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Politicising history in Latin America

Venezuelan politics is dominated by a cult of personality. But under Maduro, the facade is crumbling

Latin American leaders have always tried to exploit history for their own ends. Former Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez is a prime example. Ruling the oil-producing country from 1999 until his death in 2013, Chávez modelled himself on Simón Bolívar, leader of the South American independence movement. For Chávez, Bolívar was the father of "21st-century socialism". He represented the South's very battle for social and cultural emancipation from the North.

Chávez created his own personality cult, styling himself as Bolívar's spiritual successor. This would allow him to legitimise the rule of his United Socialist Party and ensure enduring loyalty from the people. The Party sometimes went to bizarre extremes to uphold the cult of Chávez – refusing to announce his death from cancer until two months after the event, for example. The distortion and invention of Venezuela's history garnered international support – a result of lavish "oil diplomacy".

Chavism has remained an influential force in Venezuela since its founder's death, allowing Chávez successor, Nicolás Maduro, to cling onto power despite his catastrophic economic record.

Chávez – Bolívar's spiritual heir

Latin American leaders frequently call on their country's history, or a version of it, to justify their own political actions in the present day. The background to this practice is a tumultuous national and regional history marked by military dictatorships and centuries-long marginalisation of indigenous groups. This history offers a wealth of events and personages that can be co-opted for political projects and the construction of national identities.

Specific to Latin America is the close link between how history is interpreted and the formation of personality cults. Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina, Getúlio Vargas in Brazil and Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico all

called on history to justify their own hold on power. They sought to construct national identities and unify “the people” into a mass political movement. This enabled them to sweep away checks and balances with minimal resistance, by fusing the executive, judiciary and legislature.

Maduro has done just this in holding (rigged) elections for a “constituent assembly” in Venezuela, with power to rewrite the constitution and bypass or even dissolve the current opposition-held National Assembly.

In Latin America, history is used to justify emergency rule and special decrees by presidents who don’t wish to submit to any other authority. When a president wins an election, they feel they have the legitimacy to consolidate power. Their personality dominates the politics of the country. "Comandante-Presidente Chávez" managed to tie his military career as a lieutenant colonel and putschist to the elected office of president. He styled himself as the country’s saviour, protector and guardian. At home and abroad, Chávez portrayed himself as a champion of the poor. Meanwhile, he saw it as his mission to establish Bolivarian socialism, relying on a motley crew of historical figures – Aristotle, Marx, Nietzsche and Bolívar himself – to justify his aims.

Idealising the past

Chávez exploited Bolívar’s name in the creation of "Bolivarian Circles" (círculos bolivarianos) – a loosely-knit network of workers’ councils that could appeal directly to the president for assistance with community programmes, thus cementing his power. Sections of the population previously excluded from Venezuela’s oil wealth were now able to appeal for funding, bringing them a new sense of self-worth. The circles have continued under Chávez’s successor Maduro, and help explain why he is still in power. A uniform, political slogans and public acts of remembrance are designed to foster a sense of solidarity.

Effective exclusion strategies

The division of society into "us" and "them" plays a key role in this process. Chávez managed to polarise the country not just politically but also socially, excluding the old corrupt elites that had enriched themselves at the expense of "the people". His primary aim was to bolster his own camp and make it more homogeneous and cohesive. So it is no surprise that the dominant discourse focuses on publicly denouncing his rivals as "traitors" and "parasites". These include North American “imperialists”, the counter-revolutionary church, the oligarchs and the unpatriotic bourgeoisie.
This "us and them" mentality is expressed in calls to demolish liberal

bourgeois political culture and establish a new cultural model in its place. In Venezuela, efforts to do so have mainly focused on controlling the state, the central vehicle for the distribution of wealth and prestige. As a result, the lines between defending positions of power and serving the fatherland have become blurred.

When the facade crumbles...

Falling oil prices, rising corruption and government failures mean Venezuela is now on the brink of civil war. Authoritarianism is on the rise and the new Bolivarian elite, encircled by a weak but growing opposition, has strengthened its military ties. Faced with severe shortages of food and medical supplies that are eating away at his followers' loyalty, it's a question of Maduro's political survival. Conspiracy theories that accuse every rival of attempting to overthrow the president mean that "21st-century socialism" is becoming isolated as a movement.

The regime is also finding it harder to find its legitimacy in the figure of Bolívar. President Maduro does not look like a credible successor to him, or even to Chávez. Chavism and is in crisis; its political apparatus is in meltdown.



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