



HUGO Boss

The paratrooper turned president: Chávez has consolidated political power and kept his allies loyal.

*Ever heard of a regime that gets stronger the more opposition it faces? Welcome to Venezuela, where the charismatic president, Hugo Chávez, is practicing a new style of authoritarianism. Part provocateur, part CEO, and part electoral wizard, Chávez has updated tyranny for today. | **By Javier Corrales***

As the 20th century drew to a close, Latin America finally seemed to have escaped its reputation for military dictatorships. The democratic wave that swept the region starting in the late 1970s appeared unstoppable. No Latin American country except Haiti had reverted to authoritarianism. There were a few coups, of course, but they all unraveled, and

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constitutional order returned. Polls in the region indicated growing support for democracy, and the climate seemed to have become inhospitable for dictators.

Then came Hugo Chávez, elected president of Venezuela in December 1998. The lieutenant colonel had attempted a coup six years earlier. When that failed, he won power at the ballot box and is now approaching a decade in office. In that time, he has concentrated power, harassed opponents, punished reporters, persecuted civic organizations, and increased state control of the economy. Yet, he has also found a way to make authoritarianism fashionable again, if not with the masses, with at least enough voters to win elections. And with his fiery anti-American, anti-neoliberal rhetoric, Chávez has become the poster boy for many leftists worldwide.

Many experts, and certainly Chávez's supporters, would not concede that Venezuela has become an autocracy. After all, Chávez wins votes, often with the help of the poor. That is the peculiarity of Chávez's regime. He has virtually eliminated the contradiction between autocracy and political competitiveness.

What's more, his accomplishment is not simply a product of charisma or unique local circumstances. Chávez has refashioned authoritarianism for a democratic age. With elections this year in several Latin American states—including Mexico and Brazil—his leadership formula may inspire like-minded leaders in the region. And his international celebrity status means that even strongmen outside of Latin America may soon try to adopt the new Chávez look.

THE DEMOCRATIC DISGUISE

There are no mass executions or concentration camps in Venezuela. Civil society has not disappeared, as it did in Cuba after the 1959 revolution. There is no systematic, state-sponsored terror leaving scores of *desaparecidos*, as happened in Argentina and Chile in the 1970s. And there is certainly no efficiently repressive and meddlesome bureaucracy à la the Warsaw Pact. In fact, in Venezuela, one can still find an active and vociferous opposition, elections, a feisty press, and a vibrant and organized civil society. Venezuela, in other words, appears almost democratic.

But when it comes to accountability and limits on presidential power, the picture grows dark. Chávez has achieved absolute control of all state

institutions that might check his power. In 1999, he engineered a new constitution that did away with the Senate, thereby reducing from two to one the number of chambers with which he must

commanding one armed force was not enough for Chávez. So in 2004, he began assembling a parallel army of urban reservists, whose membership he hopes to expand from 100,000 members to 2 million. In

Colombia, 10,000 right-wing paramilitary forces significantly influenced the course of the domestic war against guerrillas. Two million reservists may mean never having to be in the opposition.

As important, Chávez commands the institute that supervises elections, the National Electoral Council, and the gigantic state-

owned oil company, PDVSA, which provides most of the government's revenues. A Chávez-controlled election body ensures that voting irregularities committed by the state are overlooked. A Chávez-controlled oil industry allows the state to spend at will, which comes in handy during election season.

Chávez thus controls the legislature, the Supreme Court, two armed forces, the only important source of state revenue, and the institution that monitors electoral rules. As if that weren't enough, a new media law allows the state to supervise media content, and a revised criminal code permits the state to imprison any citizen for showing "disrespect" toward government officials. By compiling and posting on the Internet lists of voters and their political

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negotiate. Because Chávez only has a limited majority in this unicameral legislature, he revised the rules of congress so that major legislation can pass with only a simple, rather than a two-thirds, majority. Using that rule, Chávez secured congressional approval for an expansion of the Supreme Court from 20 to 32 justices and filled the new posts with unabashed *revolucionarios*, as Chavistas call themselves.

Chávez has also become commander in chief twice over. With the traditional army, he has achieved unrivaled political control. His 1999 constitution did away with congressional oversight of military affairs, a change that allowed him to purge disloyal generals and promote friendly ones. But



Strong arms: Chávez has created an army of 100,000 loyal civilian reservists and plans to expand the force to 2 million.

tendencies—including whether they signed a petition for a recall referendum in 2004—Venezuela has achieved reverse accountability. The state is watching and punishing citizens for political actions it disapproves of rather than the other way around. If democracy requires checks on the power of incumbents, Venezuela doesn't come close.

POLARIZE AND CONQUER

Chávez's power grabs have not gone unopposed. Between 2001 and 2004, more than 19 massive marches, multiple *cacerolazos* (pot-bangings), and a general strike at PDVSA virtually paralyzed the country. A coup briefly removed him from office in April 2002. Not long thereafter, and despite obstacles imposed by the Electoral Council, the opposition twice collected enough signatures—3.2 million in February 2003 and 3.4 million in December 2003—to require a presidential recall referendum.

But that was as far as his opponents got. Chávez won the referendum in 2004 and deflated the opposition. For many analysts, Chávez's ability to hold on to power is easy to explain: The poor love him. Chávez may be a *caudillo*, the argument goes, but unlike other caudillos, Chávez approximates a bona fide Robin Hood. With inclusive rhetoric and lavish

spending, especially since late 2003, Chávez has addressed the spiritual and material needs of Venezuela's poor, which in 2004 accounted for 60 percent of the country's households.

Yet reducing Chávez's political feats to a story about social redemption overlooks the complexity of his rule—and the danger of his precedent. Undeniably, Chávez has brought innovative social programs to neighborhoods that the private sector and the Venezuelan state had all but abandoned to criminal gangs, though many of his initiatives came only after he was forced to compete in the recall referendum. He also launched one of the most dramatic increases in state spending in the developing world, from 19 percent of gross domestic product in 1999 to more than 30 percent in 2004. And yet, Chávez has failed to improve any meaningful measure of poverty, education, or equity. More damning for the Chávez-as-Robin Hood theory, the poor do not support him en masse. Most polls reveal that at least 30 percent of the poor, sometimes even more, disapprove of Chávez. And it is safe to assume that among the 30 to 40 percent of the electorate that abstains from voting, the majority have low incomes.

Chávez's inability to establish control over the poor is key to understanding his new style of dictatorship—call it "competitive autocracy." A competitive autocrat



Cry for help: Opposition protesters clash with police during a march in a pro-Chávez neighborhood in December 2002.

PAUL BRONSTEIN/GETTY IMAGES

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has enough support to compete in elections, but not enough to overwhelm the opposition. Chávez's coalition today includes portions of the poor, the bulk of the thoroughly purged military, and many long-marginalized leftist politicians. Chávez is thus distinct from two other breeds of dictators: the unpopular autocrat who has few supporters and must resort to outright repression, and the comfortable autocrat, who faces little opposition and can relax in power. Chávez's opposition is too strong to be overtly repressed, and the international consequences of doing so would in any case be prohibitive. So Chávez maintains a semblance of democracy, which requires him to outsmart the opposition. His solution is to antagonize, rather than to ban. Chávez's electoral success has less to do with what he is doing for the poor than with how he handles organized opposition. He has discovered that he can concentrate power more easily in the presence of a virulent opposition than with a banned opposition, and in so doing, he is rewriting the manual on how to be a modern-day authoritarian. Here's how it works.

Attack Political Parties: After Chávez's attempt to take power by way of coup failed in 1992, he decided to try elections in 1998. His campaign strategy had one preeminent theme: the evil of political parties. His attacks on *partidocracia* were more frequent than his attacks against neoliberalism, and the theme was an instant hit with the electorate. As in most

Chávez's populism is grandiose, but selective. His supporters receive unimaginable favors while detractors are paid in insults.

developing-country democracies, discontent with existing parties was profound and pervasive. It attracted the right and the left, the young and old, the traditional voter as well as the nonvoter. Chávez's antiparty stand not only got him elected, but by December 1999 also allowed him to pass one of the most antiparty constitutions among Latin American democracies. His plan to concentrate power was off to a good start.

Polarize Society: Having secured office, the task of the competitive autocrat is to polarize the political system. This maneuver deflates the political center and







maintains unity within one's ranks. Reducing the size of the political center is crucial for the competitive autocrat. In most societies, the ideological center is numerically strong, a problem for aspiring authoritarians because moderate voters seldom go for extremists—unless, of course, the other side becomes immoderate as well.

The solution is to provoke one's opponents into extreme positions. The rise of two extreme poles splits the center: The moderate left becomes appalled by the right and gravitates toward the radical left, and vice versa. The center never disappears entirely, but it melts down to a manageable size. Now, our aspiring autocrat stands a chance of winning more than a third of the vote in every election, maybe even the majority. Chávez succeeded in polarizing the system as early as October 2000 with his Decree 1011, which suggested he would nationalize private schools and ideologize the public school system. The opposition reacted predictably: It panicked, mobilized, and embraced a hard-core position in defense of the status quo. The center began to shrink.

Chávez's supporters, meanwhile, were energized and not inclined to quibble as he colonized institutional obstacles to his power. This energy within the movement is essential to the competitive autocrat, who actually faces a greater chance of internal dissent than unpopular dictators because his coalition of supporters is broader and more heterogeneous. So he must constantly identify mechanisms for alleviating internal tensions. The solution is simple: co-opt disgruntled troops through lavish rewards and provoke the opposition so that there is always a monster to rail against. The largesse creates incentives for the troops to stay, and the provocations eliminate incentives to switch sides.

Spread the Wealth Selectively: Those expecting Chávez's populism to benefit citizens according to need, rather than political usefulness, do not understand competitive autocracy. Chávez's populism is grandiose, but selective. His supporters will receive unimaginable favors, and detractors are paid in insults. Denying the opposition spoils while lavishing supporters with booty has the added benefit of enraging those not in his camp and fueling the polarization that the competitive autocrat needs.

Chávez has plenty of resources from which he can draw. He is, after all, one of the world's most powerful CEOs in one of the world's most profitable

Hugo Chávez's Rules for the Aspiring Dictator			
Out <i>Old-Fashioned Authoritarianism</i>		In <i>Chavismo</i>	
	Ban legislative bodies	Revise rules so that sweeping changes require fewer votes	
	Ban opposition parties	Antagonize them	
	<i>Desaparecidos</i> : Make your political opponents disappear	<i>Aparecidos</i> : Make new voters suddenly appear on electoral rolls	
	Keep a low international profile	Parade abroad with an antiglobalization message	
	Consolidate power within the military	Create an army of reservists	
	Spend on big public-works projects	Spend on ad hoc social services	
	Appoint experts to handle economic affairs	Appoint experts to handle electoral strategies	
	Use torture, curfews, and intimidation to keep people in line	Allow rampant crime to keep people off the streets	
	Ban the vote or conduct massive fraud	Publicize lists of voters and their voting habits	
	Warn about "destabilizing" domestic groups	Warn about the dangers of George W. Bush	

businesses: selling oil to the United States. He has steadily increased personal control over PDVSA. With an estimated \$84 billion in sales for 2005, PDVSA has the fifth-largest state-owned oil reserves in the world and the largest revenues in Latin America after PEMEX, the Mexican state-oil company. Because PDVSA participates in both the wholesale and retail side of oil sales in the United States (it owns CITGO, one of the largest U.S. refining companies and gas retailers), it makes money whether the price of oil is high or low.

But sloshing around oil money isn't polarizing enough. Chávez needs conflict, and his recent expropriation of private land has provided it. In mid-2005, the national government, in cooperation with governors and the national guard, began a series of land grabs. Nearly 250,000 acres were seized in August and September, and the government announced that it intends to take more. The constitution permits expropriations only after the National Assembly consents or the property has been declared idle. Chávez has found another way—questioning land titles and claiming that the properties are state-owned. Chávez supporters quickly applauded the move as virtuous Robinhoodism. Of

course, a government sincerely interested in helping the poor might have simply distributed some of the 50 percent of Venezuelan territory it already owns, most of which is idle. But giving away state land would not enrage anyone.

Most expropriated lands will likely end up in the hands of party activists and the military, not the very poor. Owning a small plot of land is a common retirement dream among many Venezuelan sergeants, which is one reason that the military is hypnotized by Chávez's land grab. Shortly after the expropriations were announced, a public dispute erupted between the head of the National Institute of Lands, Richard Vivas, a radical civilian, and the minister of food, Rafael Oropeza, an active-duty general, over which office would be in charge of expropriations. No one expects the military to walk away empty-handed.

Allow the Bureaucracy to Decay, Almost: Some autocracies, such as Burma's, seek to become legitimate by establishing order; others, like the Chinese Communist Party, by delivering economic prosperity. Both types of autocracies need a top-notch bureaucracy. A competitive autocrat like Chávez

TOP LEFT: MARIANA BAZORE/REUTERS; BOTTOM LEFT: JOSE AGUIRRE/REUTERS; RIGHT: KIMBERLY WHITE/REUTERS

doesn't require such competence. He can allow the bureaucracy to decline—with one exception: the offices that count votes.

Perhaps the best evidence that Chávez is fostering bureaucratic chaos is cabinet turnover. It is impossible to have coherent policies when ministers don't stay long enough to decorate their offices. On average, Chávez shuffles more than half of his cabinet every year. And yet, alongside this bureaucratic turmoil, he is constructing a mighty electoral machine. The best minds and the brightest *técnicos* run the elections. One of Chávez's most influential electoral whizzes is the quiet minister of finance, Nelson Merentes, who spends more time worrying about elections than fiscal solvency. Merentes's job description is straightforward: extract the highest

possible number of seats from mediocre electoral results. This task requires a deep understanding of the intricacies of electoral systems, effective manipulation of electoral districting, mobilization of new voters, detailed knowledge about the political proclivities of different districts, and, of course, a dash of chicanery. A good head for numbers is a prerequisite for the job. Merentes, no surprise, is a trained mathematician.

The results are apparent. Renewing a passport in Venezuela can take several months, but more than 2.7 million new voters have been registered in less than two years (almost 3,700 new voters per day), according to a recent report in *El Universal*, a pro-opposition Caracas daily. For the recall referendum, the government added names to the registry list

The Everywhere Man

Oil money and an expansive ideology mean that Chávez's influence knows no bounds.

When Hugo Chávez travels, controversy rarely trails far behind. In recent years, the Venezuelan leader's peregrinations have come to resemble an anti-American road show. He makes it a point to visit countries on the outs with the United States—Cuba, Iran, and Libya—where he is feted as a brave and progressive statesman.

But Chávez is peddling more than an anti-American tirade. His potent mix of ideology and oil money is increasingly leading him to meddle in the internal politics of his neighbors, much to the frustration of some Latin American leaders. "Chávez is orchestrating a campaign throughout Latin America to inject himself into the electoral processes of Bolivia, Colombia, Mexico, and Nicaragua," says former Mexican Foreign Minister Jorge Castañeda.

A favored Chávez tactic is funding left-leaning civil society

groups with political aspirations. In Nicaragua, he has stumped for Marxist Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega and offered him cheap oil. Chávez has supported Brazil's Landless Workers Movement, which is pushing for dramatic land redistribution. The Venezuelan president has also been active in Bolivia, where he has funded the *cocaleros*, a powerful group of small-farm owners that opposes coca eradication efforts. Evo Morales, the Bolivian leftist leader, has even taken to calling Chávez "*mi comandante*."

Rumors of Chávez's machinations are everywhere in Latin America—and Chávez seems



Fidelity: The Venezuelan president has a loyal friend in Cuba.

content to see them spread. Ecuador's *El Comercio* newspaper recently reported that members of an underground leftist movement there had received weapons training in Venezuela. In Mexico, there are published reports that the Venezuelan Embassy has become a hub for antigovernment activities. Venezuela, it appears, is not enough for Chávez. —FP

up to 30 days prior to the vote, making it impossible to check for irregularities. More than 530,000 foreigners were expeditiously naturalized and registered in fewer than 20 months, and more than 3.3 million transferred to new voting districts.

Chávez's electoral strategists have also figured out how to game the country's bifurcated electoral system, in which 60 percent of officeholders are elected as individuals and the rest of the seats go to lists of candidates compiled by parties.

The system is designed to favor the second-largest party. The party that wins the uninominal election loses some seats in the proportional representation system, which then get assigned to the second-largest party.

To massage this system, the government has adopted the system of *morochas*, local slang for twins. The government's operatives create a new party to run separately in the uninominal elections. And so Chávez's party avoids the penalty that would normally hit the party that wins in both systems. The benefit that would otherwise go to an opposition party gets captured instead by the same people that win the individual seats—the precise outcome the system was designed to avoid. In the August 2005 elections for local office, for instance, Chávez's party secured 77 percent of the seats with only 37 percent of the votes in the city of Valencia. Without *morochas*, the government's share of seats would have been 46 percent. The legality of many of the government's strategies is questionable. And that is where controlling the National Electoral Council and the Supreme Court proves useful. To this day, neither body has found fault with any of the government's electoral strategies.

Antagonize the Superpower: Following the 2004 recall referendum, in which Chávez won 58 percent of the vote, the opposition fell into a coma, shocked not so much by the results as by the ease with which international observers condoned the Electoral Council's flimsy audit of the results. For Chávez, the



Against the wall: Chávez survived a coup attempt and a referendum seeking his recall.

opposition's stunned silence has been a mixed blessing. It has cleared the way for further state incursions, but it left Chávez with no one to attack. The solution? Pick on the United States.

Chávez's attacks on the United States escalated noticeably at the end of 2004. He has accused the United States of plotting to kill him, crafting his overthrow, placing spies inside PDVSA, planning to invade Venezuela, and terrorizing the world. Trashing the superpower serves the same purpose as antagonizing the domestic opposition: It helps to unite and distract his large coalition—with one added advantage. It endears him to the international left.

All autocrats need international support. Many seek this support by cuddling up to superpowers. The Chávez way is to become a ballistic anti-imperialist. Chávez has yet to save Venezuela from poverty, militarism, corruption, crime, oil dependence, monopoly capitalism, or any other problem that the international left cares about. With few social-democratic accomplishments to flaunt, Chávez desperately needs something to captivate the left. He plays the anti-imperialist card because he has nothing else in his hand.

The beauty of the policy is that, in the end, it doesn't really matter how the United States responds. If the United States looks the other way (as it more or less did prior to 2004), Chávez appears to have won. If the United States overreacts, as it increasingly has

in recent months, Chávez proves his point. Aspiring autocrats, take note: Trashing the United States is a low-risk, high-return policy for gaining support.

CONTROLLED CHAOS

Ultimately, all authoritarian regimes seek power by following the same principle. They raise society's tolerance for state intervention. Thomas Hobbes, the 17th-century British philosopher, offered some tips for accomplishing this goal. The more insecurity that citizens face—the closer they come to living in the brutish state of nature—the more they will welcome state power. Chávez may not have read Hobbes, but he understands Hobbesian thinking to perfection. He knows that citizens who see a world collapsing will appreciate state interventions. Chávez therefore has no incentive to address Venezuela's assorted crises. Rather than mending the country's catastrophic healthcare system, he opens a few military hospitals for selected patients and brings in Cuban doctors to run ad hoc clinics. Rather than addressing the economy's lack of competitiveness, he offers subsidies and protection to economic agents in trouble. Rather than killing inflation, which is crucial to alleviating poverty, Chávez sets price controls and creates local grocery stores with subsidized prices.

Rather than promoting stable property rights to boost investment and employment, he expands state employment.

Like most fashion designers, Chávez is not a complete original. His style of authoritarianism has influences. His anti-Americanism, for instance, is pure Castro; his use of state resources to reward loyalists and punish critics is quintessential Latin American populism; and his penchant for packing institutions was surely learned from several market-oriented presidents in the 1990s.

Chávez has absorbed and melded these techniques into a coherent model for modern authoritarianism. The student is now emerging as a teacher, and his syllabus suits today's post-totalitarian world, in which democracies in developing countries are strong enough to survive traditional coups by old-fashioned dictators but besieged by institutional disarray. From Ecuador to Egypt to Russia, there are vast breeding grounds for competitive authoritarianism.

When President Bush criticized Chávez after November's Summit of the Americas in Argentina, he may have contented himself with the belief that Chávez was a lone holdout as a wave of democracy sweeps the globe. But Chávez has already learned to surf that wave quite nicely, and others may follow in his wake. **FP**

Want to Know More?

For a brief compilation of some of Hugo Chávez's most controversial statements on politics, personalities, and culture, visit www.ForeignPolicy.com.

The rise of competitive authoritarianism remains relatively unexplored terrain. A notable exception is Lucan A. Way's "Authoritarian State Building and the Sources of Regime Competitiveness in the Fourth Wave: The Cases of Belarus, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine" (*World Politics*, January 2005). Marina Ottaway offers a broader perspective on the phenomenon in *Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003).

The colorful Chávez has spawned a healthy literature of his own. The British journalist Richard Gott has written an engaging account of Chávez's turbulent rise to power in *Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2005). A more varied and theoretical discussion of Venezuela's slide into authoritarianism can be found in *The Unraveling of Representative Democracy in Venezuela* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), edited by Jennifer L. McCoy and David J. Myers. Moisés Naím explains how Chávez outsmarted the American superpower in "A Venezuelan Paradox" (*FOREIGN POLICY*, March/April 2003).

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