

The Life and Death of Hugo Chávez in Perspective

Millions around the world pay homage

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By Gloria La Riva

Millions of Venezuelans, Cubans and people around the world have paid homage to Latin American revolutionary Hugo Chávez Frias in recent days. Some 33 heads of state and representatives of 50 governments attended Chávez's funeral.

In the first hours that he lay in state, 2 million grief-stricken Venezuelans bid their beloved Comandante farewell, in a line that stretched as long as five miles. From Mexico City to New York City, countless vigils are being organized by supporters, inspired by Chávez's revolutionary spirit and life.

But President Barack Obama—in a 60-word statement with not one word of condolence—just promised more “policies that promote democratic principles” in Venezuela.

✘ Obama's cynical attitude sums up Washington's role ever since Hugo Chávez became president. The U.S. government has spent billions of dollars to back the Venezuelan right-wing elite in one plot after another to try to overthrow him and the Bolivarian Revolution.

Hugo Chávez's tragic and untimely death may have whetted the U.S. government's appetite, but the imperialists are deeply mistaken if they think they can turn back history.

The massive outpouring in Venezuela is not just an expression of deep sentiment for a fallen leader. The cries of “We are Chávez!” and “Chávez Vive!” are a resounding commitment by the people, the masses who brought him back from the grip of a U.S.-sponsored military coup in 2002.

Today, they are more determined than ever to defend the Bolivarian Revolution.

Preparing for the future

When Chávez announced on December 8, 2012, that he had to return to Cuba immediately for another cancer surgery, he was very likely aware that his condition was terminal and little time remained.

He conducted himself to the end of his days in the heroic manner that characterized his life.

In what would be his last public pronouncement to the Venezuelan people, Chávez said: “If something were to happen, I repeat, if I were to become incapacitated in any way, not only should Nicolás Maduro conclude the [current] term, as the Constitution dictates, but, in my firm opinion, as full as the moon, irrevocable, absolute, total—if in that scenario new

presidential elections are convened, as mandated by the Constitution—you should vote for Nicolás Maduro as president of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. I ask that of you from my heart.”

He was never able to speak to his people again.

Those fateful words are extremely important, because now the election for a new president must be held within 30 days of Chávez’s death.

On March 9, the National Elections Commission set April 14 as the date to elect a new president of Venezuela. The date was extended to give time for nominations, preparation of voting machines, and a 10-day campaign period and to accommodate a Sunday date.

In the meantime, Maduro has been sworn in as interim president, and is the designated candidate for the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). Presumably, the right-wing opposition candidate will be Henrique Capriles, who lost to Chávez last Oct. 7.

Chávez’s enormous authority enabled him to convey to the 7 million members of the PSUV what is today a matter of pressing urgency, to unite behind a revolutionary candidate who can once again defeat the opposition.

Chávez recognized that his word would carry enormous weight among the masses, to weather the onslaught of right-wing propaganda and assault sure to come after his death.

Hugo Chávez had an abiding confidence in the people because he understood them. He came from them, from the most humble roots of Venezuelan society.

Hugo Chávez’s youth

Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías was born July 28, 1954, in the small, remote village of Sabaneta, Barinas state in western Venezuela, the second of six children. Hugo and his older brother Adán—today governor of Barinas—were raised by their grandmother Rosa Inés, while the parents Elena and Hugo, schoolteachers with a meager income, lived close by with the youngest four. This was a common tradition among extended families.

Some of the stories of Chávez’s youth come from his neighbors and relatives, in the book “Our Chávez” by Cuban authors Rosa Miriam Elizalde and Luis Baez.

The village of Sabaneta had no electricity during their childhood, and the family struggled to get by. In one moving account, little Hugo was turned away from his first day at school because his grandmother couldn’t afford to buy him a pair of shoes.

But he learned resourcefulness from his elders, selling candies at school that his grandmother made, to bring home some coins.

Chávez’s young life imbued in him an enormous spirit of solidarity and generosity with the people, especially the most oppressed. As president, one of Chávez’s very first acts was to provide free school lunches for hundreds of thousands of poor children. School attendance shot up dramatically.

Years later, in July 2001, when this reporter joined thousands of people as they marched with Chávez down the streets of Caracas, he patiently took the time to receive embraces

and handwritten notes from the people, to hear their encouragement or petitions for help. He made sure their needs were addressed.

Yet Chávez did not see himself as an individual whose good works alone would be enough to resolve Venezuela's problems.

He began to adopt a concept of revolutionary societal change while in Venezuela's Military Academy, which he entered at the age of 17 in 1971.

In the academy and army, Chávez's radicalization was fueled by various factors, his brother Adán's socialist influence, his own growing rebellion against military corruption and abuse, and the broader scenario of Latin American struggle.

In "Our Chávez," he explains his political maturation: "The Hugo Chavez who started at the Academy was a boy from the countryside, a plainsman with aspirations to be a professional baseball player; four years later, a second lieutenant emerged who had set out along the revolutionary path. ...

"At that stage, I began to read Fidel, Che, Mao, Plekhanov, Zamora ... and books like *The Bigwigs* by Américo Martín; 'The role of the individual in history'; 'What is to be done'. And of course, I had already begun a thorough study of Bolívar."

In 1982, Chávez formed a secret organization, the MBR 200 (Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement), of like-minded officers inside the military willing to take on the government. He would be their commander in the historic attack on the government in 1992.

Meanwhile, Carlos Andrés Pérez became president—his second term—in 1989. He immediately accepted the economic dictates of the International Monetary Fund in exchange for a multi-billion-dollar loan. The neo-liberal agreement suddenly doubled gasoline prices and hiked the price of other goods. It caused a massive spontaneous rebellion by the people in the streets of Caracas.

The uprising of Feb. 27, 1989, and government massacre that followed is known as the "Caracazo." It is estimated that up to 3,000 people were murdered by security forces.

This brutal repression convinced Chávez and his colleagues of the need to deepen their preparations.

In the pre-dawn hours of Feb. 4, 1992, Chávez and his movement carried out their military action to attempt a takeover of Miraflores presidential palace, but they were attacked as soon as they approached. Traitors inside the movement had revealed their plans.

Historic words: "For Now"

By the end of the day, Pérez's military defeated Chávez's forces and was about to carry out an assault on troops loyal to him in two other regions. To avoid further losses of his men, Chávez appeared on television to tell his troops to stop the fighting.

In his TV appeal, the rebel lieutenant colonel said, "Comrades, unfortunately, for now, the goals we set for ourselves have not been reached in the capital. ... we here in Caracas were not able to take power. ... I assume responsibility for this Bolivarian military movement."

Those two words, “for now,” electrified the vast majority of the population. Never before had a soldier taken on the corrupt government to vindicate the people, and he had promised to return.

In prison, Chávez became such a hero in the eyes of the oppressed, that during the presidential elections, wherever the bourgeois candidates spoke, people at the political rallies would chant for his freedom. The next president, Rafael Caldera Rodríguez, pardoned Chávez and his colleagues in March 1994.

At first reluctant to participate as a candidate in Venezuelan elections, because of his distrust of capitalist elections, Chávez was urged on by many people. He finally decided to run for president in the 1998 elections.

With no funds and only broken-down vehicles for transport, he traversed the country to denounce the traditional capitalist parties of Democratic Action and COPEI as those responsible for the country’s crisis. Huge crowds mobbed him every step of the way.

Chávez won in December 1998 with 56.2 percent of the vote under the banner of his Fifth Republic Movement. He assumed office in February 1999.

The words he spoke in his oath were unlike those of any previous president. “I swear that with this moribund constitution, I will carry out and push for the necessary democratic transformations so that the new republic will acquire a new Magna Carta fitting for the new times.”

In a process that has been repeated in Ecuador and Bolivia, the new Bolivarian Constitution of Venezuela was adopted in 1999. It was the 26th constitution in Venezuela’s history, but the first that was ever approved by popular referendum, with 71.78 percent of the vote.

Free health care, free education, a ban on privatizing the country’s national resources, recognition of Indigenous and other minorities to their own culture and language, and a democratization of the political process are a few of the provisions.

Chávez was swept into office with a massive outpouring of support of the most oppressed, and he responded with all his energies and power at hand to initiate immediate and urgent programs to address the poorest sectors of the population, as well as working to empower the people at the base to defend the gains.

But it was after the right-wing’s fascist coup of April 2002—when people mobilized by the tens of thousands to demand his return and the military forces loyal to Chávez rescued him from the fascists—that the acceleration of the revolutionary process became possible.

Hugo Chávez’s legacy

Before Hugo Chávez, Venezuela was a classic model of capitalist underdevelopment: obscene opulence for the Venezuelan elite and foreign capitalists, and poverty and hopelessness for the majority. Under Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolutionary process, a whole panorama of revolutionary social programs lifted millions of Venezuelans up out of despair.

His courage and vision transformed his people into a combative force that has learned to defend what it has gained, the right to housing, health care, literacy, education, culture and

most of all, independence and dignity.

Before Hugo Chávez, Latin America was fractured and under the heel of neo-liberal policies that benefited only the banks and big business. In the 1990s, Cuba was virtually alone in the Western Hemisphere, struggling mightily to defend socialism after the demise of the Soviet Union.

Chávez embraced the Cuban Revolution as his own and proudly defied U.S. imperialism, by forming together with Cuba the historic alliance of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas—ALBA. After decades of the sacking of Latin America and the Caribbean, an unprecedented process of anti-imperialist unity and transformation has begun in the continent.

One of Hugo Chávez's greatest legacies was his fight for a socialist Venezuela, to expand and make permanent the gains that have been fought for so far.

From the viewpoint of Marxism, history and especially revolutionary change are made by great social forces and through the agency of class struggle. Marxism rejects the method of bourgeois historiography that places the role of "great men" as the central factor in the major events and developments that shape an entire historical era.

But Marxism also recognizes that particular individuals have played an indispensable part in molding together the social and political forces that created entirely new historical forces. The Russian Revolution for instance changed the character of the class struggle everywhere for the 20th century. Lenin played a unique and indispensable role during the revolutionary process, and without him it is unlikely that the Bolsheviks could have seized and retained state power.

Fidel's leadership was another such example. His initiation and leadership of the Cuban Revolution was indispensable to its victory.

Lenin and Fidel did not simply ride a wave of revolution; they actually helped mold the forces that led to a re-shaping of history

So too with Hugo Chávez. The unique role he played in the last 15 years also molded together the forces of Latin American integration and unity on an anti-imperialist and socialist basis and changed the dynamics of the class struggle not only in Venezuela but throughout the continent. Chavez, like Lenin or Fidel was not a "superman," but his role in the creation of ALBA and the larger unfolding process in Latin America was unique and indispensable during the past decade.

Today, the people and the struggle have been dealt a major blow with the loss of this great leader. But the social and political revolutionary movement that he catalyzed will offer up other leaders dedicated to pursuing the movement until final victory.

Upon his death, comrade Chavez has entered history not only as revolutionary life well led but as a source of confidence for all those who have been shaped by the movement he inspired—the millions who are oppressed and have been the object of extreme exploitation but have entered the political process now as actors demanding to be the shapers of their own historical destiny.

Hugo Chávez Frias Presente!

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