

REVOLUTIONS AND THEIR AFTERMATHS: PART ONE — ARGENTINA'S PERÓN AND VENEZUELA'S CHÁVEZ

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The Cuban revolution of 1959 has ended in a prolonged period of stagnation. A new revolution has started, although it is still unclear whether it will come from the top or the bottom of the political system. Its destination remains unknown.

If Cuba's future is still undetermined, it is not for lack of prediction or proscription. Most Cuban specialists, including myself, have produced numerous papers on the subject. Each writer has had his own models. A Marxist methodology of economic determinism is a familiar example, even though Marx would be dismayed by the general conclusion that Cuba will inevitably return to a free market economy. Models that focus on the machinations of the Castro brothers and their cronies or the military have produced some of the more pessimistic forecasts. Equally common has been to look at the pattern in other countries moving away from socialist models. Russia provides an example of the latter approach as well as the machination model. Those who wrote the Helms-Burton legislation seemed to have believed, or at least hoped, there would be a popular uprising, followed by a military government that might produce a Chilean model. In my own papers, I have suggested the Chinese economic reform model might be best for purely selfish American national security interests, while hoping that the influence of the surrounding democratic countries would eventually produce political reform as well.

In this and in a planned subsequent paper, I am taking a different approach, one based more on theories of political culture. Specifically, I take two common precepts from political development theory and explore their relevance to several examples from Latin America.

In a debate with Karl Marx in the First International, the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin argued that the nature of the revolution would determine the future society. (Marx argued for a revolution based on the dictatorship of the proletariat.) Proponents of Bakunin's view can point to the Marxist nature of the Russian and Chinese revolutions and their totalitarian after-maths, and the Islamic revolution in Iran and the mullah-dominated theocracy that followed. Nasser's military revolution in Egypt in the 1950s led to a military-dominated government that still predominates today. Chaotic revolutions with no clear leader or ideology have dominated the Arab Spring, with the result that instability has followed in Tunisia and Libya and until recently in Egypt. On the positive side, it is possible to argue that the American Revolution, directed by a representative Congress, resulted in the strong democracy that exists today in the United States. This is essentially a theory of change.

The second precept in political development theory is that political cultures change very slowly and that revolutions often lead to societies that are very similar to those that preceded the revolution. Thus, the military government that replaced the Morsi government in Egypt can be viewed as a return to the norm, as can the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua. This precept can either coincide or compete with the earlier precept. Thus, historians have argued that the American Revolution came about as the result of a demand of the colonists for the same political rights as their fellow citizens in England, and that the colonies' internal governments provided the models for the newly-created United States. Even the totalitarian regimes of the Stalinist Soviet Union and Mao's China

have precedents in their countries' histories. This is essentially a theory of continuity.

These precepts are not of course the only theories of what happens after a revolution. Wars, decolonization, economic crisis and "great men" theories certainly abound as do their examples. However, there are plenty of examples of outcomes influenced by the two precepts discussed above. They also have the advantage of being observable before or just after a revolution and therefore give us data for prediction.

I have had the great opportunity to have served or studied in four countries that have undergone revolutionary upheavals in the last half of the Twentieth century, Argentina, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Cuba and, while making no claim as to being a historian, have often fallen back on these two precepts to understand the countries in which I worked. This essay will focus on Argentina and Venezuela as examples of the two precepts of change and continuity. In a subsequent paper, I plan to deal with Nicaragua and then draw on all three case studies to make some tentative observations on the future of Cuba.

ARGENTINA AND JUAN PERÓN

Our history could begin at any time, but we will start in 1930 when a coup by General José Felipe Uriburu replaced more than 40 years of Constitutional government in Argentina. Uriburu's predecessor was Hipólito Yrigoyen, a populist and founder of the Radical Civic Union Party (UCR). An economic downturn as a result of the great depression, divisions among the radical party and Yrigoyen's plans to nationalize the oil industry have all been cited as factors that led to a loss of popular support for his government and his downfall.

The next 13 years are variously called "The Conservative Restoration" or the "Infamous Decade." A conservative political union called the *Concordancia*, an alliance between the military, strong economic interests and disaffected Radicals governed the country. It was somewhat nationalist, "corporatist," pro-church and supported landed and foreign (primarily British) investments.¹ Elections, of limited legitimacy, were held in 1933, and General Agustín Pedro

Justo replaced Uriburu. Juan Perón was still a captain at this time and a supporter of Justo. Throughout this period, and for the first time in modern Argentine history, military officers, even at a junior level, began to participate and at times to direct the political process.

Revolution of 1943

By 1943, the political amalgamation of the *Concordancia* was coming apart. Elections were deemed as corrupt and Argentina was finding it very difficult to maintain its position as a neutral nation in WWII, particularly in its relations with the United States. A coup in 1943 ousted the government of Ramón Castillo.

Key to the coup was the United Officers Group (GOU), of which Perón was a founding member. United against the *Concordancia*, but not much else, the new group was inherently unstable. General Rawson, the new president, announced a new cabinet comprised mostly of civilians. He was gone in four days, replaced by General Pedro Pablo Ramírez. Ramírez tried to repair relations with U.S., only to be undermined by Nationalists with Axis sympathies. After nine months, General Edelmiro Farrell replaced him. Farrell would wait until a month before Germany's surrender to enter the war on the allied side.

It was during Farrell's presidency that Juan Perón began a rapid rise to power. He had already been successful at military politics, but had played a back-room role. He had served as a military observer in Italy, where he had been impressed by Mussolini, and as a member of the faculty of the Superior Military Academy during 1931–36.

Perón was early in recognizing the potential power of labor and the poor. Under Ramírez, he sought only a minor position as head of the labor department, at that time not even a ministry and mainly concerned with labor statistics. Perón quickly converted it into a Ministry. Argentina already had a history of labor unions, but they were badly fragmented.

Perón gained control of labor unions by supporting their demands, settling strikes in their favor, recog-

1. "Corporatist" is a loosely defined term, commonly used to describe a political ideology found in Italian Fascism and various political groups in Latin America. In this essay, I use it to describe a political belief that it is the government's role to broker and direct various interest groups.

nizing new unions, and establishing a limit of one union to each industry and requiring their prior approval by the government. He used the latter power to place his own people in leadership positions and became the legitimate voice and face of the social reforms of the 1943 revolution.

Perón did not neglect his military roots during this period. With close ties to General Farrell, Farrell appointed him Minister of War, where he continued to assiduously cultivate junior officers as he had at the Superior War Academy.

Many senior officers and opponents in the military saw Perón's rise as a threat and they forced his resignation and arrest on October 9, 1945. Mass demonstrations by the General Confederation of Labor forced his release 8 days later. Farrell resigned shortly afterward and Perón won new elections in February 1946. Shortly before his election, he married his longtime companion, Eva Braun or Evita.

During and immediately after World War II, Argentina accumulated large foreign exchange holdings. International demand for Argentine beef and grains had been high, while the disruption of the War had diverted industrial production in Europe and the United States to war equipment. Argentina had money, but could not spend it. Perón used the revenue and the accumulated reserves to his advantage.

Both as Minister of Labor and during his years of rule, Perón cemented his power with significant labor and social reforms.

- He introduced universal suffrage including the vote for women in 1949.
- A minimum wage was established. Initially, real wages rose. Also introduced were an eight-hour workday, fringe benefits, including paid vacations, protection from dismissals, freedom of speech in labor courts and unemployment insurance.
- To improve income distribution he introduced a progressive income tax and effectively subsidized internal grain prices.
- Government spending significantly increased as he doubled the labor force of the public sector.

He increased government spending on social welfare projects, some real, some Potemkin villages, and with Evita, articulated the aspirations of the poor or the *descamisados*, the shirtless ones. This was uniquely

Perón—no Argentine president, perhaps with the exception of Yrigoyen, had so excited the public, but Yrigoyen was a private person who seldom appeared in public. Perón bought off much of the business sector with loans and tariffs. Pursuit of import substitution policies in Argentina predated Perón, when Argentina found it could not obtain consumer goods from the warring nations of Europe. Perón, however, embraced the policy wholeheartedly and had the money to do it.

Appealing to Argentine nationalism, he nationalized the railroads, banks and telephone companies, mostly owned by British interests. Resentment against the British was high and the nationalizations were popular. The prices of compensation were also high so there was little complaint from the companies.

Almost the only classes that did not benefit from Perón's actions were the large agriculturalists and the related export industries which Perón taxed heavily to pay for his programs. Perón was re-elected in 1952.

Although Perón could probably have easily won the 1952 elections, he continued to use the same tactics he had employed as Labor Minister to silence his critics. He fired over a thousand university professors, closed the training schools of opposition parties, and shut down opposition labor unions. He also seized *La Prensa*, the most prestigious opposition paper, and sold it to the major Peronist trade union.

Perón's Overthrow

Perón eventually outwore his popularity. Many of the policies he had used to gain popularity began to backfire.

The taxes on agricultural exports resulted in a decline of such exports. Foreign exchange reserves were exhausted. Many of the state-owned or -supported import substitution industries could no longer obtain the foreign exchange for needed intermediate imports. Wages fell as unemployment and inflation increased. Perón was forced to oppose wage increases in many industries.

Perón also antagonized the Catholic Church, which had originally supported him. Church support was a reaction against the Radical Party that opposed religious education in the schools. In his second term, however, Perón endorsed legalization of prostitution and divorce and finally, as Church opposition increased, reversed his position on religious education

in the schools. The Church sanctioned him and threatened excommunication in June 1955.

Lingering resentment in the Army and the Navy also increased when Perón reversed his opposition to foreign investment in the Argentina oil industry and began negotiating with foreign firms. The Army and Navy overthrew Perón in September 1955. Perón would spend seventeen years in exile, before coming home to a country willing to take a desperate chance on him for political and economic stability. In those years, the country would go through eight presidents, while trying to deal with the legacy of Perón.

The economy would fluctuate widely as the competing theories of import substitution and liberal economics struggled and alternated in power. The absence of Perón was the key political issue and was an important concern for the military who opposed his return. Governments swung back and forth between elected civilian leaders and military governments.

Perón would come back in 1973 and be reelected President. However, surrounded by corrupt and incompetent advisors, he had no more of a solution to the country's problems than he did in his first years in office. He died in 1975 and Argentina continues to struggle with his aftermath.

Continuity

Despite its many tumultuous and unique aspects, the Peronist revolution and its aftermath were in part simply a continuation of the Argentine political culture. Divisions had always run deep in the country and were often settled with bloodshed. The concept of a single republic versus a loose confederation dominated most of the 19th century. Conflicts between the large agricultural estates and the cities were always present, and the balance of power had already begun to change with heavy immigration in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Although Perón may have played a small part, he was not responsible for the introduction of the military into politics in 1930. As was most of the military, he was impressed with Fascism, particularly Mussolini's brand, and used a "corporatist" model of governing.

Interest in import substitution and making Argentina less dependent on foreign trade arose during WWI. The great depression and WWII accentuated it. A nationalist desire for state control over the oil industry goes back to at least the government of Yrigoyen.

Change

Despite the thread of continuity, the impact of Perón and his revolution on Argentina was enormous, in part because he extenuated many of the more conflicted threads and, in part, because he added many new elements. His role in the military and military politics grew rapidly after 1930 and he was a key participant in the 1943 revolution.

His understanding of the growth of the poor and industrial classes was unique to politicians of his time. His capturing, building and using the labor union movement was new to Argentina and fundamentally altered the pillars of power. His ability to speak to the masses, the *descamisados*, the working class and to represent their interests made him and his wife Evita larger than life and created a persona that remains, even as a concept, a fundamental theme of Argentine politics.

The economic chaos that has plagued Argentina for the last 60 years was due in large part to his restructuring the economy after World War II. More than any earlier President, Perón's "corporatist" approach to governing, which made the state the arbiter of economic interests, created a rent-seeking society. His rhetoric of berating the wealthy and stirring class-consciousness turned that rent seeking into the zero-sum conflict mentality that still exists today.

VENEZUELA AND HUGO CHÁVEZ²

In the fall of 1998, following two years in Havana, I reported to my new post at the American Embassy in Caracas. One of my first tasks was to monitor the election to approve the new Constitution. Among those opposed to Hugo Chávez, there was considerable fear that he would attempt to turn Venezuela into another Cuba, following his hero and role model, Fidel Castro. Many in the Embassy and in Wash-

2. The author wishes to thank Manuel Lander, Venezuelan historian and former senior Foreign Service National at the American Embassy, Caracas, and Hernán Oyarzabal, former Venezuelan Governor to the IMF, for their very helpful comments on an earlier version of this part of the essay. I must give special thanks to the late Janet Kelly, with whom I spent many hours discussing Venezuela's political culture and history. Professor Kelly was perhaps the first to point out the similarities of Hugo Chávez to previous Venezuelan presidents and may have been the best political analyst I knew during my three-year stay in Venezuela.

ington agreed. My own take was quite different. Where others saw Cuba, I saw Argentina. Where others saw Fidel Castro, I saw Juan Perón. I believed that neither Venezuela's history nor the manner in which Chávez took power would allow him to consolidate his power into a totalitarian system, even if he so desired. The parallels to Argentina were not complete – no sense making prognosticating too easy – and the story is far from over, but so far it appears that my judgment was sound.

The Gómez Dictatorship and the Class of 1928

Democratic government is relatively new to Venezuela. Civil war and military governments were the rule for most of Venezuela's history. General Juan Vicente Gómez came to power by coup d'état in 1908 and ruled until his death in 1935. In 1928, student protests began in Caracas. Gómez put them down and jailed many of the students. The jailing sparked new, nationwide demonstrations that caused the students early release and exile.

Several of the student leaders, including future presidents Rómulo Betancourt and Raúl Leoni gained recognition as the class of 1928. They would be largely responsible for the 40 years of democratic rule that started in 1959.

False Start

After the death of Gómez in December 1935, General Eleazar López Contreras, an associate of Gómez took power first as interim president and then by indirect election. Despite López Contreras association with Gómez, he was quick to liberalize much of the harsh measures in place. He allowed the return of the exiles, released prisoners and abolished censorship. He introduced major labor reforms including a minimum wage, the right to strike, unemployment insurance and supervision of labor conditions. Nevertheless, as he moved through his term he banned many demonstrations and forcefully broke a month long labor strike. In 1941 López chose General Isaías Medina Angarita to replace him. Medina quickly legalized political parties, extended suffrage to women, and guaranteed freedom of speech and the press. Free elections for Congress were held in 1943.

Presidential elections were scheduled for 1946, but a split between Medina and López divided their supporters. A military coup ousted Medina. An alliance was formed between the leftist party, Acción Democrática, led by Rómulo Betancourt's class of

28, and a new group of military leaders led by Major Marcos Pérez Jiménez. Betancourt led the new government until elections were held.

During this period, the reforms and social programs of López and Medina were expanded, relying on oil revenues generated by higher taxation. Implementation of proposals made by Medina for agrarian reform begun. In 1948, a novelist and founding member of Acción Democrática, Rómulo Gallegos became the first Venezuelan president directly elected. The military ousted him nine months later and established a Junta headed by Colonel Carlos Delgado Chalbaud. Delgado was assassinated in 1950 and replaced with an interim President. In 1952, Marcos Pérez Jiménez, a leader of both the 1945 and 1948 coups, became President in a fraudulent election.

Pérez Jiménez's rule coincided with rising oil prices and considerable economic growth in Venezuela. As had previous governments, he used the oil revenues to develop national resources, improve public services and undertake massive infrastructure projects. Although many Venezuelans would come to appreciate the national development that occurred during his presidency, Pérez Jiménez was never very popular. To maintain his power he had banned Acción Democrática and the Communist Party, and vigorously suppressed dissent. He used the army to maintain power. Many politicians, including Betancourt and Gallegos went into exile. In 1957, Pérez Jiménez tried to replace general elections with a plebiscite that would allow him to rule indefinitely. This action sparked a general uprising in January 1958, and with rioting in the streets, Pérez Jiménez left the country.

Punto Fijo and Forty Years of Democracy

In 1958, three major parties, Acción Democrática of the center-left, COPEI of the center right, and the Unión Republicana Democrática signed the Punto Fijo Accord. They agreed to respect elections, appoint members of the other parties to ministerial positions, and work to a shared program of government. In 1959, Rómulo Betancourt of Acción Democrática won the election. Raúl Leoni's election in 1964 marked the first democratic transition in Venezuelan history.

The Punto Fijo accord—a pledge to support bipartisan government—came the basis for democratically elected government until 1999. It succeeded, eventually making Venezuela into a two party condominium, dominated by Acción Democrática and COPEI,

although other parties continued to exist. Its support came from all classes of society and, when petroleum dollars were sufficient, it provided for all classes.

With the revenues generated by the 1973 oil crisis, President Carlos Andrés Pérez had the resources to make most of the economic mistakes common to Latin America (and Argentina) at the time – nationalization and import substitution. He nationalized the foreign oil companies, pushed import substitution and substantially increased the nation's foreign debt. The debt rose from 2.8 billion dollars when he took office to 29 billion when he left.

President Luis Herrera Campins won the election in 1979 and initially continued Pérez's policies, accumulating even more debt as oil prices underwent a significant drop. Before his term was over, Herrera Campins reversed his policies, but to little effect. His successor, Jaime Lusinchi, tried a more neo-liberal approach towards economic reform, but political pressures also forced him to abandon his efforts.

Finally, Carlos Andrés Pérez was re-elected in 1989 with the promise of a return to the prosperity and the policies of his previous administration. During his campaign he denounced both the IMF and the World Bank. However, within weeks of his inauguration, he signed a 4.5 billion dollars stabilization agreement with the IMF. Among the reforms suggested by the IMF was a rise in the country's highly-subsidized domestic oil prices, which in turn prompted an increase in bus fares. Demonstrations and looting broke out in the city of Guarenas, near Caracas, in February 1989. In two days it spread throughout cities around the country. The government brought the demonstrations under control, but its use of force left hundreds dead. The event became known as the "Caracazo" and would seriously undermine the government's and the political system's legitimacy for the next decade.

In 1992, Pérez's government survived two coup attempts. Lieutenant-Colonel Hugo Chávez led the first attempt. Despite the failure of the attempt, Chávez catapulted himself into the national spotlight when he appeared on national television to call for all rebel detachments to cease hostilities. In the process, Chávez quipped that he had only failed "for now." In this, he emulated his hero, Fidel Castro, in his famous "History will absolve me" speech after the failed attack on the Monaca barracks. Pérez was impeached and later removed from office in 1993 for

the embezzlement of 250 million bolivars belonging to a presidential discretionary fund. Pérez and his supporters claim they had used the money to support the electoral process in Nicaragua.

After two interim presidents, Raúl Caldera won the presidency in 1993 with a small plurality and 30% of the vote, approximately the same percentage with which he had won his first term in 1968. Caldera had been a founder of COPEI and signed the Punto Fijo accord, but in the 1993 election he abandoned COPEI to form a coalition with smaller parties. The scandals of the Pérez presidency, the allegations of corruption in previous administrations, and the general economic decline caused by low oil prices had undermined the traditional parties.

Caldera had a difficult term. To achieve political reconciliation he granted amnesty to Hugo Chávez and others involved in the 1992 coup attempt and attempted to reform and improve social benefits in a tripartite agreement with unions, the business sector and the government. However, he inherited a major banking crisis, foreign exchange was in short supply, and inflation rose rapidly. He eventually turned to the IMF for help and opened the oil industry to partnerships with foreign firms. The new measures helped the economy, but did little to win public approval.

Hugo Chávez Comes to Power

In December 1998, Hugo Chávez won the presidential election with 56% of the vote. His election finally ended the moribund Punto Fijo accord. An Acción Democrática/COPEI alliance won only 40% of the popular vote. Chávez campaigned with a populist appeal, while attacking corruption and neo-liberal economic policies. His attempted coup against Pérez gave him legitimacy with those wishing for major change. Chávez was a natural orator with an ability to speak in the language of the street and, as did Perón in Argentina, he was able to capture the imagination of the poor and lower middle class.

Once in power, Chávez moved quickly to change the nature of Venezuela politics. He ignored constitutional procedures to change the constitution and ruled by referendum. He held an election for a constitutional assembly, which then changed the constitution. The result was a unicameral legislature and an extension of the term of the presidency to seven years. He then held a new presidential election, which assured him another seven years.

With a majority in the new Congress, Chávez began to pack the courts with his supporters. Congress also gave him the power to issue decrees to change laws. Decree laws were not new to Venezuela; similar powers had been given to previous presidents as well, but in the consensus politics of the Punto Fijo period, and where the opposition often had a strong percentage in one or both houses of congress, the powers had not been seen as so threatening.

Initially, Chavez followed a moderate economic course. He kept the budget under control, attempted to improve tax collection and debt management, and had ambitious schemes to increase oil production. Flush with revenues from higher oil prices, which almost tripled in his first two years, Chávez was able to increase cash transfers and social services to the poor. He also seemed to prefer foreign investors to domestic companies, personally approving a hostile takeover of the private and domestically-owned electric company, Electricidad de Caracas, by the American firm AES. However, Chávez's rhetoric, especially against the wealthy and middle class, frightened investors.

In mid-2000, the National Assembly passed the Ley Habilitante (Enabling Act). This act allowed Chávez to rule by decree for one year. In November 2001, shortly before the Ley Habilitante was set to expire, Chávez announced a set of 49 laws central to the implementation of his program. Many of these laws affected the regulation of financial institutions, the environment, and rules of litigation. They also included a Hydrocarbons Law and an agrarian reform program. Some of the laws were simply poorly drafted. Thus, a law to regulate the preservation of coastlines would essentially have confiscated all the port facilities, marinas, and homes along the coast and rivers. In some cases, the government issued changes in the laws after promulgation and the expiration of the Ley Habilitante. The agrarian reform law was severely criticized because it included lands that had been left fallow for crop rotation or pastures under renewal.

In the end Chávez's intentions did not really matter: his rhetoric had already broken any sense of trust between his government and vast sectors of the population. Public demonstrations became weekly occurrences and grew over time. The banging of pots in protest was heard nightly throughout the city. In April, a strike broke out at the state oil company, PDVSA, and Chávez announced the firing of the

Board of Directors. On April 11, 2002, a mass demonstration was held at the headquarters of PDVSA and then a mass march of hundreds of thousands of people headed downtown to the presidential palace. What happened next is still the subject of considerable controversy. Chávez was detained by a group of generals and flown to an island off the coast. The next day Pedro Carmona, head of the federation of business organizations, was sworn in as interim President. He promptly dissolved the Congress and dismissed the Supreme Court. His actions caused much of his support to quickly collapse. Chávez supporters began counter-demonstrations. The next day, other members of the military arrested Carmona and brought Chávez back into power.

Chávez would remain in power for 11 more years, until his death in March 2013. He would survive more strikes and demonstrations, and a recall election. He was re-elected for two more terms. He closed or intimidated much of the press, and barred many opponents from running for election on unproven charges of corruption. His populist rhetoric and vilification of his enemies, including the United States, never wavered, nor did his support and friendship with Fidel Castro. He moved his populist and nationalistic themes from rhetoric to action as he embraced foreign exchange and price controls, nationalized foreign and domestic companies, and seized several million acres of farmland and pastures. Foreign debt more than doubled and inflation set new highs. After his death, his handpicked successor won a narrow victory in the next election. So far, he has continued Chávez's policy and governing style.

Continuity

Chávez came to power by a democratic election. Unlike Perón in Argentina or Castro in Cuba, Chávez came into power in a country that had a recent tradition of democratic processes and elections. He had no military backing. The Venezuelan military was firmly committed to democratic rule and the senior officers generally distrusted Chávez. Initially, he did not even have a majority in Congress. Unlike Perón, he had no labor movement to support him. The principal labor union, the Confederación de Trabajadores de Venezuela, had long been closely allied with Acción Democrática and to a lesser extent COPEI. To change the nation's politics he had to do it by referendum and elections. Unlike Castro, and more like Perón, he was never able to establish abso-

lute power, nor use physical force against his rivals. After his ouster and return, the power equation changed somewhat. The Army became less of a threat, but still could not be trusted to support him and, unlike in Cuba, the majority of the large middle class remained in the country.

Despite the heated rhetoric and considerable attention Chávez has received, there has also been a great deal of continuity between Chávez's economic policies and those of the Punto Fijo period. Dependency on oil exports has characterized the Venezuelan economy for a century and, even before the Punto Fijo period, governments used oil revenues to finance public projects and social welfare. The economy has been vulnerable to the roller coaster nature of oil revenues, which in turn has affected political stability. Chávez was very lucky to have high oil prices throughout his 14 years in power.

Populist economic and social policies and appeals to nationalism were also present before and during the Punto Fijo period. Acción Democrática was a center-left (although anti-communist) labor-supported party throughout most of its existence. Greater control over the oil industry was always part of its program. Carlos Andres Pérez also attacked neo-liberal policies in his first term. Governing by decree was also not new to Chávez. The previous constitution permitted it and Congress granted the power to presidents several times during the Punto Fijo period.

Change

Chávez's biggest change to the political culture was his style. Chávez was an enormously talented orator, who understood the aspirations and frustrations of Venezuela's poor and lower middle classes. He knew and used the language of the street and belittled his opponents. He polarized Venezuela and articulated class differences to a point not previously seen.

Chávez never agreed with the basic spirit of the Punto Fijo years – cooperation, power sharing and political comity. His attitude to criticism, particularly from the press, was a throwback to the dictators. His

use of the referendum to change the political process was attempted by Dictator Pérez Jiménez and even then, it failed. His use of intimidation and dubious criminal charges to keep opponents off the ballot had no parallel in the Punto Fijo years.

Chavez's legacy

It is too soon to identify Chávez's legacy. The most obvious historical parallel is to Perón's charisma and the destruction of political comity. However, Venezuela's political comity was already under challenge before Chávez's rise to power. The departure of the class of 1928 and the country's economic instability had already made it difficult to govern. Chávez, however, articulated and hardened class differences and that will be hard to undo.

Perón developed a durable domestic political movement; Chávez was a more personalized leader interested in developing an international political status. Perón created a disciplined populist political movement that has lasted, even as some parts broke away; even after being evicted from office and exiled, he was able to keep control of his party and the labor movement for 17 years.

Chávez's political movement was never as well developed. He cobbled together his movement from numerous splinter parties, some of whom have retained their separate identities. It is still unclear if his successors will remain united, especially if they lose a major election.

Still, it is unlikely that Chávez's opponents will be able to undo everything he accomplished. They will likely return to power at a time of economic crisis. They may not be able to reach out to the poor at least initially. Chavistas, even if divided, will likely have a significant representation in the Congress. The Judiciary will be in Chavista hands. The opposition will have difficulty changing his constitution without resorting to Chávez's own method of a referendum. Moreover, even if they do succeed, they will have to contend with a divided nation. Chávez will have a lasting impact on his country.