

Chavez Blasts the Spanish King

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Playing the Nationalist Card

It's been almost two hundred years since Venezuela first declared its independence from Spain, but over the past few days Hugo Chávez stoked Venezuelan nationalism again by attacking King Juan Carlos of Spain. The spat, which could damage diplomatic relations between the two nations, began over the weekend during a hemispheric summit held in Santiago, Chile, during which Chávez called ex-Spanish Prime Minister José María Aznar a "fascist." In one of his typical rhetorical flourishes, Chávez added, "fascists are not human. A snake is more human."

Moving to damp down the escalating rhetoric, Spanish Prime Minister José Luís Rodríguez Zapatero then remarked: "[Former Prime Minister] Aznar was democratically elected by the Spanish people and was a legitimate representative of the Spanish people." Insensed, Chávez wouldn't let go. Though his microphone was turned off, the Venezuelan leader repeatedly tried to interrupt.

Finally, Juan Carlos leaned forward and said, "Why don't you shut up?" According to reports, in addressing Chávez Juan Carlos did not use the formal mode of address in Spanish known as *usted* but rather the familiar form or *tú*, which is generally reserved for close acquaintances or children, not a head of state.

Aznar and the 2002 Coup

The summit ended in fiasco, as Juan Carlos stormed out of the meeting while Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega rushed to embrace and defend Chávez. Meanwhile, Chávez said the king was "imprudent" and asked if Juan Carlos knew in advance of the brief coup against him in April, 2002. As he left Santiago, Chávez openly questioned whether Spain's ambassador had appeared with Venezuelan interim president Pedro Carmona during the 2002 coup with Juan Carlos's blessing.

"Mr King, did you know about the coup d'état against Venezuela, against the democratic, legitimate government of Venezuela in 2002?" he asked. "It's very hard to imagine the Spanish ambassador would have been at the presidential palace supporting the coup plotters without authorisation from his majesty," he insinuated. The Spanish paper *El Mundo* quoted Chávez as saying that the king had "got very mad, like a bull. But I'm a great bullfighter – olé!" The Venezuelan firebrand added, "I think it's imprudent for a king to shout at a president to shut up. Mr King, we are not going to shut up."

Though Chávez enjoys warm ties to the socialist Zapatero, the Venezuelan leader has long lambasted the previous Spanish regime. During Bush's first term the United States enjoyed

a willing foreign partner in Spain. José María Aznar, who had reorganized Spanish conservatives into the People's Party (Partido Popular or PP) had been Prime Minister of Spain since 1996. Though Chávez exaggerated in calling Aznar a fascist, the Spanish politician's family certainly had clear fascist ties. Aznar's grandfather, in fact, served as Franco's ambassador to Morocco and the United Nations and his father was a pro-Franco journalist.

In 2002, Aznar was Washington's willing ally in opposing Chávez. Prior to the April 12 coup, Venezuelan businessman Carmona visited high level government officials in Madrid as well as prominent Spanish businessmen. Though it's unclear whether Juan Carlos gave his blessing as Chávez suggested, once the coup had been carried out Carmona called Aznar and met with the Spanish ambassador in Caracas, Manuel Viturro de la Torre. The Spanish ambassador was accompanied at the meeting by the U.S. Ambassador, Charles Shapiro. As Chávez languished in a military barracks during the coup, PP parliamentary spokesman Gustavo de Arístegui wrote an article in the Spanish newspaper El Mundo supporting the coup. According to anonymous diplomatic sources who spoke with Inter Press Service, the Spanish foreign ministry holds documents which reveal the Spanish role. The documents reportedly prove that de la Torre had written instructions from the Aznar government to recognize Carmona as the new president of Venezuela.

Diplomatic Fall Out

The diplomatic tit-for-tat continued after the coup. After defeating the coup attempt, Chávez detained the president of Fedecámaras, Carlos Fernández, who was accused of helping to foment a lock out which reduced oil output in 2002-03. Fernández was charged with inciting unrest and sedition. In February 2003 Ana Palacio, the Spanish Minister of External Affairs, criticized the detention. During his Sunday radio and TV show, Chávez angrily shot back that Spain should not interfere in Venezuela's internal affairs. "We must respect each other," said Chávez. "Don't get involved in our things and we won't involve ourselves in your things. Is it necessary to remember that the Spanish ambassador was here applauding the April coup?" Chávez added, "Aznar, please, each one in his own place."

The diplomatic chill continued late into 2003 when Aznar criticized Chávez for adopting "failed models" like those of Cuba's Fidel Castro. Chávez retorted that Aznar's statements were "unacceptable" and added that "perhaps Aznar thinks he is Fernando VII and we are still a colony. No, Carabobo [a battle of independence] already happened. Aznar, Ayacucho [another battle during the wars of independence] already occurred. The Spanish empire was already thrown out of here almost 200 years ago Aznar. Let those who stick their noses in Venezuela take note that we will not accept it." In a further snub Chávez stated that Aznar should respond to the Spanish public which protested PP support for the invasion of Iraq. "He should definitely take responsibility for that," Chávez concluded.

Miguel Angel Moratinos, the Spanish Foreign Minister, has accused the previous PP administration of supporting the failed coup d'état against Chávez in April 2002. Speaking on the Spanish TV program 59 Segundos, Moratinos remarked that Aznar's policy in Venezuela "was something unheard of in Spanish diplomacy, the Spanish ambassador received instructions to support the coup." Before the cameras Moratinos declared, "That won't happen in the future, because we respect the popular will." Adding fuel to the fire Chávez remarked "I have no doubt that it [the Spanish involvement] happened. It was a very serious error on the part of the former government." Chávez declared that Venezuela

had no problem with the PP nor with Spain, and that for a brief moment the two countries enjoyed good relations. But later Aznar's political as well as personal views changed. "With Aznar," Chávez stated memorably, "there was neither chemistry, nor physics, nor math."

Needless to say, Chávez's retort to Juan Carlos has not been embraced by all. In Spain, the press has rushed to defend the King against Chávez, while the Spanish community in Venezuela called for a protest march against the President. Peru and Chile, strong U.S. allies in the region, have also expressed support for Juan Carlos and have criticized Chávez's reaction at the summit.

Still, Chávez has gained welcome political mileage from the incident, which has stoked unpleasant memories of Spanish monarchical rule. United Left, a Spanish political party, qualified Juan Carlos' statements as "excessive." Willy Meyer, spokesperson for the party, said that Juan Carlos behaved as if he was still in the 15th or 16th centuries. "The King can't tell the Spanish President to shut up," he said, "and doesn't have the right to do this to others outside of Spain."

For the past eight years, Chávez has sought to build up the cult of Simón Bolívar, a Venezuelan who liberated the country from Spanish rule. Books on Bolívar are selling like hotcakes in Caracas, hardly surprising in light of the political importance which Chávez has attached to Bolívar in his public speeches. By attacking Juan Carlos, Chávez may cast himself as a true Venezuelan patriot fighting against the domineering attitude of the old Spanish Empire. It's a move that plays well to the Chavista base and Venezuelans' sense of national pride.

Nikolas Kozloff is the author of Hugo Chavez: Oil, Politics, and the Challenge to the U.S. His new book, Revolution! South America and the Rise of the New Left will be released in April, 2008 with Palgrave- Macmillan.

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