

# Venezuela & Iran: Whither the revolutions?

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June was a busy month for two of Washington's real 'Axis of Evil'. Venezuela's Chavez completed his nationalisation of oil and Iran's Ahmedinejad stemmed a Western-backed colour revolution, leaving both bad boys in place, muses Eric Walberg

What drives US foreign policy? Is it primarily the domestic economy, as it logically should be, or, as many argue, the powerful Israel lobby, or as other argue, the need to secure energy sources? Of course, the answer is all three, in varying degrees depending on the geopolitical importance of the country in question. And woe to any country that threatens any of the above.

Russia is perhaps a special case, as US politics was dependent for so long on the anti-communist Cold War that ideologues found it impossible to dispense with this useful bugaboo even after the collapse of Communism. But it was not only Sovietologists like Condoleezza Rice that perversely prospered from this obsession, but the US domestic economy itself, which was transformed into what is best described as the military-industrial complex (MIC). It would take very little to placate today's Russia — pull in NATO's horns and stop pandering to the Russophobes in Eastern Europe — but that would hurt the MIC and would hamper the US plans for empire and oil. So it remains an enemy of choice, though not part of the Axis of Evil.

This crude characterisation by Bush/Cheney lumped North Korea, Iraq and Iran together as the worst of the worst. With the US invasion of Iraq, the current score is one down, two to go. But North Korea is a red herring. It is merely a very useful Cold War foil, beloved of the MIC, justifying its many useless, lethal weapons programmes. A popular whipping boy, a bit of innocent ideological entertainment.

Without Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and ignoring Korea, we are left with Iran. But Bush could easily have added Venezuela to his list, as it is these two countries that pose the greatest real threat to the US empire. Both have charismatic leaders who not openly denounce US and Israeli empire but do something about it. And both have large, nationalised oil sectors. Chavez's successful defiance of the US has directly inspired Bolivia, Ecuador and Paraguay to elect socialist leaders and given Cuba a new lease on life. Ahmedinejad has defied the many Israel-imposed bans on supporting the Palestinian resistance and even publically questioned the legitimacy of Israel itself. These bold and principled men are thereby pariahs, albeit useful ones for the MIC, along with their Cold War ghost Kim Jong Il.

That is the catch. While the empire officially frets, the US military-based economy thrives on its official enemies. It would collapse without them. This is the supreme irony to be noted by observers of what can only be described as the bizarre and contradictory world of US foreign policy.

Venezuela and Iran are indeed threats to the US empire. President Hugo Chavez not only thoroughly nationalised the oil sector after the crippling strike led by oil executives in 2002-03, but proceeded to use the revenues to transform his country, putting it on the albeit bumpy road to socialism — subsidised basic goods, mass literacy and free health care. He has even been providing poor Americans with discount gas. “The oil belongs to all Venezuelans,” Chavez emphasised to reporters last month in Argentina, after the government announced it was taking over oil service companies along with US-owned gas compression units, adding to the heavy oil projects Venezuela took over in 2007. Natural gas looks like it will be next. The point of this is to “regain full petroleum sovereignty,” that is, full political sovereignty. No more attempted colour revolutions for Venezuela.

Which brings us to Iran. When Mahmoud Ahmedinejad took office in 2005, with the backing of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, he tried to wrest control of key ministries, especially oil and the government’s National Iranian Oil Company (NOIC), from the Rafsanjani/ Mousavi capitalist elite, replacing officials with his own choices — primarily from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). It was not till 2007 that he was able to install his candidate for oil minister, also head of the NIOC, Gholamhossein Nozari. Like Chavez, he proceeded to use state oil revenues to consolidate his base among the poor, something which the so-called reformists under his predecessor Mohammed Khatami or earlier nonreformists under Rafsanjani/ Mousavi were not noted for.

While Hashemi Rafsanjani was parliamentary speaker with Mirhossein Mousavi his prime minister in the 1980s, younger Iranians, including Ahmedinejad, were fighting in the IRGC (many martyring themselves) in the war with Iraq in the 1980s. Rafsanjani became Iran’s first president in 1989 and added to his family’s vast fortune, much of it connected with oil, during his privatisation programme when he opened the oil industry to private Iranian contractors. This continued under the “reformist” Khatami, who took over the presidency in 1997.

Ahmedinejad’s ascendancy in 2005 on a platform to fight and eliminate the “oil mafia” confirmed the IRGC as the underlying force confronting Rafsanjani and the reformists. Throughout the 2009 electoral campaign, Ahmedinejad attacked his opponents as leaders of the corrupt elite, now trying to claw back control.

The elite had had enough, and the election ruckus last month was their last stand against the clearly populist, essentially leftist Ahmedinejad (in the West labelled a “hardliner”). Some pundits call Ahmedinejad’s decisive win a coup d’etat by the IRGC, but the recent demonstrations in Teheran look eerily similar to those in Caracas in 2002-03 when Venezuelan society was paralysed by its economic elite, mobilising its own Gucci crowd, strongly backed by the US, protesting a populist president’s determination to use oil revenues to help the common people. Chavez risked his life in the process, but his careful planning foiled the plotters and he survived to carry out his agenda. Whether Ahmedinejad can do the same, and to what extent the IRGC is a vehicle for promoting social welfare is a drama which is only now unfolding.

The Western media has uniformly denounced the Iranian elections, with no real evidence, as fraudulent, much as it denounced the many elections that Chavez had to undergo in the face of US-inspired strikes and even a military coup, before the opposition and its US backers relented. The US has generously financed Iranian expatriate dissidents and has penetrated Iranian society with the clear intent to overthrow Ahmedinejad, exactly like they

did in Venezuela, though it is rarely mentioned in the Western press.

The US policy of using soft power to undermine unfriendly governments is well known to both Latin American socialists and Iranian clerics. Khamenei insisted in his sermon last week that Iran would not tolerate the green “colour revolution” underway. No wonder that Ahmedinejad, Chavez and Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin are such good friends. They have much in common.

In similar electoral contests in Latin America between nationalist-populists and pro-Western liberals, the populists have consistently won in fair elections, so the results in Iran should come as no surprise. Past examples include Peron in Argentina and, most recently, Chavez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia and Lula da Silva in Brazil, all of whom have consistently polled 60 per cent or more of the vote in free elections. The people in these countries prefer social welfare over unrestrained markets, national security over alignments with military empires.

The parallel between Iran and Venezuela coincides with a flowering of relations between Iran and Latin American countries as it seeks a way out of the US-imposed blockade. Iran will help develop Bolivia’s oil and gas sector, has opened a trade office in Ecuador, and entered into agreements with Nicaragua, Cuba, Paraguay, Brazil and, of course, Venezuela. Council of Hemispheric Affairs analyst Braden Webb reports that “Venezuela and Iran are now gingerly engaged in an ambitious joint project, putting on-line Veniran, a production plant that assembles 5,000 tractors a year, and plans to start producing two Iranian-designed automobiles to provide regional consumers with the ‘first anti-imperialist cars’.”

Perhaps what upsets the US most about Ahmedinejad is his continued attempts to establish an Iranian Oil Bourse in the Iranian Free Trade Zone on the island of Kish, an idea which Chavez heartily approves of. The bourse is meant to attract international oil trading to the Middle East and to help move international trade away from the dollar as the oil currency, currently accounting for 65 per cent of trade. Over half of Iran’s oil business is now conducted in euros, despite the EU’s support for the US boycott. An indication of just how evil the US considers this move is the fact that his Evil Axis colleague Saddam Hussein was executed not long after switching his accounts to euros. Note that Kim Jong Il remains comfortably in place despite his own penchant for euros.

Both the Venezuelan and Iranian thorns have incensed Washington for daring to use their oil revenues to redistribute wealth in their societies and then organise resistance to US hegemony in their respective neighbourhoods. They are examples which continue to inspire and which pose a threat to US imperial policy, both international and domestic. For what better way to solve all the ills of US society — lack of secure health care, poverty, violence — than dismantling the MIC and initiating a foreign policy based on peace rather than war?

The big difference between these two thorns, of course, is Islam and Iran’s interference with the US-Israeli agenda. Now that the oil companies have resigned themselves to Venezuela’s new assertiveness, they and their government spokesmen are not so concerned with trying to overthrow Chavez. However, the extra weight of the Israel lobby in Washington makes sure that another Iranian revolution remains at the top of the list of Obama’s things-to-do.

Another curious difference is that US attempts to turn Venezuela’s neighbours against it backfired, as they came to Chavez’s defence and followed his example, while similar efforts to conspire against Iran have had considerable success.

The schism in both Venezuelan and Iranian societies is very real and is being taken advantage of by the US and friends, who are doing their “best” to engineer a collapse of the populist governments to make room for more US-friendly colour revolutions. But there is too much Yankee baggage for this to work anymore. It is time for a colour revolution at home.

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Canadian Eric Walberg is known worldwide as a journalist specializing in the Middle East, Central Asia and Russia. A graduate of University of Toronto and Cambridge in economics, he has been writing on East-West relations since the 1980s. He has lived in both the Soviet Union and Russia, and then Uzbekistan, as a UN adviser, writer, translator and lecturer. Presently a writer for the foremost Cairo newspaper, Al Ahram, he is also a regular contributor to Counterpunch, Dissident Voice, Global Research, Al-Jazeera and Turkish Weekly, and is a commentator on Voice of the Cape radio. Eric Walberg was a moderator and speaker at the Leaders for Change Summit in Istanbul in 2011.

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