Venezuela

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On December 3, 2006, Hugo Chávez Frias, Venezuela’s president since 1999, won reelection to a six-year term, with 63 percent of the vote. The Venezuelan opposition, convinced that he won through fraud, sank into despair. But a year later, on December 2, 2007, the tables were turned when voters defeated by referendum constitutional changes proposed by Chávez that would have increased his power enormously.

The Chávez Phenomenon

Starting as an obscure army officer, Chávez launched his political career with an unsuccessful coup in 1992 and landed in jail. Given amnesty in 1994, he was elected president four years later at the head of his Movimiento Quinta República (MVR) party, which appealed to the poor with a socialist platform. When he took the oath of office for the first time in February 1999, he declared the country’s constitution “moribund” and announced elections for a National Assembly that would write a new one. In those elections, Chávez’s supporters won 122 seats and the opposition only six.

The new constitution that would become the basis of what Chávez called the “Bolivarian Revolution” was approved by popular vote that December. At the same time a new National Assembly was installed in which the president’s supporters held 130 seats and his opponents 37. The Chavist majority proceeded to appoint new members of the Supreme Court and the National Electoral Council (in charge of the electoral process), as well as a new attorney general, comptroller general, and ombudsman—all of whom were unconditional followers of Chávez. Similarly, the president was given absolute control over all public agencies, the presidential term was extended from five years to six, and Chávez himself was immediately reelected to a second term.

From the day he took office Chávez never hid his aim of emulating communist Cuba. This was symbolized by his frequent trips to the island and the economic support he provided Castro’s government. Oil-rich Venezuela sent 50,000 barrels of oil daily to Cuba, and in exchange, Cas-
tro sent Cuban teachers, doctors, and paramedics to Venezuela. In 2006 such Cuban personnel in Venezuela totaled more than 30,000. Chávez, like Castro, declared himself an anti-imperialist and challenged the American government, becoming, in 2000, the first Western head of state to visit Saddam Hussein after a decade of isolation, and subsequently accusing the U.S. of orchestrating the 9/11 attacks in order to justify the invasion of Iraq. Domestically, the government sought to introduce socialist, “anti-imperialist” ideology through the educational system, both public and private, but this drew so much opposition that the plan for the private schools had to be withdrawn.

On April 11, 2002, government supporters shot into a crowd that was demonstrating for Chávez’s resignation, killing 19 people and injuring 200. An army-led coup then removed him from office and the U.S. quickly recognized the provisional government that replaced him. But the military chiefs could not agree among themselves, and Chávez was back in power 72 hours later.

In 2003, after a protracted strike, Chávez fired 20,000 directors, managers, and other employees of the state-owned company Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) and made it an arm of the government, a caja chica (petty-cash box) where he got the money to support his social programs for the poor (Misiones) and lavish gifts outside the country for political purposes, such as deeply discounted oil to Cuba, other Latin American countries, and inner-city U.S. neighborhoods, and cheap gasoline for London buses.

A national referendum to remove him from office, held in 2004 at the initiative of the opposition, was defeated easily. Suspicions of large-scale fraud that marred the vote convinced Chávez’s opponents that the president’s control of the electoral machinery made fair voting impossible, and so the opposition boycotted the National Assembly elections in December 2005. Chávez’s supporters won all 167 seats, and the new body increased the president’s control over the appointment of judges and other high officials.

Learning the lesson from Fidel Castro’s failure to export the Cuban revolution by force of arms, Chávez sought to spread his revolution through money, backing the Colombian narco-guerrilla group Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), helping Evo Morales win the Bolivian election of December 2005, and trying — unsuccessfully — to do the same for leftist presidential candidates in Peru (Ollanta Humala) and Mexico (Andrés Manuel López Obrador) in 2006. Even in the face of these defeats, Chávez celebrated as private victories the election later that
year of Rafael Correa in Ecuador and former guerrilla Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua. In 2007, there thus emerged a Chávez-Morales-Correa-Ortega axis that tried to supplement the socialist rallying cry with “indigenism,” a political movement of revenge and neo-racism aimed against people with European ancestry.

Venezuelan diplomacy worked in two parallel lines. Beside the traditional, state-to-state relationships, the regime created organizations and support networks for the Bolivarian Revolution. It provided financial support for the creation of Circulos Bolivarianos (Bolivarian Circles) all over the world, which not only promoted the revolution in their own countries but also acted against any group opposing Chávez.

According to a Justice and Democracy Foundation report issued in November 2007, Chávez had designated a total of $38 billion as gifts to other countries. Just 5 percent of that sum could have paid the minimum wage of the one million unemployed Venezuelans. Some of the money went to buy helicopters, refineries, and health clinics in those other countries, and some was used to buy external debt bonds of Cuba, Argentina, Brazil, Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Ecuador. In addition, the report noted an investment of $10 million in the Latin American TV channel Telesur, a Chavist project that tried to copy CNN. Cristina Moure, director of research and analysis for the foundation, warned that “if you ask the government about these donations, it will reply that they are about Latin American solidarity. But it is just the buying of support for Chávez’s goal of extending his revolution to other countries.”

Chávez’s dream of becoming an “anti-imperialist and multipolar” world leader was also promoted through the investment of millions of dollars in public relations. Foreign journalists were often used to promote the Bolivarian Revolution. American journalist Barbara Walters, for example, was brought to Caracas in March 2007 to interview Chávez and create a favorable impression of the regime. Other celebrities who were hosted and used for the same purpose were actors Danny Glover, Kevin Spacey and Sean Penn, and supermodel Naomi Campbell.

A New Presidential Term

Chávez’s reelection at the end of 2006 emboldened his followers toward greater radicalism. Chavist bands—sometimes supported by military men or public officials—invaded and stole from farms that produced sugar cane, meat, milk, and chickens. On other occasions the army directly occupied properties, under orders given by Chávez on his Sunday
program "Aló Presidente!" (Hello President!), broadcast on radio and TV for anywhere between four and nine hours.

The food shortages that the country suffered in late 2007 were partly the result of these invasions. Another factor in the shortages was government regulation that set the price of food well below the inflation rate. Staples disappeared from supermarkets, and sometimes it was only possible to find them at street vendors' stands, a kind of black market tolerated by the authorities.

Another form of assault on private property was invasion of, and stealing from, apartment buildings in Caracas and other cities. These tended to be either old buildings that were going to be demolished or renovated, or else new construction projects that were in the process of selling their apartments. Organized gangs protected by government officials and popular Chavist leaders were behind the invasions.

There was a marked increase in emigration, and by late 2007 an estimated 450,000–500,000 citizens were thought to have left the country since Chávez came to power. The bulk of the emigrants were between 24 and 45 years old, and their preferred destinations were the U.S. (mostly Florida), Canada, Spain, and Italy. Many were physicians—some 2,700 in 2007 alone—whom Chávez called traitors to the country and replaced with Cuban doctors and paramedics. The most recent wave of emigrants also included many other professionals and middle-class businessmen, and a good number of them left properties in Venezuela in the hope that they might some day return.

Apart from economic reasons, the most important factor driving emigration was the increasing lack of personal safety. Opinion polls showed that most Venezuelans, regardless of social class or region, considered this the greatest threat to their own personal lives. Venezuela had the highest rate of homicide in Latin America: in 2007 there were 12,000 murders, most of them by firearms. There were also 382 kidnappings, mainly of ranchers and businessmen; nine of those kidnapped were killed. In Caracas alone, 9,875 cars were stolen, mostly under firearm threats. Many crimes went unreported due to lack of trust in the police.

The crime problem was largely due to the amount of firearms in the hands of the population, rising alcohol and drug consumption, incompetence of judges and prosecutors, and extensive corruption. Many crimes—especially the murders and kidnappings—were widely attributed to policemen and military officers. A report by Transparency International published in September 2007 ranked Venezuela 162d in its corruption perception index out of 180 countries studied.
Venezuela was a paradise for drug trafficking and other international crime syndicates. The former Venezuelan minister Moisés Naim, editor-in-chief of Foreign Policy magazine, published an article in El País, a leading Spanish newspaper (Nov. 4), titled “Venezuela’s Hidden Story,” describing the situation. He pointed out the irony that Chávez, a consistent critic of globalization, had allowed Venezuela to be globalized “by criminal gangs.” Naim concluded, “it is a globalization that depends on corruption, crime and death. And that may be more critical in shaping Venezuela’s future than any of Chávez’s political experiments.”

On December 28, 2006, the reelected president announced his intention not to renew the broadcast license of the privately owned Radio Caracas Television (RCTV) because its owners, he claimed, had been implicated in the coup that tried to overthrow him in April 2002. On January 10, 2007, Chávez ramped up his rhetoric, announcing the “Socialism of the Twenty-First Century.” From now on, he explained, there would be only one political party in Venezuela, his own, and he proposed to alter the 1999 constitution. On January 18, the National Assembly bestowed on the president special powers until July 31, 2008, to allow him to pass laws he considered necessary.

On February 4, Chávez ordered a military parade to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the failed coup he led in 1992, and on that day the four branches of the Venezuelan armed forces adopted as obligatory the salute of the Cuban revolution: Patria, Socialismo o Muerte! (Homeland, Socialism or Death!)

During 2007 Chávez significantly increased the already high number of military officers holding high positions in government and at the head of state-run companies.

Chávez presented to the National Assembly his proposal to reform 69 articles of the constitution on August 15. The more controversial points were:

1. Increasing the length of presidential terms from six years to seven and allowing indefinite reelection of the president;
2. Ending the independent powers of governors and mayors, and enabling the president to change territorial boundaries and appoint vice presidents for the different regions;
3. Changing the rules on the legal status of different types of property, in effect eliminating private property;
4. Creating communal councils similar to the committees of the Cuban revolution;
5. Eliminating the legal force of international human-rights treaties within Venezuelan borders;  
6. Officially designating the military as “Bolivarian” and identifying it as socialist and anti-imperialist;  
7. Implementing “popular and socialist” education “to demolish the old values of capitalism and individualism.” 

But the radicalism that emerged with Chávez’s reelection brought a strong backlash. Already in February 2007 opinion polls began to show considerable resistance: indefinite reelection of presidents was opposed by 60 percent; Cuban-style socialism by 86 percent; curtailing private-property rights by 78 percent; the closure of RCTV by 75 percent; and confrontation with the U.S. by 78 percent. 

The government nevertheless closed down RCTV on May 27, the regime’s most serious infringement on free expression yet. Forced to close its open signal in Venezuela, it became an international cable channel. The move against RCTV drew widespread condemnation internationally, the U.S. Senate unanimously approving a resolution deploring the action. In Venezuela, street protests proliferated. The attack on freedom of expression served to mobilize a new element of opposition to the regime: graduate and undergraduate students who believed that the autonomy of their universities would be targeted next. 

Chávez, however, did not appear fazed. He harshly criticized the Venezuelan Catholic Church for defending freedom of speech, and called José Miguel Insulza, secretary general of the Organization of American States (OAS), who opposed the RCTV closure, “stupid” [using a vulgar expression], “dull,” and “viceroy of the Empire.” 

There were also other attempts to stifle dissent: physical attacks on journalists, destruction of television equipment, and the use of the penal code to persecute journalists and opponents of the regime. Thus Gen. Francisco Uson, a former Chávez collaborator, was sentenced to five years in prison because of opinions he expressed on a TV program. 

The Gutenberg University of Sweden and the Andrés Bello Catholic University of Caracas, in a joint project that studied free expression in Venezuela, concluded that the government owned or controlled nine of the twelve national TV stations, in addition to several local stations. During 2007, the pro-government TV and radio stations did not give opposition leaders any opportunity to express their opinions about the proposed constitutional reforms. On the contrary, each day these media promoted the changes.
The economic aspect of "Socialism of the Twenty-First Century" entailed the nationalization of "strategic" companies. The energy sector was first: Exxon Mobil, Conoco Phillips, the French company TOTAL, British Petroleum, and the Norwegian firm Statoil. This was not, strictly speaking, expropriation, because the government paid the oil companies the value of the shares it took over, and allowed them to retain a minority stake. When nationalization was carried out in April, the government orchestrated a grand demonstration, mobilizing the army and Chávez followers in the Orinoco Petroleum Belt.

In May came the turn of the telecommunications company CANTV to be nationalized. Afterwards, there were persistent rumors that Venezuelan directors and managers would become officers of the Cuban Intelligence Service G-2, with the power to tap telephones and Internet communications. The government took over Electricity of Caracas in June, a company that had been privately owned since its establishment in 1895.

In July Chávez traveled to Belarus and Russia to buy arms. He declared in Minsk: "We have created a truly strategic alliance between Venezuela and Belarus. We should protect our homelands and oppose external threats." Greeting President Lukashenko (described by Washington as "the last dictator in Europe"), Chávez told him: "If we have done so much in less than a year, I can't imagine how much more we can do in the next 20 years in power." Chávez called on the Belarusian government to "oppose a fake democracy that is really an elitist and transnational oligarchy."

On August 4, five days before an official visit by Chávez to Buenos Aires, Argentinean customs authorities seized a suitcase containing $790,000 from a Venezuelan-American citizen, Guido Antonini Wilson. He was traveling in an airplane rented by ENARSA, the Argentinean State Energy Company, together with officials close to Julio de Vido, Argentina's minister of federal planning, and with employees of Venezuela's oil company, PDVSA. Antonini was not arrested, and a few days later traveled to his home in Florida. He went to the FBI and claimed that he was receiving threats from people linked to the Chávez government.

In Florida on December 12, the FBI arrested Carlos Kaufman and Franklyn Durán, Venezuelan businessmen suspected of acting as foreign agents. Both men had pressured and threatened Antonini Wilson not to say that the cash seized by Argentina's customs was sent by the Venezuelan government to help fund the electoral campaign of Argentinean presidential candidate Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. For several weeks the
scandal occupied the front pages of newspapers and television news programs in Venezuela and Argentina. Chávez and senior officials said that the case of Antonini Wilson’s “suitcase” was a conspiracy orchestrated by the “Empire” and President Bush.

REFERENDUM

As the December 2 referendum on Chávez’s constitutional changes neared, most opinion polls showed a majority against him. Nevertheless, it was assumed that many of his opponents, convinced that the result was fixed in advance, would stay away from the polls. Thus it came as a great surprise when, early in the morning of December 3, the Chavist president of the National Electoral Council announced to the country that the presidential proposals had been rejected, 51 percent to 49. More than three million people who had voted for Chávez’s reelection in December 2006 voted against him one year later. Chávez acknowledged defeat at 2:50 a.m., and rumor had it that the military leadership had to convince him to do so. But two days later Chávez used obscenities in referring to the outcome. Calling the opposition’s victory “Pyrrhic,” he threatened to carry out his socialist vision even against the electorate’s manifest will.

There were several reasons Chávez lost the referendum. Clearly, a majority of Venezuelans rejected Cuban-style socialism, threats to property rights, and the antidemocratic idea of a president for life. Furthermore, the newly energized student movement provided fresh leadership to anti-Chavist ranks. The shortages of basic food items also hurt the government’s cause. Another factor was an incident at the 17th annual Iberian-American Summit, held in Chile, where Chávez was made to look ridiculous. After he interrupted Spanish president Rodríguez Zapatero’s remarks by shouting insults against that country’s former president, José María Aznar, King Juan Carlos of Spain exclaimed to Chávez, “¿Por qué no te callas?” (Why don’t you shut up?). The scene was immediately broadcast on YouTube, and the international media had a field day mocking Chávez.

Also hurting Chávez was that some former friends turned against him. On November 5, Gen. Raúl Isaías Baduel, who had been a key ally and defense minister until July 2007, informed the media that the proposed constitutional changes amounted to a coup d’état. And on November 27, María Isabel Rodriguez, Chávez’s recently divorced second wife, gave a press conference asking people to vote against the changes, since they would convert Venezuela into a second Cuba.
Furthermore, Chávez damaged his own cause. He used his Sunday TV and radio program on November 25 to criticize and insult Colombian president Álvaro Uribe, threatening to break off diplomatic and commercial relations. Uribe responded: “President Chávez, the truth is that if you are fomenting an expansionist project in the continent, that project does not have any place in Colombia. You cannot set the continent on fire talking about imperialism when you, helped by your budget, want to form an empire.” It is likely that this tiff convinced a good number of the nearly three million Colombians with Venezuelan citizenship to vote against the constitutional changes.

The most important consequence of the December 2 referendum was that it demonstrated to the opposition the realistic possibility of defeating Chávez at the ballot box through unity and wise strategy. The result also convinced many upper- and middle-class Venezuelans—including Jews—who had considered emigrating to remain in the country.

Israel and the Middle East

Chávez showed special interest in relations with the Arab and Muslim world. In 2004 he traveled to Tripoli to receive the Muammar Gaddafi Human Rights Prize from the Libyan president. Chávez declared support for the nuclear program of his “brother,” Iranian president Ahmadinejad, and visited Tehran a total of seven times; Ahmadinejad visited Venezuela three times. In 2007, Iran Air inaugurated regular flights to Venezuela, and Conviasa, the Venezuelan airline, began offering flights to Tehran and Damascus. By 2007 the value of Venezuela’s trade with Iran exceeded $10 billion, making Iran Venezuela’s second largest commercial partner.

The Chávez government was also linked to Middle Eastern terrorist groups. On March 5, 2004, Phil Gunson, president of the Foreign Press Association in Venezuela and a correspondent for the Miami Herald, published an article about the recent appointment of Hugo Cabezas and Tarek El Aissami as director and deputy director of ONIDEX, Venezuela’s National and Foreigners Identification Office, the body that provided identification cards and passports for natives and for foreigners living in the country. According to Gunson, the two men were linked to extremist groups in Los Andes University (ULA), and El Aissami, whose father was Iraqi, was possibly connected with Islamic fundamentalist movements in the Middle East. On February 2, 2007, President Chávez appointed El Aissami vice minister of internal affairs and justice.
When university students protested in Caracas streets in defense of freedom of expression, they were brutally repressed by the police forces under the orders of El Aissami.

During Israel's war in Lebanon in 2006, Chávez repeatedly accused Israel of genocide and compared its actions to Hitler's Germany; visited Syria and Iran to express solidarity with Hezbollah and the Palestinians; and ordered the closing of Venezuela's embassy and consulate in Israel. The government also organized an anti-Israel demonstration in front of the Israeli embassy in Caracas. Chávez's speeches since the end of the war—especially during his visits to Muslim countries—and the government-controlled media's statements were consistently hostile to Israel. Among the government-supported anti-Israel activities that took place during 2007 was the exhibition "Palestine, an 11,000-Year History," financed by the state oil company PDVSA and two Chavist mayors. There were also organized activities to raise money for the release and repatriation of the terrorist Carlos Ilich Ramirez, the "Jackal," who was serving a life sentence in France.

Anti-Semitism

Venezuela was historically a country open to immigration, with low levels of anti-Semitism and xenophobia. This remained true of the great bulk of ordinary Venezuelans even during the Chávez years.

Argentinean sociologist Norberto Ceresole, a self-declared anti-Semite and Holocaust denier, is believed to have had a formative influence on Chávez's attitudes. Unlike all previous democratically elected presidents of Venezuela, Chávez refused any communication with Venezuelan Jewish organizations. During the early years of his presidency Chávez did not even mention Jews. Meanwhile, other important Chavist figures and the government-controlled media expressed clear anti-Israel and sometimes anti-Semitic views, leading the Confederation of Israelite Associations of Venezuela (CAIV), the representative body of Venezuelan Jews, to send numerous letters of protest. CAIV's requests to meet with ministers and other public officials usually went unanswered.

In November 2004, DISIP, the regime's political police, got a court order allowing it to raid the site of the Hebraica School and the Hebraica Club in Caracas "to search for arms." There was never an explanation for the move, only accusations by some Chavists leaders that the Mossad (Israel's secret service) had planned the assassination of state prosecutor Danilo Anderson.
In his Christmas address on December 24, 2005, Chávez said, “the minorities descended from those who killed Christ are the same ones who today control the riches of the world.” The Simon Wiesenthal Center in Buenos Aires responded by organizing an open letter signed by more than 300 Venezuelan intellectuals and scientists—mostly non-Jews—protesting the anti-Semitic remarks and also denouncing Chávez’s invitation to Iranian president Ahmadinejad to visit Venezuela.

On March 24, 2007, CAIV celebrated its 40th anniversary at an event held at the Hebraica Club and School. Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Argentina’s first lady, was the guest of honor. Representatives of AJC, the World Jewish Congress, the Latin American Jewish Congress, and the Latin American Sephardic Federation also attended. President Chávez, several ministers, and other senior officials were invited, on the assumption that since Cristina Kirchner and her husband had a close relationship with Chávez, members of the government might attend as a show of courtesy, and their presence could improve the relationship between the regime and the Jewish community. But none of the official guests came, and Jewish leaders interpreted this as further evidence of the government’s lack of sympathy for the Jews.

The CAIV event prompted a disturbing dialogue on the National Radio program “La Noticia Final” between interviewer Cristina González and Argentinean writer Carlos Asnárez, author of *Palestine, A Nation and a People*. González, who had drawn many earlier complaints from CAIV for negative remarks about Jews, referred to CAIV’s anniversary as follows: “There was recently a Jewish meeting. Many Jews came to Venezuela to celebrate. . . . Everybody knew how many came into the country, but nobody knew how many stayed. No one checked how many left, and maybe a good number of people from the Mossad could have come.” Asnárez replied: “This has to do with the impunity that these Zionists have, to operate worldwide with very strong economic power, an extremely strong media power. In Argentina the Jewish lobby is tremendously powerful and we can compare it with the American Jewish lobby. Unfortunately they play with guilt. Some political leaders who do not share Zionist ideas attend events organized by the Zionists because they feel obligated in order to appear in the photo so they will not be accused of anti-Semitism, the first accusation they like to use.”

created a spillover effect into mainstream society. There was a rise in anti-Semitic vandalism, caricatures, slogans at rallies, intimidation, and physical attacks against Jewish institutions.” Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro dismissed the report, saying it was part of America’s psychological warfare against Venezuela.

Besides Cristina González, the journalists who most frequently expressed anti-Semitic opinions were Mario Silva and Vladimir Acosta, both of whom indulged in conspiracy theories directed at Israel, the “Zionist lobby,” and individual Jews, such as Pynchas Brener, rabbi of the Ashkenazi community. Chávez often said that Silva’s show, “La Hojilla” was his favorite program, and during the weeks leading up to the December 2 referendum he arranged to have himself interviewed on it three times. Israel and the Jewish community were also regularly attacked in the official government newspapers *VEA*, *Las Verdades de Miguel*, and *El Diario de Caracas*. The complaints that CAIV sent to government officials, the attorney general, and the directors of the national radio and TV stations about the media were ignored.

The most serious physical threat to the Jewish community during 2007 took place at midnight on December 1, a few hours before the vote on the referendum, when police once again raided the Hebraica Club and School in Caracas while a large wedding was taking place. This generated great anxiety in the community, which was relieved by the announcement of the electoral result.

**JEWISH COMMUNITY**

The great majority of the 14,500 Jews of Venezuela lived in the capital city of Caracas. Sephardi Jews began arriving from Morocco and elsewhere in the Middle East beginning in the 1930s, and especially after Morocco achieved independence in 1956. Ashkenazi Jews were generally the descendents of World War II refugees. The two communities differed only in their liturgies; they jointly supported a school, a cultural and sports center, a weekly newspaper, and a social-service agency. The local synagogues varied by their congregants’ place of origin and degree of religious Orthodoxy. An estimated 8–10 percent of Jews required financial aid because they are old, disabled, or unemployed.

When Chávez was first elected president, Jews had the same preoccupations about their future as other Venezuelans, but when the government’s hostility towards Israel and Jews become evident, many considered
leaving the country. The Jewish community lost about 25 percent of its members since 1999, especially young couples seeking to educate their children in a safe environment and college graduates who continued their education in the U.S. or elsewhere and did not return to Venezuela upon completion of their studies.

In 1997 the Hebrew day school had 2,000 students; in 2007 enrollment was down to 1,400. Nevertheless, Jewish life remained dynamic, with extensive cultural, sports, and social activities. Zionism was traditionally strong in Venezuela, and that remained true even in the face of the Chavists' constant attacks against the State of Israel.

Paulina Gamus