

## VENEZUELA TODAY: A PERSONAL VIEW

**María Ramírez Ribes**

I didn't vote for Hugo Chávez. Ever since I first heard him speak, long before he was elected, I realized that if he became president, sooner or later we would have to take to the streets to demand his resignation, as happened with Bucarán in Ecuador. Indeed, I expressed this opinion publicly as a guest speaker at a forum in the philosophy faculty of the University Andres Bello in Caracas.

I've never liked populist demagogues or soldiers in positions of power. Someone who has led a coup d'état and who has been formed in a military academy is more inclined to command than to govern, and the worst thing is that they won't be able to see the difference between the two.

I object to the way Chávez has presided over the country. My main objections lie in his incompetence and in the resentment created by his misuse of power, which has left scars that will be hard to heal. His repetitive, fiery, Manichean discourse has divided the nation, causing grudges and provoking unnecessary confrontations. Throughout the history of Venezuela, no leader has had so much support from all sectors of the population, so many resources with which to eradicate poverty once and for all, such an opportunity to reinforce and democratize public institutions and strengthen the education system, as Chávez had in the first few years of his government. And the only thing he achieved was a huge step backwards.

Thus my biggest complaint against Hugo Chávez is that he wasted a historic opportunity to transform the country, precisely when people – those who voted for him and those who didn't – were crying out for him to do it and ready and willing to help him. He had everything in his favor. His informal and intimate style and ability to talk for hours in front of the cameras (admittedly without really saying anything) seduced large parts of the population, especially the less privileged sectors who felt that at last they were being taken into account. He could have taken advantage of this to do something concrete for these people, not just to curry their favor but to give them better living conditions. But he did nothing of the sort, save use them as fodder for his project. He replaced the existing social programs with the “Plan Bolívar 2000”, which put the army in charge of handouts and has been exposed as the source of massive corruption. According to the statistics of the regional organization CEPAL, Venezuela is one of the few Latin American countries in which poverty has increased in the last four years.

The transformation which the country required could have been made without calling for a complete constitutional overhaul: a simple reform of the existing constitution would have been sufficient. Neither did I

agree with the way the constitutional process was convoked and then carried out. For example, why exclude those not born in the country when Venezuela is a nation of immigrants? Why not at least include all those who have been naturalized and resident in the country for over 21 years (the minimum age for participation for those born here)? Thus we were already witnessing the process of exclusion which has characterized Chávez' thoughts, attitudes, discourse and politics, and which would eventually lead to the widespread myth that he was reclaiming the rights of the dark-skinned peoples against the whites, when it is a recognized fact that the vast majority of Venezuelans are of mixed blood, including virtually all of the presidents who have governed the republic. And with respect to constitutional change in general, I believe that in the Americas we have had too many constitutions to imagine that by changing the words we can change reality.

One of Chávez' flagships was the fight against corruption, and look what has happened. Where are the billions of dollars which have entered the government coffers? Where is the money from the Macroeconomic Stabilization Fund, nearly 3% of GNP, which Chávez himself admits was used for purposes other than those stipulated by law? Why attack the only viable and efficient state enterprise, Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA), rather than the social security institute, the Banco Industrial de Venezuela, the Plan Bolívar 2000 or the so-called Social Fund? Many people suspect that there is a relation between the missing money and the creation of the armed "Bolivarian Circles" which are sowing terror among the public.

It is true that school enrolment has increased, something which I have always fought for. However, this has been done in order to control education more tightly – to impose Chávez' truths on children and teenagers, rather than to equip them to find their own. The reaction to the presidential decree concerning government supervision of schools constituted the awakening of Venezuelan society and was the initiation of an unstoppable mobilization of the citizenry. From that moment onwards, the (then incipient) opposition began to conquer the streets, discover citizen power and show the first signs of an extraordinary process of transformation.

In a speech on 2 February 2000 commemorating the first anniversary of his government, Chávez openly revealed his aim of destroying anything that got in the way of the revolutionary process: "We will not hesitate for one moment to launch the offensive, the popular offensive, the institutional offensive, the offensive on all fronts. Attack and attack and attack ... If we have to keep attacking in order to eliminate obstacles, then we will keep attacking with the same force, using that same force to drive forward the revolutionary process whatever the consequences". His obsession with the revolutionary process was there to stay. One year in power was enough to

leave behind the essence of democracy: the respect for differences and institutions. It should be recalled that in November 2001 he used special powers of decree to legislate on economic activity without even consulting the National Assembly.

Just like a nineteenth-century caudillo, Chávez has trampled on the principle of the separation of powers, appointed friends and cronies as heads of the bodies responsible for controlling governmental actions, and wiped out the distinction between party, government and state. As a result, the use of the state's resources for purely party-political purposes has become commonplace, which perhaps explains his desperate attempts over the last year to get his hands on PDVSA.

Chávez has never understood the meaning of government within a democracy. His egocentric megalomania and uncontrollable narcissism have led him to believe that governing implies imposing his televised presence on each and every Venezuelan household in a kind of permanent political campaign, condemning and insulting anyone who does not adhere to his creed. The campaign is non-stop, even after seven election victories. The sight of his own face on the screen, the sound of his own voice, the knowledge of the impact he can achieve through the mass media – all this has bedazzled him into confusing the function of a president with that of the campaign manager, attracting followers (and creating enemies) by means of an image. How much damage has been done by these national broadcasts of three, four, even five hours! How much damage his speeches (through both the content and the style) continue to cause! How deep the wounds he has inflicted and continues to inflict! How much money wasted because of his whims and incompetence!

Was it really necessary to change the name of the Republic of Venezuela? Was it justified to spend so much on paperwork, coins and notes, passports and all types of official documents, when the country has so many other priorities? Admittedly the decree changing the name to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela was approved by the National Assembly, but recently even this nomenclature has undergone modifications. The authorities of Mérida State have issued documents of late with the letterhead of “The Revolutionary Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela”. While Bólivar was the symbol for the first three years of the Chávez government, the Bolivarian revolution has become the favorite slogan over the last twelve months. So if Chávez manages to stay in power, we know what the name of the country will be.

Somebody should put together an anthology of presidential whims during these four years. Not only did Chávez buy one of the most expensive planes of its type for his personal use, since the old one obviously wasn't good enough for him, but he insisted on remodeling it inside because he didn't like the decoration and, without even having used

it, repainting it outside because he didn't like the color. The show, the spectacle has been an integral part of what he believes to be government. Imagine the amount of money he spent in an attempt to present a cavalcade on the Battlefield of Carabobo on the anniversary of the final event in the struggle for Venezuela's independence! The government bought everything needed to produce a realistic representation of the famous battle on the site, including the cloth for the nineteenth-century military uniforms. But the costume-makers couldn't finish the uniforms on time, so the show couldn't go on and the whole effort was wasted. (I imagine that the following year Chávez' followers had to convince the president not to try again because his image had deteriorated to such an extent that such a spectacle would have been counterproductive, especially with respect to the international audience which he has been very careful to cultivate.) In the meantime, the state publishing house, Monte Avila, which was a pioneer in making known the major works of the Americas, had been forced to stop printing because it had debts amounting to a paltry two million dollars – probably less than what it cost to remodel the beloved presidential plane. At the same time, the government was withdrawing its subsidies from institutions which had pioneered education in the poorest barrios, such as the Salesian "Fe y Alegría" schools which are widely regarded as a model of educational management for the less privileged sectors of Venezuelan society. Confrontation with the Catholic church has been another feature of the Chávez presidency, and he has paid the price in terms of popularity (though it must be admitted that he has also won new followers by defending the rights of certain evangelical sects which are spreading throughout Latin America).

The major achievement of this government has been the mass media campaign carried out in countries like France and in the international anti-globalization forums such as the social Forum in Porto Alegre, at which Chavez' presence has been a magnet for those who still believe in the revolutionary utopia and who let themselves be seduced by charismatic figures. At these events the cynicism and lies have been handled with great skill. Indeed, there are probably few cases in history in which reality has been so successfully distorted on the world stage, especially in front of leftwing audiences. No doubt substantial portions of the resources which (by the president's own admission) have been diverted from their proper destiny, have been devoted to the promotion of the Bolivarian revolution among these sectors. There is no secret about Chavez' close relationship with the editor of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Ignacio Ramonet, with whose help various seminars on the Bolivarian revolution have been held in the Sorbonne. The Venezuelan government has financed extensive propaganda in *Le Monde*, and has succeeded in winning over public opinion in France. Thus French intelligentsia has adopted the Bolivarian Revolution as its

bastion and Chávez as its new revolutionary hero. These contacts with leftist intellectuals have paid off handsomely for the government, creating a totally false impression of its opponents. And, of course, what happened on 12 April 2002 hasn't helped the opposition's image.

For those outside Venezuela, what remains of those April events is not the huge march of nearly two million people in Caracas demanding Chávez' resignation, nor the premeditated national broadcast by the president precisely at the moment that sharpshooters were opening fire on the peaceful demonstrators, nor the fact that the highest-ranking general, Luis Rincón, in another national radio and television broadcast, announced that the president had resigned. (It turned out that this same general was then appointed defense minister when Chávez was returned to power – maybe by Rincón himself, who knows.) No, none of this is known, or if it is, it doesn't matter. What did reach the world was the unscrupulous ineptitude of a handful of individuals who tried to impose their personal project on the country, frustrating the wishes of millions of Venezuelans, many of whom had risked their lives to create this unique moment in the history of the nation. Which all goes to show that Chávez is not the only incompetent autocrat in the country.

We will never know the true cost of having lost this opportunity. It would have been relatively easy, given the president's resignation and the resulting power vacuum, to have negotiated with the Assembly and formed a broadly-based coalition government. This coalition could have included a representative of civil society; one from the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV); another from the employers' federation (Fedecámeras), which could even have been Carmona, the now-disgraced leader of the take-over; one or two of the dissidents from the government party, such as Luis Miquelena, who a few days earlier had served up this very option to the opposition; and perhaps a military official, since it was the army which had disobeyed Chávez' order to shoot at the population (the famous "Plan Avila") and then asked the president to resign. It should be pointed out that it would have been impossible for the vice-president, Diosdado Cabello, to have assumed the presidency as stipulated in the constitution, since he – along with the president and a few others – was responsible for the implementation of the Plan Avila and thus guilty of the indiscriminate massacre of civilians. During those hypothetical negotiations with the Assembly, the rest of the powers of state could have stayed in place until the transitional government had called for new elections – within one month, according to the constitution. So what happened? Why, with such a simple and democratic solution staring us in the face, were so many ghastly mistakes made? Who was responsible for all this? I guess we will never find out. And the terrible part of this event is the cunning way the government has taken advantage of it. The April debacle gave Chávez the

chance to purge the armed forces, because it revealed who he could count on and who he couldn't. The "Carmonazo", as it has come to be called, was just what Chávez needed to show the world that he was a victim of an extreme right-wing coup-loving opposition. From now on, he was able to justify his disparagement of "the opposition", while the majority of his true opponents could only wipe their tears and wonder what had happened. I have to confess that very few moments in my life have left me with the sensation of impotence and frustration which I felt after 12 and 13 April. When the time came to march again on 1 May, I thought that I wouldn't be able to do it. In the march we had to collect signatures for the referendum and the constitutional amendment, but the enthusiasm of 11 April seemed a long way away. It was Labor Day, and the downcast workers were asking, what's the point of signing? What they wanted was jobs, not signatures. I was near "Bandera Roja", a group at the extreme left of the opposition, and I saw that – as usual – they were refusing to get downhearted. And as I went round the different factions that comprised the march, I became aware once again of the wide-ranging plurality, the complete lack of uniformity, that has characterized what is known as the opposition. I began to recover my spirits, though I knew that no protest could ever match the 11 April march, that that opportunity would never be repeated. Tragically, the nineteen victims that day died in vain. A Truth Commission was set up to determine responsibilities, but nobody is in jail – neither for the massacre itself, nor for the looting carried out by the Bolivarian Circles once they realized that Chávez was back in power. They felt safe. Time and again Chávez has incited "the people" to attack the haves, to invade private property, in the same tone a father might use to justify the wrongdoings of his children. He has even referred to would-be assassins as "heroes of the revolution".

We have lost count of the number of marches we have been to. Neither the marches nor the strikes have had much effect. Personally, I didn't think that the calling of a general strike on 2 December was a good idea. I felt that it would have been more advisable first to have exhausted all the possibilities of the "negotiation and agreements table" chaired by the Secretary of the OAS, Cesar Gaviria. Indeed, I thought it better to wait until 2 February and hope for the referendum. But I never imagined – I reckon nobody did – that the government's arrogance would outdo every type of pressure. Not even the dictator Pérez Jiménez would have acted like this: when the people told him to go in 1958, he went. In contrast, after 45 days of national strike, Chávez not only insisted that he would never resign but said: "We don't care if we have to go naked, we don't care if we starve, this is about saving the revolution".

The consultative referendum is specified in Article 71 of the constitution, and has in fact been implemented once before. After the

events of April and faced with the deteriorating political, economic, social and institutional situation, the opposition decided to collect signatures calling for a consultative referendum on 2 February. The government immediately started to put obstacles in the path of the referendum, and the problems got worse. The growing confrontation led to the arrival of Gaviria and the negotiating table, which the government has sabotaged on several occasions. Perhaps it was the resulting desperation which caused the opposition, on 2 December, to call the strike, which initially was supposed to last 48 hours. At that moment it seemed far too long to wait for August 2003, the date marking the halfway stage of Chavez' presidential period, at which point a recall referendum could be held according to Article 72 of the constitution. Since participant democracy has been one of Chavez' flagships, the strike was conceived as a way of pressing for the 2 February consultative referendum. Moreover Article 347 opens the door to civil disobedience, and Article 350, which closes the constitution, speaks of "the people's right to rebellion when they have to act against a despot in defense of their freedom". I imagine that Chavez included this latter article in the constitution to justify his coup attempt against Carlos Andrés Pérez in 1992.

How difficult it is for those outside Venezuela to understand what is really going on! To understand, for example, why Venezuelans can not wait for the recall referendum in August. The point is that, according to the constitution, there can't be a referendum in August either, because it is only in that month that the process of collecting signatures is supposed to begin – in other words, what was actually done on 2 February, in the event known as "The Great Signing". The recall referendum could be delayed for several months. If it were to be held after Chavez had started the fifth year of his term, and if he lost, the vice-president would finish off the period. And the vice-president, José Vicente Rangel, is equally if not more unpopular than Chávez. Only time will tell whether the calling of the strike was the right decision. The argument of the Democratic Coordination is that, after collecting over 1.5 million signatures for the consultative referendum and duly requesting that it be held on 2 February, the president said no. Since then, every imaginable pressure has been brought to bear, all in vain. "The Great Signing" took place outside government control, with the voluntary resources of the community. Nearly four million Venezuelans, all of them on the official electoral register, signed up in favor of a recall referendum and a constitutional amendment to bring the elections forward, as well as expressing their support for the PDVSA workers fired by the government.

Turning to the strike itself, at noon on Tuesday 3 December, the second and – according to the original plan – potentially the last day of the stoppage, the action looked doomed to failure. PDVSA hadn't even joined

the strike. What pushed the oil company to join in, was the government itself. I was there and I saw this with my own eyes. Consider the following facts.

A few days before the strike started, Ali Rodríguez Araque, the president of PDVSA, a position he had assumed after resigning as Secretary General of OPEC in order to help Chávez in the aftermath of April 11, provided facilities in the PDVSA headquarters in La Campiña so that the Bolivarian Circles could hold some forums. Given the association of these brigades with violence and aggression in the public consciousness, this was a very provocative action.

Worse was to come. On the evening of 2 December, a band of masked police officers broke into the home of Juan Fernández, the leader of an opposition group within PDVSA called “Petroleum People” who had been receiving threats for some time. They tied up and muzzled Fernández and his daughter while they searched the house for information. The following day, around 100 unarmed people – myself among them – gathered outside the PDVSA offices in Chuao to demonstrate our solidarity with Fernández. At about 1.30 in the afternoon, a contingent of soldiers, with all the paraphernalia of full-scale war, launched a vicious assault on us. It was a totally unprovoked and incomprehensible attack.

It was this, along with other events during those days, that pushed PDVSA managers into joining the strike. They never imagined that the rest of the company’s workers, and then the merchant marine, would follow them: in fact, this hadn’t happened in previous stoppages. One by one they downed tools, Venezuelan citizens uniting around a cause, and basing their rebellion on Article 350 of Chávez’ Bolivarian constitution. I wonder whether this clause of civil disobedience, which as I mentioned earlier permits individuals – civilian or military – to ignore laws or orders in certain situations, exists in any other constitution in the world.

I do not want a politicized PDVSA, with the company used as a tool for a specific political project, at the exclusive service of the government in power, with programs and ideologies which may or may not benefit the entire population. It is worth mentioning that for several years a group of experts have been working on the idea of making all Venezuelans shareholders in PDVSA. The project, which has been analyzed very thoroughly, would oblige the government of the moment to make much more effective use of oil resources. Chávez rejects these reforms, just as he rejects the existing structure of PVDSA on the grounds that it is too independent of the government. He wants total control of the company, and if he can’t get it, then he would prefer to hire foreigners rather than perfectly qualified Venezuelans, who care deeply about their country and who will resist despotism and presidential manipulation. This obsession with controlling everything has been a permanent feature of the Chávez

mandate. Very few Venezuelan companies have survived the experience – hence the president’s concern for foreign investment, which in turn explains why so much money has been spent on promoting a democratic image of the regime.

PDVSA has resisted Chávez from the very start, as has the mass media. Nobody should forget the offensive way in which, on 8 April 2002 in his weekly radio and TV program, “Hello Mr. President”, he fired the leading managers of the oil company. This episode was the trigger for the strike which in turn led up to the events of 11 April and thereafter. I wonder whether the PDVSA managers or anyone in the opposition could have envisaged on 3 December that two months later the strike would still be going on without having forced Chávez out of office, with a fall in GDP of 15 % (though it was already down 9 % before the stoppage) and exchange controls in place – which give the government greater power over private enterprise. Chávez summed up this last point succinctly in his Sunday show: “The dollars belong to the people” – in other words to him; “not one cent for the coupsters” – in other words, for those who don’t profess the same faith as him.

The importation of gasoline and the hiring of foreign personnel to run the oil industry is costing the nation dearly, but Chávez prefers to decapitalize rather than to give in to the proposals for electoral solutions. He has managed to make the general strike work in his favor. He now has some specific culprits that he can blame for the disastrous state of the nation, in line with what he has always claimed. He isn’t at all worried about what happens to the middle and professional classes, those who not only produce but who also have the intellectual resources to put a stop to his whims. Instead, the president is aiming at the gradual disappearance of these groups so that he can rule over an impoverished country at leisure and without interruption. That is why he has not only permitted, but also stimulated, the proliferation of street sellers, to the extent that Caracas is becoming like a huge bazaar. Indeed, many small shopkeepers in commercial areas like Sabana Grande have had to take their merchandise out onto the sidewalk in order to compete with the peddlers. What Chávez has not reckoned with is the integrity, determination, intelligence and enormous love for the country of all these people he denigrates. He has lost touch with this reality.

Above all Chávez wants to hang on to power, and he has explicitly stated this on several occasions. On one famous occasion he said, “I think I will never leave”. He will never leave voluntarily because he is like a child who won’t let go of the toy that he always dreamed of, or the narcissus who stares at the mirror because all that matters to him is his own image. The worrying thing is that several of the people close to him, who could do the

nation a big favor by bringing the president down to earth, have too much to lose if he goes. So the show must go on, more than ever.

There are those who think it exaggerated to label Chávez a dictator and to compare him with previous Venezuelan caudillos such as Juan Vicente Gómez. It is true that under Chávez we have not witnessed the atrocities that occurred in the prisons in the times of Gómez, but there have been other atrocities, among them the promotion of violent confrontation and conflict. The creation of the armed Bolivarian Circles has done great harm to the nation, far greater than the losses caused by the general strike, because these brigades foment feelings that go against respect for life, peaceful co-existence, private property, democracy and all that we most value. When you give weapons and authority to groups who have never had anything, I think it's very difficult to control the outcome. The president himself admitted as much when Gaviria asked him to rein in the Bolivarian Circles in December after they had attacked the facilities of various television channels.

On 23 January 2002 I experienced for the first time the divisions which characterize the country at the moment. That day I was present at both the opposition and government marches in front of Miraflores Palace. I had to climb over barricades to move from one side to another. I couldn't believe my eyes. They were two countries, two worlds broken apart by barbed wire, both imaginary and real. Within the ranks of the government supporters, the cohesion-within-plurality which I had witnessed in the opposition marches didn't exist. The contrast was striking: despite their chanting, there was something sad about these people. The banners they carried had all clearly been written by the same person (the handwriting was the same), and though the messages were often constructive they lacked the humor and imagination of the opposition placards. I couldn't penetrate very far because the access was restricted, but as I passed by I tried to make eye contact with those nearest me. I sensed they found it hard to meet my gaze. Their faces seemed to be saying, what are you doing here? And what really struck me was that deep sadness, along with the sensation that they had somehow lost their way.

I will never forget that empty stare on the faces of so many of those people, individuals who appeared not to know what they were doing in that place or who had brought them there. They seemed not to know who they were; perhaps they never had. Admittedly many of them were under the effects of the free booze which the government usually provides on the buses that take them to the starting-points of the marches, but those faces raise questions that cannot go unanswered. How did we let things reach this state? Why were these people abandoned in the past? Is there sufficient political willpower now to avoid any more lost generations of Venezuelans in the future? These conditions already existed when Chávez came onto the

scene. His speeches were aimed at these people, creating a space for them that they had never had before. He exploited them and continues exploiting them, without improving their living standards. He diagnosed the disease, but did nothing to cure it. He bared the wound in all its ugliness and forced us all to see it, and from now on no political project in Venezuela can afford to ignore the hitherto-excluded sectors of the population.

On that 23 January I would have liked to have shared what I felt with all Venezuelans. Over a year has passed, and every day more people see and feel what I experienced then and are determined to do something about it. And there are several projects for national reconstruction which include all social sectors. Venezuelan society has undergone an extraordinary process of transformation, and this is evidenced in many ways. A lot of people who never before showed any concern for the dispossessed are now working untiringly so that everybody in the country – without exception - can enjoy a dignified life, and can come to understand that it is not a question of good opinions and bad opinions but of differences that have to be respected because that is what democracy is all about: the capacity for co-existence within differences.

Clearly Venezuela would be better-off as a productive nation, with a will to work, with the satisfaction of having met one's obligations, with the happiness provided by free self-fulfillment, than as a country devoured by hatred, dependent on hand-outs, driven towards destruction and enslaved by blind service for a cause and adhesion to a creed. The president seems not to realize the advantages of the former option, and thus is not aware of his failure and sees no need to call elections. While the opposition is prepared to exhaust all existing legal and constitutional possibilities in order to secure an electoral solution, the government appears determined to sabotage any such efforts. The only hope is the Negotiation and Agreements Table.

The mass media has played, and continues to play, a leading role in the national press. However, both the state and private TV channels have focussed almost exclusively on presenting their own points of view without making an effort to put themselves in the other side's shoes. And this has fed confrontation and conflict. I do understand the reaction of the private channels in the face of the government's lies and attacks (which are now taking the form of serious legal actions which pose a threat to the freedom of expression), but I also think that in times of war – and we must be aware that this is a kind of war – resolving the dispute has to take priority over exposing cynicism. It should be recalled that when Solomon decided to cut the disputed baby in half, it was the real mother that begged him not to do it and gave up her claim.

Reversing the ever-worsening conflict which Venezuela is experiencing at the moment will require a great deal of imagination. We can't afford to

keep on repeating the same old formulas if they don't lead to concrete solutions. The private TV companies and the rest of the media have kept going but are suffering huge losses. Some of their publicity promoting democratic co-existence is constructive but generally speaking they have failed to present a vision of a feasible and desirable Venezuela, for example showing what life is like in the barrios and how some individuals have managed to better their lot with the help of micro-credits, or how the immediate environment can be improved with the efforts of the whole community – in other words, instead of focussing solely on the events of the moment, they could be reflecting on how the country can be rebuilt in the future. They need to present the proposals of new leaders, innovative approaches in which tolerance and flexibility predominate. And I am convinced that if the Democratic Coordination started to do this, the media would follow suit.

Venezuela has tended to believe that both the problems themselves and their solutions come from above. The nation has put its faith in saviors, charismatic leaders who have usually looked to the past to resolve the problems of the present. Chávez is one of them. The situation we're in right now requires a rupture with the past. We can't afford to go back again. Chávez has led the country back to the nineteenth century, which witnessed just 27 years of peace and was characterized by the marriage between civil society and the military that gave rise to caudillos. Chávez has many of the traits of the nineteenth century caudillo, trying to run the country as if it were his private estate, but he is an autocrat who has discovered the possibilities of the new technologies, the power of the media and the usefulness of show biz culture. Putting all this together he has written a script for himself and has recited it so often that he has ended up confusing the role with reality. He can still win applause but the audience is getting smaller, and what Chávez needs is the big stage, the great battle from which he will emerge as a hero.

When General Pérez Jiménez fell from power in 1958, the main political powers and parties came to an agreement known as the "Punto Fijo" pact, which represented the initiation of modern democracy in Venezuela. For twenty years the pact brought progress and welfare to the country, but the effect wore off, recession set in, and this led to Chávez' attempted coup in 1992. At that moment, when what the nation needed was regeneration, Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez Frías clearly represented regression. So why, a few years later, did he win the elections? Why did so many Venezuelans (perhaps unconsciously) vote for that return to the past? Probably many fell for the false promise of the revenge vote, reacting instinctively against the failures of the recent past. Some were simply not aware of the dangers, while others thought that the seduction would work the other way round and that Chávez could be manipulated. It was not to

be. It would be terrible if now, instead of a rupture, we were to bet on another repetition of the past, falling into the same old traps and failing to learn the lessons of our history. In order to avoid this happening, it is essential that everyone – newspaper readers, television viewers, the educated and the uneducated, those who can think for themselves and those who rely on preconceived ideas – understands the path taken by Venezuela historically, comprehends the mentality that has influenced our way of being, and refuses to be seduced by simplicities.

A historical examination of the Venezuelan mentality reveals that, once independence had been won, equality – over and above liberty – became the principal social value. In national folklore, prosperity is not the result of hard work but of cunning and sheer luck, and that justice is a vehicle for punishing the rich and powerful. Moreover, welfare is not seen as the result of personal effort but rather something handed out by the state, the means by which the state redistributes what others have produced and earned. This perception creates confrontation and resentment, and goes against contemporary values. Chávez knew what was in play and has been clever enough to exploit it for his own benefit and for the detriment of modernity.

There is no point, on the threshold of the new millenium, in resorting to the worn-out revolutionary myths of the mid-twentieth century. Venezuela's reaction to the present situation will reflect the extent to which she has absorbed the past and learnt its lessons. The mass media can play an important part in this process of reflection, so that in future we don't fall back into the repetitions and regressions we are suffering at the moment. The speed with which events are unfolding prevents us from seeing whether we are facing a terminal crisis or a transition towards better times. It is important to recognize that Chavez' ouster is just the beginning of a process of national reconstruction which will only work within the framework of a shared national project. And it is essential to reject the idea that one sector of society can impose itself on another. Nobody will benefit from an agreement reached on the ruins of the nation. Rather than the magic of a candidate or some elections, what we need right now is a governance pact which waters down the confrontation between two different perceptions of the country's reality. The possibility of forming an emergency cabinet by consensus is hindered by these antagonistic visions, one authoritarian and primitive, the other modernizing and democratic. This transition cabinet is a vital step in the path towards the necessary electoral solution.