

# Salvador Allende and Hugo Chavez: Similarities and Differences on the 'National Road to Socialism'

By [Prof. James Petras](#)

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I have known and advised three left wing president including President Papandreou (Greece 1981-85), President Salvador Allende of Chile (1970-73) and President Hugo Chavez.

Both Allende and Chavez share many strategic goals and embrace policies favoring the working class, peasantry and the urban poor. They also pursued programs regaining national control over the strategic sectors of the economy, redistributing land (agrarian reform), reallocating budgetary expenditures in favor of social programs for the poor and pursuing independent anti-imperialist foreign policies.

In broad historical and sociological terms, they also share a common belief in constitutional, electoral processes, in a multi-party system, a mixed economy and independent trade unions, business and civic associations.

Despite the convergences and similarities between Allende and Chavez, there are important political differences, which account for their different trajectories. Chavez proceeded toward political change before undertaking a deep socio-economic structural transformatio, thus creating a solid constitutional and political framework. Allende, on the other hand, accepted the existing political system and proceeded to implement radical socio-economic changes. As a result, Allende constantly faced political blockages, institutional obstacles that limited his capacity to realize the full potential of the structural changes. In contrast, Chavez' political reforms led to the compatibility between political institutions and socio-economic change - minimizing opposition obstructionism.

Secondly Allende's government lasted less than 3 years, while Chavez has governed for nearly a decade and is still very popular. The military coup in Chile in September 1973 destroyed the Popular Unity Government and the military dictatorship lasted 15 years (until 1989). In Venezuela, a military coup (April 11-12 2002 lasted 48 hours before it was defeated and Chavez was restored to power. The reason why the coup succeeded in Chile and failed in Venezuela was because Chavez had built a substantial loyalist base among military and developed a strategic alliance between the military-popular masses, while Allende mistakenly trusted the so-called 'professionalism' of the military. Both Allende and Chavez faced 'bosses' lockouts', attempts by the capitalist class to shut down the economy in order to foment discontent and overthrow the government. In both countries the mass of workers, technicians and some managers intervened to support the government. However, while Allende returned the majority of the factories to their capitalist owners, Chavez fired 15,000 managers and supervisors who led the lock-out and replaced them with loyalists. Similarly while Allende allowed the rightwing generals to purge loyalist military

officers in the run-up to the coup, Chavez expelled and jailed military officers after the failed coup.

In other words, Chavez is a political realist who understood better than Allende the limits of bourgeois democracy, was willing to use the prerogatives of executive power to defend popular democratic rule against its internal oligarchic and external imperial enemies.

Chavez sees the revolutionary democratic and socialist transition process based on institutional and popular power organized through mass organizations. Allende saw socialist change principally through the established institutions and minimized the role of popular power institutions – creating a constant tension between the political parties and the community councils.

Chavez and Allende opposed US imperialism, its wars (Vietnam in the 1960-1970's), Iraq and Afghanistan (today). But Chavez' foreign policy is much more pro-active, in promoting Latin American integration via ALBA, Banco Sur and bilateral trade and arms agreements with China, Russia, Iran, Brazil and Argentina. Allende looked more to the Andean Pact, the non-aligned movement and links with social democratic European regimes like Sweden and Germany. As a result Chavez has been more successful in isolating and defeating Washington diplomatically than Allende with his constant effort to conciliate with the US.

The political paradox is that the Allende government, based primarily on self-identified 'Marxist' parties and trade unions, never achieved hegemony over the majority of the masses (especially poor women) while President Chavez has established Chavista majorities in 12 national and local elections and referendums.

During his tenure in office President Allende represented his time – a clear democratic-socialist alternative to US-controlled client regimes. Even today the establishment of worker-controlled factories, popular neighborhood councils and popular power under Allende, serve as important reference points for the present transition to socialism in Venezuela. But President Chavez has gone much further and deeper in some areas of social transformation: He has introduced popular militias, decentralized the budgetary expenditures to local neighborhood councils and organized a unified mass socialist party, to avoid the intra-party conflicts which plagued the multi-party coalition of the Allende Government.

## Conclusion

While there are important historical continuities between the democratic socialism of Allende and the 21st century socialism of Chavez, and both reflect important milestones on the road to national liberation, it is clear that Chavez, much more than Allende sees the clear and decisive importance of building a mass base for popular power outside of the strictly electoral parliamentary arena. Where Allende mistakenly idealized Chile's bourgeois democratic institutions, attributing to them a classless character, Chavez combines the democratic norms of electoral politics with the need to build independent organizations of class power. History has demonstrated, at least so far, that Chavez' realism has been much more effective in gaining and retaining popular power than Allende's idealism

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