

Policy Watch: The Chavez-Gadhafi link

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Venezuela's Hugo Chavez and Libya's Moammar Gadhafi have met on several occasions and put on a show of being great friends and allies. Their friendship, though, appears to have little substance considering that while Chavez continues to revel in poor Venezuelan-American relations, Gadhafi has in recent years worked to improve Libyan-American ones. Yet while their relationship might not be of much interest, comparing them is, since Chavez is now pursuing an ambitious revolutionary agenda similar to the one that Gadhafi attempted earlier in his career.

Both Gadhafi and Chavez came to power as self-proclaimed revolutionaries at a relatively young age. Both ruled oil-rich countries. Both proclaimed their loyalty to the vision of older revolutionary leaders in poor countries nearby (Nasser of Egypt for Gadhafi, Castro of Cuba for Chavez), whose attempts to spread revolution elsewhere -- while initially successful -- had experienced grave setbacks. Both also have a penchant for making dramatic, even outrageous, statements and gestures.

Most importantly, both Gadhafi and Chavez tried to use their oil wealth to revive Nasser's and Castro's respective revolutionary visions. Like Gamal Abdul Nasser and other Arab nationalists, Gadhafi sought to unite the Arab world into one nation. Gadhafi principally attempted to achieve this through agreeing on unions between Libya and other Arab countries. One of the primary motivations for these other countries for agreeing to these unions, of course, was their desire to obtain money from Gadhafi.

Similarly, Chavez has grand ambitions for spreading revolution throughout Latin America, as Fidel Castro and Che Guevara had also hoped for. Like Gadhafi, Chavez is also using his country's oil wealth to foster this ambition. Chavez now provides crucial economic support for the Castro regime in Cuba. Chavez is also providing aid to like-minded revolutionary leaders in Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua. Further, Chavez has purchased a massive amount of Argentina's debt in order to prop up its government.

Although Venezuela has not formally united with any of these countries, Chavez sees himself at the head of a "Bolivarian" bloc of Latin American countries whose leftist leaders are all beholden to him for vital economic support that helps them defy Washington.

Since Chavez's goals in Latin America are similar to what Gadhafi's were in the Arab world, the factors that prevented Gadhafi from achieving his ambitious aims earlier may also prevent Chavez from achieving his now or in the future. Basically, what happened with Gadhafi's unification schemes was that only three governments -- first Egypt, then Tunisia, and then Morocco -- ever agreed to them, and even those were not serious. These three were happy to take Libya's money but did not surrender any meaningful decision-making authority over their countries to Gadhafi in return. Once Gadhafi realized he was not getting anything in return for his money, each of the unions came to an end.

The Latin American leaders Chavez is now supporting certainly share his revolutionary enthusiasm. This enthusiasm, though, would probably wane if Venezuela reduced or ended its generous aid to them. But even if Chavez continues providing them with money, none of them wants to give him any serious say over what happens in their countries. Like Gadhafi's Arab "brothers," Chavez's Latin American ones are not that grateful.

As Gadhafi did before him, Chavez may eventually learn that money does not buy loyalty. But also as with Gadhafi, it may take Chavez decades to learn that lesson.

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