The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Chavez Was No Dictator

By Boris Kagarlitsky

March 10, 2013



The Russian blogosphere is sharply divided over the death of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, with some people expressing vulgar joy at his passing, and others pouring out passionate eulogies. Many people repeated cliches that Chavez was a "dictator" and had no interest in learning anything more about him or his social programs. Such comments contain more ignorance and prejudice than anger.

Unlike Russia, Chavez firmly upheld the rights and freedoms enshrined in Venezuela's constitution. The opposition owned many television channels, and major newspapers freely conducted daily campaigns against the government. Political parties organized by the president's enemies had complete freedom, and for the past 10 years Western observers declared all of the country's elections to be honest and fair. Anti-government forces regularly won elections in various provinces and even in the capital. Incidentally, the absence of election fraud is why nobody in Venezuela has ever attempted to stage a color revolution. On the contrary, the opposition has almost always conceded defeat and congratulated the winner.

What's more, petrodollars were used to buy food for the needy and for free school meals and health care. Programs such as providing micro-credit for farmers in remote provinces and the struggle against illiteracy were fairly effective. In addition, new schools and universities were built to increase admission for members of the lower class.

But this does not mean that Venezuela under Chavez was heaven on earth. The authorities systematically provided assistance to the poor but did very little to eradicate the roots of poverty. Housing construction also progressed poorly, state industry barely developed and the creation of government-owned oil companies after their Venezuelan-based assets were expropriated from foreign oil majors resulted in a drop in production and productivity. Structural reforms in Venezuela were more often declared than implemented.

The strong reliance on a top-down rule led to excessive bureaucracy, inefficiency and a growing conflict between government and social movements. Having first supported the creation of new trade unions, Chavez later accused them of counter-revolutionary activity the moment workers began criticizing his policies. Although Chavez was unusually tolerant of his enemies, he turned out to be very short-tempered when dissent arose in his own camp.

Despite Chavez's numerous mistakes and failures, he remained a hero to the Venezuelan poor. His weekly television talk show was extremely popular. In what other country would the president chat with people about everyday subjects? People loved listening to him. Although Chavez was verbose and long-winded, he was never an eloquent orator. He did not give speeches, but simply chatted, cracked jokes, related news, described trips abroad and talked about life or books he had read. It was impossible to stop him. He loved communicating with the people, but he did not know how to listen to them.

With Chavez gone, the Moscow media are wondering whether Russian corporations will be able to maintain their contracts with Venezuela, but common Venezuelans have a very different concern. The future of that state is now in the hands of members of a political apparatus accustomed to hiding behind the leader's back. Chavez's authority, charisma and popularity largely offset their failures. Now they will have to answer for their actions. Acting President Nicolas Maduro faces new elections, but Venezuela is unlikely to return to the past. After all, Chavez's success resulted not only from the unique features of his personality but also from the fact that he made serious, sincere attempts to meet the needs of the masses.

Boris Kagarlitsky is the director of the Institute of Globalization and Social Movements.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/03/10/chavez-was-no-dictator-a22210