

The Shadow of Bolivar

One of the most interesting aspects of Chavez and his political movement has been the central role given over to the man known as The Liberator - Simon Bolivar. The outstanding leader in the struggle for Venezuela's independence from Spanish colonial rule in the early 19th century, Bolivar went on to liberate four other South American countries - Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia (his namesake).

Inspired by the republican ideal of a sovereign people shaping its own political future, Bolivar also cherished a vision of a united and independent Latin American continent to rival the US to the north. However, after his series of remarkable military victories Bolivar was sidelined by the local elites who took over the running of the newly independent countries, and this vision was never realized. Bolivar died in 1830.

For the next 120 years Venezuela was ruled - with a few short-lived exceptions - by a series of despots and dictators until 1958. In January of that year a civilian-military alliance overthrew the then dictator Perez Jimenez and for the first time the promise of real democracy and an open society was in the offing for Venezuela. This hope was soon crushed, however, when the two mainstream political parties Accion Democratica and COPEI decided to share power exclusively between themselves under an agreement known as the Pact of Punto Fijo.

Spurred on by the US government, the aim of Punto Fijo, was to exclude the Left from political life, and this imbalance in the political system was to characterize Venezuela for the next 40 years. While the oil boom of the 1970's lasted, this political set-up could be held together by massive corruption and graft, but with the fall in oil prices in the 1980's the cracks began to show.

Although hundreds of billions of dollars had come into the country there had been an abject failure to re-distribute the wealth, so that by the 1990's 80% of Venezuela's 23 million people were living in poverty. During this period the figure of Bolivar appears in popular culture as a symbol of an alternative society based on real democracy, civil rights and patriotism (cf the songs of Ali Primera).

It was against this background that Hugo Chavez launched his failed coup attempt in February 1992. For several years Chavez and a group of officers within the army, inspired by their studies of Bolivar, had begun to refine a political philosophy they termed Bolivarianism. They aimed to resurrect some of the central values of Bolivar, that in their view had been lost in modern Venezuela: national independence, economic self-sufficiency, and an ethic of service to the people.

In the aftermath of the failed coup of '92, Chavez became a popular symbol of resistance to the old political system, particularly among the country's poor. After his release from prison in 1994 he set about building a broad political movement, bringing together other parties of the left such as MAS, Patria Para Todos, and the Communist Party, as well as his own party the Movement of the Fifth Republic. This movement set out an agenda broadly defined as Bolivarian - inspired by Bolivar's vision of a democratic society with real rights for all its citizens.

In the presidential elections of 1998 Chavez won 56% of the vote. Once in power Chavez set in motion a process of redrafting the country's constitution. National elections were held to a Constituent Assembly where representatives of political parties and civil society drew up a new "Magna Carta", as Chavez termed it at the time. This new Constitution was passed by popular referendum in 1999. Under its terms the country became officially known as the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

One of the central tenets of this Bolivarian Constitution is its focus on participative democracy, the idea that citizens should be involved as much as possible in the

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process of political decision making. To this end, the Constitution allows, among other things, for any elected official - including the President - to be removed from office by popular referendum half way through their term. The Chavez government has also encouraged the creation of what are known as Bolivarian Circles, neighborhood and community organizations which focus on popular education and activism. The aim is to provide an arena for people to become aware of their rights under the new Constitution - such as free healthcare and education - and to lobby their public representatives or local government wherever there is a failure to implement them.

Much of the private media campaign in Venezuela has sought to demonise the Bolivarian Circles, claiming they are a front for armed militias. The evidence on the ground seems to suggest, however, that the Circles are a progressive phenomenon, providing a much-needed sense of empowerment and "ownership" over the political process amongst those previously marginalized.

In addition, Chavez has attempted to resurrect Bolivar's ideas of a unified Latin America. While the elites of these countries have been wary of supporting his position, the realities on the ground, with millions from Chile to Chiapas feeling the negative effects of Washington's neo-liberal economic policies, point to a fertile ground for such a vision. Two hundred years on The Liberaor still casts a long shadow.

For more on the historical roots of the Bolivarian Movement read "*In The Shadow of The Liberator: Hugo Chavez and the Transformation of Venezuela*" by Richard Gott ■