

15 Years of Hugo Chavez

Comandante: Inside Hugo Chávez's Venezuela.
Rory Carroll, Canongate 2013.

"It isn't really a book about oil," said Rory Carroll, the author, smiling apologetically as he handed me my signed copy. And true – the ins and outs of the national oil company PDVSA are not detailed, nor is Venezuela's relationship with OPEC, nor the development of Venezuela's Orinoco Belt of tar sands. But the country now rivals Saudi Arabia in oil reserves and it is oil – and its mismanagement – that brought Chávez to power and oil that fuelled his 'Bolivarian revolution'. Although the book concentrates on the personality and management style of this 'bear of a man', it is inevitably – if unwittingly – a study of the resource curse, the economic and political explanation of why new oil-rich states become prone to conflict, corruption and economic devastation. Of course this 'paradox of plenty' pre-existed Chávez but given the bold promises and revolutionary fervour of his 15 years in office – as well as the 'gift' of a rare and prolonged upsurge in oil prices – its continuation in Venezuela is a particularly bitter blow.

It is because of that revolutionary idealism that Venezuela excites such unparalleled biting scorn. No other oil-rich state receives quite the same level of ridicule. The question for any author writing about Chávez is whether they manage to maintain balance between the zealous pro-Chávez left and outraged international observers. The answer in this case is a disappointing 'no'. The book reads as one man's unremitting slide from a position of objectivity to one of head-in-hands frustration at Chávez's failures. Although a fascinating read that brings to life Chávez full booming personality, the reader is left with a queasy sense of over-indulgence.

2002: A Turning Point

According to Carroll, the attempted coup of 2002 was the turning point, the 'mood changer' in Venezuela. Chávez had come to power on a wave of anti-elitism, seeking 'a Third Way', neither capitalist nor socialist. His motivation, in common with many other Latin American states in the 1990s and 2000s, was a continuation of Simon Bolívar's 19th-century anti-imperialist revolution, an economic and social liberation. Chávez espoused both a potent mixture of nationalism and a genuine desire to spread wealth and ease hardship.

However, the effect of the 2002 coup was to push Chávez 'into the arms' of Castro and into direct conflict with

Venezuela's wealthy elite who, as Carroll describes, 'thought they were Venezuela' and exuded a 'sense of entitlement'. Whether the US 'pulled the strings' behind the coup remains unclear: Carroll states that there is 'little evidence', although he acknowledges US funding of anti-Chávez groups and their prior knowledge of the coup. Regardless, the effect was a deepening of US hostility, exacerbated by Chávez's agreement to export 95,000 bopd to Cuba in exchange for 20,000 doctors, teachers and engineers. Chávez had become the nightmare scenario of 'Fidel's heir with oil'.

In this atmosphere of increased division and external pressure, loyalty was everything. You feel Carroll's utter exasperation as he describes how a 'masterful politician' became a 'disastrous manager', making communication with the public – through Chávez's marathon 'Sunday shows' and almost daily interruptions of other public media – the highest priority. "The catch was that he never shut up," says Carroll. Chávez's word was de facto law and ministerial power was determined by 'access to the throne'. His media broadcasts became renowned for their unpredictable announcements but initiatives and reforms were not followed through. Bizarrely, given Chávez's original anti-corruption platform and his own 'monastic' life, he became tolerant of wide-spread pocket-lining, only denouncing corrupt ministers when it was politically expedient to do so. Foreign loans simply evaporated.

Wasted Opportunities

As the book progresses, the reader increasingly feels Carroll's end-of-tether frustration and it is hard not to agree with his conclusion that Chávez's legacy is one of wasted opportunities. Despite Chávez's apparent concern for the poor, the Avila slum dwellers stayed living in their mud-slide prone shacks, kidnappings and street crime became commonplace, and much heralded penal reforms proved a failure. Carroll is particularly critical of the lack of economic restructuring for long-term sustainability, notably Chávez's reliance on 'raids' on the Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA to fund his social programmes and the country's increased reliance on oil exports – from 80% to 96% within a decade. Chávez's choice of strategy during a period of severe drought that affected hydroelectric production is illustrative: he chose to cut power to industry rather than reduce domestic consumption,

for fear that his popularity might suffer. The absurdity of crowd-pleasing state subsidies is abundantly clear when you consider that in 2011 you could still fill an SUV for less than \$1.

But of course, that is the central dilemma of the 'resource curse': why does reliance on resource wealth, particularly oil, result in internal division and economic and political dysfunction? As the book moves from being a well balanced, informative analysis of Chávez's ascent and consolidation of power towards an excoriating attack on his failures, you feel the loss of the author's international perspective. His ridiculing of Chávez for abandoning nuclear energy after the Fukushima disaster, and for losing state investments in Lehman-issued derivatives exemplify the exceptionalism to which Venezuela is routinely treated. His acknowledgement that real incomes soared between 2003 and 2008, that half the population was lifted out of poverty, that communities were empowered and there was a halt to US meddling are muted, tucked into the narrative, and easily over-read by those more alert to Chávez's failures.

Carroll does give Chávez credit for not becoming a despot – there are no torture chambers in Venezuela, no death penalty, and elections are respected. Internal division never became Nigerian-style guns and sabotage and Chávez didn't amass a personal portfolio of assets, Middle Eastern style. Indeed, the final word belongs to the people of Venezuela who, in 2012, gave Chávez a 55% win with an 80% turnout. For all his many failures, it seems that Chávez has been hoisted on his own petard of revolutionary idealism – had he promised less, condemnation of the 'monkey in the palace' would have been more muted. Carroll's book, disappointingly, fails to put Chávez in his international context or give him sufficient credit for his achievements, and the reader is left with the tantalising thought of what might have happened if the 2002 coup had not occurred. However, it does provide one more, if oblique, study of the apparent inevitability of the resource curse. ■

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