



INTERNATIONAL

THE “CHAVEZ-TARZAN PROJECT” IN LATIN AMERICA

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*Understanding what is going on today in Latin America, including in my country Bolivia, requires focusing on four things. On the economy; on politics and on the “Tarzan” phenomenon, which traces its roots to Hugo Chávez; on the challenges facing our country and our region; and finally on how we can fight for democracy and freedom in Latin America.**



PHOTO: EFE

Bolivian president Evo Morales, Cuban vice-president Carlos Lage, and president of Venezuela Hugo Chávez in Sinahota, Bolivia (May 2006)

Something strange has happened within the Latin American economy in the last ten years. First we went through the “lost half-decade in 1998-2003”, as it was dubbed by the CEPAL (the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean). To explain it, along with devaluation in Asia in 1999 came devaluation in Brazil in 1999, the Argentine crash in 2001, devaluation in Brazil in 2002 and

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implosions in Venezuela and Uruguay. It was a tremendously tough half-decade for the region. And following the “lost half-decade” we came to what we have today.

While the lost half-decade occurred from 1998 to 2003, from 2003 up until now we have had the best economic period for Latin America, with Foreign Direct Investment in the region of 70 billion dollars, remittances of 60 billion dollars and all Latin American countries exporting three times what they did four years ago (all annualised figures).

You are probably asking yourselves “Is there investment in Bolivia?” It is certainly less but this is offset by the income generated by drugs, where output is on the rise. As for exports, we have stepped these up from 1.2 billion dollars a year to 4 billion in 2006.

Sadly this has tended to lead to smugness in the region, because we are often happy enough just to compete with our past instead of with China or India. And it is my great fear that if we do not realise that this moment of opportunity should be seized upon to make institutional reforms and make headway in the field of technology, we could end up in a world where all the technology and software will be produced in India and all manufactured goods in China, while Latin America would merely be left as a source of commodities.

As for political trends in Latin America, I would split these out into three segments: from the 50s to the 80s these were marked by the widespread exercise of political totalitarianism and economic *dirigisme* accompanied by a strongly military component; from the 80s to the 90s the economy opened up, markets became freer and there was greater democratisation (what Fukuyama termed the “End of History”); and finally, with the incipient 21st century, a new era arrived.

What is this? The return of history? The return of populism of the left? I call it the “Tarzan era”. Let me elucidate: in the films I used to watch as a child, Tarzan used to say to the lady: “You Jane, me Tarzan”. Today, politically speaking, in several of our countries you can hear: “You poor, because he neo-liberal, imperialist, corrupt man and owned by party; me Tarzan, come to save you”. And simple though it may seem, people buy it.

This is what is going on in Latin America. Many times we are swayed by artificial or utopian definitions and typecasts. Yet when Carlos Fuentes was asked whether Chávez was a latter-day left-wing icon, he answered: “No, he is a tropical Mussolini”.

Another name is often used – “populists” – which is kindly and misses the crux of what is happening.

If there is one thing we have learned from Latin America it is that there are three ways to meet electoral pledges:

- One which is not feasible, involves paying with money you do not have: printing notes, fuelling inflation, sliding into debt and bankrupting the country.
- A further method is viable and typified by generating evenly distributed growth, pursuing a public agenda which benefits citizens, planning for the long-term and giving priority to aspects such as education and bolstering institutions.
- And lastly, the third way of going about matters is the sad story of Latin America: inconsistent control of production and services.

If there is one thing that we all admire about Spain it is the fact that with the active and decisive involvement of the PP debate on the economy – and the debate on control of the means of production and services – has managed to become as though we were driving along a relatively narrow highway in such a way that, irrespective of who is in power, any movement always leads you forward, whether this be faster or more slowly.

Our highway in Latin America, on the other hand, is so wide that any movement has us bouncing along from one side to the other. Either we privatise everything or we nationalise everything. And time and time again, going back and forth and failing to get ahead.

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This makes it possible to exercise populism of two different kinds: right-wing populism which involves privatisation, giving away resources and changing the constitution to get yourself re-elected (like Fujimori); and the other brand, left-wing populism which entails claiming sovereignty, driving out foreign investment and giving areas of power to one’s political cronies.

This is at the heart of what we are living through. This is the scenario with Mr Chávez as he churns out oil at rising prices and talks about controlling the means of production.

To understand how this “Tarzan Project” works in our region you have to understand who is the leader, who he works with and what slogans he uses. You also have to understand how he organises himself when he is not in government, how he works when he is on campaign, how he operates when he gets into government and how he organises regional coordination. Because the worst thing we can do is to make light of our adversary and see him as just a figure of fun or a clown.

It is easy to say to the leader of this project, Mr Chávez, that he is a clown or make the mistake of doing what the Americans did and say “let’s not listen to what he says, let’s see what he does”. No, we might be interested in what Ronaldinho does and not what he says. But it is advisable to listen to what politicians say. A politician ends up being a hostage to his words. It is too naïve to think that behind every insult there is only a huge mistake.

No. Chávez is nobody’s fool. He is extremely clever, he has a photographic memory, abundant finance with his oil, he is vindictive and he is highly communicative.

In Caracas in April 2002 the clash in the streets was violent. Chávez took control of the armed forces which, paradoxically, were the most institutionalised in Latin America. While in Latin America governments dressed in uniform, in Venezuela the country’s leaders were civilians in suits and ties.

That was in April 2002. In January 2003 he took PDVSA (Petróleos de Venezuela Sociedad Anónima) and carried out the largest privatisation in the history of Latin America: a very powerful oil company in corporate hands went back to belonging to a person. Who as a ruler would not also wish to have 166 out of 167 members of parliament on-side? And as though this were not enough, they granted him an Act enabling him to rule by decree for a year and a half.

Many people say “What he is doing is not sustainable”. Obviously it is not. If you asked me whether this will still be going on twenty years from now, I would reply that it will not and I would add that this business is going to come to a sticky end. The problem is that Chávez gets more and more of us aboard his aeroplane, which has a lot of fuel. And one again we get the sad story of Latin America and instead of a political agenda of freedom and development it is a question of climbing aboard an aeroplane only for it to crash and then having to piece everything back together again.

Who does Chávez work with? He has become pragmatic, he is flexible, he evolves. Before he had military folk to stage coups, but now he is served by indigenous coca producers in Bolivia, Doctors of Economics in Ecuador, symbols from the 80s in Nicaragua, a priest in Paraguay...

He is absolutely pragmatic when it comes to taking power. He has shifted from lending support from a distance to taking close control. He does not send along the odd sop so that all goes well, but instead runs a campaign team and tailors the rhetoric.

In my country he used the indigenous factor to impressive effect and displayed a great ability for external communications. Imagine how effective it was when a reporter from *The Economist* asked “But was Bolivia really like South Africa until Evo Morales came along?” because this blurs civil rights (Bolivia had universal suffrage 10 years before Alabama in the USA) with economic opportunities.

In Bolivia there is poverty. This can be tackled by education, institutions which are established in the long-term and more resources for the indigenous communities. Either that, or you can use the ploy of blaming someone else for it.

They are masters of spin. Chávez's technique and system is very much akin to the method of drawing in the masses that was used in the first half of the 20th century: the use of repeated simplification in catch-phrases to put down adversaries. They present themselves as the people against the elite sections, as the nation against imperialism, like Fidel versus Bush, as the poor against the oligarchs, as socialists against neo-liberals, as natives against foreigners, as the State versus globalisation.

Venezuela's diplomatic relations are anything you like except respectful towards the Vienna Convention. He has far outperformed Che Guevara in the type of insurgency techniques he used in the 60s, by whipping up urban upheaval (instead of rural guerrilla warfare) and funding social movements which employ simple slogans, such as "no to the FTA" (Free Trade Agreement). Such movements are financed using petro-dollars and are supplemented by "narco-dollars".

“The struggle in Latin America at the start of the 21st century is not one between the left and the right, but rather one between the totalitarian radicalism propounded by Chávez and democratic freedom”

The supporting rôle which the KGB used to play is nowadays played by the NGOs. We find European NGOs which are highly effective and back demonstrations in various places aimed at ousting companies which hail from the same country as themselves. Moisés Naím encapsulates this in the term "ONGOGS" (Non-Governmental Organisations Organised by Governments).

Chávez has the best campaign and communications team in Latin America. He sells hatred and revenge. In Bolivia he launched the slogan "If Quiroga wins, civil war by January. Either we get in the nice way in January or the tough way in July". And the "Stockholm syndrome" as an electoral strategy, after three years of chaos and three presidents brought down, really does work. It works so well that relatives of mine used to go to mass to pray that, please for the love of God, I might save myself and NOT win the election. Imagine how effective that message is if even relatives come to accept it.

In Nicaragua, on his election campaign Daniel Ortega put his name to a law in favour of penalising abortion. That is how he got into the good books of his bitter adversary, the Catholic Church. Just about everything serves these people in coming to power, or taking it. With one extra detail: the power of Chávez's cheque-book is such that it can absorb voting from the centre through to the left. Afterwards, once they have already taken power and ensconced themselves in

government, they can attempt to be Leninists, politically speaking, and Marxists, in economic terms.

How? Politically they neutralise Parliament, dismantle institutions, unnerve the media, even if they do not close them down, push the Church into a corner, subject the Army, set up election control systems...

In Venezuela, for example, voting is no longer secret. It is not true that when you put your finger forward your ID is kept secret. The Constituent Assembly has become a mechanism to melt down the established order and institutions. This is moreover a dynamic programme because what they learn in a regional offshoot they apply in another.

As regards the economy, their activities are not *dirigiste* but Marxist. In Bolivia they tell the Government to nationalise an airline and it replies “No, not that one because it is a loss-maker; but we will do this for a telecommunications company, because it makes a lot of money”. It is all about creaming off the surplus.

Chávez’s policy employs the “naïve temporizer” which Theodore Roosevelt spoke about. The kind that thinks that when the crocodile comes it is better that it eats Tom, Dick or Harry because by the time it gets here it will be full. But this is not true because crocodiles eat every day and never get full.

In the regional theatre Mr Chávez has the largest political multinational in the history of Latin America. It has its own subsidiaries: Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua. It has franchises, such as Haiti. It has joint ventures, such as Argentina. It has extra-regional ties with the Muslim world, Europe and Asia. It has target countries: it is going for Guatemala and Paraguay. The jewels in the crown which it wants to gain in the medium term are El Salvador in Central America and Colombia in South America. If it is any comfort it can be said that it is impossible for it to win in Brazil, though it was close to doing so in Mexico.

Chávez does not need to occupy large countries, what he seeks to do is neutralise them. He controls several of the radical movements in them. For example, when the Brazilian Senate came out with a resolution condemning the closure of RCTV (Radio Caracas Television, a Venezuelan TV network), it was only 24 hours before the Movimento sin Tierra de Brasil, Brazil’s Landless Movement, was protesting against the senate. This begs the question of who Brazil’s Landless Movement actually works for and what their movement has to do with RCTV.

He is the biggest Goliath but he disguises himself as David, speaks of imperialism and strives to gain a monopoly over everybody.

When Tarzan says: “You poor because he be corrupt”, what has to be understood is that the “Tarzan Project” destroys the little institutional content that we have and sinks us into structural corruption.

Moving to Bolivia, let's see how Chávez's policies have been at work in my country. The indigenous leader in Bolivia was not Evo Morales, who is a union leader who was not an indigenist hard-liner. Radical indigenism was represented by Felipe Quispe, to whom Chávez initially gave his backing. However, when Hugo Chávez got the feeling that Morales had more promise, he ditched Quispe.

The drugs issue is a very serious problem in Bolivia. In the 80s and 90s in Bolivia we were the champions or at least the runners-up in producing cocaine. Thanks to a major national effort and the great support of friends of Bolivia such as president José María Aznar, between 1998 and 2003 we cut back on 80% of cocaine production: from 250 tons we dropped down to 40 a year. Nonetheless, in one or two years we will climb back to champion-level figures because now the illegal production of coca for cocaine is being encouraged. Surprisingly the only real neo-liberalism in the full sense exercised in my country is the illegal cultivation of coca for drugs. There are no taxes, there is no regulation... Now that really is the ultimate model of all-out neo-liberalism.

Foreign investment in my country has fallen off. And according to the Chávez doctrine which now pervades one should condemn bilateral investment treaties and give up on the World Bank's arbitration institutions because they are "imperialist puppets".

And all this is happening when the country is in its finest hour economically speaking, at its best moment in history in terms of prices and export volume for commodities. Yet we are not making the most of this chance to raise productivity, invest in technology or boost productivity with an eye to the long term. Because the problem is that this favourable economic juncture has coincided with the Chávez-style "Tarzan Project" whose tentacles are trying to reach out into my country.

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“petro-tyranny” or freedom with sovereignty;
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The struggle in Latin America as this, the 21st century, gets underway is not played out between the left and the right, but between the totalitarian radicalism propounded by Chávez and democratic freedom. It is that basic and intrinsic: totalitarian radicalism versus democratic freedom.

The straight choice for our hemisphere is “petro-tyranny” or freedom with sovereignty; autocracy versus democracy; radicalism which drags us back into the past or modernisation that unites us with the future.

In Bolivia there is an extra element. We want change without hatred but what we get is hatred without change.

Never forget that in 1992 Chávez appeared on television sporting a red beret and made the best speech in Latin American contemporary politics. Then he was asked to give up on the coup as having failed and he did not do that. He said that the project had not succeeded... “FOR THE TIME BEING”. He is never beaten and knows when to side-step. Chávez now has his soldiers hailing with the phrase “Socialism or death”. Experience tells us that he is talking about other people’s deaths and not his own. And in this struggle one should have it clear that there will always be risks. I am convinced that it is better to have a Latin America with children who have a homeland without fathers than a region with children who have fathers without a homeland. And the challenge facing us is of such grand proportions.

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Some years ago, when president José María Aznar came to La Paz, he asked me “What can you possibly gain by going 6,500 up the mountains there?” I answered “Well, in La Paz we live in a geographical depression or hollow between the Eastern mountain range and the Western range and because of the imposing peak known as Illimani we never get to see the sunrise and if you want to see it you have to go up to the top”. Going up the mountain teaches you a lot of things. You have to know the lie of the land and how to tackle adversity; and to get to the summit you need a rope so that the whole team progresses together, because on your own you cannot reach it.

Today in Latin America our aim should be to instil throughout the region the awareness that overcoming the threat posed by the dark night of radical totalitarianism and seeing the eternal dawn of democratic freedom requires that all of us democrats work together to rise to the top.