

What After Chavez?

Written by Nick Thomas-Symonds

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NICK THOMAS-SYMONDS, APR 18 2013

On Tuesday 19 September 2006, the then US President, George W. Bush, addressed the United Nations General Assembly. With his administration facing strong criticism as a consequence of the ongoing war in Iraq, Bush argued that terrorists were being sidelined as democracy spread in the Middle East. The next day, the then Venezuelan President, Hugo Chavez, addressed the same audience, and told them: "The devil came here yesterday." He added: "It still smells of sulphur today." His finger pointing in accusatory style, Mr Chavez told the gathering that the United Nations, with its structure set after the Second World War, was "worthless."

The exchange symbolised the diplomatic relationship between Venezuela and the US. A major part of Mr Chavez's popular appeal was his willingness to stand up to what he characterized as imperialism. After all, El Comandante traced his heritage to another Latin American independence leader, Simon Bolivar. Mr Chavez's antipathy had personal elements, too. He accused the US of trying to bring him down. To use just one example, a brief coup in 2002 temporarily removed him from power, and he openly accused the US of being responsible for it.

With Mr Chavez's death on 5 March 2013, there is an argument that things can only get better in diplomatic relations between the US and Venezuela. After all, even under Mr Chavez, Venezuela was still trading widely with the US. The US Department of State's "fact sheet" on US-Venezuela relations confirms the extent of this trade: "The United States is Venezuela's most important trading partner. U.S. exports to Venezuela include machinery, organic chemicals, agricultural products, optical and medical instruments, autos and auto parts." It adds: "Oil dominates U.S. imports from Venezuela, which is one of the top four suppliers of foreign oil to the United States. About 500 U.S. companies are represented in Venezuela. U. S. foreign direct investment in Venezuela is concentrated largely in the petroleum, manufacturing and finance sectors." That is not to say, however, that the US desire for oil has made it a no-go area for US governments in their diplomatic relations with the Bolivarian Republic. Sanctions were imposed on the Venezuelan state oil company, PDVSA, in 2011, for making supplies to Iran.

The demise of Mr Chavez is one thing, the position of his successor, Nicolas Maduro, on the US, quite another. To win the presidential election, Mr Maduro, a former bus driver, needed to present himself as continuing the work of Mr Chavez. As Mr Chavez's chosen successor, and as the incumbent during the election, this may have seemed an easy task. However, Mr Maduro has taken this argument to extraordinary lengths. He not only declared himself "the son of Chavez" but claimed "Chavez lives!" and even went so far as to argue that El Comandante appeared to him as a bird whilst praying. Mr Maduro has continued to plough Chavez's anti-US furrow. After all, he did serve for a substantial period as his foreign minister. An allegation that the dead president had been the subject of an attack by "historic enemies" led the US State Department to declare the notion that the US had played any part in Chavez's death from cancer as "absurd."

Mr Maduro won the presidential election on 14 April 2013 with 50.7% of the vote. His winning margin of 1.5% constitutes only 235,000 votes. His defeated rival, Henrique Capriles, has alleged electoral malpractice and asked for the votes to be counted again. The US urged an audit of the result as an "important, prudent and necessary step." However, the National Electoral Council has declared Mr Maduro's victory "irreversible". That said, the narrow margin of Mr Maduro's victory, particularly given the advantages of his links to Mr Chavez, may prove less durable than he may think. On Twitter, National Assembly, Head Mr Diosdado Cabello, said the "results require deep self-criticism." Protests against the result continue. The outcome may yet prove unpredictable, and Mr Chavez's demise

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may have heralded something new in Venezuelan foreign policy after all.

For now at least, Mr Maduro's policies matter. One of his first acts was to announce the continuation of funding of socialist programmes from oil revenues. Even setting to one side the protests against his controversial presidential election victory, the International Atomic Energy (IEA) predicted last month that whoever was the President was in a "Catch 22" situation. The current policy of using the nation's oil reserves to fund socialist programmes cannot continue without putting the stability of the nation's economy at risk. On the other hand, the programmes cannot be scaled back without political and social unrest. It is here that there may be a small chink of light for US-Venezuela relations, even under Mr Maduro. Venezuela cannot afford to turn any investors away unnecessarily. Even now, the US multi-national Chevron advertises that it is playing a part in six onshore and offshore projects.

Mr Maduro can also continue to increase oil sales to Russia and China. Igor Sechin, Russian deputy prime minister and President of Rosneft, even sported a Hugo Chavez T-Shirt when he visited Venezuela in the weeks before the presidential election of 7 October 2012 which was won comfortably by Mr Chavez. Mr Chavez had already increased oil sales to China. China's energy giant, China National Petroleum Corp (CNPC), is heavily involved in tapping the vast reserves of the Orinoco. But, currently, the greatest debate in Venezuela is not the fate of its foreign policy, but the fate of Mr Maduro himself.

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