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*“Chavez Charms Now, But How Will Venezuela Feel in the Morning?”*

Should the American Left embrace Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez?

Admirers of anti-imperialism and Bush-bashers find Chavez hard to resist. His populist rhetoric and well-oiled welfare programs have won him the hearts and minds of Venezuela’s poor, who constitute a large majority of his citizens.

And Chavez is a charmer: after a recent “non-political” visit to Venezuela, supermodel Naomi Campbell marveled at the “love and encouragement” he lavishes on programs for the poor.

But history chastens. After visiting the Soviet Union in the 1920’s, American muckraker Lincoln Steffens reported enthusiastically that he had seen the future, “and it works.” In gazing upon Venezuela’s Chavista future, American progressives ought to bring a bit more skepticism to bear.

Unfortunately, the Chavez vision of Venezuela’s future is now on open display as never before. A Chavista-dominated assembly has now produced a blueprint of some 69 reforms to the national Constitution. They will be put to a vote in a December referendum. They will surely pass.

What then? Try asking General Raul Isaias Baduel. In 2002 General Baduel helped save Chavez from a short-lived, CIA-supported coup. Until his retirement last July, General Baduel was Chavez’ minister of defense.

At a recent press conference, General Baduel denounced the constitutional reforms as “in effect a coup d’état” designed to get rid of the few remaining checks on Chavez’ power.

Baduel is correct. The thrust of the reforms is to concentrate power in the hands of a single person: Hugo Chavez. Power would be taken away from local governments – where some vestiges of opposition to Chavez remain – and handed to the national government. Local bodies would remain, but their membership would be hand-picked from above, in other words, by Chavez.

The area around the capital, Caracas, where a few pesky mayors still oppose Chavez, would become a federal district, with its officials selected by – guess whom? -- Chavez.

Civil and democratic rights would become subject to the dictator’s whim. Under the so-called reforms, Chavez could declare a state of emergency, for an indefinite period, suspending most basic rights in their entirety, with no possibility of judicial review.

And perhaps most tellingly, presidential term limits would be removed: Chavez could run for reelection indefinitely.

All this in a country where Chavez has already eliminated or intimidated nearly all the major opposition media, and where he already totally controls the congress and the courts.

If this concentration of power does not give Chavez' admirers pause, it should. Let us assume for the moment that Chavez' professed intention to establish socialism is genuine, and that he hopes to do right by the poor. Even so, history teaches that power tends to corrupt, and absolute power to corrupt absolutely.

Recent decades have seen other so-called socialist systems, from Moscow to Havana, fall prey to an absence of real checks and balances. In the end, they brought neither political freedom nor lasting economic success. Socialist economies without truly democratic political systems have been tried and have failed – repeatedly.

And then there is the problem of succession. Even if Chavez personally were saintly, who will succeed him as President under this brave new system? How will that person be chosen? If there are no real checks on that person's power, why should we expect that person to remain uncorrupted?

No wonder Venezuelan university students have taken to the streets. The problem is not, as Chavez claims, that they are rich brats born with a silver spoon in their mouths. The problem is that they see where these constitutional reforms are headed, and they are not ready to surrender their country to a supposedly benevolent dictatorship.

Show me a revolution opposed by university students *en masse*, and I will show you a phony revolution. For all his charming pretensions, Chavez is dangerous to democracy. Progressives should side with the students, not with the would-be dictator.

**Doug Cassel's commentaries are generally broadcast Wednesdays during the noon hour of the Worldview program on Chicago Public Radio, 91.5 FM, and rebroadcast at 9 PM in the evening. Views expressed are personal views of the author and not necessarily those of Notre Dame Law School, the Center for Civil and Human Rights or Chicago Public Radio.**