battalion 51 and Cuban doctors to control the epidemic. The United States sent its troops to the island and its Navy ships were anchored off the coast. How many Haitians did your country treat on those ships? Chavez asked President Barack Obama but never received an answer. The same Battalion 51 doctors travelled with their Cuban counterparts to Sierra Leone during the Ebola outbreak.

While Venezuelans have free universal and constantly improving health care, how does it compare to Latin American countries like Colombia and Chile with privatised health? A Colombian journalist, Juan Gossain, reported some specific cases. A man climbed up to the roof of a health clinic in Bogota and threatened to jump if a doctor did not attend to him. He had been waiting eight months for an appointment. That same night, in another Colombian city, a patient who had been waiting three days at the reception with an unbearable headache attacked a doctor. A young boy lost his sight after the health company delayed his eye operation. In 2012, there were 60,000 complaints against the private health providers in the first six months. When Gossain went to a pharmacy and asked for medicine prices, the owner told him seven of every ten customers went back empty handed because they could not afford to pay for them. Private health is a \$12-billion business in Colombia and the consequence, as Gossain says, is that it is sometimes cheaper to buy a coffin than medicines. "Thieves everywhere," Gossain wrote, "Corruption and disorder, which is its main accomplice, starts from the beginning. The Colombian health system does not have a single database but two: one for people who pay their contributions and the other for those who receive their subsidies from the state. The chaos is of such proportions that they charge for attending to people who do not even exist." While Colombians and Chileans are

marching for free universal health care, the Venezuelan opposition attacks Barrio Adentro structures in their periodic fits of violence. An opposition journalist spread the rumour after presidential elections in 2013 that the Cubans were hiding ballot boxes in the health centres and soon mobs descended on them, trying to set them alight, at times with the Cuban doctors inside. This was repeated in 2014 when more than a hundred health centres were attacked by the opposition, just like public buses and food shops, services the well-heeled opposition supporters do not use.

## **EDUCATION**

Chavez had started improving the school infrastructure almost as soon as he won the elections in 1998, falling back on the army to renovate crumbling schools and building new ones. In 2003, he was ready for the more ambitious goals of ridding the country of illiteracy and developing a new system of Bolivarian education. The inspiration lay in the teachings of Simon Rodriguez, Bolivar's tutor and one of the continent's earliest and most daring educational innovators. "Nobody does well what they do not know; the Republic cannot be created with ignorant people, whatever the plan," he had argued. Bolivar had a military metaphor for education: nations march to greatness at the same pace as their education. Not surprisingly, the new Bolivarian pedagogy aimed at social inclusion of the marginalised classes and preparing students to build a new Republic.

Army units in Fort Tiuna and paratroopers in Maracay had started experimenting with the Cuban literacy method of 'Yes I can' around their bases. It was named 'Mission Robinson I' after the pseudonym that Simon Rodriguez used in Jamaica when he had fled Venezuela. When the programme was rolled out in June 2003, Cuba sent more than 89,000 television sets, 80,000 VHS recorders, 2 million notebooks, 1.3 million cassettes for the tele-classes, 30,000 of which were for the educators, and 230,000 manuals for volunteers. About 80,000 alphabetisation centres were set up to draw in the estimated 1.5 million illiterate Venezuelans. As with the health mission, the facilitators used any available space to start the classes, using audio-visual methods to make the programme more attractive. The facilitators' work was to encourage the illiterate population, many of them old and very poor, to shed their

nervousness and come to the classes. As the programme developed, the volunteers realised they had to address very specific problems. The indigenous population had to be taught in their own languages. The literacy programme used 26 languages for their instruction. There were people with disabilities and many had problems with eyesight. The visual methods were useless for the blind and a Braille system had to be developed. Cuba sent planeloads of lenses to keep the educational programme going. Many of the illiterates were in the hellish prisons. Douglas Antonio Garcia, a prisoner, took the initiative to educate his mates with the Cuban method. He was one of the estimated 44,000 facilitators and 16,000 supervisors who worked in the programme and, in 2005, Unesco declared Venezuela free of illiteracy, the only country other than Cuba in the continent at that time to achieve the status. The Cuban method is used throughout Latin America and even in Spain. Mission Robinson was not without its problems. Those attending it were among the poorest in the country and were paid a small stipend to offset their lost earnings, as were the volunteers. Often, material and wages did not come on time and logistical problems led to classes being shut down and then restarting. These were possibly difficult to avoid in the early years of the Chavez government when the state was still weak but Mission Robinson did more than just quickly get people to read and write or sign their names. Mission Robinson II and III had more ambitious aims of preparing the formerly illiterate students with broader education by including history, geography, basic computing and a second language. It turned Venezuela into the "world's biggest classroom".

Mission Robinson I quickly spawned many other missions such as Mission Miracle. It also gave birth to Mission Ribas, named after the independence hero Jose Felix Ribas, whom the Spanish had executed and then displayed his severed head as a warning to the population. It started in November 2003 with 300,000 high school dropouts and was intended to get them through the secondary stage. Teenagers and older people studied together. One of them, Jeans Edward Borrego Boscan, spoke of his experience at the first graduating ceremony of Mission Ribas. His parents were politically active and subjected to constant police harassment during the pre-Chavez era. They sent him to live with his grandmother so that his education was not disturbed. After finishing primary school, he wanted to study in a polytechnic but his grandmother refused to

send him there as it was targeted by the police and the political parties because of the militant sympathies of its students. The harassment eased when Rafael Caldera became President in 1994 and Boscan enlisted there but days after classes started, it was closed down by a presidential decree and converted into a degree college. Boscan dropped out of education and got down to working, holding several jobs, rising through the ranks, and raising a family but without finishing high school. At his daughter's graduation ceremony, the college principal invited him to present her with the graduation certificate. When he returned home, his wife told him it was his turn to qualify, which he did through Mission Ribas. "The experience is marvellous because we were excluded from the educational system before; now we are submerged in it like fish in water, with hope in Mission Ribas and in ourselves. The lost time is behind us... we believe in the project, in all the people who work in it and in our family members who bear on their shoulders some of the responsibilities at home while we are studying," Boscan told Chavez who was present at his graduation ceremony.

The formal education system expanded and modernised in Chavez's time. Hundreds of schools were built and renovated. There are five times as many teachers as in the past and the state provides free education from pre-primary to the university level. Someone from a poor home can typically go to Simoncitos or Little Simon centres, which are state nurseries, and then through primary and secondary schools to either Robinsonian technical schools or to universities. They do not have to pay any fees. The state provides the textbooks and at least two nutritional meals while transport is free for students, even on private buses. At least 200,000 university students get scholarships so that they can study in the cities and, since not everyone can leave their home even with economic support, university education has been 'municipalised', with the universities opening centres in smaller towns and imparting their courses through visiting lecturers or by interconnected computers. Thousands of people have graduated from Missions Robinson and Ribas.

The state found out very early that the private universities or even the autonomous public ones did not want to take in students from the state schools or the missions. At the same time, there were not enough public universities to accommodate all these students. In

the 1950's there was just one private university in the country and the public universities enjoyed greater prestige till the 1960's. During that time, there was a literacy drive and the elite classes worked out that they could keep their privileges only by pushing for private universities. It fitted in neatly with the neo-liberal ideology of the 1980's that valued private dominance of higher education in Latin America. Venezuela was no exception. Entrance examinations in state universities meant that the poorer students from state schools could not compete with the richer children who had libraries in their schools and private tutors at home. The autonomous universities were moulded in the PDVSA structure: money came from the national budget but the administrators were not answerable to the country and they gave themselves privileges without any public questioning. Corruption gained ground while academic standards stagnated. None of Venezuela's universities, public or private, ranks high even in the continent. The highest listed Venezuelan university, ULA (University of the Andes) does not even figure in the top thousand universities. Since 1998, the public universities have become opposition strongholds with prolonged strikes prompted by professors and harassment of Chavista students.

Chavez decided to open the armed forces university, which attended to only a few hundred soldiers, to civilian students and to expand it. The university of the Venezuelan armed forces, Unefa, opened new centres in cities around the country and now caters to a student population of more than 250,000. He also launched Mission Sucre, named after the Venezuelan independence war hero whom Bolivar had installed as the first President of Bolivia. Before Chavez came to power, higher education was only available in 71 of the 356 municipalities of the country. Young men and women from the poorer families could not afford to travel to the big cities to pursue their studies. So the university system went to them. The Bolivarian University of Venezuela (UBV) started opening up centres in the municipalities. The physical spaces were inadequate at the beginning and equipment and staff were in short supply. But the students in the new university were given their books for free from the beginning and libraries were established in the municipalities.

The UBV now has better equipped and inter-connected campuses dotted all over the country and a student body of tens of thousands. It is at the heart of Mission Sucre and administers it. Many of the “universities” in Venezuela are modest structures. Regional and technical colleges have been modernised and are linked to sectors of the economy like electricity and gas. There are bigger and more specialised ones like the security university (Unes), the arts university (Unearte) and a sports university. The emphasis now is on setting up specialist universities to feed the country’s need for trained personnel who can be incorporated into the emerging industries. The number of new universities and the size of its university student population are impressive but the quality of teaching in the state, private and autonomous sectors is still below par. The government has started addressing the issue with a nationwide consultation exercise involving students, teachers and parents, but structural problems remain. Many of the schoolteachers in the past did not even turn up at their job and the school management had no way of disciplining them because of their political affiliation. It is still fairly common in the autonomous universities for professors to demand payment from students for accepting them. As is to be expected, they do not like the changes being introduced in the system and the opposition subsumes their cause in the general cry that the state is interfering in the education of the children and inserting dangerous Bolivarian ideology in them.

The Bolivarian notion of higher education departs from the traditional university pedagogy. As the country produced little in the past, and lived off petroleum exports, its universities were more interested in offering administration, legal and service sector courses, rather than specialised courses that catered to industry, construction, agriculture or even food processing. A former UBV rector gave the example of industrial engineering students in private universities who had not seen a turbine, far less dismantle one, even by their seventh semester. They were trained to look up manuals and resolve problems of imported machineries. This aspiration has deep social roots. In the first years of the Bolivarian universities, the students were mainly interested in becoming lawyers or administrators as these professions enjoyed the greatest social prestige. For Chavez, the UBV was the “motor, the vanguard, the horse, the spear, the flag of a new liberating

educational model". The UBV students are obliged to work in the surrounding communities. Their graduation or post-graduation degrees or diplomas depend on their final project that has to analyse a real problem in the communities around them and offer a working solution. A student of electrical engineering or of environmental sciences, for example, goes to a barrio, works with the community and presents a solution to a specific problem. This breaks the wall between the classroom and the real world; the world of the barrios comes into the lecture hall and knowledge goes out into the community. The interaction between the UBV and the community helps students develop a social vision and encourages popular organisation in the barrios. It has been much harder to dissolve the notion of hierarchy of knowledge in the UBV faculty; many of the professors still suffer from the old notion that their work is to fill the blank minds of their students.

There has been an exponential growth in telecommunications and information technology in the Fifth Republic. There are more mobile phones than people and the whole country seems to be talking on one at all hours. The telecommunications sectors has consistently been among the highest growing sector of the economy. The use of computers has leapfrogged. All primary school students now have their free sturdy computers called Canaimas. The project started with a presidential stopover in Lisbon. The then Portuguese Prime Minister, Jose Socrates, showed Chavez a laptop his government was introducing in schools. Chavez wanted to roll out the programme in Venezuela and the two countries signed an agreement, first for Portugal to sell the computers and then for them to be produced in Venezuela. Free computer notepads are now being given to secondary and university students and, by 2014, more than three million laptops had been distributed to schoolchildren. In the first school year, the children are made familiar with the laptops at school and by the second year they are allowed to take it home with them. As the local production is not sufficient to cover the high demand for notepads among university students, the government buys them in bulk, principally from China. One of its other less conventional sources is Haiti where a Danish couple with the help of a Belgian and a Haitian entrepreneur set up a computer notepad production centre after the earthquake to help with the reconstruction. It was also a smart business move. Most of the workers in the Haitian factory are women, not because



the company has a special policy of recruiting female staff but because they are more nimble with their fingers.

The Venezuelan government has a programme of what it called mass "technological literacy". It established thousands of 'infocentros', essentially computer clubs with Internet connection, in the barrios where students, workers and the elderly learn to handle computers and have access to emails and the web. More than a million people have learnt to use computers and local clubs, groups and community councils produce their own newsletters and documents. The infocentro programme was inspired by a similar but smaller Cuban model and received a Unesco award. It has begun spreading to other Latin American countries like Ecuador. Venezuela has among the highest Internet penetration in the continent with 13 million Internet users in a population of 30 million, the second highest university-going student population in South America after Cuba and the fifth highest in the world. The improved educational system has led to more Venezuelans reading books. There are large crowds and brisk sales at the book fairs that travel all over the country. Many young Venezuelan authors can now look forward to being published. The state also prints classics and distributes them free to the population. As his opponents mocked him for being a modern-day Quixote, Chavez ordered the printing and distribution of millions of copies of Don Quixote that were handed out at the Plaza Bolívars. Venezuelans are moving towards the top of the reading list in Latin America, something unthinkable in the pre-Chavez years when they were distracted with an endless diet of television soaps and beauty contests. The revolution has also been a reading revolution.



**The free Canaima computers, one of the revolution's flagship programmes**

## **CHAPTER IX**

### **FOOD AND SHELTER**

Venezuela came close to mass starvation during the opposition strike in 2002. It was reminiscent of the time just before the 1973 coup in Chile when food disappeared from the shelves and magically reappeared as soon as President Allende was overthrown. Chavez was determined the scenario would not repeat itself in Venezuela, although it happens before elections as a 'vote harvesting' technique for the opposition. Chavez's first challenge was to make sure the people had enough to eat; the second was to produce food the country consumed to achieve food sovereignty.

For decades, Venezuela has been importing food for its domestic consumption, although it has all necessary conditions for a thriving agriculture. There is no shortage of cultivable land and a relatively small population. It has at least 30 million hectares of varying quality ready for farming and plenty of water, both in rainfall and with the large rivers in its territory. It has different climatic zones, from the hot plains to the mountains that are ideal for growing flowers. Colombia and Ecuador, with similar topography and climate, are major flower exporters whereas Venezuela imported them till it was banned to encourage domestic production. The country has phosphate rocks and deposits of calcium and magnesium that can be used to improve soil quality. It is not short

of fertilisers with its petrochemical industries. The country lived off agriculture and cattle ranching for most of its history with tobacco, cotton, coca and coffee as its major crops. It was the third largest coffee exporter in 1830. All that changed with the development of the export-oriented petroleum industry early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and, by the late 1920's, agriculture ceased to be the major contributor to the national economy. The oil boom emptied the countryside quickly as farm workers and landowners abandoned agriculture to seek their fortune in the new gold rush. By 1950 the majority lived in the cities, most of them in slums and ramshackle houses built on unstable land. The majority of the population is concentrated in Caracas and the northwest of the country along the Caribbean coast, living in overcrowded cities that expanded with little planning or public services.

There was a major influx of immigrants from Europe after World War II. Between 1944 and 1963, Venezuela experienced a population growth of 5.58% and 4.51% between 1964 and 1983 as Europeans, displaced and impoverished by the war, disembarked in the port of Guaira near Caracas. Then came a wave of Latin American migrants, some displaced by military dictatorships and others to escape the economic crises in their own countries. The population jumped from 5 million in 1958 to 24 million in 2001 and almost to 30 million a decade later. But the rural population declined and by 1960 only 35% of the population lived in rural areas. That figure dropped to 12% in the 1990's and the rural population declined from 3 million to 2.5 million in 2000. In 2010 it was 1.7 million, although the number has marginally gone up since then. There are only about 400,000 people actively engaged in agriculture. In any case, Venezuela did not cover its domestic needs with its own agriculture since 1940's. Food production outpaced population growth from the 1960's till the late 1980's and started decreasing after the crisis of 1989 when the state started delinking itself from the countryside.

When the oil prices were high, it was cheaper to import food than to grow it and the share of agriculture dipped in the national income. World food prices declined from 1975, making imports even more tempting. But as oil prices collapsed, the state could no longer import food at will while domestic agriculture could not be boosted at a finger click. It became harder for the poor to access

food on the shelves. Between 1970 and 1997, calorific intake decreased in Venezuela along with Sub-Saharan Africa and Cuba and most of its protein intake came from imported meat. Child malnutrition increased towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as did the number of underweight newborns. It became the only Latin American country as net importer of agricultural products, buying an estimated 70% of its food from outside. In 2014, the figure was a little less than 50%. All this happened at about the time the United States and the European Union pushed through food exports to the developing world. They argued, especially from 1994, that the poorer countries should open their markets to western agricultural exports while keeping the subsidies and protectionist measures over their own agriculture.

Venezuela remains a country of abundant land with few people to cultivate it. Historically, one of the reasons has been the large land holdings. Some of its most influential Presidents were big landlords or became one after their term in power. The landowners were more interested in cattle ranching than in growing crops. They imposed harsh working conditions in their estates and used hired guns to stamp out any resistance. This led to persistent peasant uprisings and the Federal War in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with its rallying cry of 'free land and free men' in which hundreds of thousands of people died. There were some attempts at land reform in the 1960's when President Kennedy pushed his Venezuelan allies to check rural anger that was feeding insurgencies and Left-wing guerrilla movements in the continent. The land reform was a sham. Landowners were financially compensated for the land that was taken over. Often, they sold the unproductive parts of their holdings and invested the money in more profitable parts of the economy. In 1997, holdings of 500 hectares to 5,000 hectares or more accounted for 60% of all land ownership and it was in the hands of 2% of the population. The rural regions had the highest incidence of poverty. A French journalist, Maurice Lemoine of Le Monde Diplomatique, described the stark contrast he saw for himself:

"Behind countless lines of barbed wire lie the 20,000 hectares of hatos (cattle-farms) belonging to the Boulton family, one of the richest in the country. Then come the 14,000 hectares of Hato El Charcote, property of Flora Compañía Anónima. A few dozen

young bulls graze this land, lost in its immensity. Beyond that the Branger family's estate covers a massive 120,000 hectares... beyond that other terratenientes (*landowners*) estates, domains of 80,000 hectares here, 30,000 hectares there, often with as few as three or four hectares actually being used. "I'm a landless peasant. I've got land, but it's in the graveyard," says Jesús Vasquez. For years, any campesino (*peasant*) who trespassed on these uncultivated tracts would be caught and imprisoned, or chased out with bullets. On tiny fractions of an acre, campesinos grow anaemic maize and live off the Holy Spirit. Anyone who cannot afford to buy or rent an allotment rots, confined to the four walls of some horrible slum on the edge of a town."

The Bolivarian Constitution of 1998 promised to promote sustainable agriculture as the basis for rural development and food sovereignty which it defined as sufficient and stable supply of food for the people and their ability to access it. It described food production as a national interest and central to economic development and declared latifundios (*large land holdings*) as contrary to social interests. Chavez almost paid with his life for moving ahead with land reforms. The coup of April 2002 was a direct response to his decree recognising farmers' rights the year before. The state was a large landowner and much of what it owned was lying idle. The Chavez government started by distributing some of this land to the farmers and began taking over private land not being cultivated only in 2005. Chavez's land reforms allowed large landowners to keep their land if it was being used productively and not just for cattle grazing or as a farmhouse for an elite Caracas family that flew in during weekends. Many of these idle farms were staging posts and storage centres for drug dealers with improvised airstrips from where planes loaded with drugs that came in from Colombia were transported to Central America and eventually to the United States.

The state asked for old land records and possession certificates from the big landowners, most of whom did not have them. They had either bribed local land officials or used force to grab land. They formed a powerful rural mafia connected to the local police

and military officers, judges, provincial governors and national politicians. When the farmers grew restive, they hired assassins or the military did the job for them. Local magistrates, who were often personal friends of the landowners, covered up the massacres. This pattern of landlord violence continued well into the Chavez years and no less than 300 farmers' leaders were killed in this period as retaliation for land occupation. In some cases, the Chavez government first seized the land and then negotiated with the former owners to come to a settlement as farmers backed by the National Guard moved into the farms. In many other places, the farmers took over the land from absentee landlords on their own initiative. The state has recovered an estimated 3.5 million hectares and handed them over to the farmers. More than a million people benefitted from the land reforms and production as much as the area under cultivation grew significantly.

Land reforms in Venezuela came to international attention when the government took over one of the biggest land holdings in the country of the British Vestey group, known locally as the English company, owned for four generations by the family of Lord Vestey. The company had business interests in Venezuela since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and was rumoured to own a million hectares and a cattle herd of 120,000 when it was expropriated. Lord Vestey staged a one-man protest in 2001 when the land laws came into force. The *Meat Trade News Daily* reported on the loss for the Vestey empire with poorly hidden satisfaction:

"In 1903, two entrepreneurial Liverpoolian brothers arrived in Caracas determined to add to their burgeoning empire of foreign food producers by buying Venezuelan cattle ranches. Over the next decade, William and Edmund Vestey added 11 ranches covering thousands of hectares of prime pasture to a list of holdings that ranged from egg processing plants in China to beef herds in Madagascar. The Vestey brothers and their descendants came to epitomise British mercantile power, feeding the industrial heartlands of the UK with their refrigerated ships, transporting meats and foodstuffs from far-flung corners of the world in the name of Empire and considerable profit.

"How times have changed. The Vestey's' once ubiquitous Dew Hurst butchers' shop chain is history, their long-standing – and completely legal – tax avoidance scheme has ended, and now a pugnacious Venezuelan born in a mud hut to two schoolteachers has launched a land grab on one of their most prized assets. Doubtless with an eye on the Vestey's' imperial heritage, and the fact that his target is ultimately controlled by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Baron Vestey (a man so close to the heart of the British establishment that he nominally looks after the Queen's horses), President Hugo Chavez announced he was nationalising the land controlled by the Compania Inglesa, the Venezuelan arm of the Vestey Group Ltd. His chosen opponent is Lord Sam "Spam" Vestey, the chairman of Vestey Group Ltd, one of the longest-standing friends of Prince Charles, owner of a fortune estimated at £750m and whose titles include Master of the Horse and third Great Officer of the Royal Household, a ceremonial role which entails him riding behind the sovereign for occasions such as the state opening of Parliament. His second wife, Celia, is Prince Harry's godmother, while Nina Clarkin, Lord Vestey's niece, is rated the best female polo player in the world after a childhood spent playing the sport with Princes Harry and William. When the President first drew up his 2001 law threatening to expropriate privately-owned agricultural land that had been declared "idle", Lord Vestey staged a one-man protest outside the Venezuelan embassy in London. As Phillip Knightley, author of the family history *The Rise and Fall of the House of Vestey*, put it: "They did not live on the income; they did not live on the interest from their investments; they lived on the interest on the interest."

Giving the farmers land was the first step to reviving agriculture. Women heads of rural families were given priority in land redistribution and received food subsidies before and after



childbirth. Land titles were formalised for small and marginal farmers, among them those who had farmed occupied land. Once individuals or groups received a "carta agraria" for the land, they could apply for loans to acquire the necessary items for cultivation. Once it was confirmed that they were cultivating the land, they were given a "declaration of permanency". Three years after working the land, they received a "title of adjudication" and, if they kept cultivating it, they could pass it on to their children but not sell it. This way, the government hoped to stall any re-concentration of land. Taxes were raised for unused or under-utilised land. A big push for agricultural growth came after the devastating floods of December 2010 that led to huge crop and animal losses. Something like 27% of the vegetable cultivation and 60% of banana production were washed away and coca, milk and meat production fell by 50%, 10% and 30% respectively. As a response to the floods, Chavez inaugurated the "Gran Misión (major or special mission would be an approximate translation) Agro Venezuela in January 2011. The President was from the agricultural heartland and had a special affinity with the farmers. Modernising agriculture was among his election promises for 1998. In 2000, he had established a national plan for developing agriculture and food supply. More money was earmarked for agriculture in his presidential terms and some of it went into modernising the agricultural infrastructure, improving rural roads and providing electricity to the farms. Its effect was that even in the year of the petroleum strike, the calorific intake of the Venezuelans increased and today is above the internationally recommended standards. A national seed plan was implemented to bring down the dependence on imported seeds which ranged from 100% for vegetables and 50% for potatoes to 60% for maize. Agricultural corporations were created for processing and putting coffee and milk on the market. Ageing agricultural processing plants were modernised and large new facilities set up. His critics mocked him for a barter agreement with Argentina in which Venezuela exchanged petroleum in part for pregnant cows to improve the quality of the national cattle breeds. Venezuela began importing less wheat and meat from the United States, contracting a large part of it instead to Brazil and Argentina.

Agro Venezuela started with farmers registering with the mission. They were asked what they grew and what they needed to keep

going. Within a few weeks the mission mapped out how many farmers the country had, what they grew, where they grew it and what they lacked. Teams from the agriculture ministry visited the farms to check the information and finances and seed and other inputs were delivered to the farmers. The government passed legislation to force public and private banks to contribute a part of their capital towards the new mission. The private banks complained that the paper work was affecting them, which was partly true but it was also an excuse not to give out loans other than to the large farmers, their traditional clients. The government's response was to tell the private banks that the state would take the capital reserved for agricultural loans from them, distribute it among the farmers and give the banks reasonable rates of interest. Even before the new mission, agricultural credit had increased from about \$164 million in 1999 to roughly \$7.6 billion in 2008. The farmers organised into local assemblies which received the farming inputs, from light and heavy machinery to seeds and fertilisers. Agro Venezuela has revived agriculture, though the country still depends in large measure on imports to feed itself. Venezuela now has an emerging agro industry, ranging from the production of tractors and harvester combines to small water pumps. Agro Venezuela works with the private sector and gives priority to strategic crops such as maize and rice. Dairy and meat production have registered real increases and some crops that had all but disappeared from the farming map like cotton and sunflower have been revived. In 2012 and 2013, agriculture grew by more than 10% in Venezuela.

In 2010, Chavez nationalised the Spanish-owned agribusiness, AgroIsleña, bulk distributor of imported agrochemicals and renamed it AgroPatria (*Homeland Agriculture*). Control over this business, and other smaller agrochemical companies, gave Venezuela the ability to monitor and control the chemical pesticides and fertilisers going into its food system. A 2008 law recognises agroecology as the basis for sustainable agriculture and calls for phasing out toxic agrochemicals. Venezuela has promoted urban agriculture, trying to develop a culture of local and family agriculture that had been lost for almost a century. There are hundreds of vegetable patches and indoor cultivation centres all over the country, though what they produce is still not a significant part of the national production. Among the most enthusiastic

responders to urban agriculture have been former gang members. They say it is a cathartic experience for them and they prefer not to have to work for a boss. The state gives them the land and the inputs and they are allowed to sell their produce in the community or to the state agencies. Prison education has also focussed on urban farming so that the prisoners can be incorporated into these farms. In 2013, President Maduro announced that 320 Venezuelan technicians had been trained to set up 80,000 urban agricultural projects. The inspiration for these projects are the Cuban organic urban gardens that were a way of tackling the food crisis in the island after it lost its biggest market, the Soviet Union. Venezuela was the first country to ban the destructive trawl or drag fishing in its waters. The government provided thousands of modern boats and outboard motors to the traditional fishermen. It buys the fish straight from them and stores them in cold storages that the state has built so that the catch is sold directly to the people. Private middlemen still buy the catch from the fishermen and the price of fish remains high, other than in the state food shops. Fishing stocks and fishermen's catch have recovered and endangered fish species are being found again in Venezuelan waters.

Despite all these advances, Venezuelan agriculture remains anaemic. The country still imports a large part of its food needs. Venezuela imported 48% of its cereals in 2007-09, which was less than the 55.9% it imported before the Chavez years but still higher than Brazil's 14.2%. Between 2000-2009, it imported more than \$31 billion worth of food, about 10% of its petroleum earnings of that period. Chavez wanted agriculture to contribute 12% of the GDP by 2007 but it missed the goal and it has stagnated at 4-6% of the GDP share. When the land distribution programme was being undertaken, the government established two programmes to induce people to take up farming, training them and helping them set up cooperatives. The cooperatives did not function as the government had planned. There were disputes among the cooperative members; they were insufficiently trained, inexperienced or found the work too hard. They were often people who were moving from the city to the countryside and from jobs where they were paid wages to collective cooperative work. At times, the farmers distrusted the functionaries of the agrarian institutions. The country had lost much of its agricultural expertise and had to train up experts hurriedly by sending them to Cuba but

the results were unsatisfactory. Credit did not often reach the new farmers on time and they gave up their new vocation. There was no threat of food embargo or of imminent hunger that would force the population to take agriculture seriously. Everyone knew that the state had enough oil money to import food that was not being produced. Another contradiction in stimulating domestic production was that national production would be more expensive than imported food and push up inflation, hurting most the poor. Domestic price controls to help the majority served as an incentive for the farmers to ally with the smugglers who took their harvest to neighbouring Colombia. In some cases, good intentions worked against the government. It built soya processing plants but as little soya was produced in the country, it ended up importing it to keep the plants going.

During the oil boom, the Venezuelans developed a taste for wheat, very little of which grows in the country. Their food habits became more Americanised and local vegetables and fruit lost their market. They also have a curious habit of consuming dry milk that is more expensive and almost all of which is imported. Consumption has outpaced agricultural production in the revolution. The per head meat consumption is an example, rising from 11 kg in the pre-revolution years to 24 kg within 15 years and the calorific intake has increased by 130%. Between 1999-2011, food consumption increased by 80%. Obesity, not malnutrition, is now a major health issue: about 40% of the population is either obese or overweight. There is an unresolved problem of large companies and agricultural middlemen cornering food production, hoarding them and selling them at inflated prices. Food shortage has been a weapon of choice for the opposition: it increases voter anger against the government and also gives the hoarders a tidy profit when they do release stocks.

After the petroleum strike, the state reacted by creating its chain of subsidised food markets. The armed forces had the experience of storing and distributing food during the first years of the Chavez presidency and then during the petroleum strike. In April 2003, the government set up the first three small Mercal (food market) stores in the barrios of Caracas and two food warehouses. The new chain was incubated in the military barracks. In 2002, Venezuelan Navy ships were sent to Colombia and Central America to stock up with

food as big businesses and middlemen created food scarcity. In 2003, Chavez asked the armed forces to buy vegetables from the farmers and ferry them to the Mercal shops. As the poorer Venezuelans flocked to the open-air markets, the opposition mocked the soldiers, nicknaming senior officers as 'General Potato, General Onion and General Cucumber'. The Armed Forces were to provide the initial logistics for the new corporation. At first, Mercal's stocks came from imported items. In 2003, 80% of the goods it sold were imports which came down to 50% a year later and then to 37% in 2005. The new state food chain has grown at an astonishing pace, with more than 20,000 new shops that now function all over the country, attending to more than 15 million people. Mercal supplies food at massively subsidised prices which, at times, can be as high as 80%. Mercal became a powerful counterweight to the private domination of the food chain. Now, the state too could buy from the farmers and sell directly to the consumers and the private actors no longer had the monopoly with which to push down their purchase prices. The Mercals mostly cater to the poor though there are no restrictions on who can shop in it. It is not uncommon for upper class opposition supporters to sneak into Mercal shops away from their neighbourhood; buy in quantity; stock them in their cars and then get rid of the Mercal bags before reaching home.

The state shops come in varying sizes, from the basic ones that resemble neighbourhood grocery stores to much larger premises. Between them they sell essentials like oil, sugar, meat, pasta, rice and eggs. In the larger premises, they sell vegetables and fruit that they source locally from the farmers, cutting out the middlemen. The Venezuelan government claims to have the largest food distribution network on the continent. It supplies at least 40% of all products consumed by Venezuelans and caters to more than half the population. Mercal is a vast enterprise. It supplies food to hospitals, public schools and the feeding houses in the barrios. Mercal also organises open-air markets on most weekends throughout the country. It has a programme of taking these markets to work places in which the workers coordinate with Mercal in distributing the products and another Mercal programme works directly with the communities to take basic food items to the most vulnerable families. A big part of the earnings from petroleum go towards maintaining the Mercal. In 2012, the government

subsidies amounted to at least \$1.6 billion and savings of between 50-60% for the consumers. Larger Pdval stores were opened in 2008. The products at Pdval are not subsidised but the prices are controlled and sell for significantly less than in the open market. The largest of the state stores are the Bicentenarios (Bicentenary stores). Originally, it was a privately owned supermarket with a history of worker dissatisfaction and a habit of putting prices up at will. In 2010, government inspectors shut it down for a day for overcharging. The supermarket reopened the day after and did not pay any attention to the government order. After the second closure, the state decided to take over the chain. At first, the supermarket owners said in public that the business was far too complex for the state to handle. They had badly miscalculated the state's capacity to prepare for the takeover in secret. Once they realised that the state indeed could run the business, they came back, this time offering to cooperate with the state.

The state-run food distribution network has been a powerful counterpoint to speculation and deliberate shortages, though its presence in the middle class areas is negligible, given that many of them do want wish to buy from the state as part of their political position. For all the advances in food production and distribution, two issues have remained unresolved. Food and agricultural raw material are smuggled in huge quantities to Colombia through the porous borders. Unscrupulous middlemen make higher profits selling their goods to the smugglers than in the domestic market. Venezuelan food floods the border states of Colombia, where the prices are much higher, and some estimates put the quantum of smuggled food items at 30% of Venezuelan production and imports. Long queues are a common sight outside many supermarkets in Venezuela. Those in the queue, often waiting since early morning, are not the usual shoppers; they are people who buy and resell food and whatever else they can lay their hands to those who are put off by the long queues. These are usually street traders who sell the food they buy at controlled rates in the state shops at much higher prices on the streets.

The best tribute to Mercal came from a leaked U.S. embassy cable:  
"The state-owned "Mercal" chain of discount food stores may be for lowest income Venezuelans the most visible sign of the Bolivarian revolution. Paid

for with petroleum revenue, it has become a massive undertaking, with thousands of outlets, either state-run or franchised, that provide staples at up to 30 pct below regular prices, along with a modest dose of propaganda... the Mercal success story shows that the GOV commitment to return the state to the lead role throughout the economy is real, not just rhetorical... Mercal has some inherent advantages, e.g. it does not rely at all on paid advertising, and many of its stores, particularly the larger Supermercals, were given to it by the GOV, which had received them from failed banks.

"The Mercal chain shows that Chavez's "beautiful revolution" is indeed capable of producing mechanisms which can implement its goals... Mercal has become a functioning food distribution system that gets products onto the shelves where consumers can get them... as a system for building political support, it has proven its worth. Every customer who buys a discount bag of powdered milk can feel he is getting a tangible benefit from Chavez's government. And, from the point of view of the GOV's broader ideological priorities, it gets the state back into a "strategic" area of the economy, which cannot be left to the politically unreliable private sector..."

## **HOUSING**

A major housing programme was unveiled in February 2013 with the target of building three million homes by 2019 in a country of 30 million people. The new housing programme set itself what many thought was an impossible target of housing almost 40% of the country's population. The landslides and heavy rains in December 2010 not only swept away crops and livestock but also destroyed houses and shacks in the shanty towns of Caracas that hang from the hills at drunken angles. Elsewhere in the country, the plains were flooded as lakes and rivers burst through the banks, displacing people who lived near them. Almost all of them, in Caracas or in the countryside, were the poorest of the poor who

had built their homes by themselves where nobody else wanted to live. They had built them with whatever they could lay their hands on: cardboards for walls and tin and zinc sheets for the roof. Often, more than one family lived in these unsafe structures. The market prices for even modest homes in Venezuela are astronomical and are as expensive to rent as to buy. Policemen, nurses, firemen and even middle class professionals live in the barrios, which are not uniformly poor but are certainly all at risk in the earthquake zone, which is Caracas and almost the entire northern part of the country. Venezuela is a highly urbanised society, with 95% of the population living in the cities, 50% of them in barrios and 40% in cities with populations of half a million or more. Between 1941-50 the population in Caracas increased 86%. The barrio population grew sharply from the middle of the 1950's. Whereas in 1960 the barrio population was 22% of the urban population, by 1997 it was 50%.

An estimated 30,000 families were displaced in Caracas alone in December 2010. The first priority was to send them to safe shelters. Some of the displaced came down the hills after their homes were swept away but others had to be persuaded to leave their damaged structures behind. A young woman told television crew after a Chavez visit of her own plight. She lived with her aged father in one of these cardboard homes. When the ground began to move, she hurriedly took her disabled father outside into the pouring rain and the two watched their house go down the slope. As the light started to fade that afternoon, she asked her father what would happen to them now, since they lived on the little that she earned; how would they ever have a roof over their heads? We live in a revolution, her father told her, the President won't abandon us. They were shivering that night when they saw the first file of soldiers and rescuers coming up the hills looking to escort the people to safety. Chavez himself went out into the flooded streets and the hills, asking the people to accept the government's offer of providing them with decent shelters and proper homes. You will not leave your shack for more of the same; you will be given proper homes, he promised them over loudspeakers as he drove into the devastated zones. They abandoned the homes they had built with enormous effort over generations and headed for Chavez's shelters.



In the first days, the families were put into temporary shelters and given food, medicines and clothes. Chavez ordered government institutions to open up their premises and take in the families. Within days, they were being given rooms in the Foreign Office, the ministries and the state television stations. Chavez opened the doors of the presidential palace for them and requisitioned hotels and unused shopping centres. The state organised Christmas meals and New Year celebrations in the shelters. By February 2011, when the situation had stabilised, Chavez launched the Gran (Special) Mission Housing Venezuela (GMVV), the most expensive and complicated of all the missions, and put himself at its head. As with the agricultural mission, it started with a registration drive. Marquees were set up at every Plaza Bolivar in the country where anyone who did not have their own home could sign up to the mission. About three million people signed up. There were good reasons for the massive registration. At least 13 million people lived in the barrios and construction of houses was minimal in the pre-Chavez years, declining from an average of 72,000 units in 1986-88 to only 12,000 during the crisis year of 1989 and 42,000 in 1990. Construction picked up in the first years of the Chavez presidency with around 87,000 houses being constructed by the public and private sectors in 1999-2002. This, though, barely dented the backlog and the houses the private sector built were for those who could pay for it. After the initial registration, teams from the housing mission started visiting the existing homes to check the data and to find out the most desperate cases. As with the agricultural mission, those who had registered were encouraged to form local assemblies and select who would move into the new houses first. There have been very few disputes in the queue but some cases of corruption and selling of priorities did happen in the beginning and perhaps still do now. This was corruption typical of the Fourth Republic, when it became morally acceptable and culturally normal to be corrupt, and was seen as the sign of an enterprising, clever and successful individual.

At around this time, middle class families began to complain of the housing scams affecting them. It was almost normal practice for property developers to demand a hefty initial deposit from their clients. The deposit amount was often increased and those who did not pay the new amount lost their earlier deposit, which the property companies pocketed. House prices were increased as they

were being constructed and bank interests were extremely high. Many middle class families were either indebted to the private banks, which worked in tandem with the housing companies, or lost their money and moved to the barrios. They wanted Chavez to take up their cause. The plight of the tenants was like a mirror image of the peons in the rural land estates. Dingy, filthy and crumbling structures, known as *pensiones*, were parcelled out into tiny rooms for tenants who lived there without rights. They were subject to violence from landlords who paid off the local criminals to throw out tenants who defaulted on payment or complained. Large companies controlled the rent market in the middle class areas and exercised enormous powers over the tenants. Generations of families stayed together as young couples could not afford to buy or rent new homes.

Like any other housing programme on this scale, the first needs were land, equipment, finance, skilled labour and technology to speed up the construction projects. An example of technological innovation is the petrocasa or "petroleum house", which is a mass-produced family home. The average petrocasa has three bedrooms, two bathrooms, a kitchen, a dining room and a lounge with a total area of 70 square metres. The houses are built with PVC profiles that are locally assembled and filled with concrete, steel and iron girders. They are sturdy enough to withstand tropical storms and even gunfire as also being fire and earthquake resistant. They can be built in days and petrocasa technology has evolved to build houses of up to five storeys that make them more useful in urban settings. Petrocasas are on an average 40-50% cheaper than conventional homes and cooler. The basic raw material comes from petroleum, of which there is no shortage in Venezuela, and the technology was developed in the country with the help of Brazilian, German and Austrian engineers.

The GMVV programme factored in 'organised people' in its plans. The state and private sectors had constructed around a million homes in the preceding 75 years but the people had constructed an estimated 2.4 million homes with whatever they could lay their hands on in the same period. Many of the construction workers lived in the same neighbourhoods where the demand for housing was the greatest. The housing mission integrated the people with the formal institutions of the state bypassing the regular housing

bureaucracy. The organised communities started looking for land in Caracas, a narrow valley where the needs were highest and land most scarce, the best parts having been occupied by the rich. Neighbourhood teams located abandoned warehouses, car parking lots and vacant land occupied by institutions of the state and private companies. An elderly landowner donated his land for a housing project after the community promised to look after him in his old age. These plots of land were expropriated and given to the housing mission. The armed forces gave up a big chunk of land at the sprawling Fort Tiuna base on the outskirts of Caracas for the construction of a new city. Building started simultaneously in the mountains outside Caracas for Ciudad Caribia (Caribia City) for 100,000 people. People who had once lived four or five to each room now had a properly constructed building, in some cases with sea view. In the provinces, the people formed their own 'self-construction brigades' where skilled workers taught the trainees and the community helped with labour while the state provided ingredients like iron rods and cement. The self-construction brigades now build around 40% of the hundreds of thousands of rural homes being constructed all over the country. The cities have a smaller 'pioneer' movement where communities started by spotting and guarding vacant land and then constructing their own homes on them.

There is no other Third World country with a housing mission of this scale relative to population and in such a compressed period of time. Venezuela does not have the capacity to build three million homes. It reached out to its international allies and Chinese, Russian, Byelorussian, Iranian and Turkish companies began building the larger urbanisations and mini-cities. As the mission expanded, logistics became a nightmare. Cement export was banned and new plants were hurriedly assembled to expand capacity. Local governments took over many of the sand and stone pits to reduce costs. Right from the start, costs were driven down aggressively because those moving in had the least capacity to pay. While housing is not treated as a commodity but as a right, it is not free either. The state does not include the price of the land. It produces the steel and cement for the housing missions and gets them straight, without intermediaries. It does not have the transport fleet and relies on private suppliers. New 'Socialist' enterprises of different scale produce bricks, doors, windows and

furniture for the new houses. The state has been importing washing machines, refrigerators and cookers in bulk from China while these factories are set up in Venezuela for the new homes that come fully furnished. Families that move into the new homes pay for it according to their ability: those with an income of less than one minimum wage pay nothing until their situation improves; the others move up from 20% onwards depending on the household income but even the most well off will not pay more than the cost of the building, and that too over 30 years at a fixed income rate of 4%. They are given individual and collective property titles.

The housing mission caused some resentment in the barrios among those who had adequate but not luxurious homes. Not all of them wanted to leave where they had lived all their lives and move in with new neighbours. They would be perfectly happy with minor improvements but complained it was impossible to find cement, steel or other hardware items on the market, or that these were being sold at extortionate prices, which was stopping them from maintaining their homes. As a response, another housing programme linked to GMVV, the New Tricolour Barrio Mission, was launched to improve streets, drainage, lighting and playing fields in the barrios to make it more liveable and to provide homeowners the ingredients they needed to maintain their homes or to add extra rooms. In both the missions, and in the new cities that are being constructed, the basic philosophy is a world apart from the earlier approach of the state providing 'housing solutions'. The housing programmes of the Fourth Republic ranged from metal containers to small unfinished homes being handed out in return for votes and were built in the most inhospitable parts on the peripheries of the city. Chavez's house-building programme went beyond providing quality homes for people. The new housing complexes or neighbourhoods in the rural areas have assured supplies such as water, roads and lighting. The residents are encouraged to organise themselves into community councils and small productive units are built around these new towns. In the cities, these could be a shop owned by the housing members on the ground floor or a carpentry unit. Sometimes single mothers work in textile units when their children are in crèches or schools or the communities manage urban gardens. In the provinces, the emphasis is on farming the land around the neighbourhood. In the larger urban conglomerations built during the revolution, the

Socialist cities, there are no billboards advertising Coca Cola or Pepsi or McDonalds. Instead, there are parks, children's playgrounds and sometimes a church constructed with state money.

It has not been all smooth sailing and brotherly love in the new townships although the Chavistas naively thought at the beginning that the new houses would be the start of a new life for those who came up from the lowest strata of society. Single mothers head many of these families with children from many different partners. Often they are harassed and demoralised individuals themselves, without either the energy or the economic resources to supervise their children who stray into anarchic, violent and anomie lives as they grow up. Neighbourhood disputes are carried into the new housing complex and the old vices of alcohol and drugs are brought into the new apartments. Then there are the usual neighbourly disputes over drinking and loud music or fights between groups of children. The response has been to bring in trained judicial staff who handle neighbourhood disputes with the help of the local community councils and work from their own offices in these cities. The contours of a 'Socialist city' are taking shape but it will be trial, error and learning from mistakes for the foreseeable future.

The missions extend beyond food, health and housing to touch everything from the fight against crime to employment, science, environment and culture. There are smaller missions like Identity Mission that makes sure that every Venezuelan has their identity card that is needed for everything from booking bus tickets to voting in elections. The science mission promotes scientific and technological development. There is more than one mission that promotes national culture that was completely marginalised during the Fourth Republic. There are three missions that stand out. One of them is Mission Negra Hipolita, named after the black slave woman who looked after Bolivar when his mother died. Mission Negro Hipolita attends to the homeless people who are persuaded, rather than forced, to stay in clinics for treatment and rehabilitation. The clinics are often buildings and farms that have been confiscated from drug lords. Here the homeless are provided medical and psychiatric attention and treated for addiction. They are educated if illiterate and taught skills so that they can return to work. The mission looks for jobs for them and provides all the

ingredients for them to express their talents, whether painting, sculpture or music. Remarkably, while the staff have experienced verbal abuse at times from those who are brought in, they have never been physically attacked. Mission Negra Hipolita has attended to thousands of homeless Venezuelans and some of them have gone back to their old professions and raised families of their own. Now, some of those who were attended to by the mission go out on the streets, encouraging the homeless to accept the services of Mission Negro Hipolita by pointing to themselves as examples.

Animals have their own mission. Mission Nevado was created to look after street animals and pets and, like Negra Hipolita, has the roots of its name in Bolivarian history. There are two Nevados that are alluded to here. The first is the mountain dog that followed Bolivar from 1813 while the second is the stray dog in Caracas, also of the same breed which ran for 12 kilometres in front of Chavez's funeral procession in March 2013 and was renamed Brazon by the soldiers and Nevado by the civilians. For the grieving Chavez supporters, the presence of the dog was more than happenstance; they took the fact that a dog that came out of nowhere to join his funeral as a divine sign that their leader was indeed the second liberator, as many of them already believed he was. The latter-day Nevado was a street dog that had survived poisoning and attacks from other dogs. Those days are past now. Nevado has an official collar and marches during national ceremonies at the front of military contingents as the National Guard mascot. Chavez was indulgent with animals. After moving into the presidential palace, he asked for the caged parrots there to be set free. One flew away but the other remained with him and would perch on his desk. His most powerful advocacy of compassion for animals was the incident with a crippled dog. He had noticed this emaciated dog in the middle of nowhere. It had been hit by a vehicle and could barely walk. He stopped his caravan and asked his aides to make sure the dog was operated upon. How could I have gone past pretending not to have noticed anything? he asked his audience. The capacity for love is infinite, he told them, and this has become Mission Nevado's defining statement. Mission Nevado provides free care for street animals and family pets. It offers abandoned animals for adoption and a series of veterinary hospitals are being built for them all over the country free of charge like the health system for humans.

Mission Arbol (Tree) is a huge voluntary exercise at reforestation. About half of Venezuela is under forest cover but it was losing it fast. At one time, it was among the top ten countries for deforestation, losing 1% of its forests every year to agriculture, highways, townships, illegal mines and petroleum installations. The southern part of the country, more than half the country, is among the most important areas of tropical wilderness with its Amazonian forests. The Venezuelan side bordering Brazil is rich in gold and other minerals and has been targeted by illegal miners who destroy the forest cover while the mercury they use seeps into the water system. There is significant forest loss to indiscriminate logging, much of which is illegal. Mission Arbol was set up to counteract the loss of forest cover. In the first years, it focussed on collecting native seeds and setting up plant nurseries. Hundreds of thousands of acres have been reforested using voluntary labour and the country can now monitor any forest loss with its own satellites.

At first, the critics mocked the missions as a political gimmick, crude populism and a vote-buying technique. After a decade, however, popular support for the missions is over 80% and not even the opposition dares to say in public that it will scrap them. The missions have reduced extreme poverty level to less than 6%. Venezuela has set itself a challenging target of reducing extreme poverty by one percent point a year. To do that, it has set up a network of what are called Socialist Mission Bases (SBM). It has identified about 1,500 pockets of extreme poverty. In each of these places, the health, education, sports and culture missions work together, with the volunteers and workers staying overnight in the barrios. They work out of three buildings: one for medical attention, another that serves as a residence for the workers while the third is an education and cultural centre. The SBMs prioritise housing, sanitary and economic projects and with its education and culture workers it tackles school absenteeism, substance abuse and violence in the community. On Sunday, doctors and health teams arrive at the SBMs to work in the community. The Mercial food delivery system is being extended to these communities. The new townships have their own SBMs but with different priorities: cleanliness, control of neighbourhood disputes, spotting sporting talent and encouraging cultural activities as well as food shops and health facilities. The missions together have replaced the Church

as the social glue that holds the country together despite the dangerous political polarisation.



**New housing for those who lost their homes in 2010**



## CHAPTER X

### THE DREAM OF A UNITED CONTINENT

The dream of bringing together the entire continent, from the borders of the United States to the frozen expanses of Patagonia in Argentina in some kind of a loose confederation, goes right back to the days of the wars of independence. The Latin American independence heroes were influenced by the Republican and egalitarian notions of the French Revolution and deeply admired the American Revolution but were alarmed by how the United States was turning into the iron fist of the Anglo-Saxon civilisation as it took territory off Mexico and colonised Caribbean islands like Cuba and Puerto Rico. It seemed to them they were defeating the royal court in distant Madrid only to confront another emerging empire in their midst.

Latin America became a much more homogeneous continent after the Spanish had by and large decimated the native indigenous population. The distance and transport of that epoch meant that only a few European settlers could keep in touch with their country of origin. They became used to the blazing sun, the high mountains, the dense forests and the enormous rivers of their new home. They became *Criollos*, Europeans who were born in the continent. Many of them fathered children with native Indian women, often slaves and domestic workers, and some with the black slave women imported from Africa to work in the plantations. In time, they lost their white purity and became a bronzed, tanned people, the Mestizos. But they all spoke the same Spanish language, except in Brazil, and although there were many different accents and dialects, they could understand themselves from one end of the continent to the other. When the English introduced football to the continent, they all picked it up and became wizards with the ball. They were overwhelmingly Catholic with no religious divide to go to war for. They also shared common ancestry with the Iberian culture and literature. Because of this, they worked, lived and married in each other's countries and developed a continental identity.

This did not mean they always lived in peace after defeating the Spanish. There were internal civil wars and rebellions and, at times,

the new nations fought one another. Brazil and Argentina fought over Uruguay in the 1820's. In 1864, Brazil and Paraguay went to war and a year later Argentina and Uruguay joined Brazil in the War of Triple Alliance, a devastating conflict in which hundreds of thousands of Paraguayans died from violence and disease. Paraguay was, in effect, a hacienda for Carlos Antonio Lopez till before the war when he ceded presidency to his son, Francisco Lopez. Paraguay vigorously defended its economic interests and was the only country that did not have any foreign debt for the simple reason that it never accepted foreign loans. Lopez father and son modernised the railways and telegraphs and the country boasted of a prosperous population, local industry and modernity that its neighbours lacked. It was Latin America's first industrialised nation. When the war finally ended in 1869 after the victory of the Triple Alliance and a year's guerrilla war afterwards led by the defeated President, Paraguay had to cede territory and became a backward agricultural country. By one estimate, and it is only an estimate, about a million people died from battles and disease. The war ended in 1869, with the victory of the Alliance, but the defeated Paraguayan President Lopez fought a guerrilla war for another year. He died after being taken prisoner and refused to surrender, shouting I die for my country. The President fought like his countrymen and women who kept the armed resistance going when their menfolk had been killed. It took an Argentinean woman, President Cristina Fernandez, to acknowledge that the war her country launched against Paraguay was a terrible mistake. All four countries went into long recession provoked by debts they ran up during the war.

There were wars at various times in the 19<sup>th</sup> century between Gran Colombia and Peru (in Bolivar's lifetime), Ecuador and Peru and between Chile and Bolivia for the control of the Atacama Desert on the Pacific coast with its precious guano or sea bird excrement deposit as also saltpetre, then vital for manufacturing gunpowder. It was literally a war over bird droppings and gunpowder in which Bolivia lost its access to the sea, which it is trying to regain this time with lawsuits in international courts rather than on battlefields. Bolivia and Paraguay fought each other from 1932-35 to control oilfields they thought existed in the Chaco region. Bolivia lost territory to Paraguay in the war and the death toll was over a hundred thousand. No oil was ever found in the part that Paraguay

took control of but natural gas was discovered on the Bolivian side. Colombia and Peru went to war in the 1930's and Peru and Ecuador in the 1940's over border disputes, the latter provoking armed fighting as late as the 1980's and 1990's, though on a much smaller scale. The first, and so far the last, military action between two South American countries in this century was the attack by Colombia on a Left-wing guerrilla camp inside Ecuador in 2008, an attack that seems to have happened with U.S. logistical help.

Stoking the wars between the South American neighbours were the foreign powers. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was principally Britain and France and a century later it was the United States. Britain actively worked to defeat Paraguay in the War of the Triple Alliance, fearing that Paraguay would control cotton production in the continent after it had annexed the cotton-growing territories of Brazil. It wanted to open up Paraguay's internal market. As the Uruguayan novelist Eduardo Galeano noted in his book, *Mirrors, Stories of Almost Everyone*, it did this by providing Paraguay with a million pounds sterling after the war "for paying reparations to the winners. The murdered country had to pay the countries that murdered for the high cost of its murder. The tariffs that protected Paraguay's industry disappeared; the state companies, public lands, steel mills. One of the first railroads in South America, all disappeared; the national archive, incinerated with its three centuries of history, disappeared". Britain even sold to the Brazilian, Argentinean and Uruguayan troops the excess stock of the baggy uniforms it had manufactured for Turkish troops during the Crimean war. In the Chaco war between Bolivia and Paraguay, the U.S.-based Standard Oil backed Bolivia while the Anglo-Dutch Shell Oil Company took Paraguay's side. Britain helped Chile with finances and warships in its war with Bolivia for the control of the Atacama Desert which, with its saltpetre deposits, helped British companies make substantial gains during World War I. The French were mainly confined to the Caribbean islands and Mexico where it installed an Austrian nobleman, Maximilian, as 'Emperor of Mexico' in 1864.

Latin America was not the primary theatre of operations for the British Empire. Behind it was the lengthening shadows of the upstart former British colony that had had a century's experience of "felling trees and Indians" and now wanted to expand to lands

and markets it could set its sight on. As early as 1823, President James Monroe set out his infamous Monroe Doctrine that recognised existing European colonies but would not permit newer ones to emerge in the continent. It was not an anti-imperialist doctrine. For years, the British navy enforced the doctrine when the United States did not have the naval strength to do so. It was merely a formal declaration that the continent “belonged” to the new economic giant, the “manifest destiny” of which was to move westwards, annexing new territories and markets. For practical reasons, the first expansionist moves were towards Central America whose tragedy, as the Mexican President Porfirio Diaz of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century had once said of his own nation, was to be “so far from god and so close to the United States”.

In 1854, the U.S. navy destroyed the town of San Juan del Norte in Nicaragua after a port official tried to levy charges on a yacht owned by the U.S. millionaire Cornelius Vanderbilt who had made his money in railroads and shipping and boasted of his philanthropy. The next year, an American adventurer, William Walker, and his band of mercenaries took over Nicaragua in their demented dream of creating an English-speaking slave nation, which a prominent New York newspaper celebrated, saying they had “burst their way like a fertilizing torrent through the barriers of barbarism”. Walker was defeated after two years by a coalition of Central American nations put together by Vanderbilt whose trade he was affecting.

Between 1898 and 1934, U.S. Marines intervened in or occupied at least six countries. This was the period of the Banana Wars when the U.S. foreign policy was intimately linked to the commercial interests of the United Fruit Company, which owned giant plantations in the region. The North American nation intervened militarily or occupied Cuba, Dominican Republic, Honduras, Nicaragua, Haiti and Panama, which broke off from Colombia with U.S. military protection after the Colombian parliament failed to ratify handing over land to the Americans for the Panama Canal. The longest occupations were those of Nicaragua (1912-33) and Haiti (1915-34). The U.S. occupation of Haiti was tinged with racism — “Think of it – niggers speaking French!” as the Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan put it — and particularly savage. Thousands of Haitians were killed when they rose in revolt against

the occupiers; Corvée, slave labour by another name, was reinstated; the invaders had veto powers at all levels of government and the Haitian President was barred from a U.S. officers' club because of the colour of his skin. In 1909, the United States forced Presidents like Jose Santos Zelaya of Nicaragua, who wanted to tax U.S. banana and mining companies, trade with Europe, take over church lands and legalise divorce, to resign. A former treasurer of an American mining company succeeded him. Two years later, an American banana tycoon overthrew the Honduran President and an American mercenary involved in the plot was appointed chief of the Honduran army. The same fate awaited Guatemalan President Carlos Herrera in 1921 when he threatened the interests of the United Fruit Company. The Marines were always at hand to put down unrest, whether it was the Cuban sugarcane workers' strike in 1917 or a rent strike in Panama in 1918.

Major-General Smedley Butler, a highly decorated Marine officer, recognised in his book, *War is a racket*, that he was nothing but "a high class muscleman for Big Business, for Wall Street and the bankers... a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism":

"I helped make Mexico... safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenues in. I helped in the raping of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefit of Wall Street. I helped purify Nicaragua for the International Banking House of Brown Brothers in 1902-1912. I brought light to the Dominican Republic for the American sugar interests in 1916. I helped make Honduras right for the American fruit companies in 1903... Looking back on it, I might have given Al Capone a few hints. The best he could do was to operate his racket in three districts. I operated on three continents."

The emerging Empire looked for cheap raw material and new markets for its exports; its ideology, as Walter LaFeber, author of *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*, says was based on "confidence in capitalism, a willingness to use

military force, fear of foreign influence, and a dread of revolutionary instability". Now, as then, the essence of U.S. foreign policy in the region remains the push for free-trade imperialism.

In 1933, the United States shed its skin and announced it would become a Good Neighbour to Latin America. Military interventions would give way to friendly cooperation and the big stick would be replaced by Hollywood's seductive charms to achieve a complete image makeover. The Marines were withdrawn from Nicaragua and Haiti. As the military offensive gave way to the charm offensive, the continent was hit with the "Brazilian bombshell" Carmen Miranda, whose films like *Down Argentine Way* and *Weekend in Havana* did their bit to promote the new all-singin' all-dancin' American image for South American audiences. Miranda's film never seduced the continent and the impossible demand of pleasing South American audiences while staying true to U.S. cultural and diplomatic interests took a toll on her. She died early, with alcohol and drug problems, but death gave her the acceptance with the Brazilian public she had sought in life. The Good Neighbour policy did not last the test of World War II and, even when in place, did not quite mean that the United States had lost its appetite for control. In 1933, Cuba came under the grip of the dictator Fulgencio Batista with U.S. blessings and he promptly turned the island into a vast gambling and prostitution den for Anglo-American millionaires. It is true that the Marines left Nicaragua but not before putting in place the local National Guards they had trained. In 1934, its commander, General Somoza, assassinated Augusto Cesar Sandino, who had fought the Americans to a standstill and had come to the capital to talk peace. Somoza became President two years later and put in place a horrific family dictatorship that was overthrown in 1979 by guerrillas who had taken up Sandino's banner. There were still military coups on the continent, as in Panama in 1941, which the U.S. ambassador first cleared for approval.

Latin America was almost untouched by World War II and even prospered from it, especially Venezuela with its oil exports. As one war ended and the Cold War began, the Good Neighbour once more turned into the neighbour from hell. Two principal motors drove the post-war U.S. policy towards the continent. The first was the absolute U.S. determination to reshape as much of the world as it

could to its own liking and the second was the paranoid fear of the Soviet Union gaining ground in its backyard. Noam Chomsky noted how the liberal George Kennan, historian, political scientist and author of the containment doctrine who largely shaped his country's foreign policy, left no doubts as to why the United States would pursue the mean route:

“We have about 50 percent of the world's wealth, but only 6.3 percent of its population... In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity... We need not deceive ourselves that we can afford today the luxury of altruism and world-benefaction... We should cease to talk about vague and... unreal objectives such as human rights, the raising of the living standards, and democratization. The day is not far off when we are going to have to deal in straight power concepts. The less we are then hampered by idealistic slogans, the better... The final answer might be an unpleasant one, but... we should not hesitate before police repression by the local government. This is not shameful, since the Communists are essentially traitors... It is better to have a strong regime in power than a liberal government if it is indulgent and relaxed and penetrated by Communists.”

Even before Kennan, Chomsky noted, the ruling American elite had rightly understood that a Communist advance in any part of the world would deny the raw materials it needed for its industry. Or, as Eduardo Galeano puts it, the Latinos might no longer be willing to accept the international division of labour in which some countries were destined to be the winners while they were always the losers. As the Cold War gathered momentum, the continent became, again in Chomsky's words, a U.S.-constructed chamber of horrors.

The United States quickly got down to business. In 1946, it set up the School of the Americas in Panama which was later moved to

Fort Benning, Georgia, a military academy that trained soldiers from Latin American nations the dark art of defeating internal subversion with the use of torture, social cleansing and black propaganda. The counter-insurgency programme was explicitly based on an anti-Communist ideology and the Marxist threat included not just the dyed-in-the-wool Reds but also practitioners of Liberation Theology and social movements. It gained notoriety as the school of assassins. The International Conference of American States was held in Bogota in April to draw up the charter of the Organisation of American States (OAS), whose members pledged to fight Communism in the hemisphere. The OAS was the political instrument that tied Latin American and Caribbean nations to the U.S. apron. As the political alliance was being worked out in Bogota, Jorge Eliecer Gaitan, the charismatic Liberal candidate who was expected to win the presidency, was shot dead on April 9. The motive for the assassination was never clarified. Thousands died and thousands more were injured as riots spread throughout Colombia. Also present in Bogota on the day that Gaitan was killed was a young Cuban activist who had come to a conference against the U.S. diplomatic initiative — Fidel Castro. The OAS was formally set up on April 30 and Gaitan's killing was the start of half a century of armed civil war in Colombia. Coincidentally, or not, Colombia sends the maximum number of soldiers to the School of the Americas and is perhaps the most loyal ally of the United States, so loyal in fact that it recently wanted to join NATO and sees itself as a supplier of cheap fighting hands to Iraq, Afghanistan or any other country where the United States needs boots on the ground.

Washington made sure that no cracks appeared in the hemispheric structure. In 1954, the elected Guatemalan President, Jacobo Arbenz Guzman, tried his hand at modest land reforms, including taking land off the United Fruit Company and offering to pay them the value they had declared for the land. The Central Intelligence Agency raised a mercenary force in Honduras to bring down Guzman. The President sought U.S. arms to defeat the mercenary army; the Americans refused and he turned to Czechoslovakia to get the military hardware needed to fight the rebels. He was then portrayed in the U.S. media as a Communist. The CIA provided logistical support to the mercenaries, including hiring aircraft to strafe the capital, while the Guatemalan army refused to fight for the President. Guzman was forced to resign and his reforms were



undone. About 100,000 people, most of them Mayan Indians, died in the next 30 years of military rule and counter-insurgency operations in Guatemala, scene of some of the most horrific atrocities in Central America. In 1957, President Eisenhower set up the Office of Public Safety that trained Latin American police officers. This, and the supply of millions of dollars of equipment to police forces on the continent, had the (intended) effect of militarising them and turning them into ferocious tools of repression against civilian populations.

On the first day of 1959, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and their guerrilla army marched into Havana to kisses and roses, but for Washington the Cuban revolution was a boil that had to be lanced. Seen through the spectrum of the Cold War rivalry, and the geographical proximity of the island, the supposedly liberal administration of the western poster boy, John. F. Kennedy, reacted by raising and equipping a mercenary force of Cuban exiles and sundry mercenaries to defeat Castro. The result was the Bay of Pigs fiasco, in which the expeditionary force was quickly defeated and forced to surrender. For the Latin American Left, this was their first victory against an invincible superpower; for the United States it was a humiliating defeat that had to be avenged whatever the cost. The Cuban missile crisis of 1962 drove the world to the brink of a nuclear war. It also unmasked the pretensions of so-called liberal U.S. Presidents. A few years before the Cuban crisis, Kennedy had stitched together a seemingly more benign Alliance for Progress. It was still an anti-Communist enterprise but one that called for timid reforms to tame the population. With great foresight, JFK had spoken of a coming revolution "which will be peaceful if we are wise enough; compassionate if we care enough; successful if we are fortunate enough - but a revolution which is coming whether we will it or not. We can affect its character; we cannot alter its inevitability". While Kennedy spoke of the coming revolution, he dreaded as much as his hawkish predecessors anything like that happening. He undermined the Cheddi Jagan government in British Guyana that led to British intervention. Alongside the token actions of cutting off aid temporarily to some of the continent's worst regimes, he also kept funding the School of the Americas brutal counter-insurgency programme.

There was no pretence at liberalism, or handwringing, during Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan's presidential terms. Nixon and Henry Kissinger orchestrated the coup that took down the elected Socialist President of Chile, Salvador Allende, in 1973 and helped install a cruel military dictatorship. Chile, Argentina and Uruguay came under military dictatorships and, coordinating with the Pentagon and the CIA, launched 'Operation Condor' that hunted down political dissidents who had fled military regimes in their own country. The Reagan administration raised, armed and trained a mercenary force that sowed terror in Nicaragua to defeat the Sandinista government. Terror cast a long shadow over most of the continent in the 1970's and 1980's. The globalisation of the next decade gave western multinationals the power to take down or install governments that only the U.S. military had enjoyed in the past, using the threat of sanctions, refusing loans or recovering bad debts at extortionate rates as blackmailing instruments for any government that stepped out of line, " a game as old as the empire", a racket, "the only one in which the profits are reckoned in dollars and the losses in lives". Some of this is described in the John Perkins book, *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man*:

"That is what we EHMs do best: we build a global empire. We are an elite group of men and women who utilize international financial organizations to foment conditions that make other nations subservient to the corporatocracy running our biggest corporations, our government, and our banks. Like our counterparts in the Mafia, EHMs provide favors. These take the form of loans to develop infrastructure — electric generating plants, highways, ports, airports, or industrial parks. A condition of such loans is that engineering and construction companies from our own country must build all these projects. In essence, most of the money never leaves the United States; it is simply transferred from banking offices in Washington to engineering offices in New York, Houston, or San Francisco.

"Despite the fact that the money is returned almost immediately to corporations that are members of

the corporatocracy (the creditor), the recipient country is required to pay it all back, principal plus interest. If an EHM is completely successful, the loans are so large that the debtor is forced to default on its payments after a few years. When this happens, then like the Mafia we demand our pound of flesh. This often includes one or more of the following: control over United Nations votes, the installation of military bases, or access to precious resources such as oil or the Panama Canal. Of course, the debtor still owes us the money — and another country is added to our global empire.”

These long decades of U.S. domination one way or another was seared on the South American consciousness, reflected in the Uruguayan poet Mario Benedetti’s poem, *The South Also Exists*,

With its ritual of steel  
its great chimneys  
its secret scholars  
its siren song  
its neon skies  
its Christmas sales  
its cult of God the Father  
and of epaulets  
    with its keys  
    to the kingdom  
    the North is the one  
    who orders

...With its preachers  
its poison gases  
its Chicago school  
its owners of the Earth  
with its luxurious costume  
and its meager frame  
its spent defenses  
its expenses of defense  
    with its epic of invasion  
    the North is the one  
    who orders.

But down here, down  
near the roots  
is where memory  
omits no memory  
and there are those  
who defy death for  
and die for  
and thus together achieve  
what was impossible  
that the whole world  
would know  
that the South,  
that the South also exists

The United States was confident that its backyard was secure at the start of the new American century and the first George W. Bush presidency turned its attention to Iraq and Afghanistan. It was also the time that China started buying raw material in bulk from Latin American countries: copper from Peru and Chile and soya from Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina. Cheap Chinese products poured into the continent from Mexico to Colombia; business with the Asian superpower began to grow alongside the pre-eminence of trade with the United States. After Chavez's election victory in 1999, a host of progressive leaders took power democratically in the next years: Lula in Brazil, Nestor Kirchner in Argentina, Evo Morales in Bolivia and Rafael Correa in Ecuador while the Sandinistas pulled off an electoral victory in Nicaragua in 2006. A year earlier, George Bush had travelled to Argentina to push for a continent-wide free trade agreement, which would be the largest in the world and the most lucrative in American history. But the Latin American leaders had other ideas. Chavez and Kirchner coordinated in stalling the talks, Kirchner handing over to Chavez when he needed a toilet break, and made sure the U.S. position was thwarted in the conference hall while thousands from all over Latin America gathered outside in protest. Chavez, Evo Morales, then a union leader, and Maradona rode on a train named Expreso del Alba to Plata del Mar, the summit venue, 400 kilometres from Buenos Aires, where they joined a people's summit at a World Cup stadium. It was the moment when the old order of an unequal free trade agreement died and a new era of continental integration was symbolically born.

Venezuela had never experienced the kind of military terror blessed by the United States elsewhere in the continent, though it was far from the "model democracy" it was touted to be. The political intrigues that the United States specialised in was saved for Chavez after he assumed power, with the coup and the petroleum strike of 2002 and the relentless international campaigns against him every year till his death. The young revolution could not defend itself alone against the all-powerful northern giant. It needed as a matter of survival to achieve Latin American integration. In this, Chavez started with his most potent card, petroleum, outlining it with usual candour: "Venezuela has a strong oil card to play on the geopolitical stage... it is a card that we are going to play with toughness against the toughest country in the world, the United States."

The first step to alliance building was PetroCaribe, formed on June 29, 2005, in Venezuela and the first shipment of 15,000 barrels of petroleum was sent to Belize. There were 14 participant nations at first and it now has 18 members including Venezuela: Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Belize, Cuba, Dominica, Grenada, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, St Kitts and Nevis, St Vincent and the Grenadines, St Lucia and Suriname. The Caribbean islands and Central American states form the bulk of the membership. Two more countries, El Salvador and Costa Rica, now want to join it. PetroCaribe keeps the economy of the smaller Caribbean nations afloat and stabilises those of the poor Central American nations. The sharp increases in the global oil prices after the 2003 Iraq war drove these nations to the brink of bankruptcy. Their tiny revenues were being eaten up by the enormous increase in the oil prices. These were among the most highly indebted countries struggling to survive not just the oil prices but also the financial loss after the European Union withdrew indirect subsidies on banana and sugar exports from these countries. The recession also affected tourism trade on which the Caribbean countries depend. The Clinton administration took the European Union to the World Trade Organisation for favouring the banana producers of the Caribbean nations, a move that could only have been prompted by the hefty contribution that Chiquita, the United Fruit Company in the new garb, made to Clinton's election campaign. The company was fined \$27 million in 2007 for paying off Colombian paramilitary groups, "the cost of doing

business in that country” as one of its executives said. One of those who provided voice for the company’s mascot, Miss Chiquita, was Monica Lewinski of Bill Clinton fame.

To the PetroCaribe members, Venezuela’s two-tier oil pricing offer was quite irresistible. Venezuela could not supply oil below market rates as an OPEC member but the contracting countries would get a discount. When the market price was \$40 dollars a barrel or less, PetroCaribe nations would have to pay 60% of the bill within 90 days and the rest over 17 years after a grace period of up to two years. If the price went up above \$50, the loan period would be extended to 25 years. Venezuela would also finance a part of the purchase: at \$50 a barrel, it would finance 40% of the bill, rising to 50% if the oil price went over \$100 a barrel. The PetroCaribe nations could also pay off the debt by providing goods and services to Venezuela such as rice or fruit exports or cement to meet Venezuela’s demand with its enormous housing mission. Cuba has a separate payments programme with Venezuela which allows it to meet its oil bill by sending doctors, teachers and sports trainers over there. Venezuela also covers shipping costs, helps with developing the distribution infrastructure and storage sites and contributes to creating state-controlled facilities. PetroCaribe only deals with state-controlled entities; it eliminates all private intermediaries, making sure that U.S. distributors in these countries cannot get their hands on subsidised Venezuelan oil and sell them at higher rates to the state.

PetroCaribe now meets 47% of the oil needs of its member countries. It is estimated to have saved its members more than \$1bn while its annual cost to Venezuela has been calculated at about \$7.5 billion. It has been a lifeline for the Caribbean and Central American states, allowing them to stabilise their economy. Had it not been for PetroCaribe, the economies of these nations would have gone into a freefall and their populations would have been dispersed. That the world does not see boatloads of Caribbean migrants making the risky journey to the United States is because of Venezuelan petroleum. Where the PetroCaribe nations once struggled to pay their public workers, they can now even pay off part of their old loans as the oil bill have diminished greatly and can invest in infrastructure, health, housing and water supply. Jamaica, for example, generates 95% of its electricity with

Venezuelan oil. PetroCaribe also has a development fund that invests in public infrastructure and social welfare projects. As part of the energy arc that Venezuela wants to construct in the region, it has built refineries in Nicaragua and Jamaica and revived one in Cuba that had been shut down after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The PetroCaribe nations are free to export the by-products from refining Venezuelan crude oil or to use them for local use. One of these by-products is PVC which is the building blocks for the petrocasas that are rugged enough to withstand the storms that regularly devastate the Caribbean countries.

Such has been PetroCaribe's impact that even the United States is said to have accepted the system, although its arrogance will never allow it to express its gratitude in public. Instead, the resentment comes through in a leaked diplomatic cable: "Petrocaribe... gives the GOV (*government of Venezuela*) an excellent opportunity to come across as kind and compassionate while at the same time offering the chance to tar international oil companies (IOCs) as price gougers preying on the poor. The initiative also offers the GOV an opportunity to advance its trade and regional integration agendas as well as gain positive press and hoped for support in regional fora." The keenness to join PetroCaribe made even tiny defenceless Haiti, which came under sustained pressure from U.S. pressure not to join Petrocaribe, resort to a traditional form of Haitian resistance known as "marronage" in which it pretended to go along with U.S. concerns about Venezuela and Chavez, telling the Americans they did not like the Venezuelan leader one bit, while secretly doing the opposite, talking to him about joining the group. Experts who had no known antecedent of worrying for the welfare of the Caribbean and Central American nations suddenly discovered their vocation for the welfare of the Caribbean islands. The region was falling into a long-term debt with Venezuela, they claimed. It is true that some PetroCaribe funds were misused or pilfered by some Caribbean leaders but if these nations were to turn away from PetroCaribe, they would have no alternative other than to paying for the high oil costs in full and possibly having to take out loans to pay for their loans, perfect conditions for the economic hit men to step in with their poisoned dollars.

Using oil for regional diplomacy was not a Chavez invention. In the 1960's, Venezuela distributed oil money in the region as part of

Kennedy's anti-Communist and anti-Cuba programme so that it would not fall for the Marxist temptation. In 1974, President Carlos Andres Perez sold petroleum at \$6 a barrel to the region with the provision of paying back the rest in local currency at 8% interest with full repayment in 25 years. Venezuela exchanged bauxite and aluminium for oil with Guyana and Jamaica. It also used its oil muscle to gain a foothold for private Venezuelan industries in Caribbean projects like port developments and the cement industry. But it undermined the common platform of the Caribbean countries, CARICOM. In the 1980's, the United States became indifferent to the region and Venezuela's internal economic problems meant it lost interest in these programmes. The Caribbean nations turned to Cuba which provided them with doctors and scholarships for students. The Chavez initiative was more than the usual commercial or political muscle-flexing. He spoke of the rich countries wasting energy while pillaging the poorer nations, overthrowing popular governments or unleashing wars to gain control over oil wells. Boatloads of petroleum left Venezuela for almost a century through Caribbean waters but the islands never gained from it, he reminded the Caribbean leaders. Often, private companies bought oil from Venezuela and sold it at much higher prices to these countries, which were forced to pay extortionate prices. As the Caribbean islands lacked even the most basic storage facilities, they were always desperate to buy the next consignment, whatever the price. "PetroCaribe is one of those new foundations to build ourselves again and hoist everyday the flags of our dignity, liberty and Caribbean greatness," Chavez told the PetroCaribe nations. He said the programme would make these nations "fairer, more cultured, participative and supporting, encouraging quality of life and participating in their own destiny".

The dream of Latin American integration is at least as old as Bolivar. While still a young man in 1812, Bolivar had warned from his exile in the letter of Cartagena, that if the continent did not unite, its enemies would find it easy to take advantage of their divisions and they would be conquered by the "handful of bandits who infect our lands". Later, as the Spanish empire was falling apart, he argued for mechanisms to resolve disputes among themselves. The idea of "patria grande" or a greater Latin American nation of free Republics became popular in the 20th century through the efforts of Manuel Ugarte, an Argentinean



Socialist who was completely ignored at home but revered elsewhere in the continent. Ugarte wrote a letter to Woodrow Wilson as a young man, asking him to change his country's way of dealing with the continent. That earned him Washington's permanent enmity. Ugarte was thrown out of several countries under U.S. pressure. In the end, he killed himself in his study but his formulation of a greater nation struck deep roots among Latin American revolutionaries even before the Cuban revolution. The Bolivarian strategy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century was to set up concentric rings of alliances, of which PetroCaribe was one. The other was the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America–Peoples Trade Agreement (ALBA-PTA). At a summit of Caribbean heads of State in Venezuela in 2001, Chavez outlined his version of ALBA as Fidel Castro listened attentively. Afterwards, when the Cuban President asked Chavez for documentation for the new alliance, Chavez admitted there was none; he was only thinking aloud. ALBA is the Spanish word for dawn and Chavez came up with the name as he discussed the idea in more detail through the night with Fidel. At daybreak, Chavez suggested they name this new partnership between the two countries, signed in 2004, as the dawn of the new era. Six more countries have since joined the alliance as full members: Bolivia, Nicaragua, Dominica, Ecuador, St. Vincent and The Grenadines, and Antigua and Barbuda with a combined population of over 70 million and a GDP of little more than \$500 billion at that time. The Bolivian President, Evo Morales, suggested in 2006 that they add the PTA to its name to mark a difference between the fair trade within the block as against the free trade that the USA wanted to impose on the continent.

ALBA rejects the existing idea of free trade zones with its sweatshops, using the scandalously cheap labour of poor Latin Americans working in slave-like conditions — like in the maquiladora industrial estates in Mexico bordering the United States — producing affordable goods for western consumers. It sought instead to boost local agriculture and industries that contributed to eliminating poverty in their region. Agricultural production was aimed not so much at food exports as to building food self-sufficiency, especially for the small Caribbean islands that are periodically affected by powerful tropical storms. It opposed the intellectual property rights structure, like the one that patents genetic biodiversity and indigenous peasant knowledge of the

developing countries in western capitals, saying that it privileged the interests of the developed countries. Ecuador's President, Rafael Correa, posed this question: would the western countries, that argue with such vehemence for intellectual property rights, have done the same if they were the ones supplying raw material to the international market and the developing nations were the ones processing it with their superior scientific and intellectual capacities? ALBA is not typically about commerce and trade deals. It encourages, for example, members working together to develop their medical capabilities. They are setting up a joint university of health sciences with its headquarters in Caracas and campuses in other ALBA countries so that students can pursue different courses in different locations, with each government providing scholarships for the students.

ALBA set up a bank in 2008 to finance small entrepreneurship among community projects in the region. It has begun sending cadets and officers to defence academies of the ALBA bloc that have their own defence doctrines instead of allowing them to be indoctrinated in the United States or Europe. Other powerful examples of cooperation are the literacy and ophthalmologic programmes that have ensured that this is a bloc with full literacy and adequate health care for its population while countries that subscribe to the free trade model like Mexico, Peru and Colombia are far behind in each of these indicators. ALBA also acts as a common political and diplomatic bloc at international fora, articulating common positions that challenge the U.S. narrative on regional and global issues. While ALBA has been extraordinarily active politically and diplomatically, it has been far less able to unite the social, environmental or trade union movements of their countries so that the agenda of the people is put before the needs of capital even in the continent.

The 1999 Bolivarian Constitution drives Venezuela's foreign policy. The government is obliged to work for "Latin American and Caribbean integration" based on the values of "regional sovereignty" with common defence and foreign policy, "solidarity, peaceful cooperation, complementarity and social justice". Without ALBA, none of these countries by themselves would have been able to check the onslaught of transnational capital. If Latin American integration was an aspiration for the Bolivarian founding fathers, it

is a matter of survival now and a defence mechanism against the might of capital, says Rafael Correa. In looking for economic independence, ALBA and PetroCaribe are tying up with the older economic alliance of Mercosur which groups Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Uruguay and Paraguay (with Bolivia on way to joining it). Mercosur combines to be the fifth largest economy of the world. Its members have everything from abundant water to precious minerals, vast stretches of fertile land and agricultural skills, an existing industrial base and, of course, Venezuelan oil. Venezuela has moved Mercosur closer to PetroCaribe and ALBA, working to weave together a continental economy that no longer looks to the northern giant for survival.

The third, outer ring of the alliance was the creation of Unasur (again, Chavez came up with the name), established in 2008 with its headquarters in Quito, Ecuador, and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (Celac) in 2011, established in Caracas with 33 states speaking five different languages. Both of these are regional platforms of South American and Caribbean nations without the United States or Canada. Unlike PetroCaribe or ALBA, Unasur is a more heterogeneous platform in which governments of the Left, Right and Centre have had to work together. Now when there are coup attempts in the continent, the Latin American countries first turn to Unasur, which rejects using force to overthrow elected governments. It does not always succeed, and it certainly failed in Honduras in 2009 when President Manuel Zelaya was overthrown by the military with covert U.S. support for getting too close to Venezuela. In Paraguay, Unasur could not prevent President Fernando Lugo, a former Bishop, from being impeached and forced out of office by the National Assembly in 2012 on false charges. As with Zelaya, his real crime was to have taken his country closer to Venezuela, something that neither the local oligarchy nor the United States was ready to forgive. In both these cases, however, Unasur's counter-check effectively prevented large-scale massacres that usually accompanied military coups in the past. In Bolivia in 2008 and Ecuador in 2010, Unasur's pressure contributed to thwarting coup attempts. Latin American Generals dreaming of coup now have to contend with the fact that they will face diplomatic isolation and worse. The continent wants to put such "gorillas back in their cages".

As with ALBA, PetroCaribe and Unasur, Chavez was Celac's prime mover, battling through the illness that killed him. The summit was to have been held in Caracas in mid-June 2011 but was postponed to December that year as he underwent operations in Cuba. It was his last major project for Latin American integration. At the start of the Chavez era, it was almost fashionable to mark distance from him. The Right set him up as a bogeyman in countries like Colombia, Peru, Mexico and Central America and smeared their opponents as agents of Chavez, whom they accused of trying to export the destabilising and failed Venezuelan experiment to their countries. The anti-Chavez rhetoric was a vote-winning card for them and the commercial media played up scare stories of Venezuelan agents distributing cash and even weapons among the Left voters. It was futile arguing with the media but Chavez made the point with the leaders of the Right that they would have to accept him as a legitimately elected President just as he would accept them though they were ideologically far apart. The declining influence of the United States and the assurance that Venezuela was not exporting its revolution calmed the other Presidents.

The setting up of the television station Telesur in 2005 was the continent's first challenge to the media monopoly that is closely tied to U.S. interests. The owners of the big newspapers and television stations in the continent have their own business groupings and have turned into active political players against the progressive regimes. The modern Latin American coups no longer start when tanks leave the barracks; it begins with television and newspaper campaigns to diminish popular support for these governments and to provide the excuse so that the tanks come out on the streets. They create the climate in which coups become a possibility. There are at least two major examples of this: Chile in 1973 when the influential newspaper *El Mercurio* went on the offensive against the Allende government and created mass neurosis in the population and the 2002 coup in Venezuela in which the media not only prepared the ground for the coup but also was an active participant. It was the same in Bolivia, Ecuador, Honduras and Paraguay where the Right tried to organise military coups against the government. In Argentina and Brazil, both with moderately Leftist governments, the media has substituted the discredited parties of the Right in organising the opposition. The internal campaign by the Latin American media is picked up and

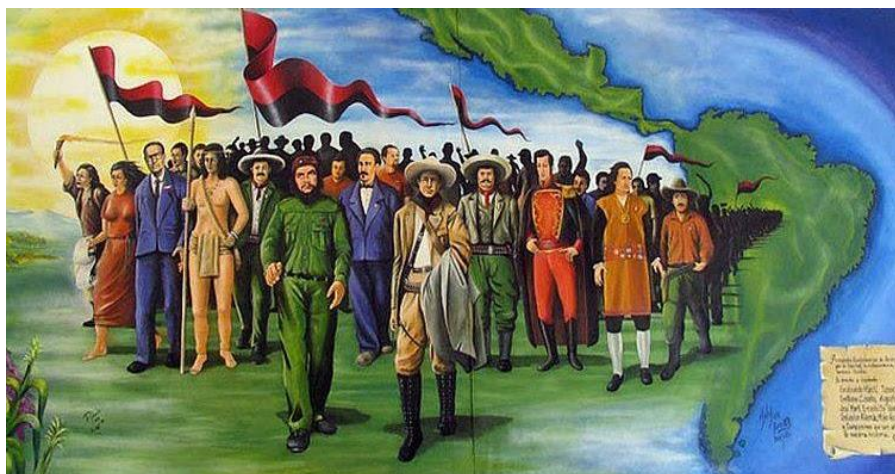
amplified by private western media and state news agencies and media outlets that discredit these governments and promote the idea that they got what they deserved. In this upside down world, liberal western newspapers support military coups as a step towards the restitution of democracy against the "dictatorship" of elected governments working for their people. Telesur is an attempt to explain the continent with its own voice, to see it through its own eyes. Its mission statement is 'Our North is the South'. There have been criticisms of Telesur from within its own camp for being too dependent on Venezuela and for not having a larger audience share. What cannot be doubted is that its presence has challenged the information monopoly.

At moments of crisis, such as during the unfolding coup in Honduras, Paraguay, Bolivia and Ecuador, Telesur provided a different, and more truthful, version of events than the Spanish version of CNN or the BBC and eroded their credibility. Latin Americans turned to Telesur in larger numbers than CNN during the Honduras coup and its cameras certainly played a part in avoiding a civilian massacre. A Telesur football programme, *De Zurda* (From the Left) combined Left-wing politics with football analysis and interviews with the continent's most famous footballers during the 2014 World Cup in Brazil. With Diego Maradona as one of the hosts, it quickly became the continent's favourite sports show during the championship.

The United States still remains the big beast on the continent. It exercises enormous power by controlling three key levers: military might, financial control and power over words and images. China's rise has given the continent a new trade partner but the United States has not been eclipsed as a market. Thousands of Central Americans try to cross into the United States for a better life. Their remittances are vital for Mexico and Central American countries. The United States has increased its investments in military and police training for Latin American nations and this gives it inroads into the very heart of progressive governments. Its monopoly control over the media fashions public opinion against Latin American integration from within the continent.

Against all odds, what has changed is that the overwhelming U.S. control in its backyard has come under unprecedented challenge.

There can be no doubt that the ringleader of this successful conspiracy on a continental scale was Hugo Chavez. Equally, it can be argued that, in a different time and in changed circumstances, Chavez achieved more in legitimising and achieving continental integration than Bolivar himself.



## CHAPTER XI

### **CHAVISMO: DOES IT EXIST?**

For all the achievements in health, education, housing and food distribution, it could be argued that a reformist government might have been able to do much the same and that this itself does not mark out Venezuela as "revolutionary". The more traditional forms of government in Brazil and Argentina have taken giant strides in getting people out of poverty and providing social security. The ruling elite in Venezuela has lost power. Bankers and the finance capitalists no longer nominate ministers and the President no longer has to depend on them for his campaign funds or on the corporate media to legitimise his rule. The rich have not so much lost their wealth as their grip over political power which explains their visceral hatred for everything that has to do with 'Chavismo', a disparaging term they coined to define the new order. At the heart of the Venezuelan experiment is the thesis of people's power that frightens them.

Initially, Chavez's supporters disliked being called 'Chavistas' or their movement being defined as Chavismo. It was an insult coined by the elites and the "Chavista hordes" were seen as "lowlife, bandits, black trash, thugs". Chavismo bore the stigma of militarism, populism, authoritarianism, a personality cult, an idea of the past, a polarising element or even a kind of contagious Caribbean madness of low taste. Elias Jaua, a radical student leader who served in Chavez's government as Vice President and is now the Minister for Communes, describes the antipathy:

"In reality it was an attempt to strip us of our identity as Bolivarians, it was the oligarchy's final effort to preserve the term Bolivar within the rusty archives of history academies. However, not only could they not steal from us the essence of the name "sons of Bolivar", but we took on the name Chavista as well, and we dignifiedly gave it a new meaning. I remember a march when I saw "I'm Chavista, so what?" for the first time, etched angrily on a piece of cardboard by a woman from the working class. From then on we were Chavistas, which at the beginning just meant that we

were followers and defenders of Hugo Chavez. After consolidating the people's victories of 2002, 2003 and 2004, we once again ratified our identity as Chavista. I remember that in that period the commander began to question the term, because he believed that it gave way to a personalistic tendency which went against revolutionary principles, but he later realised that being Chavista was something that transcended his surname.

"Being Chavista is knowing that power belongs to us a people and not to the rich, it is feeling respected in our cultural and social diversity. Being Chavista is being conscious of the fact that our national income is for everybody and holding human solidarity up as a supreme value. Being Chavista is to feel part of a strong ethical belief in life, for the liberation of the people, for the union of South America, for the greatness and the beauty of what they didn't teach us about our father, Simon Bolivar. Being Chavista is to be irreverent in the face of domination. Being Chavista is both thinking and acting from a leftist standpoint... They do not understand that there is no Chavismo without the thought and passion that Chavez has for the people, that Chavismo doesn't exist without a free people, that there is no Chavismo without a preferential option for the poor, that there is no Chavismo without true socialism."

**Chavismo is a Latin American variant of Socialism.** It has consciously differentiated itself from European Socialism, saying that there were older traditions in the continent going right back to the times when the indigenous people lived in a communal state without the norm of private property. While Chavismo recognises that it cannot go back to those idyllic times, it condemns the European invasion and genocide of the native population. It argues that the peculiarities of the continent make the transplant of a European model impossible and that no other continent needs to copy their model either. In this, Chavismo has been deeply influenced by Simon Rodriguez, Bolivar's irreverent teacher. Rodriguez had implored Latin Americans that if they were so keen



to copy from the Europeans, why did they not copy their originality. He tried out on a smaller scale utopian Socialism in which people understood that they could realise their own potential by working together. "Men are not in the world to destroy themselves but to help one other," he argued. Chavismo breaks from the mental colonisation that marks the continent's elites who see the United States and Europe as superior civilisations. The Latin American elites believe that only a limited version of democracy can be offered to their own people because they are not educated enough for it. The methodology of Chavismo is that of Simon Rodriguez: "Where are we going to look for models? Spanish America is original. Its institutions and government have to be original. Either we invent or we err." This was not lost on Rodriguez's student Simon Bolivar who said "our people are neither Europeans nor North Americans but rather are more a mix of Africa and the Americas than a European discharge". Chavez was also deeply influenced by Latin America's "forgotten Marxist", the Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui, who suggested that the continent should do without copy and paste Socialism.

Chavez rescued the Robinsonian thinking, arguing that the "revolutionary ideology that moves this Bolivarian revolution is not imported from other latitudes, it is not an ideology removed from our own nature, no, our ideology is autochthonous; our ideology is Creole like the savannah; our ideology is the product of our own history, of our own clay, of our own legends and our own dreams... We live effectively in an era where the ideologies seemed to be dying out. The "end of ideologies" has consistently given rise to the tendency in our contemporary thinkers of looking for models in other latitudes to import and try to implant them in our societies." He spoke of achieving the "concrete Robinsonian utopia": it was "neither a dream nor delirium, but a philosophy. The place where this would happen would not be imaginary as Thomas Moore had thought: his (*Robinson's*) utopia would be, in reality, the Americas." The Robinsonian utopia itself was defined as a type of supportive society where the human being is the fundamental element; a superior state of society in which the people work out together how to meet their needs and desires, avoiding individual suffering. This, Chavez argued, could only be realised in a profoundly democratic and sharing society.

**Chavismo rejects representative democracy for a "participative and protagonist" model.** Chavez was fashioning his ideology at about the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the break-up of the Soviet Union. It was celebrated with Francis Fukuyama's famous formulation of the "end of history" with the permanence of the Western liberal democracy as the only possible political model. "There is an approach," he said of Fukuyama's thesis, "that tries to signal the end of ideology and that would arrive at an era that we would call technocratic, robotic, where there are no ideas. No, this will never happen; there will always be ideas that will drive the movements, life and the will of the people. Our tasks should be... debates every day, the battle of ideas, the artillery of thinking, voluntary work, the incorporation of praxis, solution of problems, attention to the weakest, the creation of a society of love, of a new spirituality, of a new ethical and moral base". Chavismo wanted a clear break with the old system of representative democracy where the people vote once every five years or so while their representatives make deals behind closed doors in the interests of the ruling class. This, for Chavez, was a corruption of the very notion of democracy, a sham perpetrated on the people. The so-called representative democracy, for him, was nothing more than an artifice to dominate the people. He quoted Bolivar's famous phrase to this effect, "Our people have been dominated more by deception than by force". Chavismo was designed to break with the "farce of representation", conquer new participative spaces in a first phase of development and encourage self-government at the community level. "The popular Bolivarian democracy will be born in the communities and its vital sap will extend to the entire social body of the nation," Chavez said.

The Bolivarian alternative is a system in which the people not only have more direct power but can also use it with greater frequency. The Venezuelan Constitution takes up some of these ideas. It does not do away with competitive elections but it gives people the right to recall their President and every other elected representative. The Bolivarian democracy goes deeper than this. It speaks of a new "geometry of power". In this new geometry, the traditional state extends beyond the political elite, the bureaucracy and the repressive organs like the armed forces to become a more broadbased and accommodating "social state". The new state involves the social movements and the people through "people's

power". It is futile to speak of power to the people, Chavismo argues, if the people are not organised. Power can be transferred from institutions organised to handle it to the people only if and when they have their own organisations. "The state functions as a "unit of power", a unit that should not be confused with concentration, and "power" that needs to be exercised in a harmonic manner and well distributed in all of the national territory".

The new agency of popular power is the community council, a neighbourhood organisation that groups between 200 and 400 families living in a geographically contiguous urban area, 10 and 20 families in the rural areas and 10 families for the indigenous people. The community councils were born with the Venezuelan parliament approving legislation in 2006 before the presidential elections of that year in which Chavez ran openly and defiantly on a programme for a Socialist Venezuela. The community councils have as their pedigree the Bolivarian Circles and the committees on water, health, education and urban land distribution that had mobilised the people alongside the missions. Chavez saw them as a way out of the representative democratic straitjacket: "Democracy, if it only remains merely as representative, becomes a trap in which the hopes of the people... are enclosed and die... in which the constituent power is enclosed and denied and often evaporates... if we want real democracy, live, participative, protagonist, if we want a country of free and equals, there is no other way than to transfer more power every day to the Venezuelan people... Every day more instruments will have to be forged for direct democracy and break with representative democracy which ends up being a dictatorship, the dictatorship of an elite against the interests of the people. Representative democracy always advances in that direction, towards degeneration. Capitalism is the kingdom of the private. Socialism is the kingdom of the public; it is the kingdom of the collective."

The community councils have to register with the state and elect their spokespersons through secret voting in citizens' assemblies. The spokespersons can be recalled like any elected official. The councils receive financial grants to improve their neighbourhoods. They also wield considerable local power. All local businesses or housing constructions have to get approval from the community

councils. Larger public works carried out by the state or private businesses have to consult the community councils in the project area. The councils exercise "social control" on large projects as well as their own. Not all community councils are supportive of the government. After a long time denouncing the community councils as a mechanism to set up parallel power, many neighbourhoods in opposition-dominated areas now have their own community councils. Community councils group themselves into communes, which have a defined geographical area of operation but much greater powers. Both the community councils and the communes are political spaces. A former Minister for Communes, Reinaldo Iturriza Lopez, describes these as being "fundamentally made up of men and women of the popular classes that have suffered" who, feeling rejected, "rebelled against representative democracy". This rejection, including indifference, at first created a passive attitude, a decision to remain on the political margins. Chavismo, according to Lopez, incorporated the act of rebellion into the political and is "inconceivable without collective memory, without the common notion of rebellion. The communal councils are spaces of common political construction. They are a space in which the common denominator is Chavismo, which not only predominantly shares a class origin but also a common experience of politicisation". Chavez did not create the communal councils, says Lopez, to bring them to the lowest common denominator but to incorporate those from below, to guarantee them a space and a place — Chavismo has not been domesticated.

The communes are also creating a new form of communal property, somewhere between the state and private forms of ownership. They can run their own businesses. Communes now operate local transport, tourist attractions and small businesses from bakeries to carpentry units in the cities and farms and agricultural businesses in the countryside. The communes, at the moment, operate small businesses and for the next few years will concentrate on taking over maintenance work from the state agencies in areas like health, education, roadwork or even electricity. They also plan to move into the service industry, especially tourism, or taking state services to the communities. The state has been toying with the idea of transferring schools and medical centres to the communes. As the communes are seen as spaces of local self-governance, they have taken up part of the

state's responsibilities in tackling crime, preventing drug use and supervising businesses that speculate or hoard items. There has been talk of giving them limited legislative powers and even the power to print stamp scrip or local currency. This would be on the lines of the experiment that the small Austrian town of Wörgl had tried out successfully in the middle of the Great Depression in 1932. In his last televised address to the nation, Chavez told his successor Maduro that he was entrusting to him the future of the communes in the same way that he would entrust him with his own life.

The communes now have a voice at Miraflores, the presidential headquarters, through the Presidential Commission on Communes that allows them to suggest policies, supervise their implementation nationally and interact with institutions of the state. For the government, they serve as its eyes and ears, keeping close tab on the missions and government projects and saving them from complete bureaucratisation. They have become a channel for implementing social policies and modernising public institutions, making them somewhat people-friendly. They are the concrete forms of Chavismo's ideal of self-government springing from within the communities and a more radical model of decentralisation. Communes are still not part of the planning process in any great measure, which often reflects in public works being executed without considering the priorities of the local communities.

With more than 40,000 registered community councils and nearly 1,000 communes, they cover perhaps as much as half the population. But how effective have they been? The picture, as is normal for an experiment, is mixed. The communes have not grown at the pace of community councils. One practical reason for this is the sheer number of elections in Venezuela. Most years there is at least one, and often two or more elections. The Chavistas cannot afford to lose even one for fear of the opposition bouncing back. Most of the community council and commune leaders are part of the ruling United Socialist Party and this relentless electoral campaigning takes a toll on the health of the community councils and the communes. Many Chavista mayors and governors, like their opposition counterparts, were suspicious of the community councils, fearing that their own powers would be curbed. While this

has diminished, it has not entirely gone away. Ambitious local leaders are tempted to treat the councils as their personal fiefdom and as an instrument of local control. There are problems of group rivalries within communities that extend to the councils and the communes. At times, community councils fight among themselves either to corner resources that flow from the state or to deny it to other community councils. Besides, there are problems of passivity and councils that cease to function from time to time. Corruption has affected them; there have been cases of people who have lived off very little all their lives suddenly handling relatively large sums of money and stealing from the funds.

A bigger and more permanent danger for the communes is that as they get close to the state, it will try to co-opt them. The former Minister for Communes feels that, "These spaces of political construction of the communes are characteristic of all revolutionary processes. However, the tendency to control them is equally characteristic; a task that is always taken up by the most conservative and bureaucratised forces within the revolution. There is no more an effective way to control these spaces (the communal councils) than to corrupt them, neutralize them: try to convert the organized people into clientele, into a venue where popular leaders that manage in a way that makes it impossible for communities to successfully execute solutions to their problems, especially in the face of the state bureaucracy, and therefore the communal councils lose total legitimacy. When they are converted into scenarios of disputes about positions or resources, these spaces become closed: the people begin to identify them as more of the same and, in the worst cases, they remove themselves from these spaces." The communes are Chavismo's answer to the "terminal crisis of popular revolutions" which, as the radical Argentinean Peronist of Irish extraction, John William Cooke, said, happens when the spaces of popular participation are closed down and with the dominant bureaucratic style comes a ruling bureaucratic caste. For all their failings, the community councils and the incipient commune movement have been overwhelmingly positive for the people down the economic scale, those who live in the barrios and villages. It has allowed funds to flow to the communities without the filter of bureaucracy. It has taught them organisational and management skills. The urban middle classes and the rich are much less enthusiastic. With a little prodding from

the private media, they see the councils, and even more the communes, as a step towards Cuban-style Communism. However patchy their record, the poorer communities see the community councils and communes as positive and necessary for their development.

**Chavismo is a continuation of Bolivar's dreams.** It has a strong Latin American identity while at the same time it speaks insistently in nationalist terms. The anti-imperialist part of the Chavista ideology comes from Bolivar, whom Chavez brought back to the national consciousness from a prolonged period of enforced amnesia. The Chavista narrative of history is that it is completing Bolivar's unfinished dream of achieving independence, social harmony and the country's march towards grandeur. Just as Bolivar challenged the Spanish, Chavez took on the many invisible controls that the U.S. Empire exercised over his country, principally in the oil industry. The North Americans (*gringos*) plundered its most precious natural resource and used Venezuela as a willing pawn to keep down oil prices by sabotaging OPEC. It exercised great pressure on its foreign policy using the anti-Communism of its political leaders and controlled the military by having its own officers implanted in the heart of the armed forces and by largely supplying Venezuela's military needs. North American companies bulldozed their way into the country's cultural market through films, television, cinemas, books and the print media to crush local talent and production. Culturally, it turned the upper classes into gringo clones. Entire social classes lost their Venezuelan identity and self-esteem, copying U.S. fashion, diet, cultural appetite, and seeing their own people as inferior to Americans or Europeans. The governments of the Fourth Republic were notorious for their wastefulness, corruption and dependence on powerful domestic and international economic lobbies. This allowed the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to impose their agendas on these governments. Chavismo defined this as economic and imperial imposition. From Bolivar, Chavismo also inherited his view of the state as an agency that had to ensure the "maximum sum of happiness" for the people and the "maximum quantum of political and social stability".

Chavismo sees the period between Bolivar's death and Chavez's electoral victory as one in which the ideals of the independence

struggle were betrayed. It seriously assumes the continental vision of the founding father. The early nationalists, and Bolivar more so than most, wanted a "nation of Republics" covering the continent. The only time Venezuelan soldiers left the borders of the country was to liberate other nations. Bolivar's soldiers, many of them barefooted men from the plains, trekked with him across the freezing Andean mountains to fight for the independence of Colombia, Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia, the first President of which was the Venezuelan Jose Antonio Sucre. Chavismo views Hugo Chavez as a modern-day Bolivar, something it did not say publicly till his death. It sees Latin American integration as its internationalist task more than uniting the proletarians of the world. It wants a diverse and politically plural Latin America to unite on issues like economic integration and standing up to pressure from the United States, including in this unity governments of the Right, the Left or the Centre. To Chavismo, this is more important than exporting its brand of revolution which would, in any case, go against the belief that there cannot be copy and paste revolutions. Nevertheless, there is a Bolivarian movement on the continental scale although it is neither very powerful nor has a huge continental support base. Venezuela is viewed positively in countries with progressive governments like Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua while it suffers from a negative image in countries like Peru, Colombia or Mexico where there has been a relentless media onslaught against it. Fortunately, the Bolivarian revolution does not come with an imperial baggage like that of Russia or China. This has allowed it to regain some of the ground it lost to hostile media campaigns against it in Latin America, among the governments and the people.

**Chavismo defines itself as 21<sup>st</sup> century Socialism.** It differs from the post-Russian revolution socialist models of Europe, the Chinese or even the Cuban model. In prison, Chavez debated between taking up arms once again and going for elections. After some hesitation, he decided on the latter, concluding that the conditions were not ripe for an armed insurgency. Instead, he would use the available democratic space and insist on a constituent assembly and the redrafting of the Constitution as a way of breaking with the existing system. In exchange, Chavismo would have to commit itself to faith in democracy, free multi-party elections, co-existence with a corporate private media and a mixed



rather than a centralised and controlled economy. As Socialists, the Chavistas are a diverse, heterogeneous force and not a monolithic one-party state. It has its dissidents; it has to hear criticism from outside its ranks and from within; it rejects the notion of a "proletarian dictatorship". It would be better to speak of "proletarian democracy", Chavez argued, the masses would reject any notion of dictatorship, however packaged; they no longer had an appetite for the old Communist model. He would neither accept the deterministic views that backward societies could not move to Socialism till they had reached the capitalist stage. "By this argument, we, the backward countries will never reach Socialism, we will have to wait first to be invaded, to be developed, before heading for Socialism," he said in a televised address in 2007. He refuted the thesis that Socialists were against private property. The Bolivarian revolution had turned the masses into property holders with their houses, their land and necessities of life. It was capitalism, he argued, which robbed the majority of the people of their property and gave it to the wealthiest. The Bolivarian revolution would not put the country's natural resources in private hands and make sure that the most critical means of production were not exclusively in the hands of the bourgeoisie but that did not mean, Chavez said, that the state would own barber shops.

Chavez, however, accepted much of the Marxist social analysis, above all that of class struggle. The Chavistas had bitter first-hand experience of this and perfectly understood the Marxist notion of history. This allowed Chavismo to accept Marxism as the most useful tool in analysing capitalism. It did not blindly accept orthodox Marxism and rejected the Socialist models of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as both wrong and passé. The Marxism that Chavez embraced was of the questioning, critical variety, not the orthodoxy. He turned to Antonio Gramsci in understanding Marxism and to academics like Istvan Meszaros, who left his native Hungary and settled for a university career in Britain, and Latin American Marxist scholars. He was particularly attracted to Che Guevara who was critical of the bureaucratic Soviet model and addressed some of the problems in advancing to a Socialist society. Chavismo's emphasis on voluntary labour as a necessary condition for revolutionary practice is directly taken from Che. He shared the pre-Marxist dream that Marx had put at the heart of his vision of a classless society — from each according to his ability, to each

according to his needs. Some Marxist analysts have suggested that Chavez had the same distrust of the uber-Marxists that had prompted Karl Marx to once say that he was not a Marxist.

**Chavismo, while not a religious movement, is deeply influenced by Christianity.** It comes from Chavez's religiosity and his subversive interpretation of the Bible and Christianity. In a live broadcast in 2006, while celebrating the passing of legislation for community councils, he made an impassioned defence of his Christian faith through the Socialist optic: "Let us all live in true Christianity beyond the fanfare... let us be capable of loving one another. Let us declare war against hate, against the culture of death. Socialism is authentically Christian. Capitalism is authentically anti-Christian, capitalism is the devil. I have no doubt Socialism is the world's salvation. The true Christ doesn't show us any other way than the option for the poor, than to insist in the human Christ, Christ the man, Christ the rebel, Christ the anti-imperialist, Christ the Socialist, Christ the liberator: well the real Christ. It is the only Christ; there is no other. For me, Jesus is one of the greatest revolutionaries of our history. And Jesus, from the point of view of the confrontation between capitalism and Socialism, was the first Socialist of our era because Socialism is based precisely on the collective, on love, on equality, on justice. Capitalism is based on selfishness, on individualism, and from there arises ambition, hate... Bolivar lived in Christianity... Bolivar also carried his cross and was crucified over there in Santa Marta." Religious symbolism at times came into Chavez's discourse and, on one occasion at least, it came to the world's attention when, speaking at the United Nations General Assembly a day after George Bush's speech in 2006, he famously said, "The Devil came here yesterday. The place still smells of sulphur."

Venezuela is a profoundly Christian country though the Catholic Church lost its political influence long before the Chavez era. The doctrine of Liberation Theology was a powerful idea in neighbouring Brazil with the Christian bases. In Colombia, one of the earliest guerrillas was Father Camilo Torres Restrepo, who died in his first combat and who, in his earlier avatar as a priest and an academic, had tried to reconcile Marxism and Catholicism. Father Torres coined the famous quote, "If Jesus were alive today, he would be a guerrilla". For Chavismo, achieving a just and equal society is the

kingdom of heaven on Earth. Its deep religious leanings have not prevented a bitter and ongoing conflict with the Venezuelan Catholic Church hierarchy. The Catholic Church has been a mortal foe of Chavez and Chavismo just as it as an institution opposed Bolivar and the independence movements. It actively participated in the 2002 coup. A small minority of parish priests and some senior Catholic figures have sided with the revolution but the overwhelming majority would not even pray for Chavez after his death. Chavismo has had better relations with the Protestants and the evangelical sects who tend to work in the barrios and whose constituents are mostly the poor.

**Chavismo is a class identity, a new political culture.** Its support base is strongest among the poor, diminishing as it moves up the social ladder. The “popular classes”, a Venezuelan expression to indicate the poor, the working class and the lower and middle class, overwhelming vote for the Chavista option in elections. A little more than half the population sees itself as being Chavista; this is “hard Chavismo” the academic pundits speak of. Not everyone in the other half is actively against the revolution and, in local elections, there are occasions when “Chavista lites” vote for the opposition to express their rejection of a local candidate or as a way of sending a signal of their discontent to the national government. Politics in Venezuela is polarised but no much the voters who move between Chavismo and the united opposition bloc. For most times, support for Chavez was at least around 60% in the elections, though his victory margins were the smallest in his first and last elections. Even on these occasions, he polled more than 55% of the votes, which would be considered a landslide in other countries but was spun in the western media as crumbling support for the Bolivarian movement pointing to its demise, which somehow never seems to happen.

Chavismo is a reaction on the part of the poor and people of modest means, often of colour as well, to the brazen class and racial discrimination of the wealthier Venezuelans, something they have always had to face. The Spanish conquest left a white upper crust that never intermarried with the black or Indian population. They kept the best jobs and managed the most powerful businesses, top university positions and television slots for their caste. They openly proclaim the superiority of Europe and the United States and the

inferiority of their own people. They could barely conceal their racial scorn for Chavez. Things got out of hand at an opposition presentation before the former U.S. Secretary of State, Colin Powell, when the Venezuelans compared their President to a monkey. While Chavistas referred to their leader as "mi comandante" (my commander), many opposition supporters twisted it to "mico mandante" (the ape commander). A common caricature of Chavez portrayed him as an ape, highlighting his Negroid features, a fate that befell other black Chavista leaders. Upper class Venezuelans paid notional homage to Bolivar but celebrated the Spanish conquest. It was common to have Columbus' statues in the public parks till radical Chavistas started taking them down. The revolution gave the ordinary people pride in their diversity and in their humble and mixed origins. The upper classes responded with a series of racial and class insults. The Chavistas were denigrated for being poor; they were shown as brutish and uncivilised and mocked for supposedly being unintelligent. Their poverty was blamed on their "laziness" and lack of brains while the rich whitewashed their often ill-gotten wealth with the myth of having achieved it through hard work and intelligence. In short, they gave themselves a monopoly of virtues while damning the poor. They lived, and live, in segregated and gated communities. Their most common contacts with the poor are the maids, the gardeners and drivers who work for them and who they pay poorly and treat even worse. As crime became pervasive from the 1980's, they began to see the masses as threatening and mindlessly violent who were out to get their money and their women. They armed themselves against the poor mestizos and the black population.

They find it intolerable that these gardeners, maids and drivers live well, that their children are given computers at state schools or that they have assured access to subsidised food. At times, swallowing their pride, they send out the very same maids and drivers to get them the things they need from the same shops while roundly cursing the government. They feel the pain of having to travel in the economy class of international flights while very black Chavista functionaries sit in the comfort of the business class. They cannot bear that the poor are flocking to elite auditoriums for operas and classical music which was exclusively for them in the past and that too without having to pay the high admission

charges. In the past, being seen at such concerts was a sign of status and an opportunity for social networking. The daily suffering that comes from the loss of power and status has turned the Venezuelan upper classes into implacable enemies of the revolution and relentless crusaders in taking down the government in any way possible. This has even forced them to simulate empathy for the poor in the hope they can win them over to their side. They accuse the Chavistas of engaging in class war but they are the ones who have the sharpest notions of class privileges. They transmit this yearning for the illusory good old days, forming new generations of hardcore anti-Chavistas.

The poor see their reality differently. They saw in Chavez someone who was like them and a leader who would not betray their interests. The revolution has given them rights they did not have before: it protects them from the heavy-handed security forces and the police; it is an insurance against racial discrimination. They can enter shopping malls, discotheques and nightclubs without being ejected by the bouncers and, if they are denied entry, can turn to the state to take their side. They are more likely to take pride in their country's achievements in the Chavez era and not run it down before foreigners to curry sympathy. Whereas the rich see the social benefits as the sign of a client state that buys the votes of the poor, the latter see it as a vindication of their long-denied rights. Venezuela is a strange country, says the noted Colombian writer William Ospina, one in which the rich protest and the poor celebrate. Another famous writer, the Uruguayan Eduardo Galeano, noted from his conversations with ordinary Venezuelans that they stick with Chavismo because it is their best guarantee against becoming invisible again.

**Chavismo did not appear fully formed.** Like any social phenomenon, it has changed at different moments in time. It emerged in the barracks of the Venezuelan army with Chavez and his co-conspirators. There were other disaffected soldiers thinking on similar lines who were not in touch with Chavez but they neither had his capability nor his brilliance. The first attempts at developing a coherent alternative to the existing regime were secretive. "We had little schools, but these were schools and work, especially at weekends, at dawn. It was then that, after much discussion, the Bolivarian-Robinsonian-Zamoran thinking emerged, the Simon

Bolivar National Project (known as the 'Blue Book') which later became the Alternative Bolivarian Agenda and later in the revolutionary project which is now in good part encapsulated in the Constitution," Chavez remembered of those days. The latest entrant in the Leftist ideological universe appeared in its first edition as a project of national sovereignty and social inclusion. It did not openly call for a Socialist state or a Socialist economy but there was enough for everyone to see that it could only become more radical if it did not surrender. The bourgeoisie did not realise it at first because they had thought Chavez could be seduced, bought or blackmailed to fall in line: after all, they had all the levers of power. When they understood that none of this would happen, they turned with a vengeance against him. Many on the Left were equally distrustful of this military officer and his radical talk. They feared he was a dictator in the making, talking populism to gain popular support. But most of them were won over after the failed coup of April 2002 while others were already finding his charms irresistible. Among them was a woman intelligence officer who had been tracking him from his obscure start and warning her handlers that they were dealing with an extraordinary individual not seen before in the country. She was told she was exaggerating. On April 14, 2002, when she heard Chavez speak of reconciliation after his return to the presidential palace with the defeat of the old order, she broke down and confessed to herself that she had indeed gone over to the side of the enemy and become a Chavez supporter.

At first, Chavez emphasised Venezuelan pride, social inclusion and moderate economic and administrative changes. He reached out to the adversarial classes and the media. Even the U.S. ambassador in Caracas at that time thought his country could work with the new President who was listening to the western countries that have conferred upon themselves the grand title of "the international community". Chavez was briefly enamoured with Tony Blair's idea of the Third Way, a social and economic model distinct to capitalism and socialism. The opposition helped him realise it would be impossible to peacefully co-exist with them. The coup and the petroleum strike of 2002 radicalised Chavismo. The missions were born and the emphasis shifted to social justice. The petroleum money now belonged to the people and the missions were a way of making it happen. The emphasis on national sovereignty turned towards anti-imperialism. The United States was the obvious

enemy. Chavez scrambled to strike friendships throughout the globe, from the Chinese and the Russians to Iran and the Arabs, to counter the hegemony. The Bolivarian foreign policy was born at around this time.

But it still was not a self-confessed Socialist Revolution. Fed up with the bureaucracy and corruption, even among his own people, and with the existing structure, Chavez started talking in private about declaring Socialism as his goal. There was opposition to it from within his own ranks. They feared it would give their enemies a great opportunity and alienate them from the frightened people. Their concerns were not misplaced though not completely correct. The only election that Chavez lost was a constitutional reform referendum in 2007, which the opposition successfully spun as an assault on private property. The opposition, that had gone into deep decline after Chavez won the presidential elections of 2006 with a record margin, revived with its victory and gained a great deal of the political space it had ceded to Chavismo. But Chavez had fought the 2006 elections with the call for Socialism underlined in his political manifesto. A year earlier, at Mar del Plata in Argentina, Chavez and the host President, Nestor Kirchner, had thwarted U.S. attempts to impose a free trade treaty on the continent. The Venezuelan President, in company of football great Diego Maradona, told a huge cheering crowd that there was no Third Way: it was either Socialism or neo-liberal capitalism. That frightened some of his advisors but did not make him less popular. A big part of the Venezuelan population has been won over by the arguments for Socialism while even the opponents now dare not openly advocate capitalism. A few speak of "popular capitalism" but they have little popular support and opposition leaders now have to invent new categories like "progressive-ness" while never clarifying what it means or answering the obvious contradictions in this argument.

**Chavismo defines itself as an eco-Socialist movement.** That seems a tall order given that the country lives off petroleum and that it has plans to exploit the vast reserves of gold and other minerals in its territory. It remains a throwaway, wasteful society where little is recycled and conspicuous consumption is the norm. It is almost completely addicted to cars because petroleum is as good as free and the country has a very limited railway system.

But at least in policy pronouncements, it takes the science and the threat of global warming seriously. Hundreds of thousands of hectares have been greened through Mission Tree; the state funds the care and preservation of threatened species and acts against the trade in wildlife. Environmental concerns are now being addressed in tourism and waste disposal. In 2012, Chavez put environmental concerns as a strategic objective of his next period of government, which Nicolas Maduro has ratified. It seeks to “construct and push a productive eco-socialist economic model based on a harmonious relationship between man and nature that guarantees the rational, optimum and sustainable use and application of natural resources, respecting the processes and cycles of Nature” and work towards the “formation of a great world movement to limit the causes and mend the effects of climate change that happens as a consequence of the predatory capitalist model”. The national plan commits itself to respecting the Kyoto treaty and to designing programmes keeping with the “ethical, Bolivarian and eco-Socialist ethic”. It is against the carbon emission trade market and wants to keep tabs on the cost of losses and damages from climate change so that it can be added to the ecological debt of the industrialised nations. Venezuela has been inviting international environmental groups for conferences and promising them a say from its platform in international climate change conferences and treaties. It looks to relive the dramatic moments of the 2009 Copenhagen climate change conference when Chavez and Evo Morales met environmental demonstrators outside the venue of the summit despite the Danish police threatening them and brought the voices of the protesters outside to the conference hall, arguing that climate change could be tackled only if the existing economic system was changed. From Evo, Chavez took the idea of ‘Pachamama’ or Mother Earth and the notion that we better address climate change seriously because the planet will survive without humans but humans cannot survive without the planet.

**Chavismo has declared itself to be feminist.** Chavismo emerged in the military barracks, among men, but when it took to Civvy Street after 1994, it found that its most loyal backers were women. Women played a key role in defeating the coup in 2002 and resisting the petroleum strike. Women form the majority of active community council members. The revolution has challenged



the inherent machismo of Venezuelan society. While Venezuelan women, as in most other countries of the continent, are not sexually repressed, they do not enjoy equal status. The beauty industry that took root in the country turned many women into living mannequins, "one with a bulging bosom and cantilevered buttocks, a wasp waist and long legs, a fiberglass fantasy, Venezuelan style". This came about on a large scale in the 1970's and 1980's when the local beauty industry improved its manufacturing skills to turn out international beauties. The Miss Universe television shows were mega media events and a useful distraction from the economic crisis. The culture has seeped down to the poorer strata. Chavez spoke out against the "monstrosity" of barrio women saving up for a cosmetic surgery, or getting into debt, while their families did not have money for the essentials. Every day, women face biased male attitudes internalised by some women: "if she is a successful professional she is treated as a "dominant personality" who could not accept the interference of a partner in her life; if she occupies a public office considered masculine or is physically strong she could be a homosexual... Whatever indicator of aptitude in a woman is carefully and exhaustively scrutinised to find deviance from what is deemed 'normal'".

The patriarchy is being strongly challenged from above and below, within institutions and through popular organisation. The Constitution recognises domestic work as productive economy and radical laws have been passed that outlaw all forms of discrimination, among them 19 forms of violence against women, including psychological. A number of national institutions have been set up to attend to women's needs. A women's ministry has been created, as also a women's bank that provide low-interest loans to women's cooperatives. Maternity leave has been increased and paternity leave recognised. There has been an upsurge in women's participation in the workforce, including in the military since 2000. Now about a quarter of graduates from the military academies are women, who serve on the frontline along with their male colleagues. Many of the civilian militia are also women. Helping the women approach parity with men in matters of rights was Chavez's political campaign in their favour. He described capitalism as machismo in action. "The pains of the world are larger for women... and larger for women of the popular classes, of the

poorer classes... If Christ carried a cross, how many crosses do the poor women of this earth carry every single day, every night... but at the same time they have so much to contribute... That's why I say that a real revolutionary, a Socialist, must be truly feminist, because the liberation of the people is achieved through the liberation of women, the grasping of machismo, and that's a cultural thing."

Women have done well in the state institutions but their numbers dwindle in the higher leadership of the ruling PSUV. President Maduro has proposed that the party work towards achieving gender parity in selecting its National Assembly candidates. The absence of a list system in Venezuela has stopped more women from getting leadership positions in public life but concern for this comes low down in the political system. Parity in selection lists is a necessary but not a sufficient step in achieving equal rights on the ground. Even with this weakness, Chavismo has brought many more women into politics and high offices, moved to tackling gender violence and campaigned among its male support base to accept gender equality.

**Chavismo is easier to define it by what it is not.** It is not state capitalism, populist, messianic, totalitarian, highly centralised, dogmatic or a one-party system. Staying true to its unorthodox and irreverent history, the Socialist experiment in Venezuela has an extra gene: 21<sup>st</sup> century Socialism. Chavismo would not define a priori what future Socialism would look like. Chavez himself said the Venezuelans would collectively define it but, of one thing, there was no doubt: it was a rejection of the neo-liberal doctrine. One of the key beliefs of neo-liberalism is that the state gets smaller when it comes to providing social services and instead concentrates on building up the security apparatus so that the status quo can sleep peacefully. The state plays a key role in Chavismo's economic development model. All social classes that live off their labour are welcome to the big tent, not just the classic proletarians. Bolivarian Socialism promises to live in democracy, participate in multi-party elections, tolerate the hostile private media and allow pluralism in its own ranks. It still seeks to dominate the strategic productive sectors of the economy but without intrusive state control over every branch of the economy. It has strong links with the armed forces, and many of its senior figures come from the military rank.

It is a peaceful but not an unarmed revolution. Unlike the earlier Communist orthodoxy, the Venezuelan Socialist model does not predict the end society. Unlike its predecessors, it is not marked by dense ideological rants, incomprehensible to the people. Instead, it speaks abundantly of morals and spirituality. Chavez argued that if the revolution lost its spiritual moorings, if its leaders became power-hungry and if the people became selfish and materialistic, it would be impossible to sustain the Bolivarian movement. It can be disputed how far the leaders of Chavismo practise what they preach but at least in discourse and policy, the movement lays great emphasis on honesty, simplicity and personal morals.

**Chavismo's organised shape is the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV).** It is the largest Latin American party with millions of members. The figure of seven million plus is mentioned but many of the members must be inactive because in some major elections the party receives fewer votes than its membership. The PSUV dominates the Venezuelan political landscape and is Chavismo's bridge to the communities. It has a fairly recent history and was constructed only in 2007. Before that, Chavismo's political wing was the Fifth Republic Movement (MVR), a loose coalition of individuals and groups that Chavez had created in 1994 after his release from prison. The MVR lacked cohesion and was given to infighting and leadership intrigues. It was little more than an efficient electoral party. Soon after his landslide victory in the presidential elections of 2006, on December 15, Chavez announced he was setting up a new consolidated party and asked the allied parties to dissolve their parties and join it. The PSUV was a vital tool for 21<sup>st</sup> century Socialism, he told his supporters and his allies, and there was little point in having more than one party if they were agreed on continuing with the revolution. The Chavista bases supported the idea; the MVR was too conventional, too much like the parties of the Fourth Republic for their liking and they wanted a more cohesive, transparent and democratic party that would listen to the base and be driven by it. Chavez promised the PSUV would be set up through a democratic exercise in a national conference. Some of the allies were unwilling to dissolve their parties and Chavez had angry words for them. "You will disappear," he told them, "If (the PSUV) had left you alone, there would never have been a revolution here! Never!" When his allies, principally

the Venezuelan Communist Party, said they would not join the project because it was not strictly Marxist-Leninist, he said, "In the end, the leaders simply never recognised and will never recognise my leadership. They have other projects: Chavismo without Chavez". The war of words subsequently died down but the relation between the PSUV and its allies who form the Great Patriotic Pole (GPP) has ever since been marked by tension, unease and low-level conflict that come to the surface during elections other than for the presidential one, when the allies support the PSUV.

In 2007, about 11,000 party "promoters" throughout the country started registering members for the PSUV. They did not have to start from scratch. Hundreds of thousands were already organised in Bolivarian circles and local electoral units and an overwhelming majority signed up for the new party, as did many members, legislators and important leaders of the other parties. After the initial registration, "Socialist battalions" of roughly 200 members each were formed with their own spokespeople. The spokespersons joined together in "Socialist conscriptions" and elected delegates for the foundational congress, a delegate each from roughly seven to twelve battalions. Early in 2008, the delegates selected the candidates for the party leadership and the ideological and political goals and in March that year the party acquired a formal structure. The socialist battalions have now become Bolivar Chavez Battle Units (UBCh) of between 40 and 80 members each. There are more than 13,000 units all over the country and something like half a million active members working every day in the communities. The first big test for the PSUV after Chavez's death was the party congress of July 2014. The opposition had thought that without Chavez, the revolution and the party would disintegrate and its leaders would start fighting among themselves. The opposite has happened. The opposition has been weakened by infighting among its leaders. Chavez kept them together; without him the glue that held the opposition together has come unstuck. Despite these advances, the PSUV has struggled in changing from a party very good at winning elections to one that changes state and society "from below". Nevertheless, it remains the engine of the Venezuelan revolution. It registers a popular support at around 45% most times while even the biggest among the other allied parties enjoy one or two percent support nationally.

**Is Chavismo a personality cult?** At first glance, it is hard to say it is not. Chavez's name is constantly invoked; his pictures adorn the walls of public buildings; people tattoo his trademark signature on their bodies; the graphic design of the "eyes of Chavez" stares down from many state buildings or tee shirts and baseball caps that the Chavistas wear. He has not been embalmed but his coffin lies at the tastefully decorated "Mountain Barracks" overlooking the city, from where he had directed the failed uprising in 1992. It draws large numbers of believers every day, for whom visiting his coffin is a pilgrimage. The moment of his death at 4:25 p.m. is observed with ritualistic canon fire every day. Much of this outpouring of affection, however, is certainly not stage-managed. People have Chavez posters in their homes and wear Chavez tee shirts from their own will. The glorification comes from the people rather than being pushed from above. There is a chapel of "Saint Chavez" just outside the official resting place. But it is managed by a lady who sells coffee, a staunch Chavista, who has nothing to do with the state. Visitors to this impromptu shrine do not particularly take it seriously but still linger at the place. The adulation of Chavez principally comes from them. No one is forced to participate in honouring his memory and no one is punished for not doing so. Large numbers of Venezuelans are openly critical of Chavez. The private media and websites that scorned him, and still do, have not been shut down. A personality cult cannot tolerate diverse opinions and has to be imposed by the state with threat or terror. That is certainly not the case in Venezuela. If there is a personality cult, it is like the one that surrounded Gandhi or Mandela. Many westerners are uncomfortable with the public display of affection for political leaders. For them, it is a sign of institutional weakness. In their austere model of politics, the leaders are managers whose legitimacy comes from the office they hold and who evoke obedience or respect but not love. The Latin American culture is not inhibited by such concerns. It is a love that dares to have a name and moreover proclaims it openly: Chavismo.



## CHAPTER XII

### **'WHATEVER IT IS, I'M AGAINST IT'**

Neither Chavez nor Chavismo is universally popular in Venezuela. The Bolivarians have the support of the majority but a significant part of the population votes against them. The late President had a consistent vote of at least 55% in his 14 years in office. That came down to a shade over 50% in the first presidential elections in 2014 without Chavez. While millions vote for the opposition, far fewer of them march on the streets against the government, even less so when the opposition enters one of its periodic fits of violence. It is not particularly united or coherent. But for all its weaknesses, it is very much a part of the Venezuelan political landscape with powerful international and local backers who will stick with it to defeat the Socialist project. The Venezuelan opposition is a beast born out of class struggle, locked in a mortal fight to the finish with its Socialist enemies.

**The opposition has an inverted pyramid of support among the social classes.** Among the very wealthy Venezuelans, and there are many of them, hardly anyone identifies with Chavismo. They are still known locally as the *mantuanos*, the class that benefited from Spanish rule. They are also the whitest part of the Venezuelan population and trace with pride their ancestry to the Spanish conquistadors. They are usually owners of large commercial business houses, banks and financial services, fancy hotels, restaurants and trading agencies. A big part of their income is stashed away abroad. This predates the revolution: Venezuela always had a risk to its economy and this class has distributed its riches in banks around the world. They have second homes in Europe, the United States and in Dutch colony of Aruba a few miles off the Venezuelan coast. They still live in luxurious mansions and residences and drive around in very expensive cars on the rear windows of which they scrawl their antipathy to the government with desperate cries like, 'This regime is starving us to death'. Their children study abroad in elite institutions and return to manage their family business or settle abroad. A mark of high distinction among the Caracas elite is their children's ability to speak French. Several times a year, they travel with their families to expensive western destinations for their holidays. In their own country, they

do not like to venture beyond their gated communities, and certainly not on foot or public transport. They like speaking to foreigners in their exaggerated American accents, complaining of the terrible regime they have to put up with, but unlike most Americans cannot manage without their maids, drivers and bodyguards. They are known as *sifrinós* (snobs) or '*piti-Yankees*'. The latter is a Puerto Rican term that has come to stay in Venezuela. The population of the U.S. colony of Puerto Rico is divided in almost equal halves: one that accepts and tries to imitate the Americans and the other sullenly putting up with it. Possibly the world's longest-serving political prisoner is a 71-year-old Puerto Rican, Oscar Lopez Rivera, imprisoned on the mainland since 1981 with a prison sentence of 70 years. Pro-independence Puerto Ricans call their fellow countrymen who accept U.S. rule '*piti-Yankees*' or little Yankees, '*piti*' being a corrupted version in Spanish of the French *petit*. It describes a kind of person who desperately wants to resemble a Yankee but cannot, however hard he or she tries. There are plenty of such adornments in the Venezuelan opposition.

The Venezuelan upper class is neither cohesive nor monolithic. It resembles more an archipelago than a solid mass. It has not lost its wealth in the new order although it can no longer live off petroleum dollars as easily as in the past. With the control of the oil industry passing to the revolution in 2002-03, they have devised a more indirect way of laying their hands on official dollars. They set up import agencies that receive dollars at very cheap rates and sell their goods, and often the dollars, at grossly inflated prices or simply move the dollars abroad through unofficial channels. As the revolution plugs this loophole, they are in serious danger of having to cancel at least one family holiday abroad a year. While enjoying most of their material privileges, they chafe at the loss of political control to the lower class "brutes", the "marginals". It provokes in them uncontrolled class and race hate and turns them into relentless, pitiless and cunning class fighters battling to recuperate their glory years. Their racism finds public expression in twitter messages and in newspaper cartoons where Chavez is shown leaving a trail of bananas behind or black soldiers turning into pigs. Numerically they are insignificant but they exercise an influence disproportionate to their numbers over the people they employ or on the middle classes who look up to them, try to imitate them and to be accepted by them.



Whereas in the past, they would have treated the middle classes with disdain, they now have to mask their feelings and feign sympathy for the poor Venezuelans under Chavismo and the lack of opportunity for the aspirational middle classes. An opposition analyst neatly captures this class and race arrogance of the upper class Venezuelans, saying how they see the Chavistas as "less civilized, less educated, oppressed, and in need of guidance or assistance from a more advanced agent. When analyzing the opposition's discourse, it becomes evident that the opposition constructs its idea of Chavistas... not conscious enough to be able to discern between good and evil, thus supporting Chavismo as a result of mere ignorance. The opposition conceives Chavismo, especially those seen as half-child, as handicapped in a very general sense. This perception is heavily shaped by the experience of the upper-middle class, Catholic, conservative opposition members... When demanding the other open his eyes, the opposition is actually asking them to put on *their* lenses, and experience the world *through them*. They fail to take seriously the idea of a Chavismo rooted in legitimate ideological claims, that are understood by its followers, and that include, but go beyond, purely material motivations."

Identification with the opposition is strong among the professionals and owners and managers of small and medium-sized businesses. Their sympathy for the revolution has dwindled even as they have prospered under it. Among the professionals the doctors are in the vanguard against the revolution. They see the public health system as a threat to their private practice. Even as they work in state hospitals, they nudge their patients in the direction of the private clinics where they hold a second job. They are frightened of losing their power as thousands of new doctors from the poorer families are inducted into the public health system and they positively froth at the mouth against the Cuban doctors working in the poor neighbourhoods. Like them, the cultural artistes feel threatened by the new social experiment as the Bolivarian revolution has questioned the show biz culture, television soaps and beauty contests and is trying to create alternative forms of popular culture. Lower down this order are the state schoolteachers and government employees, many of whom are antagonistic to the revolution. Their wages and conditions have improved drastically

during the revolution and so have their rights but this has not translated into recognition that they have prospered under Chavismo. The recruitment of almost all public employees in the pre-Chavez years was done as an act of political favour. Those who got their jobs had to vote for the party that did them the favour. This practice is not uniquely Venezuelan; in fact, it is commonplace almost throughout the continent, where public posts are either auctioned or exchanged for favours from a local strongman. In return, the public employees expect to enrich themselves through corruption. Those who were recruited in public administration during the Fourth Republic have not given up their old loyalties and are resentful that the new state does not sanction corruption though it has certainly not died out.

Perhaps the very nature of the middle class makes them want to mark a distance from the poor and cosy up to the rich. In times of crisis, as during the Fourth Republic, they voted for Chavez when they found themselves sliding into poverty. Once this was reversed, the river returned to its original course. They, like middle classes everywhere, fit the Uruguayan poet, Mario Benedetti's description in his 'Poem to the middle class':

The middle class  
half cultured  
half rich  
Between what they think they are and what they are  
a middle distance intercedes

From the middle  
they look half down  
at the blacks  
at the rich  
at the wise  
at the mad  
at the poor

If they listen to a Hitler  
they half like it  
and if a Che speaks  
half as well

Half enraged  
they lament  
(in half measures)  
being the half others gobble up  
who they cannot reach up  
to understand  
not even in half

While Chavismo is strongest in the barrios, the opposition is not without its votes there either, getting in its best moments about a quarter of the votes of the poor. They have little everyday presence in the barrios but nevertheless gain votes not only from there but also from new urban centres that have been built for the poorest Venezuelans. Sometimes, these are protest votes if the communities have not been given what they were promised or if they have a particularly domineering local Chavista leader they dislike. The Venezuelan barrios are also mixed localities where the lower middle class live because they cannot afford the astronomical sums for apartments in middle class zones or know that they will not be welcome there. Among the middle class population of the barrios are people who own small businesses and think that they will lose their private property with the Socialist project. Some copy the political behaviour of the classes they see above them, hoping that by publicly disowning Chavismo they will be accepted into the class just above them. The barrios are also home to a criminal class, some of whom are sympathetic to Chavismo and others who at times receive payments from the opposition when it periodically lapses into violence. In the border regions with Colombia, where smuggling is widespread, lucrative and an easier option than daily work, thousands of poor people have been drawn into this trade and have become opposition voters. The opposition does well in elections in the poor neighbourhoods with a high Colombian population. There are at millions of Colombian migrants in Venezuela, some fleeing the violence in their country and others looking for better economic opportunities. They were given citizenship rights by the revolution. In the past, they were denied even identity papers and lived a semi-clandestine existence, always vulnerable to police extortion and exploitation at work. They form the bulk of the informal street traders. They enjoy equal rights and facilities with other Venezuelans now but vote heavily against Chavismo for reasons the Chavistas cannot fathom. In all social

classes, there are honest hardworking and decent opposition supporters but it is also true that the most ardent among them are often those who have lost either their privileges in the new order or find that they cannot live off corruption or crime as they did in the past. Their protest, either through votes or in street action, is in defence of privilege. Quite often, they seem to be singing the Groucho Marx song:

I don't know what they have to say  
It makes no difference anyway  
Whatever it is, I'm against it!  
No matter what it is  
Or who commenced it  
I'm against it!

A leaked U.S. embassy diplomatic cable of October 2009, quoting an informant who had spent 20 years working in the slums for the Catholic charity, Caritas, sought to explain the lack of opposition presence in the barrios. Their informant recognised that "the standard of living of Venezuela's poor had increased noticeably over the course of Chavez's presidency as a result of the social missions, new laws on pensions and women, vouchers for community work, and free registration at schools... The revolution has given people in the barrios a sense of dignity and a knowledge that they have rights... much as in a long marriage, people continued to be committed to him (*Chavez*) despite the problems... many feared that the opposition, still under the leadership of the pre-Chavez political establishment, might roll back the progress they have experienced under Chavez...the opposition has practically no presence in the barrios...The opposition's failure to acknowledge the improvements that have taken place for the poor during Chavez's government will hinder its efforts to garner support in these areas."

**National and international media and human rights groups prop up the opposition.** Almost every major private newspaper is against the Bolivarian government in various degrees as are the radio and television stations with the largest audience shares. Venezuelan media watchers estimate that as much as 80% of the hundreds of newspapers in the country have an editorial line that is opposed to the revolution and the government and the

disproportionate numbers are worse in the radio and television industry. Among the three major national dailies, *El Universal*, *El Nacional* and *Ultimas Noticias*, the first two are self-declared opponents of the “regime” while *Ultimas Noticias* is less strident in its tone but not without its bias. There are many more national and regional dailies and radio and television stations equally hostile to the government. *El Universal* and *Ultimas Noticias* have recently changed ownership. A New York-based Venezuelan owned the former while a branch of the Capriles clan that threw up the opposition leader and presidential candidate, Henrique Capriles Radonski, controlled the latter. Foreign financial interests now own both newspapers. *El Nacional* is a case apart. A family-owned newspaper, it was renowned during the years of the Fourth Republic for holding the government to account and for its journalistic excellence. It changed course when ownership passed from father to son. After the death of the venerable old editor, it became ferociously anti-Chavista in its coverage. Its current owner, Miguel Henrique Otero, and his wife met the U.S. ambassador in 2010, complaining of “economic asphyxiation” of his newspaper and that of *El Universal* and saying the paper was at the “end of the financial rope”. He then asked the ambassador if the U.S. government could find financiers to help his newspaper and, if that failed, if it would be willing to provide direct financial help. The ambassador noted in the diplomatic cable that his country had not taken that step even in the Pinochet years in Chile in the 1980s. Venezuelan observers point out that the newspaper keeps going though with very few advertisements and it has been accused, not by the government but by a rival opposition paper, of exaggerating its sales figures to sell newsprint in the black market.

While the newspapers and television stations use every trick in the book, from false stories to spreading rumours on a daily basis, their campaign becomes even shriller when the opposition unleashes violence against Chavismo, as it did during the 2002 coup. The private television station, *Venevision*, owned by one of the continent’s richest men, Gustavo Cisneros, went a step further during the coup attempt, inviting the U.S. ambassador and opposition leaders to monitor it from the safety of his television station’s premises. In 2004, he met the U.S. ambassador who described him as a man of strong opinions. “That said, when he cites the position or opinion of a Latin American or European leader

by name, odds are good that he has actually heard it directly from the leader's own mouth." Cisnero asked the Americans to "prepare for a more confrontational, long-term approach to Hugo Chavez... to develop a coherent regional containment policy; and the USG (*U.S. government*) should engage more broadly in Latin America... There is no political opposition at present. It is completely atomized. USG short-term internal policy should focus on the independent press. Among the newspapers, only "El Nacional" and "El Universal" are reliable opposition supporters... The USG should be clear and precise in its criticism of Chavez. Internal opposition and regional governments need to know that they are not tackling Chavez alone..."

In the years after the failed coup, another private television station, Globovision, owned by a banker who fled with his clients' money to the United States, became the opposition's television station of choice. Globovision kept up a non-stop campaign against the government with a mix of falsehoods and alarmist news coverage. In 2008, it allowed a commentator to say in one of its live programmes that Chavez would end up like Mussolini. In 2009, it passed a series of text messages on its screen that predicted a coup. "Activate the networks of information, possible coup... Alert for Friday in the early hours of the morning... We have to march and not abandon the street, happen what may, and we must overthrow the tyrant once and for all. Despite setbacks, move forward with urgency... Whoever announces the coup, don't worry about Chavez, he is now safe with Gaddafi... 100 anti-gas masks and 300 persons to implement the resistance-withdrawal-exchange-resistance plan to do battle with the dictatorship." When the government warned it would initiate criminal proceedings against the station, the U.S. embassy cable admitted, "Globovision is clearly playing with fire by broadcasting incendiary messages, which undermine its credibility and legitimacy and risk giving Chavez a stronger and more compelling excuse for shutting it down". Globovision remained the opposition's principal platform till it changed ownership. It was so significant to the opposition that one of its leaders admitted that their "political presence stretches only as far as people can watch Globovision". Often overlooked but not without influence are the principal radio stations that play a key part in mobilising the votes in the barrios.

The Venezuelan media houses and international news agencies and media groups feed off one another. The international press picks up reports that are critical of the government, whatever their merit, and amplify these outside the borders. Sometimes, if the lie is outlandish, the foreign media first promote it and is then picked up by the national media as a news item. Of all the countless cases of international media manipulation, the BBC has to take the podium with this gem of a heading a week before the April 14, 2014 presidential elections: 'Maduro puts curse on rival voters'. The story claimed "Maduro has put a curse on citizens who do not vote for him in next week's elections". The "curse", it turns out, was Maduro telling the voters, "If anyone among the people votes against Nicolas Maduro, he is voting against himself, and the curse of Maracapana is falling on him". He was referring to a 16th Century battle when Spanish colonial fighters defeated indigenous fighters decisively. The curse he was speaking of was what befell the indigenous fighters who sided with the conquistadors. They were killed one by one by the Spanish and the Indian population was decimated. "If the bourgeoisie win," Maduro had said, "they are going to privatise health and education, they are going to take land from the Indians, the curse of Maracapana would come on you". It would be obvious to just about anyone that to say that Maduro had "put a curse" on anyone was twisting his words. But the needs of propaganda, or the aversion towards the Bolivarians, got the better of the BBC. Within the country, the Chavistas have developed alternative media and forms of communication that puts out their version of events. Internationally, they are hopelessly outnumbered. The revolution has had to fight the heavy artillery of international media campaign with feather dusters. The focus of the media orchestra is spreading neurosis among the Venezuelans. They do it by conjuring up a false reality in which everything in the country is falling apart and by ignoring the many achievements of the revolution. Their international colleagues discredit the revolution abroad so that public opinion turns towards a military intervention against a tyrannical regime. If it is not a conscious strategy, it is certainly the outcome. The media campaigns have been extremely successful in turning a significant part of the national population, many of them from the poorer classes, into unquestioning anti-Chavistas and a vote bank for the opposition. It has turned vast numbers of Latin Americans against the Venezuelan revolution, making them see it just as big capital had

intended and has contained the threat of a good example from infecting other countries. It has failed to diplomatically isolate Venezuela but it makes it difficult for most countries to defend it openly. They have to befriend it in private because of the oil riches, making sure that this does not spill over into the public domain. The image of Venezuela in flames and teetering on the brink of anarchy passes from the media discourse and becomes cause célèbre for international human rights groups like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Of them, HRW with its revolving door policy with the U.S. establishment is less effective in passing off its criticisms of Venezuela as being objective or impartial. Two Nobel peace prize winners and more than 100 academics asked HRW in a 2014 letter that it “bar those who have crafted or executed U.S. foreign policy from serving as HRW staff, advisors or board members — or, at a bare minimum, mandate lengthy “cooling-off” periods before and after any associate moves between HRW and the foreign-policy divisions of the U.S. government... Miguel Díaz, the ex-CIA analyst... exploited the eight years of experience and relationships he accumulated within HRW's advisory committee for his [subsequent role](#) as the U.S. State Department's “interlocutor between the intelligence community and non-government experts”... Javier Solana, currently a member of HRW's board of directors, served as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's Secretary General during its 1999 military campaign in Yugoslavia”. They countered the HRW's stance in 2012 against Venezuela getting a seat on the U.N. Human Rights Council because it did not respect the rights of its citizens with the suggestion that it do the same for the U.S. government with its long list of unprovoked wars of aggressions, secret extraditions and extra-judicial killings.

Amnesty International has not been as shrill as its U.S. counterpart but it certainly seems to suffer from the same mindset of employing former American officials to serve in the organisation. Suzanne Nossel headed Amnesty's U.S. chapter for a year and became the head of PEN American Center that promotes “free expression” and works to “advance literature”. Chris Hedges, who was The New York Times correspondent in the Middle East for 15 years till he left it on the issue of Iraq war, argued that Nossel's “relentless championing of preemptive war — which under



international law is illegal — as a State Department official along with her callous disregard for Israeli mistreatment of the Palestinians and her refusal as a government official to denounce the use of torture and use of extra-judicial killings, makes her utterly unfit to lead any human rights organization, especially one that has global concerns". In 2003, Amnesty International's Canadian Pacific region chapter pulled out the documentary, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, which had exposed the coup attempt a year ago, from an Amnesty International human rights film festival arguing that it would add to the polarisation in Venezuela and affect its staff there. But it had no such concern when in 2011 it put out an "urgent action" statement that described Globovision as "the only TV station whose license has not been revoked in recent years because of its editorial line". It could be described either as a howler or a crude lie. There are many TV stations in Venezuela that defy the government in ways that would lead to their closure in any Western country. When the opposition embarked on a particularly violent campaign in 2014, Amnesty termed the arrest of a mayor in one of the most troubled cities who had incited trouble as "setting the scene for a witch hunt against opposition leaders". Western citizens in the Andean town of Merida, which too experienced widespread violence, reacted with disbelief, saying they could hear gunshots ringing out from the streets where the opposition radicals had taken control even as they were reading Amnesty International's statement and asked it to check its facts. Traditional Western human rights organisations find it difficult to accept that there can be situations in which the state is not the principal violator of human rights and that non-state actors like armed groups can equally violate the right to life and liberty, as it happened in Venezuela in 2013 and 2014 when the opposition fighters took to the streets and the state responded with extraordinary patience.

**The Catholic Church is the opposition's spiritual godfather.**

That would seem like a big contradiction when the revolution's prime mover was a devout Catholic and the revolution proudly acknowledges Jesus Christ as one of its inspirational figures. Sharing a spiritual ancestry might have made the Church if not sympathetic, at least curious about the new government's preferential option for the poor. Instead, the Church hierarchy reacted with open hostility. Christ was neither Socialist nor

capitalist, they argued; he lived before all that happened. In this duelling gospels, as the U.S. embassy called them, a particularly anti-Chavista Bishop argued that Jesus "did not come to install, promote, support, or justify any political system...Jesus was not a political leader. Jesus was not a socialist. Jesus cannot be encapsulated by merely human categories, and even less so by political categories". The same Bishop, Baltazar Porras, told the Americans that Chavez was a long-term problem and that the USA and the international community should do more to contain the President's "regional aspirations".

If the Bishops were reading the Bible, they were certainly not paying much attention to the parts that Chavez quoted, like that of rich men not having a VIP pass to enter heaven. The conflict between the Church and Chavez came out into the open from the very beginning of his government. In December 1999, when the state of Vargas, close to Caracas, was devastated by a landslide in which tens of thousands died, Cardinal Jose Ignacio Velasco, the highest-ranking Venezuelan priest, said in a reference to Chavez that it was the "wrath of God," because "the sin of pride is serious and nature itself reminds us that we don't have all the power or abilities." It was a rerun of the Archbishop of Caracas blaming Bolivar for the earthquake of 1812. In 2000, the Church sent Chavez a public letter saying God did not bless any of man's projects in any field, including politics, and that Chavez was mistaken in putting a Christian tint to his Bolivarian project. The President sent them a long reply in the "name of that human avalanche that took the irrevocable decision to the change the destiny of the Republic; in the name of those who fight for its moral restoration; in the name of the excluded and the exploited of all hours; children of nobody and owners of nothing; in the name of the martyrs and those always forgotten; in the name of millions of men submerged in this pathetic, evident and undeserved squalor which oppresses their heart and crushes their soul... in the name of those who were forced to live from tragedy to tragedy... in the name of the forgotten people who catapulted me to the presidency with the powerful humility of their vote" that he had no intention of listening to them and nor would he change course or renege on his commitments to the people.

They Catholic Church accused him of twisting the faith to create a dictatorship. The Church supported the coup and the brief government that followed in 2002. The same Cardinal Velasco signed the 'Carmona decree' in support of the Pedro the Brief at the presidential palace after Chavez had been taken prisoner. As the coup began to fail, Velasco and another Bishop went to the island where Chavez was being held prisoner to make him sign his resignation so as to legitimise the coup in its final failing moments. When Velasco died the year after the coup, the police had to fire rubber bullets at demonstrators who set off celebratory fireworks and lined up the funeral route shouting, "Justice has been done, the rats bury their rat!" In October 2005, Cardinal Rosalio Castillo Lara met opposition representatives and was later quoted as saying that Venezuelans should "deny recognition" to the "ill-fated and dangerous" Chavez government and that they should organise civil disobedience against it. The papal representative in Venezuela had to clarify that his statements did not reflect the Catholic Church's position in Venezuela. The Venezuelan Church ignored and defied the Vatican edict of not interfering in domestic politics with the encouragement of the George W. Bush presidency. Pope John Paul II had admitted that Archbishop Velasco was perhaps too close to the coup plotters and a U.S. diplomatic cable noted that "the continued activism of the Venezuelan clergy in the face of the pope's caution does not surprise us". Compared to the Venezuelan Catholic Church, the Vatican with Pope Francis now looks positively Marxist Leninist. A joke doing the round among Chavez supporters is that the President is having a busy after life, having ousted a Right-wing Pope with a radical Latin American.

The troubled relationship between the Vatican, the Catholic Church and Chavez hit even choppiest waters in 2007 when Pope Benedict XVI visited Brazil. The U.S. ambassador in Caracas asked the Church if they could get the Pope to have a brief halt in Venezuela or at least a refuelling stop so that His Holiness could be influenced to speak out against the government but the Venezuelan Church representatives thought they would not be able to arrange it. What they had not foreseen was that Chavez would launch the first attack. In Brazil, the Pope defended the evangelisation of the indigenous people, claiming that Christianity had not been imposed on them. "How can the Pope say that the evangelisation was not imposed... Then why did our indigenous people have to flee to the

jungles and the mountains?" Chavez asked. "What happened here was much worse than the holocaust in the Second World War, and no one can deny us that reality... Not even his Holiness can come here to our land and deny the holocaust of the indigenous people," he said in a nationally televised broadcast and quoted the legendary Spanish Dominican priest Bartolome de Las Casas who had denounced and recorded the crimes against the indigenous people in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. "Christ came to America much later," said Chavez, "He didn't arrive with Columbus, the anti-Christ came with Columbus," and asked the Pope to apologise: "... as a descendant of those martyr Indians that died by the millions, I ask, with all respect, your Holiness, apologise, because here there was a real genocide".

In 2007, the Church played a big role in inflicting the only electoral defeat on Chavez when his proposal for constitutional reforms was narrowly rejected in a referendum. Chavez's said the Church attitude was among the reasons that it was in decline in the country. That year, an Opposition student leader, Nixon Moreno, sought asylum at the Apostolic Nunciature (embassy) in Caracas after he was charged with leading an armed rebellion in the Andean university town of Merida. A policewoman who went to arrest him accused him of trying to rape her. Moreno was one of those perennial students, having spent 12 years in the university, no doubt made easier by the fact that he did not have to pay for it because the government picks up the tabs. The government refused him safe passage after the Vatican gave him asylum. Inside the diplomatic enclave, priests held communion for him and the rector of the university where Moreno had studied personally handed over his degree. He fled the embassy in 2009 for Peru. In 2010, Cardinal Jorge Urosa Savino, told a radio station in Rome that Chavez was leading the country towards a "Marxist-Communist dictatorship" based on the foreign Soviet model and accused the President of having a "violent, exclusive totalitarian tendency". The country's Supreme Court had to step in, telling the Church authorities that they were free to practise religion but ought to "separate what could be called a spiritual, religious act of faith, from that which represents a foreign and unjustified interference in political affairs".

Hostilities have not ended with Chavez's death. In 2014, the opposition unleashed months of violence demanding that an elected government resign and effectively hand over power to the street demonstrators. In April that year, Monsignor Diego Padron, head of Venezuela's conference of Bishops said the government was promoting "a totalitarian-style system" and that it wanted to "solve the crisis by force". In the Monsignor's view the government's national development plan for 2013-19 was the "principal cause" of protests in Venezuela. The dispute between the Church and Chavismo might not be just over other worldly interpretations. In 1999, a high-ranking representative of the Episcopal conference said the government had decided to cut its traditional subsidies to the Church by up to 80%. The Church was assured of direct government subsidies in an agreement with the Vatican in the 1960's. In the final years of the Fourth Republic, Caritas, the Catholic relief agency, administered half the government's social spending. Catholic education received, and still receives, huge subsidies from the government. The difference now is that while the Church takes the money it does not want to stop its anti-government ideological education in its schools. The Church was also upset that the new government had shut it out of military pomp and ceremony and was courting the non-Catholic Churches known as Evangelicals in Venezuela who commanded the loyalty of nine percent of the population. Some of them, the embassy noted, "have plugged into Chavez's coffers and his social message, at times reflecting an anti-USG bias". In their meetings with the U.S. ambassador, the Catholic Bishops asked the embassy to involve itself more with the Church programmes in the barrios and of their wish to "to enhance its ties with the USG, as well as with American firms and the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops". The ambassador had to remind Cardinal Urosa that his embassy avoided publicising such efforts at the Church's request and the Cardinal thanked him for his discretion. The Church publicly supports the opposition when it is doing well and even more when it is on the back foot and shamed before public opinion. It is for this Chavez called the high priests of the Venezuelan Catholic Church devils in cassocks. The Church is in decline and has lost much of its political influence and religious hold on the population, although its conservative views on abortion and homosexuality have resonance with the public. Neither is it fully united in its anti-Chavismo. There are Bishops and parish priests

who defy its political line but they are a small minority. Internationally, however, the Church serves as a potent propaganda piece against Venezuela.

**The opposition is a love child of the United States.** It remains dependant on money, advice and political instructions from USAID, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI), a NED creation. The opposition leaders, whether moderates or radicals, regularly visit the Caracas embassy and are known to seek funds. They have cordial relations with U.S. Senators and Congressmen hostile to the revolution. They have never opposed any U.S. measure against Venezuela. Agencies like USAID, the IRI, the ultra-conservative Freedom House and the trade union AFL-CIO have worked to destabilise the government in which the opposition has been a willing partner. A 2005 diplomatic cable from Caracas mentioned that the IRI and the NDI were working to "facilitate the renovation/transformation of Venezuela's political parties... working with (primarily) opposition parties to help them focus on their survival as relevant political institutions through a process of party renovation and strengthening". The NDI offered its help to the Democratic Action party as it was deemed to have the largest opposition network though it was in touch with PJ for "possible collaboration on modern techniques of message development and diffusion". Eva Golinger unravelled in her book, *The Chavez Code*, the extent and pattern of U.S. aid to the opposition using Freedom of Information requests. Golinger says in her book that \$100 million was channelled to undermine the Chavez government between 2002 and 2010. Washington set up the Office of Transition Initiatives soon after the April coup in 2002 till the beginning of 2011 when it was exposed as violating Venezuelan sovereignty and law that prohibits foreign funding of political groups. The Obama administration has continued with the funding through USAID and NED. In May 2010, FRIDE Institute, a Spanish think tank, disclosed that international agencies were injecting between \$40-50 million to keep the Venezuelan opposition movement going. Part of the funding comes from European foundations in Spain and Germany. The investment in ousting the Bolivarian government was outsourced in keeping with the Bush administration's priorities. The private intelligence group, Stratfor (Strategic Forecasting Inc.), with its reputation as a

"private CIA", coached the Venezuelan opposition on how to make use of issues like power cuts, crime and freedom of expression. The firm worked at uniting opposition parties and strengthening student groups so as to repeat its successes in Eastern Europe in toppling governments by creating a wave of protests against them. Stratfor thought Chavez would be an easy target. "Chavez is nothing compared to going against the old Soviet regimes," reads one of its emails made public by Wikileaks. Since it is legally impossible to transfer all this money through legal channels, there are suspicions that much of it comes as cash in diplomatic pouches and through Colombia across the porous borders and changed on the black market for dollars inside the country.

Just as opposition to the Bolivarian revolution is not limited to political parties, U.S. funding extends to social groups of every possible variety: civil society organisations or NGOs, electoral groups, leadership development programmes, media organisations, indigenous communities and youth and student movements who have replaced the traditional parties on the streets. The U.S. embassy outlined its strategy in a 2006 diplomatic cable: "1) Strengthening Democratic Institutions, 2) Penetrating Chavez' Political Base, 3) Dividing Chavismo, 4) Protecting Vital US business, and 5) Isolating Chavez internationally". Another diplomatic cable of that year summed up the overall strategy:

"Simply stated, we are supporting and strengthening a wide range of democratic institutions... civil society NGOs, grass roots political participatory organizations, U.S. democracy-building institutions, and local organizations providing basic social services at the community level. Support for these organizations helps keep alive endangered democratic institutions, but also: plants the seeds for stronger institutions in the future; provides an alternative to Chavez's divisive message; reaches out to sympathetic chavistas; connects with the counterdrug community; engages the private sector and other financial players; lays an infrastructure for other governments to work in; gets our message into the Chavez base communities; and projects the U.S. in a positive light."

In 2005, when an opposition leader asked the United States to build political institutions and civil society in the country, the Ambassador said the embassy was "considering sponsoring English language classes, bringing back the Peace Corps (in the event of GOV approval), and establishing libraries, especially in poor areas". In a later cable, the ambassador asked for more funding for scholarships aimed at high school students for English-language courses. The Venezuela NED page lists some of the programmes and budgets. The Youth and the Future of the Country programme has an outlay of \$58,000 for "the creation of a new generation of political leaders with a deeper understanding of democratic values in Venezuela...The program will focus on the fundamental concepts of political theory, constitutional democracy and its development in Venezuela, and tools for political action". The Fostering Entrepreneurship in Defense of Democracy and Free Markets programme had a budget of \$149,413 to "promote the values of democracy and free market initiative; and reinforce the importance of defending basic democratic rights and free enterprise". Another programme, Assessing Media's Contribution to Democracy in Venezuela, was given \$53,000 to investigate "how media outlets provide coverage of electoral processes, identifying their relative strengths and weaknesses and developing a series of recommendations for each one. It will also coordinate a series of training activities for journalists and roundtable discussions with editors to help them understand the role that they can play in defending democratic institutions and processes." A larger budget of \$295,000 was reserved for the Improved Training and Communication Skills for Political Activists project that would "support Venezuelan political activists apply new technologies to effectively organize, mobilize, and communicate with citizens".

The U.S. embassy in Caracas has been unwilling to invest all its money in the notoriously fractious opposition parties. A diplomatic cable of 2005 mentioned how the "primary importance will be the mobilization and engagement of reformist forces (e.g. young leaders, women, civil society) so that necessary change does indeed occur despite the reluctance of some party leaders... Embassy strategy is to strengthen democratic institutions, penetrate and divide Chavismo, and build independent society. It is working. With additional AID, military engagement, and public



diplomacy funding, we could be even more proactive in promoting U.S. interests and values. The figures are not large. We get good value for little investment of resources in Venezuela". In 2004, USAID and Freedom House signed an agreement so that the latter would increase the "capacity of Venezuelan human rights defenders to document and report on the human rights situation in Venezuela. Another diplomatic cable mentioned how "Freedom House - through the workshops and visits to organizations around the country - has developed important relationships with many HR organizations, both in Caracas and the interior." In 2006, the embassy sought to engage the Venezuelan armed forces through "Minute Man Funds" obtained from Florida for "fostering cooperation with state and local police forces, firefighters, and first responders". Cash flow of this volume into Venezuela ensures that the opposition movement will not disappear so long as the western governments maintain their generosity.

**The opposition opts for violence whenever possible and elections when it cannot.** It is not the State Department alone that directs the opposition. The more radical wing gets its patronage from wealthy Venezuelans in the United States, mainly in Miami, who push them towards more direct, immediate and violent actions against the government. The U.S. political establishment is either unable or unwilling to control the Miami radicals and the dual sponsorship of the Venezuelan opposition saddles it with a permanently disjointed strategy. On at least five occasions between 2000 and 2014, the opposition tried to oust the government through force. The first two attempts were in 2002-03 during the coup and the petroleum strike when it combined street demonstrations and violent confrontations demanding that a democratically elected government step down. It then developed a tactic called *guarimba* or violent street demonstrations in 2004 in which groups of young men burnt tyres and blocked roads with garbage or anything else they could lay their hands on and then dispersed when the police came. At times, they attacked the riot police and any Chavista they could lay their hands on with improvised homemade weapons. The first *guarimbas* of 2004 were hit-and-run tactics that made life difficult for the Venezuelans going to work, school or hospital but created an image of Venezuela in flames. The opposition resorted to *guarimbas* in quick succession in 2013 and 2014 though these were far better planned and the

participants were armed with more sophisticated improvised weapons. They had clearly been trained outside Venezuela. More than 50 people died in these two *guarimbas* of 2013-14 with the collateral damage of those who not reach the hospitals. The country's intelligence service reported that large number of young men had been trained from as early as 2010 in Mexico. The code name for the programme was Mexican fiesta. None of the *guarimbas* did much damage to the government though it did affect the economy. If anything, these sporadic bouts of violence only discredited the opposition and allowed the Chavistas to reunite and win over many Venezuelans who were opposition sympathisers but needed to go to work or get their back children from school without having to face burning barricades, gunfire or teargas. When violence does not yield results, the opposition falls back on student movements and elections to recover from its losses. Radical students from private universities and from wealthy homes have been trained in the Gene Sharpe method of taking down governments hostile to the West through non-violent resistance while other young men and women have received paramilitary training at camps in the United States, Mexico, Colombia and El Salvador. The student and youth radicals of the opposition have been trained in the methods used by the Center for Applied Non Violent Action and Strategies (CANVAS), an organization that played a central role in toppling the Milosevic government in Serbia in 2000. "They are very impressive group of guys... When used properly, more powerful than an aircraft carrier battle group," a Stratfor email said of CANVAS.

The Venezuelan Constitution is the first in the world that gives the people the right to recall the President, as all other elected officials, half way through their terms if they can collect the signature of a fifth of the electorate for it. If in the recall referendum the signatories get a vote more than what the President had got when elected, he or she has to step down and fresh elections have to be called. The opposition used this provision against Chavez in 2004. When they lost, they cried fraud and refused to accept the result though they never provided any proof that votes had been stolen. In 2014, the Chavista presidential candidate, Nicolas Maduro, won by a whisker and his challenger, Capriles Radonski, denounced it as a stolen election, demanding that the votes be recounted and asking his supporters to take to the streets and give vent to their

fury. The result was days of *guarimba* and street violence in which 11 people died, among them two children who were run over by an opposition supporter's car. When a full vote recount was ordered, Capriles Radonski stayed away from the audit. In between, the opposition boycotted the 2005 parliamentary elections but participated in the 2010 parliamentary vote and won about 40% of the seats. Even when it participates in elections, it takes an ambiguous policy on whether it recognises the legitimacy of the election authority, the National Election Council, or the validity of the results.

Technically, it is impossible to rig elections in Venezuela. All voting and counting is electronic with fallback safeguards. Voters show their identity cards at the election centres and their names are checked at the electoral tables where all parties have their representatives. They then proceed to the voting machines where their fingers are scanned to see if it matches their record in the national fingerprint register. In case of a mismatch, the voting machine does not allow the voter to proceed. After pressing the voting button, the voter gets a printout from the machine that is deposited in a box. At the end of voting, the election commission members and representatives of the political parties do a random check of 54% of the voting boxes to see if the electronic tally matches the physical record. Once everyone is satisfied, they sign the papers and the tally is sent by satellite to the state election headquarters and then to the national headquarters. The army guards election centres but cannot enter the booth unless requested by the head of that centre. All incidents are recorded in an incident book. Together, this rules out any attempt at tampering with the voting. Curiously, the opposition wants to return to a manual system even though the country has nightmarish memories of how in the Fourth Republic that system was a sure recipe for electoral fraud. The Venezuelan system is so advanced that the former U.S. President Jimmy Carter said it was the best that the Carter Center had seen globally.

**Chavez was the glue that held the opposition together.** He was their great unifier. Their hate for him was personal; they detested him and their simple project was to get rid of him in any way possible. This allowed them to put up with electoral defeats and stay united. With his death, the opposition is struggling to stay

together. As local wits have commented, Chavez hammered the last nails in the opposition coffin from his tomb. There is not much that divides the opposition in terms of policy and vision. They all want to get rid of Chavismo and Socialism but differ how to go about it. They are divided even more by their personal ambitions and jockeying for pre-eminence among the parties. They have been cohabiting uneasily in a united block since 2002 but the umbrella under which they shelter from the Chavista downpour is decidedly leaky. The idea of a united opposition to confront Socialists in power was pioneered in Nicaragua in 1990 by the United States. The Nicaraguan model was imported into Venezuela in 2002 after the coup when the opposition decided to enter into negotiations with the government they had disowned days earlier and also to prepare for the petroleum strike at the end of the year. Their united front was called Democratic Coordination and it dissolved soon after the recall referendum when it refused to accept defeat. The opposition went into temporary decline. The next unity show was the Democratic Unity Table (MUD in its Spanish acronym) formed in 2008, this time to put up a joint slate for the national assembly elections. Its finest hour was the 2012 and 2013 elections when its candidate, Capriles, put up a creditable performance in Chavez's last electoral victory and came close to defeating Maduro a year later. The opposition could not keep up the momentum in two elections that followed for governors and mayors. The Chavistas regained their traditional vote share in both these elections. The MUD entered a crisis in 2014, a rare year without elections, with its leading managers resigning because of worse than normal infighting.

The problems in the opposition stem from two deep fractures. The traditional parties that dominated the Fourth Republic are dying slowly and in its place new and aggressive political parties are gaining ground. There is a fight unto death between those who want to get rid of the government here and now using street violence and others who share the goal but argue for a more patient approach using the electoral way. AD and Copei were the big beasts of the pre-Chavez years but their credibility was in deep decline even among their voters when Chavez came to power. The ruling class was looking to create a younger, more cohesive and more managerial party that could take the place of their traditional ones. Two new groupings emerged in the 1990s, Primero Justicia

(Justice First, PJ in its Spanish abbreviation) and Un Nuevo Tiempo (A New Era, UNT) that represented two ends of the spectrum. The PJ was a high society creation. Starting off initially as a civil society group with elite university students from the richest Caracas families and founded by a Supreme Court judge, it developed into a political party in the year 2000. Just after Chavez's victory in December 1998, Antonieta Mendoza de Lopez, senior executive in the state-owned petroleum monopoly PDVSA, whose son Leopoldo Lopez formed part of the PJ foundation, gifted it with a cheque of 60 million bolivars.

A society of young *sifrin*os, PJ was initially a greater Caracas phenomenon but has since spread to the provinces, or at least in the richer parts of provincial towns and cities after Capriles became the MUD's presidential candidate. Henrique Capriles, a Catholic who never fails to remind the world of his Jewish ancestry, was a political consultant's dream candidate. Young, white and good-looking, he was not burdened by the past. His grandfather got him a seat in the Congress in 1998 from Zulia on a Copei ticket but he refused to heed the party line almost as soon as he was elected and took an independent position. He was disciplined and cultivated a folksy image, though he had never done a day's labouring job in his life. He was mayor of the affluent east Caracas suburb of Baruta and spent a few days in jail for raiding the Cuban embassy during the 2002 coup. He was then elected governor of the state of Miranda that borders Caracas, a traditional stronghold of the opposition and prepared himself for the presidential race. Capriles' star has dimmed after two defeats and one attempt at an urban insurrection but he leaves the opposition with a big problem. Do they put him forward as their presidential face once again and, if not, who would be equally presentable with a political trajectory as a replacement candidate? At the moment, there is no one else.

Among the also-rans are Leopoldo Lopez and Maria Corina Machado, both from the heart of the richest families of Caracas, young, telegenic and political thespians, but with a penchant for misguided adventures. Lopez and Machado express the impatience of their class. They thought they had lived through to the end of Chavismo but when Maduro was elected in 2013, they refused to accept the reality of another six years of a Chavista government. They led a failed *guarimba* early in 2014 which they termed as The

Exit. It was *guarimba* by a fancy name but with much better equipment and trained street fighters, something that Venezuela had not experienced before. The Exit did not seem to lack funds and rich young Venezuelans took over streets in their neighbourhoods and turned them into war zones. Armed paramilitary mercenaries from Colombia manned many of the barricades in a handful of neighbourhoods in a limited number of municipalities. Forty-three people died in about a hundred days of urban insurgency and Lopez was arrested while Machado, co-author and international ambassador for the *guarimba*, was banned from travelling abroad and faces charges while in liberty. Capriles did not join the *guarimba* but neither did he condemn it at first. When he realised it was dying out, he started criticising the whole enterprise and then the other two. Lopez's party, Voluntad Popular (Popular Will, VP) and Machado who have fringe support in the MUD, are pushing the opposition to taking a more radical position. Capriles' party, PJ, is meanwhile trying to gobble up smaller opposition parties or split them and become the dominant force in the MUD or whatever succeeds it. The traditional parties, AD and Copei, might no longer be politically powerful but they still have a strong vote bank that draws on old family loyalties. A split in the opposition pushes them away from any real possibility of unseating the Chavistas but neither the Americans nor the Venezuelan bourgeoisie have found a way of imposing brotherly love in the circus.

Leaked diplomatic cables paint the anguish and frustration the Americans felt at the inability of the opposition in unseating Chavez, especially after the defeat of the recall referendum of 2004, the dissolution of Democratic Coordination and the boycott of the national assembly elections in 2005. "The most common trait among opposition supporters is an inability to look past recent setbacks," the embassy complained in one such cable. It quoted an opposition leader as saying that nearly 90 percent of the country opposed communism, but when he was asked why the opposition did not try to turn public opinion against oil loans to Cuba, he provided the excuse that Venezuela's former enthusiasm for democracy had dissipated into unprecedented apathy. "No serious interparty dialog about opposition unity is occurring yet," the Americans concluded, "Most opposition members are too focused on feeling sorry for themselves to plan for the future". In 2005,

when the opposition boycotted national assembly elections, the embassy admitted that the "opposition parties' lack of unity and a coherent grand strategy contributed to their pullout. Rather than planning the withdrawal, they merely reacted to events out of their control... Although many party leaders favoured participation, they caved to a surge of grassroots criticism after Accion Democratica (*Democratic Action*) pulled out... The grassroots view appears to have been based on an assumption that the voting process was not secret. In sum, the opposition pullout, like most opposition decisions, appears to have been both uncoordinated and unplanned". Four years later the embassy was complaining in 2009 that "their party structures remain top-heavy and media-focused with little grassroots reach... opposition parties are only talking about coordinating better among themselves and are instead beset by in-fighting... opposition parties continue to react to the Venezuelan president's political agenda rather than creating and communicating their own". It quoted a local electoral expert as saying "it was extremely difficult for opposition parties, which cross the ideological spectrum, to find consensus on even basic policy issues... while they are adept at eloquently attacking Chavez's legal transgressions and governance failings, they have not constructed a coherent message that will attract votes outside of the opposition's current narrow base".

The embassy was equally dismissive of the "opposition's leadership dinosaurs". It had an unflattering portrait of Leopoldo Lopez in a 1999 cable, describing him as a "divisive figure". "He is often described as arrogant, vindictive, and power-hungry – but party officials also concede his enduring popularity, charisma, and talent as an organizer... for the opposition parties, Lopez draws ire second only to Chavez, joking that 'the only difference between the two is that Lopez is a lot better looking". It quoted a PJ leader asking Lopez not to "continue dividing us, we should not go through life like crashing cars, fighting with the whole world". A third cable said that "the absence of the more popular younger generation of opposition leaders almost certainly will feed speculation that all is not well within the parties, and that disgruntled figures like Leopoldo Lopez may be preparing to launch their own self-serving "movement" at the expense of whatever cohesion the current opposition parties are able to achieve." The embassy was scathing about the Democratic Action leader, Ramos Allup, a wily political

operator who unfortunately has the looks and the mannerisms of a stand-up comedian who has accidentally strayed into politics. In a cable it titled, 'AD, a hopeless case' the embassy said:

"Accion Democratica's main problem has a name: Henry Ramos Allup. Accion Democratica (AD) secretary general Ramos Allup is crude, abrasive, arrogant, and thin-skinned. His style is not unlike that of President Hugo Chavez... He tends to rest on his increasingly obsolete laurels as the head of the largest opposition party... Rather than court Venezuelan voters, Ramos Allup's principal political strategy has been to seek help from the international community". The cable outlined how Allup's party tried to seek "funds and favors from the Embassy. When refused by one Embassy official, they ask another. AD first vice president Victor Bolivar, who solicited funding from poloff (*political officer*), organized a meeting in December 2005... to make the same pitch. When polcouns (*political counsellor*) changed the subject, Bolivar and his fellow AD officials made the same long, detailed request in English in case poloff did not understand. Former AD National Assembly deputy Pedro Pablo Alcantara calls and visits the Embassy regularly with requests for visas, scholarships for friends, etc. He calls different sections of the Embassy if he does not receive what he requests... AD boasts card-carrying members who traditionally vote the AD ticket throughout the country. As such, however, it carries even more baggage. These voters are becoming the only ones on which the party can count. Barring a major reinvention, AD is well on its way to becoming a relic of the past".

The Americans seemed to have written off the other relic of the past, Copei, as an equally lost cause: "Now scrapping for funds, Copei is a network of friends and families whose politicians lack public support and whose political base has been gradually emigrating from Venezuela. Digging up discredited fossils... would hardly offer life support to a party that needs above all to shed its



"oligarchic" image, which Chavez so successfully exploits". They had a more positive view of PJ in several of its embassy cable, saying it was "one of the few parties with strategic goals, including that of distinguishing itself from its discredited fellow opposition parties... is probably the most pro-active opposition party... perhaps the only opposition party that has articulated to us a political strategy and has demonstrated an urgency to recreate its public image and message... it is one of the few to build alliances with other parties since the collapse of the Coordinadora Democratica (*Democratic Coordination*) after the October 2004 regional elections... is one of the only parties engaging in long-term planning". The party might be "the only party making a promising effort to distance itself--both by choosing its allies and by managing its image--from the pre-Chavez past, but the young professionals failed to generate much support from Venezuelans at the national level. PJ has always fancied itself as a "party of the future" and... faces a challenge, however, to shed its yuppie image and cast itself as an organization with popular roots. While it is strongest in Caracas only, and draws much of its strength from Venezuela's thin middle class, PJ... boasts several popular local and national-level politicians... the party stands to grow even more". Eva Golinger describes PJ as the most successful IRI project in Venezuela.

**The opposition has a deeply conservative project of capitalist restoration.** At times, it mimics Chavismo but once elections are over, they return to their old discourse aimed at their real support base, the wealthy Venezuelans. This was their main act in facing up to Chavez in the 2012 elections. It was so much simpler in the early years when elegantly dressed ladies and gentlemen of the opposition took to the street with the Stars and Stripes; when discontented military officers in their dazzling uniforms thundered they would soon get rid of the "Castro-Communist dictatorship"; when executives of the petroleum industry, show biz stars and leaders of the chambers of commerce were mobbed by their adoring supporters in the wealthy neighbourhoods of Caracas. But as the social missions took hold and public opinion came to accept Chavez's social policies, it became harder for them to say quite as openly that they would reverse free health, education, housing and food programmes. By then they had lost the capacity to overthrow the government by

force and could not win elections by alienating the formidable Chavista social base or insulting the "marginals". The only route to a political comeback was through "political triangulation", made famous by President Clinton's chief political advisor, Bill Morris. Political triangulation happens when a candidate robs some of the opponent's ideas and ideologically places himself or herself in solitary splendour, far above the squabbles at the base, like Zeus atop Mount Olympus. Clinton's political triangulation was in declaring the end to the era of big government, an act of faith in the U.S. Blue belt, a manoeuvre that fetched him Republican votes. The Venezuelan opposition, in its new avatar, announced in 2012 that it was no longer hostile to Chavez's social missions and that it would address the concerns of the Chavista voters while giving out coded signals to their traditional voters that it was only a political ploy. They made contradictory promises to different constituencies, helped by the fact that the private media would not scrutinise them and by avoiding debates with the Chavistas.

In 2012, the opposition conglomerate, MUD, came up with a detailed plan of their government should they win. It was not the first; they had come up with a plan called National Consensus for the 2006 presidential elections. The document was not without its comic elements. It accused the government of militarising culture, to which the Chavistas responded that they had not yet seen the parachute regiment practising ballet. The programme was drafted by hundreds of experts but forgotten almost as soon as it was printed. Unlike the Chavistas who widely circulated and debated the National Plan that their President put forward, the opposition candidate hardly, if ever, mentioned his own plan in his campaign though he had signed up to it. There were reasons for him being evasive. It essentially dreamt of dismantling every brick of the revolution while making pious declarations like, "The great task of the new governmental leadership should be to hold high the idea of sense of belonging of all Venezuelans, without distinguishing parties, in the same country, the same political community... the coexistence of different, and even opposed, political position... in a common constitutional space dominated by the principle of pluralism". This was to create the impression that the opposition was trying to move away from political polarisation. But they were betrayed by some of the specifics in the document like the proposal to turn the petroleum company PDVSA to a strictly commercial

venture, reverting the Chavez-era policy of using petroleum profits for the missions and social investment. The opposition did not dare call for its privatisation, only its return to the old days of an autonomous existence as a state within a state. Without the PDVSA resources going into special funds for the missions, it would be impossible to sustain them. The opposition candidate Capriles said he would not send another drop of petroleum to Cuba. If that were to happen, Cuba would withdraw its doctors and health system for the poor would immediately collapse. The Venezuelan opposition is fixated with Cuba. They have accused the Cubans of colonising Venezuela which would make it the first empire that is poorer than its colony. They have accused it of spying on Venezuelans through hidden cameras in energy efficient light bulbs or rigging elections through remote control from Havana. There are few takers for this absurdity even within the continental Right and can only be explained as an infection passed on from the Venezuelan Right in Miami where such sentiments run strong.

The opposition claimed it would free the state from the ideological indoctrination imposed by the Chavistas. Yet it proposed "incorporating in the primary and middle education system demonstrable themes on the connection between property, economic progress, political freedom and social development". Elsewhere it suggested the "preservation and guarantee of the right of private property, economic liberty and private initiative". It promised to return to its former owners all businesses that the government had taken over, among them large companies in the electrical, telecommunication, steel, cement, food and agricultural sectors. Many of these enterprises are profitable. Their privatisation would financially weaken the state and strengthen the power of big capital, which is what lies at the heart of opposition thinking. Its promise to return land to the former owners would spark an explosion in the countryside while privatising the large state-owned industries would lead to a general strike and violence in the cities. It promised to liberalise price controls which would drive large sections of the population into the poverty from which Chavez had taken them out. The opposition buys into the myths of free-market capitalism although in real life economy it failed badly in Venezuela, ruining the country and preparing the conditions for Chavez's victory. Common sense suggests that they would not have been able to enforce the shock doctrine in Venezuela without

a hefty dose of state terror. Who would administer it if the military as an institution refused to take up guns against the people?

There were moments when the Americans resigned themselves to the depressing thought that, "should he lack real opponents, Chavez would most likely invent his own". They need not have worried; even for him it would have been mission impossible. The opposition is far from being on the point of extinction. It has the support of millions but, more importantly, has the full backing of the United States that will never backtrack from its intent of destroying the Bolivarian revolution. In everyday terms, the opposition has developed organic forms of political activism and a mass psychology, in which anti-Chavistas know their part without having to be prompted by anyone. There are those who take to the streets peacefully and know when to give way to the hooded men of violence. The bulk of the opposition supporters might not take to the streets every day but on election day they make use of family networks to mobilise votes. They argue their case with anyone who is willing to listen to them and, if they work in a state institution, know how deliberately to sabotage its work. If they cannot resist buying food from state shops, they take care to put it in the bag of a private supermarket to hide it from their neighbours. Sometimes they are infantile, like when they hold the national flag upside down to show their opposition to the revolution, and at other times cross all lines, calling for western military intervention in Venezuela, holding up placards with messages like, 'Don't forget us, we too have oil'. They take out their frustrations on their Chavista neighbours. While opposition supporters and Chavistas in the poorer barrios coexist for the most part in peace, government supporters have to conceal their identity in the more exclusive zones where being outed as a Chavista results in threats and damage to their property. Even opposition supporters who question such extreme methods are insulted with the same intensity. Venezuela is a country where each half of the population lives in a parallel world without any sign of convergence.

## CHAPTER XIII

### **CRIME, DRUGS, PRISONS**

In the split-screen reporting on Venezuela, the narrative on one side is so dark that it seems like an earthly version of Dante's inferno: a country overrun by crime; armed gangs sowing terror on the streets; citizens cowering in fear; nightmarish prisons; a regime involved with the drugs trade; people unable to buy food; empty shop shelves and a high-inflation dysfunctional economy. On the ground, there is indeed high crime, overcrowded prisons, shortages of some but not all essential items, and not all the time, and high inflation. But there are no child beggars at traffic intersections or people scrounging for food; the airports are bustling; brand new shopping malls that have mushroomed in the last decade are crowded with buyers; overnight buses travel without armed escorts or in convoys and people queue up in the night to get into restaurants and discotheques. Like most other Latin American cities, Caracas is dangerous and full of street life, youth culture and music. International surveys consistently find Venezuelans to be among the happiest in the continent. Is this a schizophrenic country, or a victim of stereotypes?

Venezuela indeed has very high homicide rate that makes it one of the most dangerous countries in the most violent of continents. A Socialist country with a high murder rate is more than a contradiction; it is the worst possible advertisement for a superior social system. The other Socialist nation in the hemisphere, Cuba, has among the lowest crime rates. The Left-wing government of Nicaragua has made the country among the least violent in Central America. The anomaly has not gone unnoticed. The international and national media hostile to the revolution have been quick to pick up on this. The Spanish newspaper *El Pais* captured the style of international reporting: "Caracas is a bloody city. Rivers of blood flow from its buildings; rivers of blood flow from its mountains; rivers of blood flow from its houses." In a despatch headlined, *Venezuela, More Deadly Than Iraq, Wonders Why*, The New York Times reported how "Some here joke that they might be safer if they lived in Baghdad. The numbers bear them out". It is not known if any of the NYT's sources actually left for a new life in Baghdad. At the peak of the crime wave, Venezuelan newspapers

and private television stations regularly had their reporters outside the main morgue in Caracas counting the bodies that were brought in, whether that of murders, suicides, road accidents or from unaccounted causes, and getting interviews out of grieving relatives which were then given ample coverage. The media conflates homicide with crime. If criminality is to include white collar crimes like selling dollars in the black market, hoarding and profiteering, Venezuela indeed suffers from a plague. These are white collar crimes which the more affluent classes engage in; the crime that the private media speaks of is violent crimes in which the perpetrators, like their victims, are mostly the poor. And there are no newspaper headlines to celebrate those rare days when there are no murders in Caracas.

The official murder rate at the end of 2013 in Venezuela was 39 per 100,000 population against the global average of 6.2 and 23.4 in Latin America, which accounted for 8% of the world population but 31% of the murders worldwide. Brazil alone contributes to one of every ten murders on the planet. Academics and private observatories in Venezuela, with clear animosity towards the government, put the number as high as 79 per 100,000 for the same year, arguing that the state hides the true scale of the problem while denying that their own figures are based on inaccurate projections or that they are influenced by their western funders to develop a biased discourse. They also forget to mention that the most violent state in the country, Miranda, is ruled by the opposition or that homicide rates increased when the opposition was in power in the states bordering Colombia. The crime wave did not break on Venezuelan shores with the arrival of Chavez. It was already the seventh most violent country in the world just before he came to power. A French security journal *Raids* had this report on Caracas in 1996: "With an average of 80 people shot dead each weekend, violence on public transport a daily occurrence, poverty growing exponentially and an economic crisis that has been gnawing away at the country for over 15 years – inflation is at more than 1,000% – Caracas has become one of the most dangerous cities in the world, perhaps the most dangerous." While it is true that the murder rate was two and half times higher in 2010 than in 1998 when Chavez was first elected, there are indications that it is starting to stabilise and decline.

Political point-scoring aside, violent crime has been the principal cause of concern for the population. Perhaps as a result of crime prevention measures, concerns about the economy's direction replaced worries over crime in the opinion surveys of 2014. The disparity between the actual levels of victimisation and perceptions of crime is the highest in Venezuela among the Latin American countries. About 30% of Venezuelans say crime is the principal problem in the country without having been victims. While crime numbers, homicide excluded, decreased from 2007 onwards, the perception worsened, rising from 8% in 2003 to 61% in 2011. Fewer Venezuelans are falling prey to crime compared to only a few years ago, but the fear shows no sign of abating: 61% of the population puts crime as the most important problem; 67% believe the country is more insecure than ever and 91% believe it has become worse. This is not the view of just the wealthier Venezuelans who have retreated into their fortified gated communities but also those of the barrios where almost half the residents dread insecurity, second only to Guatemala in the league of fear. The poor neighbourhoods are the principal theatres of this violence with more than 80% of the murders being committed there, 70% of which happen between nightfall and dawn. Less than 4% of the victims are from the wealthiest social classes.

Unlike the domestic opposition and the international media, the majority of Venezuelans, while afraid of crime, do not put all the blame on their President or the government. Even in the peak years of homicide rates, when the population was pessimistic, and even perhaps fatalistic about it, more than 50% of respondents in opinion surveys said the problem was beyond the President's control and less than 30% thought a different President could resolve the issue. Only 7% blamed the murder epidemic on an ineffective government. Neither did they blame the police, drugs intake nor the lack of effective sanctions in any great numbers. Instead, they blamed it on the breakdown of families, lack of education and unemployment. Far from the simplistic, politically driven discourse of the international media and its Venezuelan counterpart that put the blame on Chavez, the ordinary citizens were perhaps better able to grasp what was happening to their country.

Old-school Venezuelan criminologists spoke of a time when the country was a peaceful place and when violence a small problem confined mostly to the rural zones. The "small rural problem" was large landowners and cattle ranchers assassinating peasants demanding land or asking for better conditions. As the peasants were far from the metropolitan centre and even further down in the class hierarchy, the elites were not overtly bothered. It is true, of course, that Venezuela was far from being the violent country it is now. The murder rates between the 1960's and 1980's varied between 8 and 10 per 100,000 population. An influential Venezuelan criminologist, Mendoza Troconis, described the crimes of that time as a "primitive, crude, violent; characteristic of a race in formation, of a new people. Venezuela does not meet the specific characteristics of civilised countries. The blood crimes are committed unthinkingly, in the presence of witnesses, at a party, in a dispute linked to arguments... almost all are the result of alcohol abuse, of mental disorders produced by syphilis or extreme poverty... when a mysterious event happens or a specialised theft happens with appropriate instruments, the ordinary citizen generally thinks that the crime is not by a Venezuelan".

The unprecedented population shift from the villages to precarious urban slums with the discovery and industrialisation of petroleum prepared the ground for organised crime to strike roots. The "devil's excrement" was also the detonator of the crime wave from the 1980's. The displaced population was cramped into makeshift slums they built for themselves on hillsides in the cities, the rich having taken over the valleys. In these barrios, they lost their once stable way of life, family connections and sometimes even their moral moorings. Most of them lacked stable, formal employment, surviving off temporary jobs and at the mercy of the rich and the political operators. Men and women of the countryside adapted to their new professions as maids, drivers, gardeners, bodyguards and petty criminals. When the economy dipped from the 1980's, their existence became even more precarious. Their world began to resemble that of the English proletariat in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century which Friedrich Engels had sketched in his book, *Condition of the working class in England*: "Into every bed four, five, or six human beings are piled, as many as can be packed in, sick and well, young and old, drunk and sober, men and women, just as they come, indiscriminately. Then come strife, blows, wounds, or,



if these bedfellows agree, so much the worse; thefts are arranged... the social war, the war of each against all, is here openly declared... people regard each other only as useful objects; each exploits the other and the end of it all is that the stronger treads the weaker under foot... There is, therefore, no cause for surprise if the workers, treated as brutes, actually become such.... And, when the poverty of the proletariat is intensified to the point of actual lack of the barest necessities of life, to want and hunger, the temptation to disregard all social order does but gain power... Want leaves the working-man the choice between starving slowly, killing himself speedily, or taking what he needs where he finds it - in plain English, stealing." In the 1960's and 1970's there were more crimes against property in Venezuela than against the person: 71.44% of the reported crimes were against property and 18% against individuals. Kidnapping began to emerge as a new and lucrative trade in this decade. The majority of the reported cases were known as "express kidnapping", where the victim was allowed to go within hours if he or she paid up. The first kidnapping of a cattle rancher was reported in 1963 but by the 1980's kidnapping became more widespread in the cities and wealthy businessmen, executives and the ranchers were asked to pay enormous ransoms. An armed Left-wing guerrilla group kidnapped the legendary Argentinean and Real Madrid footballer, Alfredo Di Stefano, in Caracas in 1963 and freed him after three days when the group had managed to attract international attention to its demands.

The impoverished Venezuelans were not just living in an urban jungle mired in injustice and poverty, they were also living within touching distance of conspicuous consumption. In the same cities were the rich with their swagger, who seemed not to lack money and to whom laws did not seem to apply either. Venezuela became the most unequal society in Latin America. With the fall in petroleum prices in 1980's, the state reduced social spending which hit the poor the hardest. They were also victims of police brutality, an inhuman prison system and a corrupt judiciary. Young men who turned to arms and a life of crime preferred to go out guns blazing than die in the prison hell. The crime syndicates now had an unlimited supply of cheap hired hands. The festering social inequality and anger burst out into the open in 1989 during the Caracas uprising, etched in popular memory as "Caracazo", against the imposition of a neo-liberal economic package. This set off a

chain reaction of violence has lasted for more than a quarter of a century. The crisis that set in the 1970's, like a slow burning fuse, led to an increase in poverty, decrease in salaries and purchasing power and high electoral abstentions and protests. The social taboo on violence was broken by the state sending in soldiers into the barrios to shoot and kill the inhabitants at will during the Caracazo. Murder rates soared in the 1990's and, by 1993, it had shot up to more than 21 for 100,000 population. The legitimacy of the state collapsed and it retreated from the barrios, only occasionally sending in heavily armed policemen on punitive missions. As the government retreated, criminal gangs struck roots and became vengeful protectors of the barrios, protecting them from the police raids but also mercilessly punishing them if they did not follow their diktat.

The spark for the spiralling violence came from outside Venezuela's borders, from Colombia and the United States. The consumption of drugs soared in the United States after the end of the Vietnam War and Colombia became the main drug supplier for the traumatised Vietnam veterans and the new U.S. youth culture. Colombian drug lords like Pablo Escobar, with their lavish lifestyles, turned into legends throughout the continent, celebrated in music and television soaps. A whole culture developed around the narcotics trade, worshipping the drug lords as modern-day Robin Hoods, extolling the cult of death and extreme cruelty and grafting itself onto the existing Latin American macho culture. Arms flooded into Venezuela from Colombia, both into the poor neighbourhoods and in the gated communities of the wealthy who armed themselves against what they saw as the criminals, mainly Afro-Venezuelans, lurking outside their electric gates. No one quite knows the full extent of the illegal arms market in Venezuela and the estimates range from a million illegal guns in private hands to over nine million. It is estimated that, going by the current rate of gun seizures, it will be another 400 years before guns are taken off the streets. As crime became rampant, the affluent classes privatised their security. They now had private guards at home and offices and bulletproof cars for their families.

Latin America saw a rapid rise in the private security industry and the providers were often multinational companies based in the United States. In countries like Chile and Colombia, private

companies were allowed to build and manage prisons. Cities started to divide into zones, with the middle classes living in well-protected areas whereas the poorer areas were left to fend for themselves. Occasionally, the state went after the guns and the drugs in the barrios but the financiers of these crimes, those who bought and sold stolen goods and those at the top of the drug supply chain who lived in the affluent parts, were seldom touched. The middle class asked for an "iron fist" against crime and the politicians of the Right took up the cause in election time. They wanted the gangs to be either killed off or to be thrown into prisons, preferably forever. Debate and public acceptance of nuanced methods of crime prevention become impossible. Dissenters of the crackdown policy were dismissed as being soft on crime. Venezuelan prisons became large warehouses of mostly poor young black men. They were herded together indiscriminately and someone who was being tried for minor charges was put in the same cell as hardened murderers. Trials lasted years for the prisoners who could not afford private lawyers and prisons became schools of crime.

This was the legacy that Chavez inherited, something his critics who accused him of mismanagement, incompetence and being soft on crime conveniently forgot. At first, the revolution had more urgent matters to deal with like coups and petroleum strikes. It thought that the social programmes that dealt with poverty would by itself reduce crime and, in some areas, it did work. Theft and robbery rates diminished. From 1990-1999, there were 1,1163.2 crimes for 100,000 inhabitants but in 2000-2008 it had come down 954.3, still high but declining. The murder rates, however, did not and the key to it was in neighbouring Colombia where the United States reinforced the "war on drugs" with its Plan Colombia in 2000. More than a billion dollars were invested in equipment, training and technology for the police and military forces there to control the drug trade. It achieved results of sorts in that the narcotics trade was displaced to newer routes through the Caribbean islands. Venezuela became a transit route, caught between the world's largest producer of drugs and the largest consumer, the United States.

Drug money and gangs began heading towards Venezuela in this period of political instability when the Chavez government was

fighting for its life. Venezuela was no longer just a staging post for transshipment to the United States or Africa; it became a lucrative market for the Colombian gangs awash with money and guns. They recruited the marginalised youth in the barrios with cheap or free cocaine. Once they were hooked, the addicts attacked, robbed and killed people to pay for their drug habit. They turned into dealers and died in fights over the spoils. The gangs fought one another for control of territory. In the states bordering Colombia, where the opposition ruled, they offered life insurance for a fee (advisable) other than to members of the PSUV, the leaders of which were targeted. With the help of the corrupt local police, they took control of trade and small businesses in these states. They bought houses, set up front businesses and offered loans without collateral to impoverished communities. They soon took over the illegal betting, gambling and prostitution networks and taxi companies. As much as 70% of the murders in Venezuela are among the gang members. The situation worsened after the paramilitaries, originally set up by the Colombian military and the state to counter the guerrillas, were demobilised from 2003 during the presidency of Alvaro Uribe, a Harvard and Oxford educated lawyer. The eight years of Uribe's presidency were difficult ones for Venezuela. The heavily armed and well-trained paramilitaries were responsible for tens of thousands of deaths in Colombia and the displacement of about 10% of the rural population, the highest in the world prior to the Iraq war. Many of these internal refugees streamed into neighbouring Venezuela and with them came former paramilitary recruits, now organised in criminal gangs.

There were persistent allegations that Uribe was connected with the drugs trade and the paramilitaries. A 1991 U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency report published in 2004 had him as the 82<sup>nd</sup> name in the list of drug traffickers. It described him as a "close personal friend of Pablo Escobar... dedicated to collaboration with the Medellin [drug] cartel at high government levels". His father, the report said, was murdered "for his connection with the narcotic traffickers". The official version is that he had died resisting kidnapping at the hands of Leftist guerrillas in 1983. It is reported that the wounded father was transported in a helicopter provided by Escobar. As director of Civil Aviation, Alvaro Uribe reportedly issued pilots' licences to Escobar's many light aircraft flying cocaine to Florida. Escobar's former mistress, Virginia Vallejo, who had to

flee Colombia for the United States, mentioned Uribe senior as Colombia's "first drug trafficker" in her book, *Loving Pablo, Hating Escobar*. A Colombian television station reported of the 1997 seizure by the U.S. Drugs Enforcement Agency (DEA) of 50,000 kg of potassium permanganate, a chemical used in cocaine production, on a ship in San Francisco. The cargo, enough to produce cocaine with \$15 billion in street value, was bound for a company headed by Uribe's former campaign manager at that time who was also his chief of staff when Uribe was governor of the department of Antioquia. During Uribe's time, Antioquia's capital, Medellin, became the world's cocaine capital. Many of Uribe's closest advisers and family members, like his niece and her mother, were signalled for involvement in the drug trade. One of his brothers, Santiago, was investigated for founding and leading a paramilitary group while his cousin, Mario, was jailed for seven-and-a-half years for links to a paramilitary group. President Uribe became Washington's main man in the war on drugs and the United States ignored the intelligence report on him. His presidency was marked by the scandal of "false positives" in which unsuspecting rural youth were lured with promises of job and money, killed by the military, and then dressed up as guerrillas. The soldiers kept the bonus and enjoyed the vacations and promotions for meeting their quota of dead guerrillas. Uribe was a popular President and Colombians named him as the greatest Colombian in one opinion poll. He is also a self-confessed enemy of the Bolivarian revolution and once almost came to blows with Chavez at a meeting of Latin American heads of state in Mexico. In 2004, 150 Colombian paramilitaries were captured at a farmhouse on the edge of Caracas with Venezuelan military uniforms and weapons. Their mission, discovered by chance when Venezuelan soldiers became suspicious of one of them in a Venezuelan army uniform but with long hair, was to kill Chavez at the presidential palace and pass it off as a rebellion from within the military ranks. The men were lodged in a municipality and in a state ruled by the opposition and three overlapping circles of municipal and state police teams, all controlled by the opposition, protected their refuge. Alvaro Uribe was then Colombia's President.

The Colombians not only boosted crime in Venezuela but also transformed it. The methods of the Colombian criminal gangs were copied and brought to Venezuela. Kidnappings and robberies

became more violent, often ending in deaths. Contract killings, once relatively rare, became commonplace and the victims were executed with great cruelty. Drug consumption jumped from 0.04% in 2009 to 7.7% in 2011, years in which crime peaked and fuelled a criminal counter-culture. Anybody who was a nobody became somebody important in the barrios with motorcycles and girlfriends if he had guns and could boast of multiple murders. Homicide rates increased from 13 per 100,000 population in 1991 to 33 in 2000 and 50 a decade later. Facing them was an ill-trained and fragmented police force. There were as many as 135 separate police forces. Each state had its own force and many municipalities their own as well, often serving as nothing more than as bodyguards for the local mayor and his friends. They were poorly equipped by the cash-starved local governments and trained by former soldiers who knew of military methods but not preventative policing. The police were ill-paid and riddled with corruption. A former Interior Minister of the Chavez government estimated that the police were responsible in those years for 20% of all crimes. There was no effective external supervision of the forces, no common rules on their training and little communication among the forces.

Police reforms began in 2006 after the Chavez government had stabilised and once it became clear that there was no automatic correlation between reducing poverty and falling homicide rates. The immediate trigger for the reforms was an attempted kidnapping in which three boys of a wealthy Caracas family and their driver were killed in an incident in which active and retired police officers were involved. The National Commission for Police Reform (Conarepol), with academics, civil society groups and the federal, state and municipal governments cutting across the political divide were represented in it and consulted tens of thousands of ordinary citizens and 1,500 police officers and directors. It looked at the police structures at different levels and presented its report in 2007. The National Bolivarian Police (PNB) was set up in 2009 to regularise training, job conditions, rules and supervision. The new police force was initially deployed in Caracas and is being extended throughout the country. A new policing law was promulgated in 2008 and in 2009 internal and external supervision mechanisms were created. The pay and condition of policemen at all levels have been pegged at the same level and

have also been improved. The National Security University (UNES) was created in 2009 with a woman human rights activist as its first rector. It trains the new intakes in a more humanist doctrine where they are taught to be able to negotiate in community disputes and apply force in a progressive manner, using their weapons as a last resort. Community outreach is a big part of the new syllabus. The university's first location was an old and notorious prison where the inmates were regularly tortured. It has begun retraining policemen from the earlier periods. Many of these policemen are school dropouts, having been trained only in quasi-military methods and complain that the new human rights policies restrict their ability to control crime. UNES students who do degree and post-graduation courses are rewarded with pay rises. The university trains the Fire Brigade and the prison service staff as also the riot control contingents.

Learning their lessons from the idealistic phase, the new policing policies have not given up using militarised methods in dealing with murders, riots and drug gangs. Armed soldiers have been used in crime-prone zones to reinforce security and soldiers on motorcycles patrol neighbourhoods with high murder rates. The state has specialised snatch squads to get at the murder gangs. A CCTV camera network is being installed nationally and drones have been introduced for policing purposes. In parallel, the government talks to the gangs through emissaries, encouraging them to leave their life of crime behind in exchange for training and jobs. Some former gangs members have been sent to Cuba to become sports and cultural trainers. Others have taken to urban agriculture, a surprising choice for men of violence, but perhaps understandable because it has proved to be cathartic. They avoid working for a boss and gain social worth and acceptance once they offer the products to the community. The cumulative effect of preventative and targeted policing has been a decline in both murder and general crime numbers and a greater perception of security on the streets. Crimes like car theft, kidnapping and robbery have significantly gone down and the government hopes to bring down the murder rate to the Latin American average by 2019. In 2014, for the first time in many years, economic worries displaced crime as the country's principal preoccupation. Venezuelan opposition academics deny that this is happening; the crime graphs they prepare show a vertiginous increase in crime even as the official

figures say the opposite and public perception begins to change. But it is their voice that is amplified in the international media. The only certainty in the argument between the two sides is that it will be decades before Venezuela can even hope to become a less unsafe country.

## **PRISONS**

One of the biggest obstacles in pacifying Venezuela is the prison system. In 2013, it had a prison population of more than 40,000 or 145 inmates per 100,000 inhabitants, almost doubling from 77 in 2010. It was a crumbling system for as long as anyone can remember. One of the first testimonies that brought to the attention of the world the living hell of Venezuelan prisons in the 1940's was Henri Charrière's part-fictional autobiography, *Papillon*. Then, as later, it was a world of crumbling edifices, inhuman conditions, contagious diseases, corrupt guards, brutal gangs and the danger of a violent end. Hundreds of prisoners were killed by other inmates within the prisons or by guards. In 1995, 239 prisoners were killed; in 1996, that figure was 207. Human Rights Watch reported how by the mid-1980's, prisons in Venezuela were already in a state of crisis, and by 1994 the crisis had worsened to such an extent that the Venezuelan Public Ministry warned that it "threaten[ed] democratic stability". In 1994, more than a hundred were killed by other inmates in a prison feud. The New York Times, which reported the killings, put in a kind word for Venezuela, saying it "is not the only Latin American country to be shaken by prison violence", something which it forgot to mention in the prison deaths during the Chavez years. Not all the killings were by fellow prisoners. On November 27, 1992, when the second military rebellion hit Caracas that year, the National Guard stormed *El Reten de Catia*, a Caracas prison that was built to house 700 prisoners but had 4,000 inmates. Amnesty International reported, "The National Guard is alleged to have entered the prison... firing indiscriminately". Estimates of the time suggest that as many as 200 prisoners were killed that day.

The Venezuelan prison system showed the effects of at least two decades of neglect in the Fourth Republic and had turned into a slowly ticking time bomb. The prisoners were mostly from the marginalised classes, young, black and poor. They were robbed at



the prison gates by the staff if the police or the National Guard had not already taken whatever they could lay their hands on. They were packed into cells that were unfit for even zoo animals. They lacked proper drinking water supply, medical attention or even decent meals. Contagious diseases spread among the prisoners. The cells were infested with rats, cockroaches and other insects. Trials for the poorer prisoner could last up to five years. They were almost always given close to the maximum sentence. Those from the wealthier classes could afford private lawyers and got away with lighter sentences and their sentencing happened quicker. By the 1990's, if not earlier, the prisons had become a lucrative business in human misery. The jails had filled up with drug dealers and they took charge of the business. The prisoners had to make weekly payments to other prisoners at the top of the criminal hierarchy known as "pranes" for the privilege of not being killed. They also had to pay for the necessities like a blanket to sleep on, changing cells, receiving medical attention, using prison vehicles for court appearances or for having a mobile phone. The gang leaders themselves lived in luxury with alcohol and drug parties in the company of their girl friends, wives or prostitutes. They resolved disputes among the prisoners and other gangs with knives and guns. With the money they raised from their fellow prisoners, they paid for high-calibre guns and ammunition that the prison staff and the National Guard at the prison perimeters smuggled in for a fee. They conducted their criminal businesses from within the prisons. Families were forced to pay up to keep their sons alive. As most of them were poor anyway, they turned to petty crime or did the outside work of the prison gangs to raise the money for their sons inside. William Ojeda, a legislator imprisoned for a year for writing a book on judicial corruption titled, *How Much Does A Judge Cost*, said from his own experience that prison was "a hostile world not only for the difficult coexistence with other prisoners but also because a type of institutional violence is imposed that harasses, torments and vexes the individual till it makes him feel like a street dog".

The prisons had effectively become privatised and authority had passed on to the hands of the inmates. The state retreated from the prison system in the Fourth Republic and the inmates were left at the mercy of the gang leaders. There were few staff to guard the prisoners and they retreated as the guns came in. Many of

them gave up and left and some were dismissed for corruption. They were untrained and used violence to subdue their wards. As late as 2003, there were only 342 guards for 19,950 prisoners. In one prison, authorities found entire families and even pets lodged in the prison, with children who lived there as their residence and did not attend school. Officials stole from the prison funds and received a share of the extortion money. Prison budgets became business opportunities. Meat was bought in Caracas and sent to the prisons in the plains of Barinas, although that is where the meat for Caracas comes from. A Venezuelan criminologist discovered that the prison directors rarely visited the cells or supervised the vulnerable areas of the installations. There were few nocturnal checks inside the prisons and even fewer cell searches. In some centres, the prisoners managed the electrical installations or worked as secretaries or cooks in the staff kitchen. Violence was neither noted down nor reported to the superiors.

Chavez was no stranger to this world, having been in one of the worst prisons for two years, although not in the worst of conditions. He had a cell to himself with books and visitors. In a similar cell in the same prison, 12 inmates would be thrown together. He often spoke of hearing a prisoner being beaten to death in a cell above his own and his impotent rage at not being able to do anything about it. The book he cited the most in his television shows was Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* in which the principal character, Jean Valjean, is a convict on the run, resembling many of the poor Venezuelans locked away without hope. "Justice must be done...penitentiary centres must be where the new man is formed," he said, but his words did not translate into any major prison reform till almost a decade after he took power. There were small improvements but nothing on the scale of what was needed. His government reacted to events and tried damage control for longer than carrying out the difficult task of addressing the real issues. In between, prison numbers were made worse by a 2005 law passed by the National Assembly that disallowed alternatives to imprisonment after sentencing or having trials while the accused remained in liberty. The result was an abrupt rise in the prison numbers between 2007 and 2010, putting an impossible strain on the creaking system. At around the same time, the police forces were being reorganised and they began a major drive against the drugs trade, arresting large numbers of petty dealers and even

users. The arrest numbers were linked to efficiency targets. The prisons now had, like in the past, more inmates for theft and drug trade than murders while the judicial system remained as slow, cumbersome and inefficient as ever. Prisoners went on hungerstrike against the new law. It was not until 2011 that new legislation and a new dedicated ministry for the prisons began to have impact with a woman Minister in charge, the fiery Iris Varela, nicknamed La Fosforo, or phosphorous, for her incendiary politics.

There have been major improvement and equally fierce resistance to the new penitentiary regime. The new legislation states its respect for human rights, the development of alternative sentences, the classification of inmates and sanctions for those who violate norms in their dealings with the prisoners. Twenty-four new prisons are being built and the existing ones have been mostly refurbished with the inmates contributing the labour, the state providing the materials and the prisoners themselves prioritising the repairs. The introduction of the new regime did not go down well with the existing gangs. There were at least three major prison riots between 2011 and 2013. In the worst riot in 2012, the gangs killed about 60 prisoners, National Guard and prison officials and injured 120 others in one prison after the state decided to carry out an inspection. Vast amounts of firearms, including machine guns, and thousands of rounds of ammunition were discovered when it was searched. In another prison riot near Caracas in 2011, where the gangs took hostages, the opposition television station, Globovision, falsified the audio on the riots and broadcast interviews with grieving relatives 269 times during the operations. Prisoners spoke of how the media had announced the searches beforehand and the gangs were tipped off about the impending raid. The prison situation became the opposition's political capital at a time it was reeling from successive defeats at the hands of Chavez.

The new prison system has taken up the programmes of work, education and retraining of the inmates. Early in the 1950's, the prisons had workshops and agricultural programmes that kept the prisoners busy and contributed to the upkeep of the establishment but, like everything else, was neglected towards the end of the Fourth Republic. They have workshops once again, from bakeries and sewing units to woodworking. The prisoners are allowed to give

their families the furniture they make so that they find acceptance with the family and the community when they leave prison. The armed forces university, Unefa, helps with education and offers vocational training to the prisoners and in human rights to the staff. The internationally applauded 'El Sistema' music system has taken music teaching to prisons and some of the prisons now have their own orchestras. "The budding musicians include murderers, kidnappers, thieves and, here at the women's prison," the New York Times reported, "dozens of narcomulas, or drug mules, as small-scale drug smugglers are called... it is not all bleak. Inmates have free access to the Internet. They can pay to use cellphones. A commissary sells soft drinks and junk food". Some prisoners even have their own twitter accounts. Theatres have also come to the prisoners, who have put up shows at theatre festivals in Caracas. Venezuelan prisons have not become a wonderland and neither have all prisons changed. Corruption and brutality have not gone away; only it is no longer unofficial state policy. Many of the employees accustomed to enriching themselves still work in the penitentiary system, and the degree to which they are scrutinised will determine the extent to which they conform to the new laws. The national security university trains the newer recruits and standards and supervision have been reintroduced. The prison population will not decrease significantly any time soon because the state is trying to catch the thousands of professional murders still at large. However, balance between the underclass and the white-collar criminals is becoming less lopsided. The reforms have been welcomed by most inmates and 70% of them voted for Chavez in his presidential election of 2012.

## **DRUGS**

When Venezuela asked the United States Drugs Enforcement Agency (DEA) to leave the country in 2005, drugs became another line of attack against the Chavez government. Washington accused him of not cooperating in the fight against drugs, cut funding for Venezuela and withdrew its drug control certification. The international media, as if on cue, started a campaign accusing Venezuela of almost every drug crime imaginable. Hugo Chavez's Venezuela supplies half of Britain's cocaine, the arch-conservative British paper, Telegraph, headlined a report which said that even if there was no proof that he was personally involved, he surely

must know of it. Reversing the logic, the British Prime Minister must surely have been somehow linked to the rest of the cocaine coming into his country but such even-handedness escaped the newspaper and a large part of the western media. The Economist spoke of drugs in Venezuela by the planeload and said Chavez seemed unperturbed by claims of official complicity. The Christian Science Monitor suggested that not only was there institutional corruption in the security forces but also "the president is unwilling, or unable, to take action".

American officials started speaking in the same vein. A former director of the Bureau for the Drug Control Policy of the White House accused Chavez of "turning himself into an important facilitator of cocaine to Europe and other regions in the hemisphere", meaning his own country. But the United Nations itself says that 50% of the cocaine enters the United States by the Pacific Coast and 38% through Central America. The Venezuelans were understandably nervous; the United States had used the same accusation to intervene in Panama in 1989. The "curse of its geography", with the long Caribbean coastline and proximity to Central America, means that drug traffickers will always be tempted to use Venezuela as a transit route. The bulk of Venezuelan drug cargo was smuggled to Europe from its airports when the checks were still lax while another route was towards Africa through Brazil. In 2011, 41% of the cocaine seized in Europe had Venezuela as the country of immediate origin. The inventiveness of Venezuelan drug smugglers is astounding; they have caught carrying drugs in religious statues, in wheelchairs and even in breast implants.

Chavez threw out the DEA saying that it was more involved in spying against his country than disrupting the drug trade. He had reasons not to trust the Americans. In 1990, a CIA anti-drug programme in Venezuela shipped a ton of almost pure cocaine to the United States. The CIA station chief in Caracas approached the DEA attaché to discuss the possibility of sending drug shipments to the USA without them being seized, apparently to gain the trust of Colombian drug gangs they wanted to infiltrate. Unlike controlled shipments, this particular consignment was never intercepted and no one was arrested when the drug ended up being sold on the street. U.S. officials said it was a "serious accident rather than an

international conspiracy” and the General in charge of the CIA-Venezuelan task force was not indicted in exchange for his cooperation, though he did not implicate the CIA in his testimony. The New York Times reported how the DEA, with more than 80 offices worldwide and one of the most widely deployed U.S. agencies, “has been transformed into a global intelligence organization with a reach that extends far beyond narcotics, and an eavesdropping operation so expansive it has to fend off foreign politicians who want to use it against their political enemies”. Finn Selander, a former DEA special agent, revealed how “Our mandate is not just drugs. We collect intelligence... there’s drug information and then there’s non-drug information”. Subsequent events proved he was not off the mark. The DEA and the National Security Agency (NSA), it was revealed, had long exchanged information. Glenn Greenwald, who worked with Edward Snowden in making the Wikileaks cables public, said the DEA allowed the NSA to gain access to overseas phone networks through its own tapping operations.

The Venezuelans, suspicious of the DEA ever since the 2002 coup, apparently turned the tables on it, infiltrating its operations and sabotaging equipment, leaked security cables have revealed. Later revelations that U.S. government agencies allowed guns to freely reach the Mexican drug cartels in an operation named ‘Fast and Furious’ confirmed Venezuelan suspicion. In 2008, Bolivia followed Venezuela’s lead and expelled the DEA from its territory. President Evo Morales believes that coca leaves must be taken off the banned substances list because it is part of the local culture. Bolivians chew coca leaves that help them cope with high altitudes. Coca leaves are transformed into cocaine only through chemical intervention, he argued, saying that the United States used the war against drugs to exercise military control over the continent. Not coincidentally, Bolivia and Venezuela have been named by the United States as being laggards in anti-drug operations while Colombia and Mexico, the two countries that act as producers and suppliers in South America, and where drug money has struck deep roots in national politics and the economy, have been praised in these reports, perhaps because they are staunch U.S. allies.

Whereas the United States viewed the expulsion of the DEA as an act of impertinence, Venezuelans saw it as reasserting their

sovereignty. Angry words were exchanged on both sides and the Venezuelans asked the Americans to solve drug use in their own country. When the DEA operated in the country, not even the head of the Venezuelan anti-drug agency, ONA, was allowed into its offices. The country depended on U.S.-operated radars to detect unauthorised flights in its airspace. The radars provided information to the U.S. officers first, who then decided if they would pass it on to their local counterparts, Venezuelan military officials complained. The Americans refused to hand over the radars when the DEA left, leaving Venezuela without a radar system of its own. The drug planes took advantage of the opportunity to use its unguarded airspace. Venezuela turned to the Chinese for a new radar system and Chavez described them as "the eyes of Venezuela to prevent drug traffickers from using our country to take drugs to the U.S. empire, the largest drug consumer in the world." Once the first radars were installed in 2008, Venezuela realised that the American system either did not detect or did not inform them of all the illegal flights. In 2006, only 21 unauthorised flights were detected and in 2010 the number went up to 277. At first, Venezuela's policy was to turn these intruders away from its airspace but this only encouraged repeated incursions. In 2013, the order was given to force such aircraft to land at its airports. If they landed at improvised airstrips, they were destroyed from the air and, if they refused to heed orders, were shot down mid-air. Quite a few have either been destroyed on the ground or shot down in flight and hundreds of clandestine airstrips used by the drug traffickers have been blown up so that such aircraft have nowhere to land.

Drug seizures increased after the DEA was deported. In the six years of Venezuela's partnership with the U.S. agency, 209 tonnes were seized and this has more than doubled since then. Year after year more drugs are seized than when the DEA called the shots. Venezuela has also more than doubled the number of clandestine laboratories it has destroyed on the border with Colombia. The United States has sought to make out that Venezuela, just because it asked the DEA to leave its territory, does not cooperate with the outside world in combating the drug trade. The facts say otherwise. It has at least 50 international agreements, mostly with the European nations, and even permanent links with the USA that allows it to extradite drug barons captured in its territory. It has

handed over cartel bosses to the United States, Colombia, Italy, France, Spain and Belgium. It accepts training and technological help from mainly European countries in the fight against drug trafficking. Venezuela has captured at least 100 major drug bosses without the DEA's help who had taken shelter in its territory. The most prominent of them was the Colombian Daniel Barrera, nicknamed 'Loco' for his extreme mood swings and cruelty, picked up from a public telephone in the town of San Cristobal near the border with Colombia. He was considered second only to Pablo Escobar in Colombia and the most important drug trafficker in South America after Chapo Guzman of the Sinaloa clan in Mexico. After his capture, Colombia's President Juan Manuel Santos went on television to announce the fall of the last great mafia don and thanked Venezuela. Intelligence agents from Colombia, sharing inputs from the United States and Great Britain, worked together with their Venezuelan counterparts who tracked Loco Barrera for months and picked him up without resistance. Barrera had gone to great lengths to change his physical features. Once a portly man, he had slimmed down with extensive liposuction, had cosmetic surgery done to his face and burnt his hands with acid to make detection harder. He lived quietly in the border town for several years, travelling at times to Argentina and Brazil to see his children fathered by different women, and to West Africa where he sent his drug consignments. He did not have a mobile phone, made his calls from public telephones and worked with a small trusted group that had been infiltrated by the Colombian intelligence. Amid the celebrations over his capture, there was one discordant voice: that of Alvaro Uribe who suggested Chavez had arrested the drug lord to save face.

The United States never forgave Venezuela for throwing out the DEA and neither did it desist from trying to frame Chavez as a protector of the drug trade. Venezuelan military intelligence officers and Generals, who had stood by Chavez in developing a national alternative to the U.S. anti-narcotrafficking network, were publicly smeared as accomplices. One of them, General Hugo Carvajal, was arrested in the Dutch colony of Aruba off Venezuela's coast in 2014 after he had already been designated by Venezuela as its diplomatic representative to the island. The island authorities said he would be extradited to the United States to face a court in Miami where the Cuban far-right exiles would have made a fair trial



impossible. Even as the Venezuelan opposition celebrated, the Netherlands admitted it had violated the Vienna Convention and General Carvajal's diplomatic immunity and returned him to Caracas. The United States only reluctantly agreed with Colombia when it decided to hand over Walid Makled, a Venezuelan business tycoon who had made his money from drugs, to Caracas instead of the United States. A Stratfor email suggested Washington had wanted to use Makled to prepare a case against Chavez as a patron of narco-trafficking in an international court.

A Venezuelan judge, Eladio Aponte Aponte, fled the country to the United States in 2012 and started talking to the DEA. He had, in his own words, "to clear out" so as not to be charged for issuing a military identification card to Makled. "Comedies don't exist without pre-written scripts. It's quite rare to find a brilliant improviser — and the mediocre man doesn't go much further than autocue and teleprompter," the Venezuelan intellectual, Luis Britto Garcia, wrote of the episode after the judge, who had confessed to helping a drug baron in Venezuela, was reported to be helping the United States prepare a case against Venezuela. By politicising the DEA and preparing reports that attacked its enemies on imaginary charges but cleared its friends with fingers in the drug pie, the United States damaged its own reputation in the continent and many have begun to suspect that its drug certification programme is a tool to frame those it dislikes. In Latin America, the unquestioning acceptance of the logic of the war against drugs is coming to an end. Former and current Presidents, like Presidents Vicente Fox of Mexico and Juan Manuel Santos of Colombia, have said it is time to rethink the war on drugs. Uruguay is moving to controlled legalisation of soft drugs such as marijuana for personal use. In the United States itself, some of the states are going down this route. Venezuela would help itself if it were to do the same. Its prisons would not have to accommodate the large number of petty drug dealers and the spiral of violence could be controlled. But it dare not do so for fear of the high political cost that the United States and the international media will inflict on it, branding it as being soft on drugs and taking it as confirmation that Venezuela has always been a narco-state.

## **FOOD SHORTAGES & INFLATION**

The Venezuelan economy is not the basket case the international media makes it out to be. After the government took over the oil industry in 2003, the economy grew steadily till 2012 at an annual rated of 4.8% and poverty rates halved. This does not mean there are no real or pressing problems. In 2014, when the violent opposition protests were at its peak, the international media reported food shortages and starvation in the country. The latter was a complete fabrication. It is difficult to pass off a country as suffering from starvation if 38% of its population is overweight or obese. In 2010, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) estimated that malnutrition levels had come down from 7.7% in the 1990s to 3.7%. At least 96% of Venezuelans eat three to four meals a day and food consumption has grown by 80% between 1999 and 2011. Venezuelans born in the revolution grew by two centimetres in this decade. None of this could have happened if the country suffered from periodic starvation.

There are certainly periodic shortages of food and personal hygiene items in the shops and bottlenecks in the supply chain. Inflation, which had gone down by Venezuelan standards in the Chavez years, has risen again to become the highest in the continent. The principal reasons for this is the scramble for dollars and large-scale smuggling to Colombia and black-marketing within the country. The purchasing power of the people has improved but Venezuela still remains dependent on its oil earnings. It produces little of what it consumes, whether food or industrial products. It is easier to import and sell in Venezuela than to produce goods in the country. In the end, the high purchasing power of the average Venezuelan means too many bolivars (the local currency) end up chasing too few goods. The Venezuelan government imposed currency restrictions in 2003 to stop capital flight from the country. Only the government could provide the dollars and it was undervalued to keep inflation down. This meant that the local currency, bolivar, was grossly over-valued. With the official dollars going for cheap, people and businesses bet against the domestic currency, waiting for the next devaluation to become richer. The demand for dollar began to grow but the official dollars were scarce, and this pushed up the black market prices. As the unofficial dollar rates rose, it

encouraged people to get hands on dollars and become rich overnight without any risk to themselves. Ordinary Venezuelans began booking flights abroad to receive their tourist allowances in dollars. They then either returned quickly or did not travel at all and sold the dollars in the black market. It became impossible to find plane tickets to Ecuador, Peru or even Spain but the planes were leaving almost empty. The black market in dollars tempted businesses to import rather than produce and then sell a part of the dollars in the black market.

Inflation is an old Venezuelan problem as even the U.S. embassy admitted in its diplomatic cables:

"Inflation in Venezuela is a result of a variety of factors as predicted by orthodox economics. Liquidity (the amount of money in the economy) has increased 60 percent since August 2005, and since 1998 has increased by over 730 percent. Oil revenues entering the economy are increasing liquidity, as is government spending. Government expenditures have increased 95 percent in dollar terms since 1999. In addition the government is creating incredible amounts of money... For Venezuelans, there is a huge disincentive to save money as interest rates below inflation mean that their money loses value every day it is in their account. Venezuela, like many Latin American countries, has had a recurring problem with inflation. During the past two decades, inflation has ranged from 8.8 to almost 100 percent a year. Spikes in inflation have been historically associated with increases in oil prices, but are also contingent on monetary policy. The mid 1990s were characterized by modest oil prices, yet very high inflation as successive governments were unable to break the cycle where deficit spending resulted in a devaluation, which in turn caused more inflation and necessitated more deficit spending."

Many of the food items in Venezuela are subject to price restrictions so that the ordinary citizen is protected from inflation. This tempted businesses to look at the neighbouring pasture where more money

could be made. They sold their products to distributors who then passed these on to the smugglers. Venezuelan products were, and still are, illegally transported to Colombia where they were sold at a much greater profit since it has no price controls. Food disappearing from the shelves in Venezuela was abundantly available not just in the border towns in Colombia but also reached Bogota and other cities hundreds of kilometres from the point of origin. Contraband became such a lucrative economy in the border states of Venezuela that entire factories shut down as the workers turned to smuggling. The displaced paramilitary groups from Colombia took charge of this workforce. They stopped bringing in drugs from Colombia and instead began smuggling food and consumer items from Venezuela. This pushed up crime rates in Venezuela's Wild West. The state admits that as much as 30% of Venezuela's products, imported or manufactured, goes to Colombia. This is smuggling on a colossal scale. Scarcity has pushed up prices in Venezuela and the food sector is the principal contributor of the country's already high inflation. Not all the smuggling heads to Colombia. Some Venezuelans have developed the technique of queuing up at the supermarkets well before opening hours and buying large quantities of anything they can lay their hands on. The queues are even longer at the government shops where the prices are generally lower. The long queues put off the average customer, who does not have the time to spend hours standing in a line. The professional shoppers then sell the same products on the streets or in the barrios at a much higher price. Richer Venezuelans have cottoned on to the business prospects but whereas those from the barrios sell food or shampoo in the black market, they sell cars, computers, cameras, cement and medicines, which they obtain by bribing officials, through informal networks or by advertising it on the Internet.

At times, the government fails to supply dollars to the importers on time. Venezuela holds much more of its foreign reserves in gold than in currency and the central bank does not always have the dollars. At times the staff delay handing them over so that they can get their speed money. The dollar scarcity means that industries acquire it on the black market to pay their suppliers and transfer the costs to the customers. The high inflation rate provides another incentive for people to hold on to their dollars. The black market price dwarfs the official rate, making the illegal dollar

market a destination of choice for businessmen, travellers and fraudsters. Mark Weisbrot, an American economist who has studied the Venezuelan economy in depth, says that "unlike selling cocaine, you don't even need risk leaving this world in a hail of bullets if you can get access to official dollars at 6.3 Bf (*the local currency*) and sell them for 72 on the black market". The illegal trade is a multi-billion dollar industry that involves almost everyone, from stock market operators and big businesses to the bicycle riders pedalling their wares into Colombia.

Shortages worsened from late 2012 once it became clear that Chavez was gravely, perhaps terminally, ill. Paralysis set in the government and the situation was made worse by a sneaky devaluation of the currency. Milk, corn flour and toilet paper disappeared from the shelves. Business held on to the goods at a time the leaders of the revolution had their attention turned elsewhere, hoping to sell them later and make a bigger profit. Matters became worse after his death. As elections were called hurriedly, big business realised the revolution was at its weakest. They had in Capriles Radonski a candidate they thought would beat Chavez's successor, Nicolas Maduro, whom Chavez had chosen before his death but who did not have a popular support base of his own. Unlike in 2002-03, when they shut shop after publicly declaring war against the government, big business did not close factories or pull down the shutters. Instead, it created an artificial shortage, just as in Chile before the coup against Salvador Allende. Transporters operated only a fraction of their fleet and goods did not reach the shops. They also delayed taking their containers from the ports and placed orders in a way that most of the ships arrived at the main port and clogged it up, while the other ports remained idle. Large supermarkets operated far fewer tills than normal and long queues formed. At times, when television channels turned up to film the impatient customers standing in snaking queues, they put the products on the ground so that the buyers would scramble for it. The long lines, the empty shelves and people fighting among themselves for milk or toilet paper made compelling television images.

This might seem like a far-fetched conspiracy theory but the Venezuelan big business, through the chambers of commerce, has never been a mere economic agent. It was an active participant in

at least two attempts to bring down the government early in the Chavez years and changed its tactics but not its antipathy for his government. The chambers of commerce spoke freely with the U.S. embassy which recorded their predicament. After Chavez won the 2004 recall referendum, the embassy cables reported:

"Venezuela's businessmen have read the numbers and written off the prospects for Chavez's departure any time within their planning horizon... they have little choice but to find some accommodation with him if they are to get any help on specific issues and contain any surge towards more radical policies. Given the tools the GOV has at its disposal to reward or punish businesses (such as granting or withholding foreign exchange or contracts with state industrial giants PDVSA and CVG), their decision is understandable"... the pain of approaching the Chavez government...is somewhat lessened by the fact that many businesses which have survived the economic turmoil of recent years enjoy oligopolies, now that weaker competitors have failed, and with an oil boom kicking in, there is money to be made".

The local and international media reported how Venezuelans were fighting over milk and toilet paper. Twenty-one out of hundred products had gone off the shelves in Venezuela, the BBC reported, when in reality it meant that certain goods might not be found in one out of every five shops. Venezuelans had to run from one shop to another to get essential items and the frustration level increased. They also began to panic and hoard whatever they could lay their hands on, making the shortage worse and pushing up prices and smuggling. These tactics certainly had a powerful impact in generating a large protest vote that almost toppled the revolution. Even better, big business did not lose money, selling whatever little it offered to the public at astronomical sums or diverting supplies to those they knew would take them over the Colombian border. Maduro imposed a new law in 2013 that pegged the maximum profit margin at 30%. When government inspectors started checking prices in the shops, they found profit margins of up to 12,000% and refrigerators that were more expensive than houses. Over-pricing was rampant in almost every product. The

government also discovered that the former official consumer protection agency, Indepabis, had itself become a hotbed of corruption. Its inspectors allowed businesses to get away with exorbitant prices if they were paid bribes. The violent opposition protest against Maduro's victory in 2014 brought back the shortage that was easing and pushed up inflation that had started going down. The international media blamed the riots on food shortages but the street fighters burned trucks bringing in food and petrol supplies. The barrios did not join the protest though food prices went up. This was because they were protected by the state-run food shops that rarely ran out of supplies throughout the protest. They serve as a protective layer against the high food prices and charges far less than the market prices. The people blamed private businesses, not the government. The shortages affect the population more in the upper middle class zones that are served by private supermarkets than the poorer neighbourhoods which have more state food shops.

The orthodox economic recipe in checking inflation is to reduce governmental spending and reduce the spending power of the Venezuelans. This would have hurt the poor, which the revolution was not prepared to contemplate. In a U.S. diplomatic cable titled, "'Tan barato, dame dos'" (so cheap, give me two): conspicuous consumption undermines Venezuela's future economic wellbeing', the embassy had an accurate diagnosis of what was driving inflation:

"Venezuelans' penchant for consuming instead of saving cannot simply be ascribed to cultural proclivities. Among the direct incentives are subsidies and price controls for goods of the basic food basket, health care services, and countless other consumer items. Such measures facilitate consumption not only of the subsidized/price-controlled goods and services themselves, but, by freeing up additional income, also of automobiles, personal electronics, and the like. In addition, Chavez-decreed increases to the minimum wage... have far outpaced the rate of inflation, increasing the real purchasing power of low-income earners. In addition to these direct measures, there are at least three important policies indirectly driving

consumer behavior: robust government spending, banking regulation, and the fixed foreign exchange rate regime. With the public coffers... full of petrodollars, the BRV (*Venezuela*) has increased public spending substantially: from the equivalent of USD 26 billion in 2003 to an estimated USD 42 billion for 2006... This increased liquidity in turn has two primary effects. First, more money circulating in the economy pursuing a slower growing quantity of available goods and services pushes up consumer prices. The net effect of the increased liquidity, inflation, falling interest rates, and banking regulations is that ordinary Venezuelans have far greater incentive to consume than to save and their banks have tremendous incentives to help them do so. Venezuelan banks have been creating and promoting a wide array of consumer credit products: prizes for using credit cards; personal credit lines giving customers three times their monthly salaries and thirty-six months of financing for consumer purchases; and specialized personal credit lines for purchases of travel, cars, electrical appliances, furniture, televisions, video and sound equipment, computers, and cellular phones."

Food shortages and inflation will not go away any time soon but neither are these problems without a solution. Developing the country's productive capacity and agricultural production in a countryside almost empty of cultivators will take time, as will weaning private businesses away from their dependence on dollars and the people from their habit of mindless consumption. Ordinary Venezuelans have never had so much money in their hand or so many luxury items in their grasp and they do not want the good times to end. Private businesses have asked for currency controls to be abolished and prices to be freed. The demands are impossible for the state to accept; it would lose its foreign reserves and the Venezuelan market is not a rational entity that follows even capitalist market laws. The lessons of the shortages in 2012 and the vast black market in dollars have taught the state that it cannot continue to overvalue the local currency. To make sure that this



does take inflation to uncontrollable levels, the state will have to readjust its overpriced local currency but it will also have to mount an unprecedented supervision of the private economy and over hundreds of thousands of its citizens. Business malpractice in Venezuela, to paraphrase Karl Marx, nestles everywhere and settles everywhere it senses there is more money to be made by breaking laws. Almost every distribution and final sales point will have to be kept under surveillance and smuggling will have to be controlled. That is a bridge too far for the state on its own. The emerging outline of a solution is that the Venezuelan state will fall back on popular mobilisation, training and deploying tens of thousands of inspectors from the community councils and the PSUV party structure and put them right from the docks when the imports come in to the distribution and final sales networks. It will be one of the stiffest challenges the revolution has faced, but it does not seem to have too many other options. If that happens, Venezuela will be a country where private businesses will be allowed to operate but will have nowhere to hide if it falls back on its old ways.

As always, oil extracted a terrible revenge on Venezuela. Oil wealth gave Chavez the financial autonomy to proceed with his Socialist experiment. The country did not have to depend on foreign loans or fear that investors would withdraw their capital and bankrupt the country. With its oil revenues, it could develop its infrastructure projects and the social inversion. It had the freedom to pursue policies that ran counter to the Washington consensus. Its relative financial autonomy limited the capability of its opponents to hold it to ransom. This blessing comes conjoined with a terrible curse. States that depend on petroleum do not have the incentive to develop their capabilities while the local capitalists do not feel the need to engage in productive activities. They are happy to live off the petroleum dollars, to import and to sell it to a cash-rich population. The economy does not diversify.

In Venezuela, the state accounts for no more than 30% of the economy and can do little to control or transform it. The country produces more than before but still has to import a large portion of what it consumes. Distributors create artificial shortages and push up prices, or divert the goods to neighbouring Colombia and earn mega profits overnight. The micro-supervision of the economy

might be easier to achieve in Venezuela given its modest size and population, but it will not happen overnight.



**A typical Mercal store**

## CHAPTER XIV

### **DEATH AND LEGACY OF HUGO CHAVEZ**

Hugo Chavez died on March 5, 2013, after a little more than eighteen months of his battle against cancer. His illness turned into a global media feast. Doctors who had no access to his treatment went on television giving their opinions on his condition. In Miami, astrologers were rolled out on the screen to predict that this time there was no way out of the labyrinth for the wounded beast. A Spanish newspaper published a false photograph of what looked like Chavez on his deathbed and then apologised to its readers but not to Chavez or his family. Chavistas and non-Chavistas alike scrutinised every detail of his illness. The opposition, energised by the President's illness, demanded he be removed from office. During his convalescence, young girls from as far as Central America came to Caracas to shave off their hair when Chavez lost his after chemotherapy; disabled people in their wheelchairs climbed up stairs helped by friends; young men scaled the highest peak in the Venezuelan Andes to pray for his health; others set off on foot from their home towns hundreds of miles from Caracas carrying heavy crosses towards the presidential palace. Venezuelans fasted at home and prayed in public squares for his health. During Easter 2012, Chavez cried publicly at a church ceremony in his home state saying, "Give me your crown, Jesus. Give me your cross, your thorns so that I may bleed. But give me life, because I have more to do for this country and these people. Do not take me yet." When he died, the Chavistas felt orphaned; they had absolute trust in their President's capacity to take them out of every crisis.

An emergency operation was performed on Chavez for an abscess "in the pelvic region" at a hospital in Havana on June 10, 2011. By his own account, he was in a conversation with Fidel Castro who noticed that the Venezuelan President was in great pain. At first, Chavez did not want to be treated; the inaugural meeting of Celac was due in Caracas soon and he thought he would attend to his condition after the summit. Fidel warned him it would not help if he were to die at the summit and summoned help. Ten days later, Fidel told him his tumour was malignant and he was operated upon again. This time, the six-hour operation was for cancer but the

news was not immediately filtered out. Rumours began to circulate in Caracas that the President was gravely ill. The Celac summit was cancelled on June 29 and the next day a sombre Chavez read out a statement from Havana confirming that he had been treated for cancer. To everyone's surprise, he returned to Caracas at the dawn of July 4, on the eve of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the First Republic. He greeted his brother, Generals and ministers at the airport outside Caracas, singing an old waltz and telling them he was returning to Bolivar. Early that morning, the state television informed that the President had asked the people to gather at Miraflores where he would address them. Within hours, hundreds of thousands of people headed to the palace in silence, without any of the noise and music that are normally part of public marches. Most of them could not even approach the palace but stayed on in the avenues to hear his speech relayed over loudspeakers. When Chavez appeared on the "balcony of the people" accompanied by his daughters and dressed in military fatigues and the trademark red beret, the tension gave way to unrestrained jubilation. He led the crowd in singing the national anthem and told them in a brief speech by his standards that he had put himself in the hands of God, medical science and the people. He took out the same cross he had with him during the coup. We will win this battle as well, he told the people; every day this will be a better government.

The Chavez family gathered on July 8 at the presidential palace and it was evident that he was still in pain. He went back for his first radiotherapy treatment in Havana on July 16 and returned a week later. He celebrated his 57<sup>th</sup> birthday from the palace balcony with his daughters and grandchildren on July 28, joining in the singing of joropo, the traditional music from the plains, joking that he would live another 57 years more and invited them in advance for his 77<sup>th</sup> birthday. He declared himself presidential candidate for 2012 and began his usual bantering with his supporters. Should we provide credit to the bankrupt empire? he asked the assembled crowd, and when they shouted, 'No', he told them not to be mean. He changed the old battle cry of 'Fatherland, Socialism or Death' to 'Fatherland and Socialism, We will live and we will win'. His third round of chemotherapy was at the military hospital in Caracas, which ran into an unexpected problem. As soon as news got out that Chavez was at the hospital, crowds started gathering spontaneously. They came early in the morning and stayed all

night, singing and shouting for the President's health and refusing to leave. Among them were shamans, gospel singers and folk musicians, all singing for their President but making so much noise that it invaded the hospital and blocked traffic. Chavez, aware of the gathering outside, asked his aides to set up a communication system on the hospital roof so that he could converse with them. Fidel Castro got wind of this, perhaps having been told by the Cuban doctors, knowing that he was the only person who could make Chavez listen. Fidel rang up the hospital, asking them not to go ahead with the madness and told Chavez to behave like a patient. Chavez left the hospital after finishing with chemotherapy like a bull released from its enclosure. Thousands of people joined him en route to the palace and whole neighbourhoods turned out to greet him, many of them with their children on shoulders. Microphone in hand, Chavez responded to them, keeping up a running commentary from an open-top car all the way till he reached Miraflores: "God bless you, old man; look you're as bald as me, how many children do you have woman, five?" The next rounds of chemotherapy were shifted to Havana.

Chavez's health improved and the cancer seemed to have been contained. He took up his Sunday afternoon talk show, *Alo Presidente*, after a seven-month break in January 2012. Six days later, he had to present his annual report to Parliament as the law stipulates. Without break, and only occasionally looking at his notes, Chavez spoke for nine hours, all the while on his feet. But the cancer came back and he was operated upon for the second time in February. He had to travel several times to Cuba from March for radiotherapy. Meanwhile, the presidential elections were approaching and the opposition began suggesting that Chavez was unlikely to be the candidate. They could see the end of the Chavez years and the revolution. At the start of his illness, the opposition media argued that he was putting on a show to gain sympathy and win the presidential elections. When that became impossible to sustain, they started demanding more details of his health. The government argued that like any other patient, he had the right to privacy. They then said decisions about the government were being taken in Cuba and this violated the Constitution since the seat of government had to be Caracas. Again, Chavez and his ministers argued that he was signing papers at the Venezuelan embassy in Havana and his hospital wing was temporarily given the status of

Venezuelan diplomatic territory. The next argument was that he was in no physical state to act as the head of state and that his Vice-President should replace him. Before signing his papers as the presidential candidate for 2012, Chavez said he had had a medical check up and that he was free of cancer. I would be the first to withdraw from the race if I felt physically or mentally unable to act as President, he said in a television speech before submitting his nomination. He appointed Nicolas Maduro as his Vice-President.

Chavez's campaigning for the 2012 presidential elections was much more low-key than on previous occasions. He drew gigantic crowds wherever he went. The people sensed that this would be his last presidential campaign. The opposition taunted his ill health and their candidate mocked his swollen appearance. The President's final campaign act was in Caracas on October 4, two days before the elections. It turned out to be the largest gathering in the country's history. Perhaps a million people, if not more, turned up to hear him and were drenched in a heavy downpour. Chavez disregarded the rain but gave a shorter speech than usual. Photographs of him speaking, soaking wet under a dark sky, still as cheerful, youthful and as full of life as they had always known him became an icon to his supporters who remembered him as the unvanquished comandante, defying his illness till the very end.

Elected President for the fourth time in 2012, with almost the same majority as the first time and his popularity intact, Chavez returned to Cuba in November for further treatment. He touched down at Caracas without any great publicity early in the morning on December 7 saying that he would have reached earlier had it not been for Fidel who turned up at the airport. The two discussed Venezuelan poetry, theatre and even a story, *The Captain Without A Name*, which recounted the scene at a plaza deep in the plains of Venezuela and metres away from the banks of the mighty Orinoco where a motley crowd of smugglers, drunks, horsemen, Indians and indigent people had stopped to listen to an Army captain on a megaphone speaking to the people. That unnamed Captain was Chavez. He recounted this to his ministers and Generals waiting for him at the airport and talk soon turned to the undying flames of rebellion. You have fanned the flames all over the continent, Fidel told him, who will put it out now? We are descendants of those who were always defeated, Chavez told his

team at the airport, but this is the time for our victory. Twenty years ago, he told them, the country bordered on anarchy, the civilians and soldiers pitted against each other, the elites taking out the money from the country and the empire doing what it pleased in Venezuela. As he chatted with them, relaxed and energetic, none of them suspected he had devastating news for them the next day. Only his daughters and son-in-law looked drawn and downbeat.

In a half-hour nationally televised address on the night of December 8, he briefly reminisced about his days as a soldier, mentioned how much he had enjoyed the film *Saturday Night Fever* in his youth, when he also danced the lambada, and then broke the news that the cancer had re-appeared and that he would return to Cuba for another operation. The Cuban doctors had wanted to do the operation straight away but he refused their medical advice, telling them and Fidel that he needed to inform the country first. He took out the cross and said he still hoped to survive the operation. All his life, he said, he had lived from miracle to miracle and perhaps this time too luck would be on his side. His closest team was by his side, sat there colour drained from their faces. They had pleaded with the President earlier in the day not to break the news as it would upset the country but Chavez told them he knew his people and, in any case, he had come back to Venezuela for this reason alone. He told the Venezuelans that Nicolas Maduro would be the presidential candidate in case he was unable to carry on and asked them to vote for him. His decision, he said, was irrevocable, total, absolute and as full as the new moon. He sought votes for Maduro, who would govern together with the people and subordinated to their interests to create a new democracy with the widest possible participation and in full liberty and for a Venezuelan variant of Socialism. He said he did not ever wish to transmit the message but Chavez was not just himself but a broad collective. It was clear to everyone that Chavez was saying his farewell; that night seemed to the Chavistas like a televised version of the Last Supper.

It was his last television address to the Venezuelan people. The country was not the same it was 20 years ago; the people, the armed forces and the national unity it enjoyed now did not exist then. He reminded them of Simon Bolivar's frustration towards the end of his life when he had been barred from entering Venezuela

at the pain of death. I do not even have a country for which I can make sacrifices, The Liberator had lamented. That, said Chavez, was not his fate, and he dedicated the new Venezuela to Bolivar and Guaicaipuro, the Indian chief who had resisted the Spanish conquest. He warned the country that there would be new conspiracies and the revolution's enemies would try to divide the people and the armed forces. Their project was to restore capitalism and neo-liberalism in the country. The revolution's strategy, he said, would be unity, struggle, battle and victory. He ended his broadcast with a full-throated rendition of the tank regiment's song, Beloved Country, which has become the second and unofficial anthem since the broadcast, and a cry of Viva Venezuela. Chavez met the military high command on December 10, Bolivar's gold and diamond-encrusted sword in hand, and warned them against destabilising attempts that were sure to come and handed the sword to Maduro. It was the precise moment when power in Venezuela changed hands. Chavez said his final goodbye to his ministers and close collaborators at the airport that night, walked up the stairs of the presidential aircraft and waved goodbye with the shout of 'Long live the country'. His condition worsened in Cuba and he developed a respiratory infection. Chavez returned to Venezuela on February 18, wanting to die in his country, and tweeted, "I continue to seek refuge in Christ and have confidence in my doctors and nurses. Onwards to victory, forever. We will live and we will win". His last words to Maduro were apparently, Nicolas, it's your turn you, take care. They parted and Chavez gave him a left-handed military salute from his hospital bed.

It was left to Maduro to announce the "hardest and the most tragic news" of Chavez's death on March 5. Speaking through his tears and breaking down throughout his 10-minute broadcast, he spoke of the immense sadness and the historic tragedy of losing the revolution's comandante so early. He thanked Chavez, "wherever you may be", for protecting the people and never letting them down and said they would be worthy inheritors of his baton. Maduro was not the only one crying; an opinion survey days later found that the first reaction of 25% of the population was to burst into tears. As the news broke, the streets of Caracas emptied. The media that had insulted Chavez in his lifetime and opposition politicians went indoors. People feared the Chavistas would erupt in rage and the built-up fury would lead to a bloodbath. Maduro



pleaded for peace, tranquillity and respect in his broadcast and spoke to party leaders, asking them to ensure peace. It worked. By evening, the fear of violence dissipated and the people began coming down from the barrios, heading for the hospital or the plazas in Caracas and every single town and village throughout the country while the rich retreated to their discreet whiskey parties. The next day, when his body was put on a simple carriage and taken to the military academy for the people to pay their respects, hundreds of thousands joined the procession or stood by the side of the road. Leading the procession were Maduro and the Bolivian President, Evo Morales, who did the long journey by foot. A new cry rose at the funeral procession, 'We are all Chavez'.

Chavez's body remained at the military academy for 11 days in place of the three planned originally to give the people the chance to say their last goodbye. Many of them had not been able to join the hospital procession as traffic had been paralysed at least four hours from Caracas in every direction. More than half a million people filed past his coffin. In the first days, Venezuelans queued for up to 24 hours for the three seconds they were given to see him. Even towards the end, the queues still lasted hours. Among those who came to see their leader was 23-year-old Lisseth Pavon from the border state of Tachira, 21 hours' bus journey from Caracas. Lisseth, a member of the militia, heard of Chavez's death from her mother. She left her boy of seven years, "also a revolutionary militant", behind and set off for Caracas with some of her comrades in the militia. She had with her only 200 bolivars. There were rumours of ransacking in Caracas and the local bus station had shut the gates. Still the mission was to get to Caracas, Lisseth said, and they reached the city, after changing buses thrice, in time to see the passing hearse.

"When the hearse passed I was broken, my heart exploded into a thousand pieces, I lost my nerves from the pain, I couldn't believe that my comandante was there," she told a Caracas newspaper. In the same clothing that she left her house in, with an empanada (*a Venezuelan fried snack*), two biscuits, and a little water, Lisseth, and her colleagues took the path towards the Military Academy. They waited until midnight Thursday, to pass the chapel of rest. She was photographed with her right hand on her heart

and her left hand in a clenched fist salute, which became emblematic of how many Venezuelans saw his passing. "I got there and I wanted to touch him," she told her interviewer, "to tell him that he took away our blindfolds, that now we really have to struggle and that thanks to him we have a homeland. I don't have the words to describe what I feel for Chavez, it's love," she says, and pauses, while her bottom lip trembles, before adding, "so large [as life]..." Lisseth for now will go back to studying law, and she wants to continue in the militia, to be an example, to continue fighting the struggle with Chavez and Bolivar as examples... "Chavez hasn't given me anything material, it's about the power that he gave to us, the youth, all Venezuelans".

Chavez was taken to his final resting place, the Cuartel de la Montaña (the Garrison on the Hill), which overlooks the presidential palace and from where he had launched his 1992 military uprising. Almost every Latin American and Caribbean head of state came to his funeral. The Iranian President, Ahmedinajad, kissed his coffin and hugged his mother for which he faced criticism at home. The Byelorussian President did a brief guard of honour by his coffin with his young son. The Costa Rican President, Laura Chinchilla, it transpired, came in a drug plane for the funeral and the Mexican President, Peña Nieto, was filmed dozing off during the ceremony. There was talk at first of embalming his body and transferring his remains to the National Pantheon, for which it would be necessary to amend the Constitution which states that this can only be done after 25 years of the death of anyone considered a national hero. In the end, both plans were shelved and his final resting place, in a poor barrio, surrounded by the people Chavez identified with, has become a pilgrimage for his faithfuls, who come in thousands every day to touch his sealed marble tomb. Four soldiers in ceremonial Hussar uniform stand guard and a cannon shot is fired daily at the moment of his death.

Those who had never liked Chavez were not going to forgive him and even less promote him to sainthood after his death. It is no surprise that the richest Venezuelans remember him with the greatest bitterness. In their opinion, Chavez polarised Venezuela

and destroyed its democracy. They commonly fall back to the "Venezuela of their parents" which was apparently happy, prosperous and peaceful till the rogue soldier came to power.

This myth had few takers outside the wealthiest social classes and their glorification of the past was understandable. They had the wealth and no one to challenge them. The people of poverty and of colour remained out of their sight, living somewhere in the dangerous barrios where the rich did not have to tread. They reacted to Chavez with class and racial insults and were disgusted and horrified that the lower social classes were now in power. "Hate against me has a lot to do with racism. Because of my big mouth and curly hair. And I'm so proud to have this mouth and this hair, because it is African," he reacted. There were less extreme views within the opposition. Some of them acknowledged that the old order had failed the majority and the old democracy was flawed. Nevertheless the solution, they felt, was a more efficient capitalism; they wanted Chavez to be an efficient manager of the economy and the state. They did not forgive him for saying he was not in the business of reforming capitalism and for promoting Socialism in a country that had always been deeply conservative and anti-Communist in its ethos. To them, the Brazilian President, Lula da Silva, represented the "good Left" in the continent and Chavez the "bad Left". The Economist said how "Latin America's real working-class hero has been Brazil's Lula... And despite all the bear hugs at Latin American summits, Mr Chavez did not further the continent's cause. Although Latin America's leaders — including Lula — have been reluctant to denounce Mr Chavez, they know that he prevented it from fulfilling its potential and uniting behind democracy and open markets". Chavez was the ultimate straw man for the Western media. In its obituary, The Economist did not mince words about the "bumptious Venezuelan":

"His secret was to invent a hybrid regime. He preserved the outward forms of democracy, but behind them he concentrated power in his own hands and manipulated the law to further his own ends. He bullied opponents, and encouraged the middle class to emigrate. He hollowed out the economy by mixing state socialism and populist redistribution with a residue of capitalism. And he

glued it all together with the crude but potent rhetoric of Latin American nationalism. He spawned imitators elsewhere in Latin America, financing an anti-American alliance of like-minded leaders and client states. And he was the saviour of communism in Cuba, his aid keeping the Castros in power while slowing the transition to capitalism in a bankrupt island... It is regrettable that Mr Chavez will not be around to reap the whirlwind he has sown: perversely, the worse things now get in Venezuela, the more this will flatter his memory... now that the man has gone Latin America's democrats have an easier task".

Echoing this view was Rory Carroll, the Guardian correspondent in Caracas for six years who has written a thick book on Chavez: "He was neither a tyrant nor a democratic liberator but a hybrid, an elected autocrat... He relied on the ballot box for legitimacy while concentrating power and eroding freedoms, shunting Venezuela into a twilight zone where you could do what you wanted – until the president said you couldn't." Chavez was depicted as an evil clown, someone who was coarse, spoke too much, sang and danced in public while in private he ruthlessly promoted his corrupt coterie around him, shut down free speech and independent media, imposed a rule of terror and ruined the economy but won elections because he had bribed the poor with free health, education and housing. He sided with the brutish majority against the refined minority who were fleeing the country, went the caricature. It is true Chavez sang and danced at public gatherings. He was a happy man and said the principal motors of the revolution were love and happiness. Bitterness, Chavez said, prevailed in the other camp. What the western media did not like was the way he mocked their leaders, mainly George Bush, whom he called "a donkey" and "a coward, a killer, a [perpetrator of] genocide, an alcoholic, a drunk, a liar, an immoral person... A psychologically sick man". He also used humour with a deadly sting. Quoting a Venezuelan poem, he told Bush's Secretary of State, Condoleezza (he liked calling her Condolence) Rice, with devastating irreverence, "Remember, little girl, I'm like the thorn tree that flowers on the plain. I waft my scent to passers-by and prick he who shakes me. Don't mess with me, Condoleezza. Don't mess with me, girl." And when Hillary

Clinton held him responsible for the diplomatic impasse between the two countries, he sang to the tune of an old Mexican piece with his own words: "I'm not loved by Hillary Clinton... and I don't love her either". These were the memorable moments for the international media.

It was indeed a strange form of dictatorship, says the Uruguayan writer, Eduardo Galeano, author of *The Open Veins of Latin America*, a book that Chavez gifted to Obama at a regional summit. The U.S. President was taken aback and looked uncomfortable receiving the gift; he had thought Chavez had written the book himself. "A strange dictator, this Hugo Chavez," wrote Galeano, "A masochist, with suicidal tendencies: he established a Constitution that allows the people to get rid of him, and then took the risk of this happening in a recall referendum, which Venezuela is the first country in history to have held... how many leaders would be brave enough to do such a thing? And how many would remain in power afterwards? Until only a few years ago, Venezuelans went to the beach when there were elections. Voting was not, and still is not, compulsory. But the country has gone from total apathy to total enthusiasm. 'There is no freedom of speech here!' protest the TV screens, radio waves and newspaper front-pages, with absolute freedom of expression. Chavez has not closed a single one of the mouths that daily spew forth insults and lies. A chemical war, aimed at poisoning public opinion, is being waged with impunity".

The people had their own memorable moments. They remember him for his brief television appearance after the failed military uprising of February 4, 1992, and his memorable *por ahora* (*for now*) moment. Their next view of Chavez was in civilian clothes when he came out of prison two years later and announced to the world that his objective was taking power through peaceful means. They watched with astonishment how he placed his hand on the existing Constitution of 1998, called it moribund, and promised to put to popular vote a new Constitution. They saw him arrive back at the presidential palace after the 2002 coup, which the private television stations did not broadcast and was only seen on state television that had earlier been taken off air. They remember him facing down the petroleum strike towards the end of that year, when in his television talk show he blew on a football referee's whistle, named the top executives who had shut down the industry

and flashed a red card to sack them publicly. They recall him calmly accept the opposition's challenge to call a recall referendum in 2004, invoking an emblematic Venezuelan poem in which a peasant, Florentino, defeats the Devil in a poetic duel. They remember him riding a train with football legend Diego Maradona in 2005 to a people's summit against George Bush's plan to impose a continental free trade zone. They took pride in his 2006 speech at the United Nations General Assembly in which he termed George Bush as the Devil at a time when no one dared to cross paths with the U.S. President. But they remembered what the international media forgot: their President promote Noam Chomsky's book, *Hegemony or Survival* from the pulpit. They watched Chavez run alongside thousands of impoverished Haitians and greet them half way up the gate of the presidential palace in Port-au-Prince.

They remember him most for his small humane gestures. At a large public meeting in 2008, a little boy came up to him and, when Chavez asked him if he had any brought any gift, took out a biscuit he was chewing and gave it to the President who put it in his own mouth. He then told the audience that children were unselfish and happy to share what they had. It was capitalism that made people selfish as they grew older. They remember him after the heavy rains of December 2010 when he drove down to the worst-affected places and promised the people they would move from a refuge to a house of their own. He had to drive up the hills of Caracas to speak to people who refused to come down unless Chavez spoke to them. Some of the strongest memories the Venezuelans have of him are those during his final illness and his astonishing nine-hour speech at the National Assembly while convalescing. He was defiant and never seemingly happier than in his final election campaign when he sang and danced through his pain at the campaign rallies. They remember, perhaps more than most moments, his last campaign speech in driving rain and his final dignified television goodbye to them.

The Peruvian poet, Cesar Vallejo, had, in his poem, 'The Mass', captured the overwhelming grief for a fallen combatant that happens only occasionally in history and certainly happened with Chavez:

At the end of the battle,  
and the combatant dead, a man came unto him  
and said 'Do not die, I love you so much!'  
But the corpse, alas, kept on dying.

Two men approached and repeated:  
'Do not leave us! Be brave! Come back to life!'  
But the corpse, alas, kept on dying.

Twenty, a hundred, a thousand, half a million came toward him,  
shouting: 'So much love, and nothing can be done against  
death!'  
But the corpse, alas, kept on dying.

Millions of people surrounded him,  
with one common plea: 'Stay here, brother!'  
But the corpse, alas, kept on dying.

In the final stanza of the poem the 'sad corpse' relents, gets up and starts walking. There was no such miraculous resurrection for Chavez, of course, but his legacy is still being felt in Venezuela and in the continent and less strongly in other parts of the world. The Uruguayan President, Pepe Mujica, came close to the mark, saying it was still too early to judge Chavez's legacy but looking from a distance it appeared to be colossal. When Chavez won the presidential elections in 1998, there was no other President from the Left on the continent. Cuba was far off and quarantined. What prevailed in Latin America, as in the rest of the world, was the assertion that capitalism had triumphed forever, that there was no alternative to it, that it was the end of history. The Soviet Union had collapsed and the Berlin Wall had come down. Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher were the high priests of a rampaging neo-liberal ideologically and events seemed to have proved them right. Even the Vatican had a more than a usually strident anti-Communist Pope. The old order in Venezuela was morally, economically and politically bankrupt, which is why power changed hands. But it would not have happened without Chavez's leadership and magnetic personality. Like the tank commander that he was, Chavez opened up breaches, demolished power structures and dismantled obstacles in his civilian political career. In pulling off one seemingly impossible victory after another, he fulfilled the

German sociologist, Max Weber's observation that "Politics is a strong and slow boring of hard boards... man would not have attained the possible unless time and again he had reached out for the impossible. But to do that a man must be a leader, and not only a leader but a hero as well, in a very sober sense of the word."

Chavez left behind a country that was materially much richer than what he had inherited. Poverty went down sharply and extreme poverty even more. The poor have access to health, education, housing and other social benefits like never before in the past. Today, 64% of the country's GDP goes to the social sector. Their per capita income has grown exponentially. Before the Chavez era, only about 300,000 people received paltry old-age pensions from the state. That figure now is heading past a million; the payment is tied to the minimum wage, the highest in the continent, and goes up with inflation. Venezuela is now the least unequal country in Latin America. The country has achieved full literacy and has the second highest university-going population in Latin America, second only to Cuba. The public education infrastructure, from nurseries to new universities, has been modernised. Every school student gets a free computer and this programme will be rolled out for university students. The best students are given free holidays in Latin American destinations. Free primary health coverage is universal. The children's cardiac hospital is an example of the advance in health care. It started with a young girl having to be sent for an urgent heart operation to Cuba because the hospitals in Venezuela had a long waiting list. When the girl died, Chavez promised that he would make sure that no other child would have to meet her fate from neglect. The cardiac hospital has saved the lives of thousands of Venezuelan, Latin American and African children just as Mission Milagro has restored the eyesight of millions in the country and in the continent.

The people eat better, they live longer and obesity has replaced malnutrition as the major public health issue. This has not happened by taking away the property of the wealthy. The middle class has grown. Many more Venezuelans can afford their own homes, either through the state housing programme or because they can afford to buy it in the private sector. They own cars, go on holidays and possess electronic goods on a scale never seen before. The nation's GDP is thrice the size now as when Chavez



came into office while oil revenues are a smaller percentage of the budget than before his time. The list of Chavez's achievements is even longer than the list of complaints his detractors have of him. When the opposition started blaming him for every problem in the country, his supporters took up the cry and turned it round. Chavez is to blame that we have food, health, housing and education, they said. The highlight of his presidency was the redistributive policies that took a big part of the oil riches in the direction of the marginalised majority. In his first days as President, thousands of indigent Venezuelans gathered outside the palace gate. He mentioned the case of one, a mother with a dead child in her arms, asking for some money to bury her son. For Chavez, it was paying the "social debt" that the old regimes had left behind.

Venezuela has not just grown materially it also has a vibrant cultural life that, in the past, was largely confined to television soaps and beauty contests. It achieved full literacy in his time as President. Millions of books are published and often distributed free to encourage readership. Book fairs travel all over the country and receive record numbers of visitors. Chavez was a voracious reader and left behind a personal collection of about 13,000 books. He promoted books of many genres, fiction, economic, political and historical, in his television programmes. The national film industry revived in his time with substantial state inversions and is technologically better equipped. Film audiences now number in millions and screenings have spread out beyond the shopping malls to the communities and local theatres that have been restored all over the country. Venezuela had a unique music programme, El Sistema (The System), before his time. Chavez maintained and increased financial assistance for the programme that provides musical instruments, training and a platform for people who cannot afford the cost of nurturing their talent. There are many more theatre groups and shows now and the state has developed a programme of popularising theatre in schools and among the young. Money from the sale of drug properties is used to distribute free musical instruments in schools. Chavez set up a national circus company and an arts university where students are trained without cost. Perhaps the most noticeable development of street art has been in graffiti. There are many more public art works and museums in a country that was mocked in the continent for its limited aesthetics. He can take sole credit for reviving the folk

music of the plains. American music and its local Spanish imitation invaded Venezuela during the Fourth Republic and were played endlessly on local radio and television. Only those Venezuelan musicians who could afford to pay radio stations for airing their music survived. Folk music retreated to the periphery, playing at local fairs and feasts. Chavez sang the songs of the plains, made joropo music visible, invited the artists to his television programmes and gave it back the national profile it had lost to commercial pop music. He was also responsible for the development of sports during his term. He invested in building playgrounds, brought sports trainers from Cuba and gave Venezuelan sportsmen the opportunity to participate in international events without having to depend on private sponsors. As a consequence, Venezuela is a rising sporting power in Latin America and has a few individuals of international calibre.

Of all that Chavez did for Venezuela, his greatest achievement is something intangible: restoring the Venezuelan's self-worth. Wealthy Venezuelans saw the United States as their natural home and Venezuela as just a stopover where they made their bucket loads of money. They worshipped the American way of life, the more as their country slipped into chaos from the 1980's. They imposed their view on society that the Venezuelans were lazy, unintelligent and uncultured, without music or literature of any worth, and almost an embarrassment for the continent and the world. The beauty pageant culture encouraged women to alter their physical appearance. Cosmetic industry has long been a flourishing industry. Women enhance their breasts and buttocks to make themselves more attractive and fathers pay for their daughters' cosmetic surgery as the fifteenth birthday present. They make their noses longer and change eye shapes to appear more Caucasian. This did not disappear during the Chavez years. With disposable income, poorer women have become the new market despite a rising tide of feminism. The cosmetic surgery industry also attracts thousands of Brazilian women who have their cheaper surgeries done in the border cities of Venezuela. While the upper classes might not have had any national pride, it did not mean they lacked groups to look down upon: the blacks, the Indians and the people of the barrios. Chavez emphasized pride in the mixed ethnic heritage. As the poorer Venezuelans became better educated and fed, they regained their self-worth. Now it was their turn to return

the insults: the affected rich earned the monikers of *sifrin*os (stuck-up) and *escualidos* (skinny, flavourless types). In the revolution, women hold some of the highest offices and more of them go out and work than ever before, including in traditionally male professions like factory work or bus drivers. Even a short conversation with the two sides of the divide confirms the difference in self-perception. The Chavistas see their country as doing well and are proud of it while the average opposition supporter not only sees the country as going downhill but also thinks it is down to the ignorance of their fellow citizens.

Chavez changed the contours of Venezuelan democracy. What existed before him was a decadent representative democracy in which the citizens had little participation in the political life other than as a voter. At other times, the policies and personnel were decided upon by the elites: big business, the labour aristocracy and the church as the unholy triumvirate. Most Venezuelans were too busy fending off poverty to be bothered even to vote. The manual electoral system was open to abuse and every institution of the state was controlled by the two main political parties, Democratic Action and Copei, who fought and connived among themselves to cling on to power. It is a mistaken notion that Chavez changed the political culture with his fiery rhetoric. He came with the slogan of a participative, protagonist democracy where the people would be the subjects of political and social transformation. And he kept his word, putting to popular vote a new Constitution that was not drafted by a few wise men behind closed doors but took views from all social groups, from the powerful well-organised lobbies to the most marginalised social groups in the most distant parts of the national territory. The Constitution met with a ferocious counter-campaign but was put to popular vote and approved by more than 70% of the population. In "advanced" European democracies, constitutional changes can be affected by Parliament itself, without the proviso of a compulsory referendum; in Venezuela it has to be put to the test of a popular vote.

The Bolivarian Constitution has features that few other countries have in their founding document. It gives people the right to recall their President and other elected representatives and was the first country that exercised the right in 2004. It recognises new forms of social property and the right to learning and education. It

prohibits privatising the health system, recognises health care as a human right and obliges the state to finance the public health system. It recognises the rights of the indigenous population and "nuclear disarmament, ecological balance and environmental resources as the common and inalienable heritage of humanity". In its preamble, the Constitution commits itself to Latin American integration nuclear disarmament, ecological balance and environmental resources as the common and inalienable heritage of humanity. It makes a crucial point that is often overlooked by political commentators: sovereignty belongs to the people and cannot be transferred. In choosing their representatives, the people exercise, and do not transfer, their sovereignty. The constitutional moment, for Chavez, was a peaceful alternative to a violent taking of power. He participated in elections not just to slip into the shoes of the old state and the government but also to change their content and form. It has not been fully achieved but enemies and friends alike recognise that the demand for constitutional reforms, passed in a popular vote, is a 21<sup>st</sup> century alternative to revolution by violent means. In the end, it has the same objective of transforming the state. Chavez inaugurated the Fifth Republic in Venezuela with this Constitution and provided a model that has been taken up in other countries in the continent and has emerged as a popular demand in Spain.

The Constitution was the first step towards changing the nature of the state. The first Chavez government had a radical President but a largely conservative group of ministers, including the finance minister of the old order. In a capitalist state, the people might choose their representatives but the powerful economic lobbies make sure the policies do not affect them. That changed in Venezuela after the April coup and the bourgeoisie began to lose their access to power. The state became more inclusive of the majority aspirations but it still remained at heart a representative system. The representatives were no longer from the upper classes but the structures of the state remained unchanged: inefficient, corrupt and scornful in its treatment of those who came to it for services. The social missions and the community councils created the counterweights needed for transforming the state. They were given legal cover and powers to organise their own communities and exercise supervision over the state. The political culture began changing with the President's policy that those who governed the

country, at every level, had to do so accepting criticism, obeying the people and not by imposing their decisions. It was easier said than done as many Chavista leaders remained addicted to the old culture of creating their own fiefdoms and distributing largesse to their friends. This has been the hardest cultural battle against a centuries-old tradition of using public office for private gains. The process of co-opting power from below has accelerated after Chavez's death. While hundreds of communes have been formed, their numbers are still paltry. The state, in theory, is heading towards a communal state where the people organised in communes begin to get space in the state and the power to take decisions. The Venezuelan political system still rotates around the President and an effective communal state is beyond the horizon. However, the first steps have been taken in that direction and it was Chavez who conceptualised the change and the direction.

The Bolivarian revolution emerged from where it was least expected, in the unlikely setting of military barracks. The Venezuelan armed forces of the pre-Chavez era were the most egalitarian of the old institutions, taking in its recruits from the poorer social strata and sending the officers for education to civilian universities. The officer class had a large intake from the traditional military families and the officers had to please powerful politicians to rise through the ranks. It was a different world for the ordinary soldiers. They were often forcibly recruited. Army recruiters ambushed young men in public squares or when they came out of cinemas and took them to the military barracks. They were often illiterate as well and lived and worked in squalid conditions. The armed forces were ill-equipped while the top Generals and politicians made good money from defence purchases. The military was feared and despised by the civilian population. It, however, had a residual pride in being Simon Bolivar's army and Chavez worked on this pride and disquiet among the officers over the armed forces being used to put down civilian unrest. He graduated with Che Guevara's books hidden in his pockets. The officers were aware of his reputation as a difficult character and he had to avoid being trapped preparing for the 1992 rebellion that involved ten thousand soldiers. He did not personally interact with such large numbers and the reason so many of them joined him was because they were seething with anger at the conditions in which they lived, the conspicuous corruption of the top brass and the political leaders

and also because they had concluded that the country could not continue as it was and that there was no one capable of leading it in an alternative direction. Many of the officers who did not participate in the coup because they felt it violated their oath nevertheless sympathised with Chavez and made sure that he was not killed immediately after his surrender. His failed rebellion made him their natural leader.

Latin American revolutions have always been vulnerable to the military. The United States used them to organise coups against any President who challenged it or even embarked on reforms independent of Washington. The continental Left was as surprised as the United States with Chavez's failed military uprising and presidential victory. Both sides were almost as hostile to him at the beginning with the exception of Fidel Castro who realised very early that the new Venezuela was being born from within the heart of the repressive apparatus. The April 2002 coup taught Chavez the lesson that personal loyalties were not always the best guarantee against a military restoration project. Many of the Generals who overthrew him briefly had pretended to be loyal to him and he had scrupulously followed existing norms in promoting them to senior positions. The cleansing of the military started after the coup and it remained loyal to him during the petroleum strike. Many of the middle-ranking officers were his students at the military academy and he knew them and their families by name. He had taken the military out of the barracks and on to the street to provide emergency food, medical and housing programmes for the poor. The soldiers felt they had earned respect from the civilians after years of being seen almost as an occupying force in the barrios, from where most soldiers came. It was time for a change of personnel and also a change in doctrine for the Bolivarian armed forces. The armed forces were no longer to be an isolated professional institution. The revolution defined itself as a civilian-military enterprise; the soldiers were people in uniform bearing arms. The principal external threat to the country came from the United States and its military bases in Colombia. If war came to Venezuela, the country would not respond with large-scale ground fighting and air combat. Venezuela prepared for an "asymmetrical warfare" in which the armed forces would change into a guerrilla fighting forces. The military command was divided into regions. In times of peace, these regional military commands are directed

from a centre but in a war are meant to act independently so that the enemy finds it harder to paralyse the army by destroying the command and control centre.

The doctrine of asymmetrical warfare assumes that the enemy will be infinitely more powerful and control the skies. The Venezuelan military has bought large numbers of hand-held anti-aircraft missiles and mobile missile launchers with a reach of several hundred kilometres to inflict damages on ships and neighbouring countries that might provide bases or airspace for an invasion. On ground, the new doctrine speaks of a long-term war of resistance in which soldiers shed their uniforms and, together with civilian volunteers, form well-equipped independent units to bog down the invader in a long-term bloody conflict and force it to withdraw at some point. The Bolivarians have trained and equipped thousands of civilian militias for this who, in peace times, guard electricity, gas and petroleum installations and participate in the fight against crime and smuggling. They have an incipient military hardware industry that has as priority the production of Kalashnikovs, ammunition and communication equipment. Its most important military partners are Russia and China and this shift was helped by the United States refusing to supply it with spare parts for its F16 and Hercules aircraft and its old fleet of tanks. The military provides the Bolivarians with the management cadre that it does not get from among the private university graduates. Many serving and retired officers manage large state institutions or get the responsibility of turning around failing industries in civilian control. Many high-ranking former officers serve as mayors, governors and legislators. This was more pronounced in the early Chavez years when it was the most loyal institution that he had but the trend has continued after him. The opposition has tried to foment discontent within military ranks and recruit disaffected officials. The new military doctrine has not fully transformed the institution. There are periodic reports of shady financial dealings and of some officials disagreeing with the changes or even trying to mount coups. In 2014 and 2015, several Air Force Generals and officers of other ranks were arrested for planning military action against the government and working in tandem with violent opposition protests.

Chavez was a natural and supremely gifted communicator on the domestic and international stage, a one-man demolition army who created a new communication map in the country without taking the easy option of closing down hostile newspapers or television stations. The mainstream Venezuelan media remains a conscious and partisan anti-revolution industry but has been considerably defanged by the growth of the Chavista communication network. Chavez's television programme *Alo Presidente* was the most popular radio and television programme in the country's history. It should not have been so: he was not particularly good looking; he sang and occasionally danced and talked for hours on his shows. Yet, it was never boring and even his enemies were riveted by it. He was also a talented writer who briefly wrote a newspaper column, at ease with international journalists at press conference and a sought after interviewee even for the international media. While the private media still has the majority of audience share in Venezuela, most Venezuelans in moments of crisis turn to the state media to find out what they are not told on the private channels. The revolution has its own newspapers that have bridged the gap with private circulation. It has been less able to draw audiences in large numbers in television but after a decade of the revolution the picture is less one-sided. The Venezuelan social media sites are places of constant battles between opposed narratives. As computer ownership has increased, it is harder for the opposition to spread fear and hysteria though it is used to threaten Chavistas or non-Chavistas who question the keyboard warriors.

The President understood that communication was not just through the usual media. In 2010, the Bolivarians began training teenage "communication guerrillas" who would have "mobility, autonomy, versatility... they do not have to wait for someone to lay down the line but that they automatically act and respond". They used graffiti, loudspeakers, pamphlets and cultural expressions as forms of street communication. The programme yielded results but did not last for long as old habits drove them back to using the usual channels of communication: television and newspapers. Chavez announced in 2008 the Circus of the South for "uniting the potential of Cuba, Venezuela and all the countries of South America. We are going to have a big tent... to tour South America and the Caribbean with a circus that will be a wonderful synthesis of our magic of this new world...Let's have a grand circus, from Mexico to Argentina."



It was more than a quirky idea. He understood popular communication forms better than most on the Left. The idea of a continental circus troupe was situated within what President Chavez called the battle of ideas with the North American culture industry. The circus was one way of reclaiming the streets. He drew on Latin American traditions in wanting to craft a distinctive circus. Revolutions and circus do go together. The Soviets understood the propaganda value of circus within and beyond the borders and drew on the great love of the Russian people for the circus tradition, stretching back to at least the court of Catherine the Great. There were no less than 50 travelling troupes in the Soviet Union, where circus was king. Oleg Popov, the Sunshine Clown, was not only among the best in his genre but was also privileged by the status of clowns who were excused for their steady stream of subversive jokes. More recently, acrobats, unicyclists, stilt-walkers and clowns have played their part in the counter-globalisation mobilisations. The national circus company has fared better than the communication guerrilla programme and become a big part of Venezuela's emerging cultural landscape though not quite the touring circus company of the South that Chavez wanted it to be.

Chavez put a lot of his prodigious energy in foreign policy from the beginning of his government. His first visits were to the OPEC nations to stabilise oil prices that had been declining in large part because the market was flooded with petroleum. Venezuela was one of the countries that produced as much as it could but ended up earning less. Chavez talked the OPEC members into respecting the quotas and the prices began to rise. When the petroleum strike in Venezuela ended with his victory in 2003, he had the resources to supply the Central American and Caribbean nations petroleum at preferential terms. The creation of PetroCaribe took out the cash and resource-strapped Caribbean islands from the U.S. diplomatic orbit. They had in Chavez a new partner they could do business with and Venezuela made sure that these countries did not allow U.S. bases on their territories. The Venezuelan President saw Latin American integration as part of the Bolivarian revolution and not just a useful way of expanding regional influence. He was central to the creation of ALBA, Unasur and Celac, which were important steps in realising the long-forgotten dream of continental unity. Latin American integration would have happened with or without

him but not even the Right-wing Presidents of the region question the fact that he drove it forward and made it happen considerably quicker. The United States embassy in Caracas recognised that:

"Hugo Chavez continues to try to institutionalize his revolutionary vision for Latin America and his regional leadership by formalizing his socialist ideology; creating and financing new regional political, economic, social and media structures; and trying to reorient existing regional organizations to reflect his "Bolivarian" goals. His efforts directly led to the creation of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA), Petrocaribe, the Banco del Sur regional development bank, humanitarian "missions," and the Telesur and Radio del Sur media outlets. He strongly supported the creation of the Union of South American Nations... he appears determined to shape the hemisphere according to his vision of "socialism in the 21st century," a vision that is almost the mirror image of what the United States seeks... Chavez will remain a significant force in Venezuela, and possibly the region, for the foreseeable future."

Early this century, when very few countries dared to cross the United States, then inebriated with the notion of a new American century, Chavez challenged its hegemony in Latin America with astonishing courage. At that time, even his friends thought he was being foolhardy. In March 2007, George Bush began a five-nation farewell tour of Latin America, stopping over at Brazil, Colombia, Uruguay, Guatemala and Mexico. There were criticisms that he had forgotten the continent in his crusading wars and the U.S. President thought he would charm it with fine words, a \$75-million aid programme to help Latin Americans learn English and \$385 million for housing and medical assistance. Bush was more unpopular in the continent than any other U.S. President. Washington had singled out Chile and Mexico, both loyal allies, for not voting in favour of the Iraq war at the United Nations. He had warned Mexico that this might result in "future discipline" and Chile was told that its free trade agreement would be postponed indefinitely. While the Bush administration was preparing for war in Iraq, more than one South American country was facing imminent financial chaos. It started with Argentina where the banking system collapsed and

huge numbers of Argentineans lost their savings and pension. In only six months more than a million and a half of them became the "new poor". Between October 2000 and August 2002, Argentina saw five Presidents and five economy ministers, many of them having to flee rioting on the streets. The United States refused to help, saying it could not play the part of "economic fire chief". When the crisis extended to Brazil, the U.S. Treasury Secretary refused to extend financial support, saying, "Any new money would likely be stolen by corrupt officials and end up in some Swiss account". At the same time, it was pouring millions of dollars into the Turkish economy with its unstable banks and even higher levels of corruption. Many Republican leaders saw President Lula as a closet Communist and a friend of Castro. They were right about the second bit.

George Bush was met with lukewarm official receptions and heated street protests. There were violent riots in Brazil. In Guatemala, Indians cleansed the site of an ancient Mayan capital that he visited. In Colombia, a decoy convoy was used to trick demonstrators waiting for him. Adding to Bush's anguish was Chavez's parallel tour. The Venezuelan President mischievously denied he had embarked on a parallel five-nation tour of Argentina, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Haiti and Jamaica. "It is a coincidence that Mr Bush arrives in Brasilia and almost at the same time I arrive in Buenos Aires; that Mr Bush arrives in Montevideo and almost at the same time I am still in Buenos Aires; that Mr. Bush arrives in Colombia and I arrive in Bolivia." Throughout his tour, Chavez made fun of Bush, insulted him and warned Latin Americans against "the little imperial gentleman from the North". Bush, he said, was "a political cadaver... He exhales the smell of the political dead and he will soon be cosmic dust that will disappear from the stage." He spoke against the U.S. efforts to promote ethanol production in Latin America to supply its domestic market as "irrational and unethical". He described Bush as a symbol of domination and his own tour as "a cry of rebellion against the domination". Whereas George Bush offered fine words, Chavez announced concrete projects of integration. He offered to build a petroleum refinery in Nicaragua, a humanitarian fund for Haiti with Cuban help to double the oil supplies and rescue helicopters and tractors for Bolivia where, he said, "he who wants to construct the reign of god on the earth goes by Socialism and he who wants to

go directly to hell goes by capitalism". Chavez's shadow tour was a diplomatic first: no other Latin American President had publicly taunted a U.S. President during a state tour and turn it into a public relations disaster.

Chavez's defiance of the United States pre-dated the parallel tour. In 2002, within days of the United States bombing Afghanistan, he denounced on television the killing of an Afghan family and famously said that terror could not be fought with more terror, asking Washington to rectify its ways. That marked him out as a bogeyman for the Western media. He opposed the invasion of Iraq and visited it, travelling by road from Iran to meet Saddam Hussein. He publicly aligned himself with Iran, Syria and Libya of Colonel Gaddafi. He broke off diplomatic relations with Israel when it attacked Gaza in 2009. He backed Syria and Libya when NATO threatened them and supplied Syria with free diesel. Tripoli was bombed into submission and Gaddafi assassinated but Chavez refused to change his mind. "The tragedy in Libya is just beginning," he said then, and events proved him right about Libya and Syria. It lost him friends in the West, even among those who were normally supportive. He was criticised for his "unpleasant foreign associations" but Chavez had his own analysis that the United States had entered a more violent phase in its foreign policy that he saw as a danger for his country and the world. He based his foreign policy on working for a multi-polar world and aligning with China, Russia and Iran. He developed close relations with Teheran and build up a rapport with President Ahmedinajad. When we meet, the devils go crazy, he told Ahmedinajad, who was a profound anti-Marxist in his youth but now called Chavez a trench mate. The alliance with Iran helped Venezuela with housing and industrial technology. Bicycles built with Iranian help were named 'Atomic' when the Western media began a campaign that the factory where these were being produced was a secret uranium processing facility.

Venezuela's diplomatic gaze before the revolution was fixed on the United States. It sold vast quantities of oil to it and imported most of what it needed from there. Chavez radically altered the course of his diplomacy and courted China with his customary energy and charm, visiting Beijing six times. Venezuela's trade with China was less than \$500 million a year before 1999 and is now worth more

than \$20 billion. It supplies China with 600,000 barrels of oil daily which will increase to a million barrels a day once the new oil fields in the Orinoco belt are developed, the same quantity that it ships to the United States. For Venezuela, this is an insurance policy against Washington. Chavez said the trade relationship between the two countries extended from the subsoil (petroleum) to the skies through the satellite programme. China launched Venezuela's first satellite, Simon Bolivar, in 2008 and trains Venezuelan technicians and scientists of the fledgling space industry. The Chinese are the major financier of development projects in Venezuela through the China-Venezuela Fund. With its trillions of dollars in foreign reserve, it makes sense for China to free up a fraction and Venezuela repays what it borrows by supplying oil. Venezuela turns to China for technology in housing, construction, power, transport, hospital equipment, consumer electronics, crime prevention and military hardware. Chavez did not want to substitute one dominant importer for another. He made sure in his dealings with Chinese companies that they invested in production facilities in Venezuela. For China, Venezuela is its fourth largest market in Latin America, a secure source for petroleum supplies and a valuable political ally in the continent. For Venezuela, China is the perfect foil in displacing the United States as the largest economy but one that does not make political demands on it or interfere in its internal affairs.

Chavez courted Russia (and Byelorussia) with the same intensity. He saw in Russia an alternative source for weaponry and another ally in countering Washington. Venezuela has modernised its armed forces with billions of dollars of weapons, ranging from the shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles, attack helicopters, combat aircraft, tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, armoured personnel carriers, multiple rocket launchers, self-propelled howitzers, self-propelled mortars, assault rifles, sniper rifles and ammunition. The Venezuelan military has been training a large numbers of snipers for a guerrilla war if the United States invades it and Russia is the main source for hardware. Chavez wanted to set up his country's defence industry with Russian help and sell military equipment to other Latin American countries so that they no longer would have to depend on the United States or be blackmailed by it. The two countries have a common interest in their oil and gas industries. Gazprom and PDVSA have signed agreements for a mixed company

that will exploit and market petroleum in the Orinoco belt. The agreement with Gazprom allows Venezuela to acquire petroleum technology. Venezuela has vast deposits of gold and other valuable minerals which it wants Russia to develop. The two countries have a joint bank to finance development projects in housing, construction and automobile sectors. Russian companies are building thousands of housing blocks for the housing mission programme and Russian companies produce buses, trucks and tractors. In 2011 alone, commercial exchange between the two countries increased tenfold.

Venezuela sells little to Russia that could have been a lucrative market for agricultural export had the country not lost its capacity to produce food. At one point, Chavez asked Putin if there was anything Venezuela could sell and the Russian President suggested it export flowers. This provided the impetus for reviving the production of flowers, which had become another victim of the import mania. Russia sees Latin America as an alternative supplier of its agricultural necessities after it stopped imports from the European Union as a response to sanctions imposed by Brussels over developments in the Ukraine. Ecuador, Argentina, Colombia, Peru and Bolivia, which do have an agricultural base, will benefit from the Russian market but not Venezuela although it can claim the credit for drawing the continent to Russia's attention. Chavez and Putin found common cause and over the years developed a personal friendship. They both saw the United States as an unstable economic parasite that lived beyond its means and transferred the burden of its problems to the world economy. Western sanctions against Russia have made it look for new allies and in the changing political landscape of Latin America it has rediscovered its strategic interest that it lost after the Cuban missile crisis and the economic collapse after perestroika. Venezuela before Chavez had little interest in a global diplomatic or even economic reach. It was content selling and buying from the United States and having a presence in Europe, where the elites went for their numerous vacations or sent their children for education. Chavez forged a different network of allies and trade partners, some happy to have his oil but ignoring his politics while others found in him a fellow traveller. The Project for a New American Century, a 21<sup>st</sup> century global version of Manifest

Destiny, pushed even Right-wing Latin American nations to work with Venezuela.

Chavez kept a good distance from Socialist ideological orthodoxy. His version of 21<sup>st</sup> century Venezuelan Socialism was an eclectic mix of Christianity, Bolivar and Karl Marx. His own discovery of Socialism happened far from the world of fractious coffee-sipping urban Leftist intellectual and political circles. If a parrot were a Marxist, he said, it would be an orthodox Marxist. In fact, he probably did not qualify to be called a Marxist if one goes by Lenin's definition in *The State and Revolution*. Just accepting the existence of class struggle does not make someone a Communist, Lenin argued. He also had to accept the doctrine of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Chavez dismissed the notion of proletarian dictatorship, saying it should be understood as proletarian democracy. He was initially interested in the idea of a Third Way between capitalism and Socialism, but experience taught him that capitalism had to be dismantled, not contained. He rejected the Soviet version of the state which, in effect, was the omnipotent employer and owner of the entire productive apparatus. The Venezuelan state, he said, would not operate every taxi or barber's shop. Neither did he copy the Chinese version of market Socialism where the state controls the strategic sector and sets the private industry free in other parts of the economy, overlooking the savage exploitation of workers in the interest of capital accumulation. Venezuelan Socialism is also different from that of his good Cuban friends who developed a state economy with very limited individual participation but ended up with a bloated bureaucracy, inefficiencies and distortions that held back growth.

Chavez's Socialism had to deal with the paradoxes of a petroleum economy. A country where petrol is cheaper than bottled water has one of the highest rates of inflation in the world. The state directly receives more dollars than any other country in Latin America yet has the highest currency black market rate in the continent. It has a very high university going population but 80% of the jobs demand low educational levels. Unemployment is low and falling but is high among skilled professionals. Venezuelans love their subsidised petrol and electricity. The average Venezuelan household with its tropical weather consumes more electricity than that of Germany with its long winters. Beer and cigarettes are

cheap but medicine is expensive. Smuggling takes out about 30% of Venezuelan goods from the country. Colombia barely produces enough petroleum for domestic consumption but is a petroleum exporter thanks to the thousands of barrels of Venezuelan oil being smuggled into its market. Venezuela has millions of hectares of fertile land but not the farmers to take advantage of it. Food prices are controlled and subsidised in state markets. Thousands of Venezuelans queue up at dawn at the private and state supermarkets to buy in bulk and sell them through informal street markets or smuggle everything for which there is a market to Colombia and the Caribbean islands. Venezuela produces little but the people are voracious consumers. The Venezuelan bourgeoisie lives off imports and makes its money through the countless new supermarkets where the imported goods bought with cheap dollars provided by the state are sold at astronomical sums. At times, the speculative profit rates range between 10 and 20,000% and 100% profit margins are commonplace.

The Bolivarian Socialist model is scrambling to meet these persistent structural problems that have become deeply enmeshed in the habits of its people. The state share of the economy is only 30%, principally through its control of the petroleum industry and its majority presence in the banking sector. It has developed a significant presence in the telecommunications, food and transport sectors and has overtaken the private sector in housing construction. It is debating its economic model, aware of the reality that the country will have to co-exist with a dominant private economy for a long time. Rather than expand the state to a point it becomes a drain on the economy, it is speaking of diminishing the subsidies on petrol and electricity. There is more supervision of the private economy to plug the loopholes of dollar misuse and speculation. It has started an all-out offensive against smuggling. It is experimenting with the communes developing their own industries and businesses and there are functioning examples of that happening, though on a miniscule scale. The economic model it debates will be on how it intends to balance the state, private and communal sectors of the economy and what measures it will take in adopting a mixed economy. It seems Caracas is having a good hard look at Tito's Yugoslav example. But for all its many failings, Bolivarian Socialism has given its people real benefits. It has brought healthcare, education and housing to the population

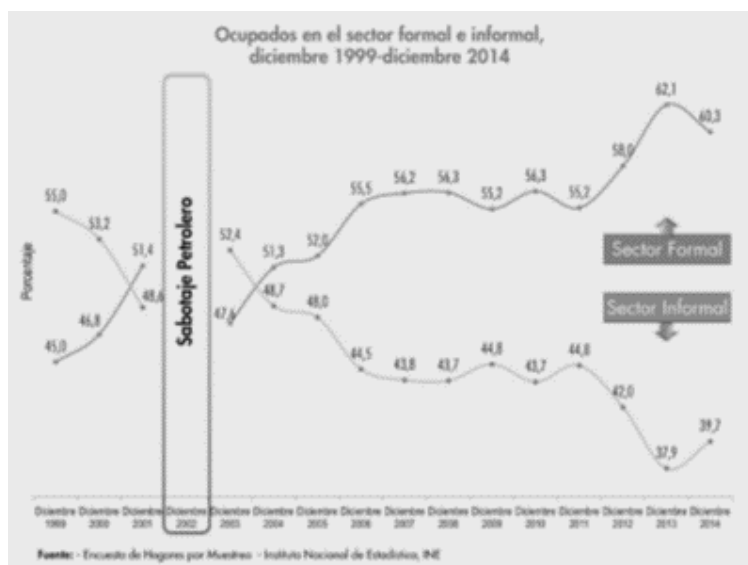


and reduced poverty dramatically. There is no starvation despite artificial shortages. Its Socialist experiment has not been stained with authoritarianism. There are regular multi-party elections and a large opposition. It has a politically interested and articulate population, a diverse and free media and a better human rights record than countries that lecture it. The country is emerging from the cultural and literary backwardness of the pre-Chavez years. But a cultural revolution in Venezuela with a new work ethic will neither be easy nor quickly achieved.

The experience of the Bolivarian state goes against the apocalyptic year zero vision of Socialism in which new revolutionary rulers drive changes at gunpoint. Socialist Venezuela is an overlapping and uncomfortable coexistence of a corrupt old state and culture with grassroots political participation. The Bolivarian state retains many of the vices of the old order just as in the daily habits of its people and the way politics is conducted. It can be a frustrating country for those who come seeking utopia. Chavez was the midwife of a society pregnant with change. He helped create an environment in which his country could be rebuilt on new values away from capitalism. As ever, the Americans were quick to spot the change. Max G. Manwaring, Professor of Military Strategy of the U.S. Army War College, described him as an astute warrior whose "Bolivarian dream has stirred the imaginations of many Latin American and other interested observers around the world. He has provided a seductive Leninist blueprint for a utopian future. Anyone can take it, adapt it for his own use, and use it anywhere in the world to bring about radical political, economic, and social change." That is a conjecture best left for the future but what is not in doubt is that in Venezuela itself Chavismo has struck deep roots and the memory of the man himself remains a live presence. It looks like that the revolution will not be easily crushed.



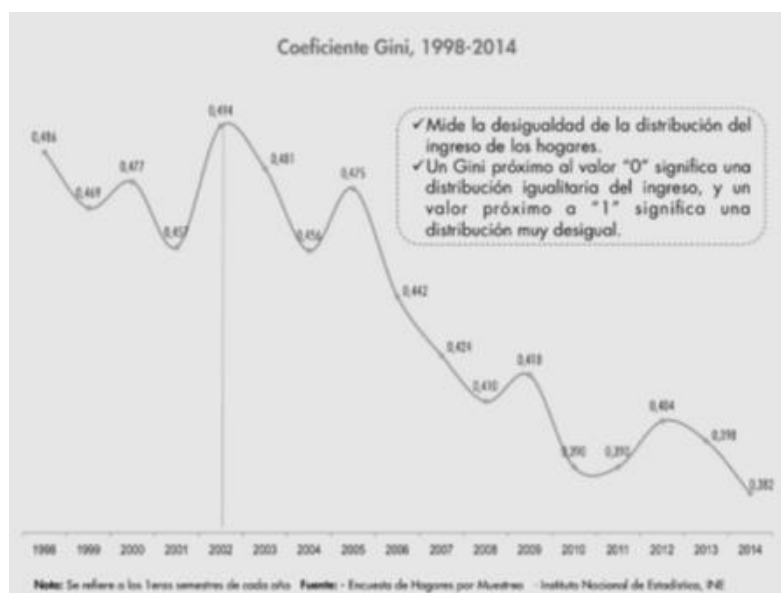
# VENEZUELA IN NUMBERS



Number of workers in formal & informal sectors, Dec 1999-Dec 2014.  
The spike in the graph was during the petroleum strike.



Unemployment rate, Dec 1999-Dec 2014.  
The spike in the graph was during the petroleum strike.

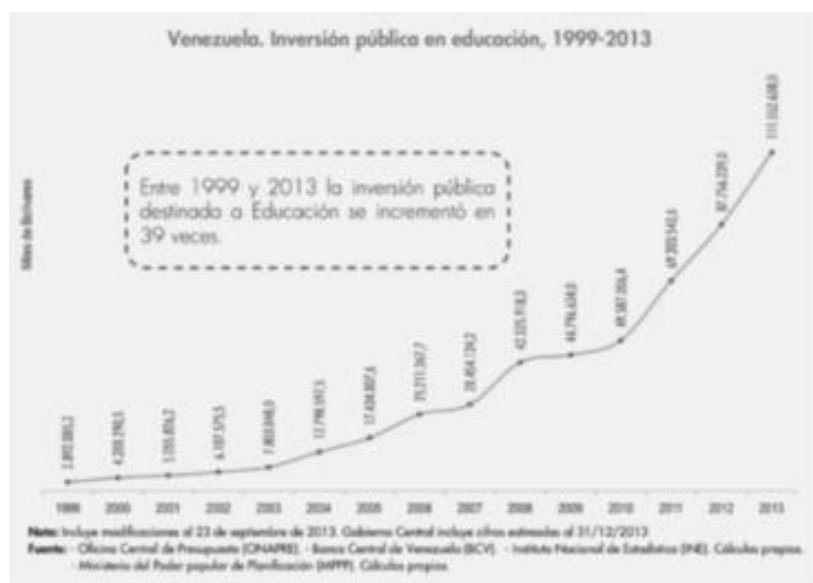


Gini coefficient, 1998-2014.

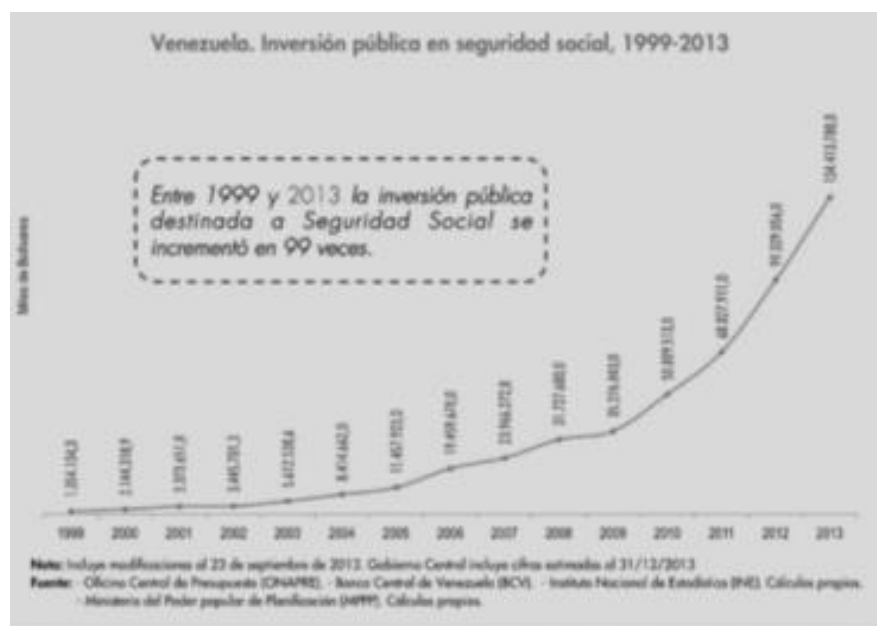
The spike in the graph was during the petroleum strike.



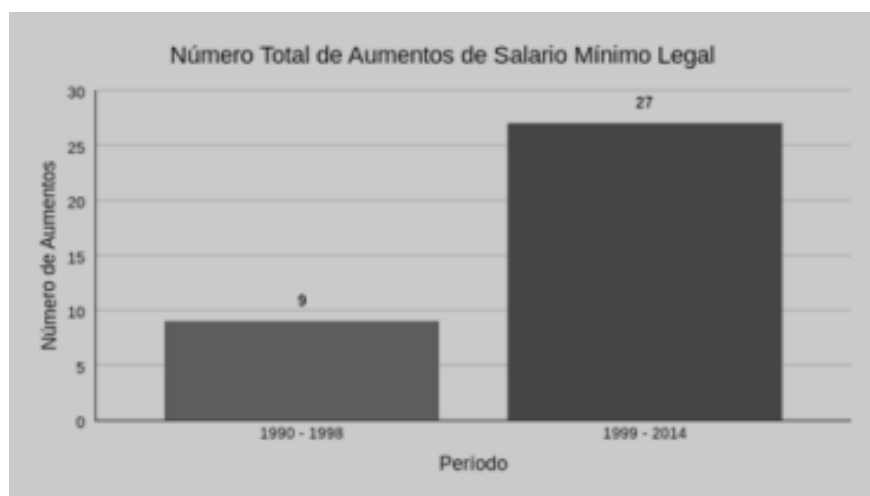
Number of pensioners, 1998-2014, a growth of 439.6%



Inversion in public education, 1999-2013, an increase of 39 times



Inversion in social security, 1999-2013, increased by 99 times



Number of times minimum wages were increased,  
1990-1998 and 1999-2014

Source: Venezuela in numbers, Planning Ministry, Caracas

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Las Campañas Admirables del Presidente Hugo Chávez (President Hugo Chavez's admirable campaigns), compilation  
El programa de la MUD (MUD programme) by Romain Migus  
Venezuela violenta (Violent Venezuela) by Orlando Araujo