

# History's warning to Hugo Chavez

By Alexandra Starr

**V**ENEZUELAN President Hugo Chavez, who was just sworn in for a third term, is acting like a supremely confident leader. On Monday, he declared the country's telecommunications and electricity utilities would be nationalized, to the astonishment of international investors. He has demanded — and is likely to receive — congressional authority to rule by decree for one year, which should facilitate his goal of installing "21st century socialism" in Venezuela.

Chavez's vision of leftist governance is not confined to his nation's borders. Over the last year and a half, he has helped allies in Ecuador, Bolivia and Nicaragua win the presidency. He has also promised a major aid package for newly sworn-in Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, which will deepen the Venezuelan's ties to a leader the Bush administration futilely tried to keep from office.

It's not hard to see why Chavez feels emboldened: He thrashed his opponent in the December presidential election by more than 20 points. Still, he may want to take note of the trajectory of the last Venezuelan president who had the good fortune to serve during a sustained oil boom. Like Chavez, former President Carlos Andres Perez demanded autocratic powers, nationalized key industries and flexed his muscle on the international stage when he was first elected to a five-year term in 1973.

High oil prices helped persuade Venezuelans to look past Perez's self-aggrandizing tendencies. He spread the oil windfall widely, doling out subsidies to domestic businesses and beefing up social programs. (Chavez has pursued a populist agenda as well, spending heavily on anti-poverty programs in particular.) Memories of the go-go '70s helped Perez win a separate term in office in 1988. During that second tenure, however, oil prices were at a low point, and Perez found that even his vaunted charisma could not save him from being prematurely forced from the presidency.

Chavez has announced he would like Venezuela's constitution to be amended so he can remain in office indefinitely. Given his tight grip on all branches of the government, his wish is

chances of the government, his wish is likely to be granted. But like Perez, he may find that the length of his tenure depends heavily on how long a notoriously fickle commodity commands a high price on the international market.

The similarities don't end with their domestic agendas. Chavez's active opining on Latin American affairs in particular recalls Perez-style diplomacy. Perez developed strong ties with Bolivia and championed the landlocked nation's campaign to gain access to the sea. Chavez's interest in Bolivia has been just as intense. He is said to have contributed generously to Bolivian President Evo Morales' successful 2005 presidential bid and has actively supported Morales' renewed effort to win access to the sea. And in Nicaragua, Chavez's recent pro-Sandinista moves mirror Perez's support of the Contra guerrillas in the late 1980s.

Neither man's ego would allow him to confine his activist diplomacy to Latin America. Perez served as vice president of Socialist International; some speculate that his frequent absences from Venezuela were one reason he didn't have a sufficient base of domestic support to stay in office once oil prices plummeted. Chavez's travel schedule has, if anything, been more ambitious. He has crisscrossed the globe, linking arms with nearly every government that is on the outs with the United States.

Therein lies one of the most significant differences between the two leaders — their attitude toward the United States. Perez had an uneasy relationship with the U.S., but it was nothing like the outright hatred Chavez harbors for the nation he calls "the evil empire." (That animosity was fanned in large part by the Bush administration's gleeful reaction to — and Chavez's belief of a U.S. role in — a coup that briefly deposed the Venezuelan leader in 2002.) Perez also respected the basic norms of Venezuela's democracy. Unlike Chavez, he did not curb the media or try to rewrite the constitution.

Still, the basic contours of the two presidents' tenures in office are similar. And Chavez has firsthand knowledge of how fast power can crumble. When the oil geyser became a trickle during Perez's second presidency, Chavez pounced. Then a lieutenant colonel in the army, Chavez staged a coup against Perez in 1992. Although it was unsuccessful, it wounded Perez politically, and he was booted from office the following year.

The 2002 putsch against Chavez also came when oil prices were at a low ebb. And although he managed to quickly regain power, he may find that, like Perez, his appeal is more dependent on oil cash than he would like to believe.

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