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## With Hugo Chavez Dead, Will Chavismo Also Die?

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Supporters of the late Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez cry in front of the Military Hospital --where he had been hospitalized-- a day after his death in March 6, 2013, in Caracas. (Image credit: AFP/Getty Images via @daylife)

Cancer is a terrible way to die, even for someone as unattractive as Venezuelan President [Hugo Chavez](#). Still, one wonders at those who rushed to offer their condolences. Such as the profoundly naïve Jimmy Carter—who decades ago expressed his surprise at being lied to by his Soviet counterpart, Leonid Brezhnev—lauding Chavez’s “commitment to improving the lives of millions of his fellow countrymen.”

[Venezuela](#) is better off with Chavez gone. However, the country will prosper only if Chavismo disappears as well. Which requires the opposition to offer a vision of opportunity and prosperity for Venezuela’s dispossessed.

Chavez was elected in 1998, a populist who challenged the country’s profoundly corrupt political establishment. In Venezuela the class structure essentially was determined by access to state privilege. If your friends were in power, you could get rich. Ideology wasn’t important.

Thus, the electoral surge for Chavez, though unfortunate, was not surprising. People desperate for change voted for change.

And he brought it. But not a positive variety. Roger Noriega of the American Enterprise Institute assessed “Chavez’s destructive legacy: deep political polarization, authoritarian manipulation, hateful rhetoric, disastrous economic policies, and the devastation of Venezuela’s petroleum industry.”

Chavez failed even on his own terms. Venezuelans remain profoundly poor and dependent on the state. Poverty has fallen because of lavish social spending, but the

country's oil revenue provides only a temporary palliative. In fact, the Chavez government has mismanaged even this asset, and has done nothing to encourage Venezuelans to become independent wealth producers.

Rather, an otherwise productive people suffer from an economy which doesn't work. Food shortages emerged earlier this year which the government, naturally, blamed on private hoarding. Chavez was dedicated to the sort of socialist state which has failed all over the world. Indeed, Venezuela ranked 144 in last year's Economic Freedom of the World index, after war-torn Congo, bankrupt [Zimbabwe](#), and long-isolated Burma.

Indeed, Chavez wasted his people's money on political objectives, such as subsidizing the failed communist experiment in Cuba. After a half century of revolution, the island state remains an economic wreck, locked in a time warp in which vintage 1950s American automobiles ply streets filled with weathered buildings unfamiliar with basic maintenance.

Chavez gained some other allies on the continent, such as [Bolivia](#)'s Evo Morales and [Ecuador](#)'s Rafael Correa. However, in other countries, such as Mexico and Peru, Chavez's meddling created a backlash that boosted more mainstream candidates.

Explained Javier Corrales of Amherst College: "the foreign influence of Chavismo, in Latin America, at least, is ailing." Today Latin Americans are far more likely to look to Brazil and Mexico for leadership than to Venezuela.

Venezuela remains nominally democratic, but Chavez's abuses were legion—and not surprising for a onetime army lieutenant colonel who led an unsuccessful (and bloody) coup attempt in 1992. Like the Castros and other communist dictators, he used economic redistribution as a pretext for authoritarianism. Even some Americans buy the explanation. Said historian Greg Grandin: "I'll be perverse and argue that the biggest problem Venezuela faced during his rule was not that Chavez was authoritarian but that he wasn't authoritarian enough."

Actually, Chavez was plenty authoritarian. For instance, Freedom House classified Venezuela as "partly free." The human rights group cited exploitation of state resources, manipulation of election rules, centralization of power, and attacks on an independent press. Freedom House explained that "the media climate is permeated by intimidation, sometimes including physical attacks, and strong anti-media rhetoric by the government is common." In fact, the group's press freedom rating for Venezuela was "not free."

Human Rights Watch was no less critical in its latest World Report released earlier this year. Under Chavez, explained HRW: "the accumulation of power in the executive branch and the erosion of human rights guarantees have enabled his government to intimidate, censor, and prosecute Venezuelans who criticize the president or thwart his political agenda. President Chavez and his supporters have used their powers in a wide range of cases involving the judiciary, the media, and human rights defenders. While many Venezuelans continue to criticize the government, the prospect of facing similar reprisals—in the form of arbitrary or abusive state action—has undercut the ability of

judges to adjudicate politically sensitive cases, and forced journalists and rights defenders to weigh the consequences of publicizing information and opinions that are critical of the government.”

Similar were the result of the State Department’s last annual human rights report, which pointed to “the government’s partisan use of state-owned media” and “instances in which elements of the security forces acted independently of civilian control.” In December 2010 the National Assembly voted to allow the president to issue laws by decree, while the government acted “to impede freedom of expression and criminalize dissent.” There also were instances of torture, arbitrary arrests, harsh imprisonment, and even summary executions of criminal suspects. The report offered 47 pages of unpleasant specifics. That is a lot, but not compared to the 300-page report issued by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 2010.

New elections are to be held in a month. Chavez designated Vice President Nicolas Maduro as his political successor and the latter will enjoy support from many Chavistas who benefited from Chavez’s rule. However, Maduro lacks Chavez’ charisma which held together a disparate movement and created an emotional bond with Venezuela’s poor. Some of Chavez’s followers have said: “With Chavez everything, without Chavez nothing.”

Moreover, the late Alberto Muller Rojas once called Chavez’s United Socialist Party, of which Rojas was vice president, a “scorpions nest.” Maduro faces serious rivals in National Assembly President Diosdado Cabello and Oil Minister Rafael Ramirez. Other influential Chavistas include Chavez’ older brother Adan Chavez, Governor and former Defense Minister Henry de Jesus Rangel, Governor and former Interior Minister Tareck el-Aissami, and Science Minister (and Chavez son-in-law) Jorge Arreaza.

Henrique Capriles Radonski, the state governor who opposed Chavez in last October’s election, is likely to be the opposition candidate. Radonski is an attractive candidate, but lost by 11 percent points. The opposition also was badly beaten in gubernatorial elections held in December.

The good news for Venezuela is that Chavez never really created Chavismo. It was a movement and regime based on one person. Remove that person, and the foundation disappears. The system may stagger on for a time, but likely has been irretrievably weakened.

The Obama administration has begun discussions with Caracas about restoring full diplomatic relations—most importantly, returning ambassadors to both capitals. That is a worthwhile objective, but Washington should avoid political meddling during the transition. The best the U.S. can do is urge Venezuela’s neighbors, such as Brazil, to press for a fully free and fair election.

Washington’s democratic credentials in the region long ago were tarnished by support for authoritarian regimes. In Venezuela the Bush administration smiled benevolently at a

2002 coup attempt against Chavez, which quickly collapsed. Today there is little for official America to do or say other than wish Venezuelans well in charting their own future—hopefully in a more liberal and democratic direction.

What Venezuelans most need is a government which empowers them, not political elites claiming to speak for them. A government which disperses rather than concentrates power, accepts rather than punishes criticism, and allows rather than impedes enterprise. Hopefully Chavez' death will provide the necessary opportunity for Venezuelans to take back control of their lives and country.