

Hugo Chavez

Hugo Chavez, who won another six-year term as Venezuela's president in October 2012, is one of the most visible, vocal and controversial leaders in Latin America.

The former army paratrooper first came to prominence as a leader of a failed coup in 1992.

Six years later, he caused a seismic shift in Venezuelan politics, riding a wave of popular outrage at the traditional political elite to win the presidency.

Since then, Mr. Chavez has won a series of elections and referendums, including one on changing the constitution to allow unlimited presidential terms.

President Chavez argues that he needs more time for Venezuela's socialist revolution to take root.

His supporters say he speaks for the poor; his critics say he has become increasingly autocratic.

In May 2012, Mr. Chavez said he had recovered from an unspecified cancer, after undergoing surgery and chemotherapy in 2011 and a further operation in February 2012.

However, in December 2012, he announced he needed further cancer surgery in Cuba, and named his Vice-President, Nicolas Maduro, as his preferred successor should the need arise.

Since then he has struggled to recover and remained out of public view, finally returning to Venezuela in February.

In February 1992, Mr. Chavez led a doomed attempt to overthrow the government of President Carlos Andres Perez amid growing anger at economic austerity measures. The foundations for that failed coup had been laid a decade earlier, when Mr Chavez and a group of fellow military officers founded a secret movement named after the South American independence leader Simon Bolivar.

The 1992 revolt by members of the Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement claimed 18 lives and left 60 injured before Mr Chavez gave himself up.

He was languishing in a military jail when his associates tried again to seize power nine months later.

That second coup attempt, in November 1992, was crushed as well.

Mr. Chavez spent two years in prison before being granted a pardon. He then relaunched his party as the Movement of the Fifth Republic and made the transition from soldier to politician.

By the time Mr. Chavez was swept into power in the 1998 elections, the old Venezuelan order was falling apart.

Unlike most of its neighbours, the country had enjoyed an unbroken period of democratic government since 1958.

But the two main parties that had alternated in power stood accused of presiding over a corrupt system and squandering the country's vast oil wealth.

Mr. Chavez promised "revolutionary" social policies, and constantly abused the "predatory oligarchs" of the establishment as corrupt servants of international capital.

Hello Mr. President

Never missing an opportunity to address the nation, he once described oil executives as living in "luxury chalets where they perform orgies, drinking whisky".

Mr. Chavez has also frequently clashed with church leaders, whom he accuses of neglecting the poor, siding with the opposition, and defending the rich.

"They do not walk in... the path of Christ," said Mr Chavez at one stage.

Relations with Washington reached a new low when he accused the Bush administration of "fighting terror with terror" during the war in Afghanistan after 11

September 2001.

Mr. Chavez accused the US of being behind a short-lived coup that saw him removed from office for a couple of days in 2002.

He survived this episode and emerged strengthened two years later in a referendum on his leadership. He then went on to victory in the 2006 presidential election.

Mr. Chavez's government has implemented a number of "missions" or social programmes, including education and health services for all. But poverty and unemployment are still widespread, despite the country's oil wealth.

Mr. Chavez is renowned for his flamboyant public speaking style, which he has put to use in his weekly live TV programme, Alo Presidente (Hello President), in which he talks about his political ideas, interviews guests and sings and dances.
