

A Polarizing Figure Who Led a Movement

By SIMON ROMERO

CARACAS, Venezuela — Hugo Chávez, who died on Tuesday at 58, rose from poverty in a dirt-floor adobe house to unrivaled influence in Venezuela as its president, consolidating power and wielding the country's oil reserves as a tool for his Socialist-inspired change.

With a televangelist's gift for oratory, Mr. Chávez led a nationalist movement that lashed out at the United States government, moneyed Venezuelans and his own disaffected followers, whom he often branded as traitors.

He was a dreamer with a common touch and enormous ambition. He maintained an almost visceral connection with the poor, tapping into their resentments, while strutting like the strongman in a caudillo novel. His followers called him Comandante.

But he was not a stock figure. He grew up a have-not in an oil-rich country that prized ostentatious consumption. He was a man of mixed ancestry — African, indigenous and Spanish — who despised a power structure dominated by Europeanized elites. As a soldier he hated hunting down guerrillas, but had no qualms about using weapons to seize power, as he and a group of military co-conspirators tried but failed to do in 1992. Even so, he rose to power in democratic elections, in 1998.

In office, he upended the political order at home and used oil revenues to finance client states in Latin America, notably Bolivia and Nicaragua. Inspired by Simón Bolívar, the mercurial Venezuelan aristocrat who led South America's 19th-century wars of independence, Mr. Chávez sought to unite the region and erode Washington's influence.

"The hegemonic pretensions of the American empire are placing at risk the very survival of the human species," he said in a 2006 speech at the United Nations. In the same speech he called President George W. Bush "the devil."

For years, he succeeded in curbing American influence. He breathed life into Cuba, the hemisphere's only Communist nation, with economic assistance; its revolutionary leader, Fidel Castro, was not only an ally but also an inspiration. He forged a Bolivarian alliance with some of Latin America's energy-exporting nations, like Ecuador and Bolivia, and applauded when they expelled American ambassadors, as he had done. He asserted greater state control over Venezuela's economy by nationalizing dozens of foreign-owned assets, including oil projects controlled by Exxon Mobil and other large American corporations.

Though he met opposition at home, he enjoyed broad support, in part by going into the slums to establish health clinics staffed by Cuban doctors and state-run stores selling subsidized food. These and other social welfare programs could be corrupt and inefficient, but they made the poor feel included in a society that had long ignored them.

At the same time, he was determined to hold onto and enhance his power. He grew obsessed with changing Venezuela's laws and regulations to ensure that he could be re-elected indefinitely and become, indeed, a caudillo, able to rule by decree at times. He stacked his government with generals, colonels and majors, drawing inspiration from the leftist military officers who ruled Peru and Panama in the 1970s.

A bizarre governing apparatus subject to his whims coalesced around him. State television cameras recorded nearly every public appearance, many of them to make surprise, unscripted announcements, often in his military uniform and paratrooper's red beret. He might rail against Venezuela's high consumption of Scotch whisky — he did not drink alcohol, his aides said — or its high demand for breast augmentation surgery. He once stunned citizens by decreeing a new time zone for the nation, a half-hour behind its previous one.

'Astute and Manipulative'

Dr. Edmundo Chirinos, a psychiatrist who got to know Mr. Chávez as a patient, described him in a profile in *The New Yorker* in 2001 as "a hyperkinetic and imprudent man, unpunctual, someone who overreacts to criticism, harbors grudges, is politically astute and manipulative, and possesses tremendous stamina, never sleeping more than two or three hours a night."

Mr. Chávez would delight in angering his critics in rich countries. He heaped praise, for instance, on Ilich Ramírez Sánchez, the Venezuelan terrorist better known as Carlos the Jackal, with whom he corresponded.

“I defend him,” Mr. Chávez said of his friend, who was jailed in France on charges of murdering two French police agents and a Lebanese informer in Paris in 1975. “I don’t care what they say tomorrow in Europe.”

No mentor was more supportive than Mr. Castro, who well understood how important Venezuela’s subsidized oil shipments were to Cuba’s fragile economy. An ally from the start of Mr. Chávez’s presidency in 1999, he offered help in one of Mr. Chávez’s most difficult moments, a coup d’état that removed him from office for 48 hours in April 2002. Mr. Castro telephoned Venezuela’s top military officials, pressing them to assist in returning Mr. Chávez to office.

The collapse of the coup, which received tacit support from the Bush administration, and Mr. Chávez’s swift return to power signaled a shift in his presidency. Seemingly chastened, Mr. Chávez promised compromise and harmony in the future. But instead of reconciliation, his response was retaliation.

He began describing his critics as “golpistas,” or putschists, while recasting his own failed 1992 coup as a patriotic uprising. He purged opponents from the national oil company, expropriated the land of others and imprisoned retired military officials who had dared to stand against him. The country’s political debate became increasingly poisonous, and it took its toll on the country.

Private investors, unhinged over Mr. Chávez’s nationalizations and expropriation threats, halted projects. Hundreds of thousands of scientists, doctors, entrepreneurs and others in the middle class left Venezuela, even as large numbers of immigrants from Haiti, China and Lebanon put down stakes here.

The homicide rate soared under his rule, turning Caracas into one of the world’s most dangerous cities. Armed gangs lorded over prisons, as they did in previous governments, challenging the state’s authority. Simple tasks, like transferring the title of a car, remained nightmarish odysseys eased only by paying bribes to churlish bureaucrats.

Other branches of government often bent to his will. He fired about 19,000 employees of Petróleos de Venezuela, the national oil company, in response to a strike in 2002 and 2003. In 2004, he stripped the Supreme Court of its autonomy. In legislative elections in 2010, his supporters preserved a majority in the National Assembly by gerrymandering.

All the while, Mr. Chávez rewrote the rule book on using the media to enhance his power. With “Aló Presidente” (“Hello, President”), his Sunday television program, he would speak to

viewers in his booming voice for hours on end. His government ordered privately controlled television stations to broadcast his speeches. While initially skeptical of social media, he came to embrace Twitter, attracting millions of followers.

He also basked in the comforts allowed him as head of state in a nation with some of the largest oil reserves outside the Middle East. He traveled in a luxurious Airbus A-319. In one jaunt around Venezuela in 2007 with the actor Sean Penn, he roamed the plane regaling foreign journalists with tales from his days as a soldier.

That outing was a rare glimpse of a man — twice married and the father of four — who guarded his privacy. Most times his government would not even say which official residence he might be sleeping in, although his aides did reveal that he smoked cigarettes in private and enjoyed coffee; at one point early in his presidency, he consumed as many as 26 cups of espresso a day.

Mr. Chávez understood the value of humor in his speeches, and he used it freely. But he was also a master of the political insult. “Apátrida” (stateless one) and “escuálido” (squalid person) — just two of the terms he used for his opponents — became part of the Venezuelan lexicon. Another insult was used against those he perceived as mimicking North American cultural mores. “Pitayanqui,” he called them, roughly translated as “little Yankee.”

The Rise of a Rebel

Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías was born on July 28, 1954, the second of six sons of primary school teachers who lived in an adobe house in Sabaneta, a town in the western Venezuelan state of Barinas, a region known for its cattle estates. His impoverished parents sent him and his older brother, Adán, to live with their grandmother. Mr. Chávez played baseball as a boy before enrolling in Venezuela’s military academy at 17.

After graduating, he joined a counterinsurgency unit roaming the state of Anzoátegui in eastern Venezuela, assigned to subdue a Maoist rebel group called Red Flag. There, in the late 1970s and early ’80s, Mr. Chávez, then a junior communications officer, began chafing at the brutal treatment of guerrillas and questioning the inequality that Red Flag had hoped to eliminate.

Soon he helped create a clandestine cell of like-minded young officers within the army, drawing on the guidance of Douglas Bravo, a leftist guerrilla leader who advocated using the nation’s petroleum reserves as a tool for radical change. They called their group the Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement.

Reading voraciously on Venezuelan history and global politics, Mr. Chávez began to articulate a national ideology, much as Mr. Castro had done in Cuba. One of his biographers, Cristina Marciano, said Mr. Chávez had spoken of being influenced by “The Green Book,” the three-volume political tract by Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi of Libya.

Once in power, Mr. Chávez established ties with Colonel Qaddafi and other Middle Eastern leaders who similarly used oil resources to buttress nationalist governments.

Those who knew Mr. Chávez well, before he emerged from obscurity during the failed 1992 coup attempt, saw another side to his intellectual development. Herma Marksman, a history professor who was Mr. Chávez’s mistress from 1984 to 1993, said he loved to have her read aloud to him from books while he drove a car aimlessly through the streets of Caracas. “He would hang on every word, especially if it was fiction by García Márquez,” Ms. Marksman said in a 2006 interview, referring to the Nobel-prize winning Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez.

Throughout the 1980s, Mr. Chávez and his fellow conspirators waited for the right moment to try to seize power. Venezuelans were becoming increasingly restive over a political system permeated with corruption. A decline in oil prices in the 1980s, along with years of fiscal mismanagement, left Venezuela perpetually on the edge of crisis.

‘Por Ahora’

By February 1992, Mr. Chávez and his army associates decided it was time to act. Their rebellion gained tenuous control over several important cities, including Maracaibo and Valencia, but Mr. Chávez, commanding five army units, failed to capture Caracas, the capital. President Carlos Andrés Pérez eluded capture. Mr. Chávez, aware that the coup had failed, surrendered.

But before he surrendered, he shrewdly struck a deal that lay the groundwork for his rise later in the decade: he persuaded officials to allow him to appear briefly on national television. Slim in his officer’s uniform and wearing a beret, he looked into the camera and addressed his supporters.

“Comrades, unfortunately for now the objectives we set for ourselves have not been possible to achieve,” he said, adding that “new possibilities will arise again.” Two words, “por ahora,” meaning “for now,” would remain with Venezuelans.

He and other rebellious officers were court-martialed, and Mr. Chávez was sent to prison. But in two years he was freed by President Rafael Caldera in fulfillment of an election pledge. After leaving prison, Mr. Chávez divorced his wife, Nancy Colmenares. He is survived by their three children, Rosa Virginia, María Gabriela and Hugo Rafael; and another daughter, Rosinés, from his second marriage, to Marisabel Rodríguez, who left him in 2002.

After his release, Mr. Chávez went on a 100-day tour of Venezuela, weaving together a broad coalition of support. After founding a political party, the Fifth Republic Movement, he ran for president in 1998 at a time of intense dissatisfaction with Venezuela's political elite. He easily defeated Henrique Salas Romer, a Yale-educated economist, and Irene Sáez, a former Miss Universe.

At the time of his rise, he was able to rally support for a new constitution. But his attempts to consolidate power fully were eventually blocked as opposition to his rule persisted.

Still, he created what few thought possible in a market economy at the dawn of the 21st century: a governing structure revolving around a single willful, mercurial personality — a man who seemed to believe in his own myth. Between trips to Cuba for treatment, that force of personality helped him to win a re-election campaign in October 2012. Even a setback would only embolden him. After he unexpectedly lost a referendum on a constitutional overhaul in 2007, he set about reminding citizens that his efforts to install a new order were not over. On billboards across Caracas appeared the words “por ahora.”
