

Hugo Chavez Leaves a Prodigious Legacy That Will Never Die

His Reforms Uplifted All Latin America, Not Just Venezuela

By [Asad Ismi](#)

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Great revolutionary leaders never die. They are immortalized in the hearts of the people they have served. As Aleida Guevara, daughter of Che Guevara, put it: "My father lives in a mountain of people." So it is with Hugo Chavez, the phenomenal socialist president of Venezuela who died from cancer on March 5, to be mourned by the millions of people all over the world who revered and admired him.

As the most popular President of Venezuela for the last 14 years, Chavez's accomplishments were legion. Not only did he transform Venezuela into a socialist welfare state overnight, but he also led the Latin American Revolution on a continental scale – a revolution which liberated 12 countries in the region from U.S. imperialist domination. This accomplishment made Chavez an international hero to people in the Global South and North, who looked to him as an example and inspiration in their struggle against Western neocolonialism.

Since its inception, Venezuela had been dominated by a rich white élite descended from Europeans who ruled over a poor indigenous, mestizo, and Afro-Venezuelan majority. This U.S.-backed élite monopolized wealth and power and kept more than 50% of Venezuelans mired in poverty even though their country had become the world's fifth biggest oil producer. With Washington's support, the Venezuelan upper class proved to be one of the most corrupt in the world, looting the country's oil wealth for 40 years. When the people protested, they were killed, as in the Caracazo massacre in 1989 when security forces slaughtered 3,000 people. Because of this brutal repression and imposed poverty, a popular movement arose and spread, eventually electing Hugo Chavez the country's President in 1998. Chavez then launched the Bolivarian Revolution, which turned out to be the forerunner of the broader Latin American Revolution.

A former army colonel, Chavez came from a poor family and was part indigenous and part Afro-Venezuelan. He was elected President four times, and by the largest majority in 40 years. Including regional contests, the Chavez government won a total of 16 elections. Determined to end what he called the reign of "savage capitalism," Chavez redistributed Venezuela's wealth by massively expanding free health care and education, and through land reform and public subsidies. These social reforms angered the United States, which tried three times to get rid of him – once through a failed military coup, then through fomenting an oil strike and other economic attacks, and then by a bungled assassination attempt.

Before Chavez, more than half the people in Venezuela lived in poverty, a figure that he had

succeeded in reducing by half before his death. He instituted free universal health care and free education, raising the country's literacy rate to an astonishing 100%. He implemented land reforms and created government supermarkets which cut the cost of food by 40%. Before these major social improvements, 70% of Venezuelans had no access to basic medical care, and 40% of them were illiterate. Chavez also increased the minimum wage by more than 600%, reduced unemployment from 20% to 6%, and moved Venezuela up four positions in the United Nations Human Development Index.

A major emphasis of the Bolivarian Revolution was on improving health care for the Venezuelan people, and the Chavez government built thousands of new clinics, hospitals, and diagnostic centres across the country. The government's health care program is called Mission Barrio Adentro, which means "inside the neighbourhood." This health care program has treated and cared for 24 million patients out of a population of 26 million. The program has sent doctors into urban shantytowns and rural villages that had rarely before seen medical practitioners. When initially some Venezuelan doctors refused to go to these remote regions, the Chavez government brought in 46,000 Cuban doctors willing to travel anywhere. Since then, the Venezuelan doctors have joined their fellow Cuban physicians in visiting all the isolated communities.

Mission Barrio Adentro is only one health program among many. Mission Milagro, meaning "miracle," has restored eyesight to about 300,000 Venezuelans. Mission Gregorio Hernandez takes care of disabled people who were formerly excluded from medical attention. Mission Sonrisa, meaning "smile," provides free dental care. Infant mortality in Venezuela has been reduced from 21 per 1,000 babies to 13, the third lowest rate in South America. More than a hundred medications are distributed free by the government, which has set up subsidized pharmacies that sell other medicines at a 40% discount.

While ensuring the Venezuelan people's physical well-being through free health care, the Bolivarian Revolution liberated their minds through public education. In less than three years, the Chavez government's educational missions taught three million Venezuelans how to read and write, completely eliminating illiteracy. Now Venezuela has one of the highest levels of literacy in the world. The missions for education include Mission Robinson for illiteracy, Mission Ribas for high schools, and Mission Sucre for universities. More than 3,000 new schools have been built. Two million children have been added to the educational system, a 25% increase. Adults without high school education have been given this service in neighbourhood schools. More than one in three Venezuelans is enrolled in high school and university, and 10 million Venezuelans are now studying. The effect of this revolutionary education is to raise the political consciousness of a people long kept uneducated and apathetic by their capitalist overseers.

Along with health care and education, the Bolivarian Revolution has given the Venezuelan people ample land and food. Food security had long been a crucial problem for Venezuelans mired in abject poverty before Chavez took power. Under Mission Mercal, the government set up 8,000 subsidized supermarkets and small markets all over the country, making food affordable for eight million Venezuelans a month who shop there. The stores are part of the Corporation of Socialist Markets or COMERSO, a publicly-owned network of subsidized supermarkets and food stores. The government also nationalized the Exito supermarket chain.

The Chavez government's land reform program, called Mission Zamora, promotes equitable

land ownership and food security. Seventy percent of the land in Venezuela is owned by only 3% of the people, who often leave it unused. For this reason, the country has had to import 70% of its food needs. Mission Zamora has broken up idle large landed estates, called latifundios, and redistributed 3.4 million acres of land to 15,000 peasant families, as well as set up 50,000 co-operatives for the new owners. These steps have boosted food production and started Venezuela well on the path towards food self-sufficiency.

As Dr. Maria Paez Victor, a Venezuelan-Canadian sociologist, explained to me: "It is not just Chavez, it is Chavez with the people of Venezuela." The massive success of the Chavez government can be explained by the fact that it is an instrument of the poor majority in Venezuela, who have risen to claim their country and its resources. So, along with health care, education, land and food, the Bolivarian Revolution literally gave power to the people and Chavez became the first ruler in Venezuela's history to ensure the participation of the poor in politics.

The Bolivarian Constitution, passed by referendum in 1999, declares that Venezuela is a participatory democracy. To promote this system, Chavez set up 35,000 communal councils and 130,000 grassroots "Bolivarian Circles" in neighbourhoods and workplaces across Venezuela. These circles have helped raise mass consciousness among the poor for the first time, and the communal councils have transferred real power to them. These councils are part of the birth of a new state. As Chavez declared, "Poverty is eliminated by giving power to the people."

The Bolivarian Revolution is named for Simon Bolivar, who liberated South America from Spanish colonialism in the 19th century. Bolivar wanted South American countries to unite, mainly to prevent another imperial power, the United States, from succeeding Spain in dominating them. On the continental level, Chavez was the most prominent leader of the Latin American Revolution, which integrated and united countries economically and politically and eliminated U.S. domination of the region. As President Chavez said in 2009, "Another world is possible... not only possible, but necessary... and this world is being born in Latin America and the Caribbean today. Today in this land of Bolivar, Marti, San Martin, Fidel, O'Higgins, Artigas, Alfaro, we are living in a revolution, a real revolution."

Chavez led the formation of several integrative organizations that united almost the whole continent, including: 1) the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), a regional bloc made up of 33 nations that includes every country in the Americas except for the U.S. and Canada. This grouping is aimed at replacing the U.S.-dominated Organization of American States. 2) the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), an integration of 12 South American countries which consists of a parliament, a presidential forum, a secretariat, and a military alliance. 3) the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our Americas (ALBA), a progressive trade alliance made up of eight countries. 4) Banco del Sur (Bank of the South), a development bank for Latin America. 5) Telesur, (the television network of the South), and 6) PetroSur (the petroleum company of the South).

With CELAC, UNASUR, the Bank of the South, PetroSur, and ALBA, an entirely new socialist-oriented continental economy is being created. This economy does not function according to capitalist market rules, but rather responds to the development needs of the Latin American people.

Infuriated by the impressive progress of the Bolivarian and Latin American Revolutions, the United States and the Venezuelan élite tried and failed repeatedly to overthrow Chavez,

leading to the expulsion of the U.S. ambassador. As the enforcer of neoliberalism and imperialism, the U.S. government has overthrown many governments in Latin America and around the world for attempting to redistribute wealth and power. Through coups, invasions, assassinations, covert wars, and economic coercion (that is, through state terrorism), the U.S. has perpetrated the genocide of about one million Latin Americans since 1950.

The Chavez government triumphed over U.S. imperialism because it organized the Venezuelan people to defend the gains of the Bolivarian Revolution. As President Chavez said in 2009: "Ten years ago, the Bolivarian revolution arrived in Venezuela, pushed forward by a powerful popular movement, and we have ten years of resisting aggressions — terrorism, sabotage by the U.S. empire — yet here we are on our feet and prepared to survive 100 more years of aggressions if we have to."

Given Chavez's organization of the Venezuelan people and his success in ensuring their participation in the Bolivarian Revolution, the continuation of his incredibly progressive achievements appears secure. His anointed successor, Vice-President Nicolas Maduro, is a staunch Chavista and has made clear that he will continue the President's revolutionary policies. New elections were scheduled for April, and Maduro is widely favoured to win them. He is working class, a former bus driver and union leader. He said recently about Chavez: "Mission accomplished, Comandante! Fully accomplished: with pain, with sacrifice, not even sickness stopping him. Nothing stopped him and no one is going to stop our people. Now it is up to us... let us construct socialism with equality and truth."

***Asad Ismi** is the CCPA Monitor's international affairs correspondent. He is author of the radio documentary "The Latin American Revolution," which has been aired on 40 radio stations, reaching a global audience of about 33 million people. This article is the 18th in a series on the Latin American Revolution. For his publications, visit www.asadismi.ws*

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