

Venezuela

National Affairs

THE CHÁVEZ PHENOMENON

Hugo Chávez was first elected president of Venezuela in December 1998 with 56 percent of the vote, and took office in February 1999, launching what he termed the “Bolivarian Revolution,” named after Simón Bolívar, the nineteenth-century liberator of Venezuela. Reelected in 2000 under a new constitution of his own devising, he won a third term in the national election of December 3, 2006, receiving 63 percent of the vote, as against 37 percent for the opposition candidate, Manuel Rosales, governor of Zulia, the richest state in Venezuela and the country’s main producer of oil.

The result had been a foregone conclusion, and many Venezuelans opposed to the incumbent stayed home on election day. Although no evidence of outright election fraud surfaced, the president enjoyed the advantages deriving from unlimited political power. His advertising and campaign costs were funded by the government, which also kept the registry of those eligible to vote, and did not share it with the opposition.

The attention that the world press lavished on Chávez almost on a daily basis dwarfed all previous interest that Venezuela had attracted in its 174 years as an independent country. Who really was Hugo Chávez? Since becoming president Chávez had been compared to Argentinean dictator Juan Domingo Perón, a paradigm of fascist populism; with Juan Velasco Alvarado, the military strongman who instituted a leftist dictatorship in Peru that lasted from 1968 until 1975; and with all three of the legendary twentieth-century despots—Mussolini, Hitler, and Stalin. And yet his friends and enemies—even Chávez himself, in fact—tended to agree that the best comparison was with Fidel Castro, who had been not only a political mentor, but also a kind of father figure.

The relationship with Castro began in the late 1960s, when the Cuban dictator sent arms and men to help the Partido de la Revolución Venezolana (PRV, Party for the Venezuelan Revolution), led by Douglas Bravo. Adán Chávez, Hugo’s oldest brother and the current minister of education, was a leading member of this group, which sought to infiltrate the Venezuelan army and take it over. Hugo Chávez, influenced by his

brother, joined the army with the same goal. In 1982, Chávez and four comrades-in-arms made a solemn promise to "break the chains that oppress the people."

They waited ten years before trying, and on February 4, 1992, with Chávez now a lieutenant colonel, he and his friends launched an unsuccessful coup against the democratic government of Carlos Andrés Pérez. For his role in the attempt, Chávez was confined for two years in the military prison of Yare. Soon after his release, Chávez visited Havana, where he was received by Castro with the honors due to a chief of state. Chávez, for his part, gave a passionate speech at Havana University that exuded Marxist ideology.

Another important influence on Chávez was Norberto Ceresole, an otherwise obscure Argentinean sociologist who espoused militarism, fascism, and anti-Semitism. Ceresole's anti-Jewish diatribes and publicly stated Holocaust revisionism led to his deportation from Venezuela in 1999. Ceresole called himself "Chávez's discoverer," and said that his own deportation was not important so long as Chávez was in a position to implement his agenda. Chávez was already president at the time, although his followers did not yet have control of either house of the Venezuelan Congress.

The Western democracies hoped for the best from the new regime despite alarming evidence about its intentions. Soon after Chávez assumed office a letter surfaced that he had written to Ilich Ramírez Sánchez, alias The Jackal, a Venezuelan terrorist serving a life sentence in France. In it Chávez addressed The Jackal as "distinguished compatriot" and told him "there is a time for every purpose, time to gather stones and cast them away, time to ignite the revolution or ignore it, of uniting classes or provoking class struggle." He continued with a quotation from Lenin, and concluded: "With profound faith in the cause and the mission." John Maisto, then serving as U.S. ambassador in Caracas, sought to downplay the letter's significance, saying that "Chávez has to be judged for what he does and not for what he says."

What Chávez would do was weaken all intermediary civic bodies — political parties, Congress, the courts — and, in tight alliance with the military, establish a government that communicated with and appealed directly to the "people." And he would accomplish all this while maintaining the framework of a democratic government, with regular elections and, at least officially, freedom of speech and of the press. What emerged was neither a pure dictatorship nor a true democracy, but a hybrid.

Upon becoming president, Chávez proposed the creation of a Con-

stituent Assembly to draft a new constitution, replacing one that had been in force since 1961. In the elections for the Assembly, Chávez supporters devised a mathematical formula, called "*kino Chávez*," that allowed him to obtain 94.5 percent of the seats with only 62 percent of the votes. The constitution that emerged, approved overwhelmingly by referendum on April 25, 1999, subjugated all other organs of government to the president's will, replaced the two-house Congress with a unicameral National Assembly, and drastically reduced civilian control over the armed forces, whose leaders were allied with him.

Since December 1998 there were seven elections of different kinds in Venezuela, each of them won by Chávez and his supporters. The breakdown of the vote remained, suspiciously, nearly invariable: 60 percent for Chavists (Chávez's side) and 40 percent for the opposition. The rate of abstention from voting always exceeded 50 percent, with two exceptions: the National Assembly elections in December 2005, in which 83 percent stayed away from the polls, and the presidential election of 2006, when 25 percent were reported as not voting.

Suspensions of voting fraud were especially widespread after the defeat, under murky circumstances, of a recall referendum in August 2004 that sought the president's ouster. Surveys done after the referendum found that roughly 80 percent of Venezuelans, including a good number of the president's backers, did not think the vote was conducted fairly. If anyone still harbored doubts that the right to secret ballot was violated, Luis Tascón, a Chavist representative in the National Assembly, provided, on his Web site, a list of people who voted for recall. Many of them were subsequently fired from government jobs, and those who worked in the private sector suddenly suffered the termination of their business with public bodies. Later, the government opened a Web page for those who wanted to ask for forgiveness because they had voted for the recall of Chávez.

The persistence of free expression under Chávez was often cited by foreign observers to disprove charges of dictatorship. The government, in fact, heavily influenced the media, most notably through its outright ownership of eight national radio stations and four television stations. Beginning in July 2005 there was also Telesur, a joint TV project with Uruguay, Argentina, and Cuba, financed by and broadcast from Venezuela. Officially designed to offer these and other Latin American countries programming related to their culture, Telesur, like the Venezuelan stations, hewed to the regime's ideological line and promoted a Chávez personality cult.

In addition, government-funded advertising was used to manipulate the

privately owned media: in order to ensure their financial survival, some of the print and electronic media avoided criticism of the government and blacklisted journalists known to be hostile to it. Often, sometimes on a daily basis, Chávez himself delivered *cadenas*, political discourses that could last hours, which all radio and TV stations were required to broadcast live. In November 2005 the regime went further, enacting a Law of Social Responsibility for Radio and Television, setting limits on the freedom of the private media. Further legislation in 2006 provided prison terms for those guilty of crimes of "opinion."

In July 2006, Chávez, in the course of one of his *cadenas*, warned that if private radio and TV channels kept "conspiring," he would withdraw their licenses. These words were said as he aimed a Kalashnikov rifle, one of 100,000 recently imported from Russia, at the TV cameras. A few months later, in an address delivered at the Military Academy, Chávez, dressed in his officer's uniform, announced that his government would not renew the license of Radio Caracas Television, which had been on the air for over 50 years, beyond May 2007. He explicitly stated his political motivation: the channel was "*golpista*," a supporter, he believed, of an attempted coup against him in 2002.

International organizations that monitored freedom of speech, including the Inter-American Press Association and Reporters without Borders, repeatedly condemned actions taken and threats made against the free press in Venezuela. And the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) had received, by the close of 2006, more than a thousand complaints of physical aggression against Venezuelan journalists. During 2006, three journalists and an editor were murdered in the course of attacks on newspaper headquarters and TV stations in the provinces. At the end of 2006, there were, in Venezuela, 76 political prisoners and more than 700 people persecuted for their political activities or opinions, among them many journalists.

SOCIALISM, ANTI-AMERICANISM, OIL

Speaking in January 2005 at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, President Chávez delivered a manifesto on the "Socialism of the Twenty-First Century." Based, he said, on "solidarity, fraternity, love, freedom, and equality," such socialism opposed capitalism, imperialism, and American hegemony. However Chávez did not explain its positive content, noting only that it remained a work in progress. While "Socialism of the Twenty-First Century" may have been a new phrase, its im-

pulse had been there for a long time. Chávez, like Castro, saw himself as a potential world leader, and to further that goal he exploited anti-American feeling wherever he could.

This was already evident in December 1999, when the state of Vargas was hit with an entire week of rain, and thousands of people were buried under tons of stones and mud. The U.S. offered to send in its army with special equipment to rescue people from the debris, but the Venezuelan government refused the help. Then in August 2000, Chávez paid a solidarity visit to Saddam Hussein, the first president of a Western country to dare visit the Iraqi dictator since the Iraq war ten years earlier. Images of Hussein driving his car around Baghdad in the company of Chávez were broadcast around the world.

On his numerous trips abroad to attend summits and other conferences, Chávez criticized globalization and American imperialism. With the invasion of Iraq by the U.S. and its allies, he stepped up the anti-American rhetoric. In March 2005, Muhammad Hatami, the former president of Iran, visited Caracas, and the two countries entered into an "anti-imperialist alliance." That September 11, the fourth anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the U.S., Chávez declared that the American government itself had orchestrated them. This rhetoric reached a crescendo in Chávez's speech at the U.N. General Assembly in New York on September 22, 2006, when, referring to President Bush's recent speech to that body, he said, "The American people have the Devil at home, it smells like sulfur here"

Chávez, at the time, was working hard to get Venezuela elected to a nonpermanent seat on the Security Council. With that goal in mind he traveled to the African Union summit in July, in Gambia, and later to Belarus, Russia, Qatar, Mali, Vietnam, and Iran, with the already routine stop in Cuba to keep Fidel Castro, his mentor, posted. In August, Chávez went to Syria, where he expressed solidarity with the Palestinians and with Hezbollah, and to China (for the fourth time). Venezuela, however, was not voted onto the Security Council.

Chávez signed agreements of cooperation and commercial deals with many of the nations he visited. Thus after the U.S. canceled the sale of weapons to Venezuela, Russia made the most of the circumstance and sold Venezuela 100,000 Kalashnikov rifles, 40 combat helicopters and 24 fighter-bomber airplanes. Venezuela, in turn, used the arms to foment unrest in neighboring Colombia. In January 2005, the U.S. State Department declared that the Revolutionary Army Forces of Colombia (FARC) had received Russian-made rifles from Venezuela.

Chávez was considered a friend of Colombia's narco-guerrillas. The U.S. often complained about lack of cooperation from the Venezuelan government in the fight against drug trafficking. In Apure, a Venezuelan state near the frontier, where Colombian drug terrorists had camps, they wandered freely and charged a *vacuna*, protection fee, to local ranchers and businessmen. Venezuelans living in the frontier states of Zulia and Táchira were frequent victims of kidnappings by irregular Colombian militias.

The tie with Cuba remained the centerpiece of Venezuelan foreign policy. Since February 1999, when Castro was the star guest at Chávez's first presidential inauguration, the Caracas-Havana connection constantly intensified. Venezuela sent oil to Cuba and, in exchange, Cuba sent Venezuela professionals—doctors (an estimated 18,000 of them), paramedics, sports trainers, teachers, and others. Venezuela sent groups of young people and professionals to Cuba for training, sick people to be treated in Cuban hospitals, and even tourists from low-income neighborhoods who could not afford to pay for their vacations.

Chávez traveled frequently to Havana both on official business and for private meetings. The Cuban ambassador in Caracas was guest of honor at many official events and gave numerous public speeches on Venezuela's internal affairs. Giant portraits of Chávez could be seen all over Havana and other Cuban cities, while photos of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara adorned the walls of many public buildings in Venezuela.

Despite the close relationship, there were big differences between the Cuban revolution, which developed into a classic dictatorship, and the "Bolivarian" one led by Chávez. The distinction was rooted less in any conflict of opinion between the two presidents than in the historical circumstances under which each came to power. Castro took over Cuba at the height of the cold war, and received considerable political and material backing—including arms—from the Soviet Union, whereas Chávez came upon the scene in a unipolar world, in which no other nation could provide him with protection from the U.S.

Unlike the situation in Cuba, Venezuela maintained the freedom to leave the country and return, protected the right to private property, and allowed economic and religious freedom. To be sure, as noted above, the Venezuelan government did not necessarily respect the "rules of the game," and the exercise of any right was subject to the president's whim.

When the Venezuelan regime attempted to emulate Cuba and introduce revolutionary ideology into the school system, it largely failed. The government, in 2001, announced plans to alter the elementary-school cur-

riculum. Immediately, middle- and upper-class parents united against the changes. As a result, the government initiative gained traction only in some public schools, which came to be known as “Bolivarian,” while the rest of the public schools and all the private institutions maintained their independence. Nevertheless, the threat of possible new moves to harness the educational system for the purposes of the regime remained, not only at the elementary level but in the secondary schools and universities as well. Unlike what happened in Cuba when Castro took power, the middle and upper classes did not leave Venezuela en masse. While some families departed in the early days of the new regime, emigration subsequently moderated. Many families kept two homes, one in Florida or another American city, and one in Venezuela. There were long lines at the Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese consulates, made up of descendants of the immigrants whose families arrived from those countries in the 1950s and 1960s. They want to obtain European Community passports, but only as a safeguard, “in case.” Prosperity, the possibility of making fast, easy money, and the hope that Chávez’s revolution would remain more rhetorical than real, restrained any massive emigration.

Another way in which Venezuela differed from Cuba—indeed from true dictatorships generally—was the high number of crimes against property and the prevalence of street violence. In Caracas alone, 100 minibuses were robbed, on average, each day during 2006, impelling the drivers’ union to organize periodic strikes that stopped traffic on the main thoroughfares. The London-based security company Armor Group considered Venezuela a high-risk country due to its daily average of 530 crimes between 2000 and 2005, a figure that increased over the first few months of 2006.

According to UNESCO, Venezuela was at the top of the list of countries with most deaths by firearms, 22.15 deaths for every 100,000 inhabitants. The mayor of Chacao, a predominantly middle- and upper-class Caracas municipality, announced in October 2006 that of the 7 million firearms in Venezuela’s streets, only 50,000 were registered. Over the course of 2006, 1,505 kidnappings took place in Venezuela.

Venezuela was the fifth largest oil exporter in the world, and Chávez took advantage of high oil prices to “buy” friends abroad. Burnishing his populist credentials, the president provided free oil to poor U.S. families in the Bronx, New England, and Milwaukee, as well as to London buses. Caribbean and Central American countries got cheap Venezuelan oil, while other nations, such as Argentina and Uruguay, received financial aid funded by oil revenues. But the biggest beneficiary, naturally, was

Cuba, which, in 2006, got 90,000 barrels of Venezuelan oil daily, of which it resold 50,000 on the international market.

Oil-generated money also paid for the technical advice and military aid that enabled Bolivia's president Evo Morales to nationalize its basic industries, according to opposition groups in that country. Funds also went for the purpose of meddling in the presidential elections of neighboring countries. There were strong indications that Venezuelan help had much to do with the victories of Morales in Bolivia, Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and the defeats of Ollanta Humala in Peru and Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico.

Chávez maintained complete control over Venezuela's finances, with no outside controls, and the public had no access to information about the national budget or public expenditures. From 2004 to 2006 the Central Bank of Venezuela transferred 24 billion dollars to governmental accounts, the exact destination of about half of the money remaining unclear. Also, *Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA)*, the national oil company, transferred monies to the government with no accountability.

Despite the regime's populist rhetoric, its policies produced a new wealthy class. All across Venezuela new luxury malls were built and still more were under construction. In the streets, meanwhile, one could spot a fair number of expensive cars such as BMWs, Audis, and Mercedes Benz, and consideration was being given to importing Rolls Royce models. The year 2006 saw an astounding 51-percent jump in the sales of new cars, and overall consumption rose by 18 percent. The costs of renting and buying homes rose steeply. Extensive corruption and special privileges given to government supporters led to the emergence of a *nouveau riche* element often referred to as the "Bolivarian bourgeoisie," whose members often paid for their purchases in cash so as to leave no traces of the expense.

Chávez instituted programs for the poor called "missions," which were accelerated in August 2004, a few months before the scheduled recall referendum, when it appeared that his popularity was decreasing and, according to opinion polls, he might be ousted from the presidency. These "missions" included the construction of many free medical clinics, a program to increase literacy, and subsidies for food and housing. There were also attempts to introduce what was called "citizen- and worker-managed governance" of businesses, and some land was distributed to previously landless people. Four out of every ten Venezuelans received money from the "missions."

Supporters of the government claimed that these policies were bring-

ing substantial benefits to poor Venezuelans, and cited statistics to prove it. Opponents raised doubts about the veracity of this data and countered that the effect of the programs was minimal, noting that 46 percent of the working-age population (some 5,500,000 people) still had neither regular salaries nor any social security. According to the UN, Venezuela was in 72nd place on the international Human Development Index.

Income from oil exports reached \$44.875 billion by October 2006, accounting for 80 percent of the national budget. Social expenditure by the government—disbursed via the “missions”—was \$5.6 billion. Venezuela’s inflation rate of 16.1 percent was Latin America’s highest, caused by an excess of liquidity; the growth rate was 9.4 percent; and the balance of payments with the U.S. was \$34.9 billion. The government kept control of the foreign exchange. The American dollar remained at 2,150 bolivars in the domestic market and reached 3,500 bolivars in December in the black market.

Venezuela’s apparent prosperity, which allowed Chávez both to finance the “missions” and to act as a global philanthropist, was entirely based on the high price of oil. Should oil prices fall, political analysts believed, these programs would have to be cut and Chávez could sustain losses both in his international support and among the domestic poor.

Ironically, despite its anti-American political stance, Venezuela continued to sell between 1,200,000 and 1,500,000 barrels of oil per day to the U.S., for an annual profit of \$27–30 billion. The U.S. was also Venezuela’s principal trading partner, the amount of trade increasing by 36 percent in 2005.

Anti-Israel or Anti-Semitic?

The increasingly uncertain boundary, in much of the world, between the delegitimization of Israel and the defamation of Jews was especially problematic in Venezuela, a country lacking a strong historical tradition of anti-Semitism.

The various constitutions of the country—including the most recent, promulgated under Chávez in 1999—guaranteed equal rights and obligations for all, and outlawed discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, religion, or culture. Between 1959 and 1993, political power was held by either of the two large parties, Democratic Action (Acción Democrática), which was social democratic, or Social Christian (Social Cristiano, COPEI). Both maintained good relations with the Jewish community.

During the 1970s and 1980s, however, there was a great deal of anti-

Zionist agitation emanating from left-wing parties, the Soviet embassy, and the influence of Libyan president Muammar Qaddafi. This ideology made headway in the universities and among some journalists. The Confederation of Jewish Organizations in Venezuela (Confederación de Asociaciones Israelitas, CAIV), the representative body of the Jewish community, worked hard to counter their influence, and Caracas was the site of frequent visits by high-ranking Israeli officials.

Chávez made it clear that a new era in relations with Jews had begun with his presidency. Previously, the leaders of the Jewish community had always paid a courtesy call on the newly inaugurated president to convey good wishes. But Chávez ignored requests by CAIV for such a meeting, and until 2000, the Jewish community had contacts with only one high official, José Vicente Rangel, who served first as foreign minister and then as vice president.

The influence of Norberto Ceresole, the anti-Semitic Argentinean sociologist, on Chávez, as well as the president's letter to Carlos the Jackal (see above, p. 309) gave Venezuelan Jews cause for concern. In fact, neither Chávez nor his ministers—many of whom, in the 1960s, had been communists and were undoubtedly influenced by Soviet propaganda—made any anti-Semitic or anti-Israeli comments during the first years of his government, although the Chavist media published some very offensive articles and cartoons. And when Chávez finally granted an audience to the Jewish leadership in 2000, he was reported to have shown great friendliness, even expressing admiration for some of the achievements of the State of Israel.

The first serious crisis for Jews developed after a short-lived coup against the government on April 11, 2002, that lasted only 48 hours before it was put down. Vice President Rangel and other officials, as well as pro-Chávez journalists, accused Jewish conspirators and the Israeli Mossad of organizing the coup. Their major piece of evidence was a speech delivered by Rabbi Pynchas Brener, senior rabbi of the Israelite Union of Caracas, the capital's main symagogue, supporting the new government that temporarily replaced Chávez. Numerous anti-Semitic statements began to appear in the state-controlled media, and CAIV met many times with Rangel to complain about them.

The issue of Jewish involvement in the coup surfaced again on November 18, 2004, when the state prosecutor, Danilo Anderson, was assassinated by a car bomb in Caracas. Anderson was well known for prosecuting bankers and businessmen suspected of being connected with the failed coup. He was buried as a national hero. As the police began

hunting for the guilty parties, some Chavist leaders again accused the Mossad. On November 29, at 6.30 a.m., police raided the site that housed the Hebraica School and the Hebraica Club, on the east side of Caracas, searching, the police later claimed, for the explosives used in Anderson's murder. None were found.

The raid sparked outrage both within the country and abroad, but despite virtually universal condemnation by the international press, the government offered no explanation or apology. Two weeks after the raid, Foreign Minister Ali Rodríguez assured CAIV's president in a private meeting that the Venezuelan government was neither anti-Semitic nor anti-Israel. Some time later a number of the policemen acknowledged, in private conversation, that they made a mistake based on an accusation by an employee Hebraica had fired.

MOUNTING PRESSURE

In the summer of 2005, possibly in preparation for the strengthening of Chávez's relations with Iran and Syria, which would occur in a few months, the Venezuelan media launched an unprecedented anti-Israel and anti-Jewish campaign. Telesur, the Venezuela-based TV station that broadcast through much of Latin America, went on the air in July. During its first four days, Telesur ran, several times a day, a program dedicated to the tragedy of the Palestinian people who were "stripped of their land by Israel," and to Israeli attacks against Palestinians civilians.

Also, Venezolana de Televisión, an official government TV channel, began broadcasting a two-hour program every evening called *La Hojilla* (The Razor Blade), a humor show that President Chávez said he watched regularly. It featured numerous jokes and hostile remarks aimed at Jews—portraying Rabbi Brener as a conspirator and Jewish doctors as guilty of malpractice—and promoted books such as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and *Hitler's War* by David Irving. In 2006, such material became both more offensive and more common on the show.

The National Radio of Venezuela, meanwhile, showcased a historian named Vladimir Acosta who denied that the Holocaust had six million victims and compared Israeli army actions in the Palestinian territories with Nazi crimes against Jews. He said, "Today Gaza is the new Auschwitz," and "Israelis massacre Arabs to do ethnic cleansing."

The print media spouted similar themes. The newspaper *VEA*, an outlet for government propaganda whose editor was an 80-year-old communist, regularly published offensive caricatures and articles. Another official paper, *El Diario de Caracas*, made available for free in hospitals,

private clinics, and governmental offices, published two articles in 2006 over Arab-sounding names that called on the Venezuelan people to expel the Jews from the country.

There was other evidence that such sentiments were approved by the regime. Venezuela hosted the 2005 World Youth Congress. Every passenger arriving at the Simón Bolívar International Airport in Caracas received a brochure, published by the Ministry of Tourism, containing anti-Zionist messages. The walls of the Sephardi synagogue, located in the center of Caracas, suddenly became frequent targets of graffiti—swastikas and offensive slogans—scrawled by Chavists.

On December 24, 2005, Chávez delivered a Christmas speech in which he referred to the “minority” that, he said, hoarded the world’s wealth, and described its members as “the heirs of Christ’s murderers.” Perhaps not coincidentally, Chávez announced, in early January 2006, an alliance with Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and said he would invite him to visit Venezuela.

Reaction came swiftly. The Simon Wiesenthal Center in Buenos Aires accused Chávez of anti-Semitism. The president, on January 13, denied the charge and denounced the U.S. for organizing a defamation campaign against him. The daily Caracas newspaper *El Nacional*, in its January 21 issue, published a manifesto signed by more than 300 Venezuelan intellectuals rejecting the anti-Semitic innuendoes of Chávez’s Christmas speech and denouncing his overture to the president of Iran “who has denied the Holocaust.”

On January 31, 2006, President Chávez met with leaders of the five organizations that formed CAIV. Attempting to put the best face possible on the situation, they told Chávez that they did not consider him an anti-Semite, offered him a dossier of the anti-Semitic statements being made in the media, and asked him to take action to bring them to a halt. On February 16, two high-level U.S. officials, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and UN ambassador John Bolton, called Chávez an anti-Semite. The government’s reply came the same day in an official statement by Vice President José Vicente Rangel, who said American imperialism had lied. Rangel declared: “The State of Venezuela and its government have the best relations with the State of Israel and its government and with the Venezuelan Jewish community. This is an unchanging policy, a state policy, and it is not subject to changes.”

But when Israel launched its war against Hezbollah in Lebanon in July, Chávez immediately condemned Israel. During the course of the war, both within Venezuela and on his trips abroad, Chávez accused Israel of genocide, and compared its military actions to the Nazi Holocaust.

The government also organized rallies in Caracas and other cities, attended mostly by public employees, against Israel and Zionism. The National Assembly, made up entirely of members loyal to Chávez, approved a resolution on July 6 condemning the State of Israel for "its criminal actions" in Lebanon, one clause reading, "The Israeli war arsenal and all its arms industry could not defeat the Intifada's child-heroes and patriots' hope."

A leader of the Venezuelan Syrian community thanked Chávez for his support of the Palestinian cause and said that the million-and-a-half Arabs living in Venezuela would support him for reelection in December. In fact, no one knew how many Arabs there were in the country, and there was no history of antagonism between Jews and Arabs in Venezuela. In the rallies against Israel organized by the government in July and August, Arabs were not prominent participants.

Nevertheless, some active Arab leaders of the pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel cause held offices in Chávez's government and represented his party in the National Assembly. The best known was Vice Minister of Internal Affairs Tarek El Aissami, whose ministry was responsible for the police and the justice system. He was the son of the leader of the Baath party in Venezuela, and his great-uncle was a close collaborator of Saddam Hussein. El Aissami was the author of numerous anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic articles.

Chávez arrived in Tehran on July 28 for a meeting with President Ahmadinejad. The two men signed several bilateral agreements, and Chávez offered "Venezuela's unconditional support to Iran." On August 2, Chávez announced the recall of the Venezuelan ambassador to Israel with the following words: "It causes indignation to see the State of Israel bombing, running over, murdering and mutilating with the gringo airplanes and the high military power thanks to American support."

In fact, for more than a year there had been no actual Venezuelan ambassador in Israel, the consulate and embassy offices in Tel Aviv had been closed, and it was impossible for any citizen with an Israeli passport to obtain a Venezuelan visa. At the time Chávez announced the recall, his country was represented only by a recently sent business attaché. Israel responded by withdrawing its ambassador from Caracas. But he would return a few weeks later, and, in November, the Venezuelan consulate reopened its doors in Tel Aviv without the Venezuelan press reporting it.

In mid-August a delegation of eight women representatives, among them the president of the National Assembly, traveled to Damascus to offer a solidarity message to the Lebanese people, humanitarian aid, and help for Venezuelan citizens trapped in the war zone. This was followed,

on August 29, by a Chávez visit to Syria, where he signed cooperation agreements with President Assad, invited him to visit Venezuela, and once again vilified Israel.

In an effort to mediate between Chávez and world Jewry, Argentinean president Néstor Kirchner had arranged a meeting in Buenos Aires on July 27 for Chávez and Israel Singer, chairman of the World Jewish Congress. Immediately afterward, both men told the press that their talks were productive.

On September 1, however, Singer published an article in the *Jerusalem Post* claiming that the Venezuelan president seemed to believe, erroneously, that opposition to Israel was compatible with good relations with his country's Jews. Singer wrote: "Chávez told us [in Buenos Aires] that he does not have debates with Venezuelan Jews and that he considers them dear citizens . . . Chávez hates President George W. Bush and vilifies Israel. He meets with Ahmadinejad and courts Syria. Perhaps he really thinks Jews can be separated from Israel, but it is impossible. He cannot be a terrorist's friend and receive support from civilized nations."

Iranian president Ahmadinejad paid an official state visit to Venezuela on September 17. The two presidents called each other "brothers" and signed various agreements. Declaring his support for Iran's nuclear program, Chávez said, "We are the same nation and the same revolution."

Despite the government's clear anti-Israel/anti-Jewish line, it remained doubtful, as 2006 drew to a close, whether these views were shared by much of the population. Probably 90 percent of Venezuelans—the relatively poor and uneducated—had little or no knowledge of the Jewish community or of Middle East issues. And among the economic and social elites that were alienated from the Chávez's government—including what remained of the independent press and the privately owned media—there seemed to be a growing sympathy for Israel and solidarity with the Venezuelan Jews who were under attack from the government.

JEWISH COMMUNITY

About 15,000 Jews lived in Venezuela, the great majority of them in Caracas, the capital. Although there were no exact statistics on the number of Jews who emigrated since Chávez assumed power, the decline in enrollment at the Jewish school in Caracas, which almost all Jewish children attended, suggested that between 1.0 and 1.5 percent of the community had left by 2006.

The Jewish community in the country was first organized in 1930,

when Spanish-speaking Sephardi Jews from Tetuan and other Moroccan cities founded the Israelite Association of Venezuela (Asociación Israelita de Venezuela). Another wave of Sephardi immigrants arrived in the late 1950s and early 1960s from Spanish Morocco, and easily assimilated into the community. Ashkenazi Jews, mostly natives of Poland, Romania, and Germany, many of them Holocaust survivors, established the Israelite Union of Caracas (Unión Israelita de Caracas) in 1950.

The two communities maintained a certain distance from each other until the Sephardim decided to become involved in the Moral y Luces Herzl-Bialik School, previously established by the Ashkenazim. In 1976 both communities, together with the Zionist Federation of Venezuela (Federación Sionista de Venezuela) and the B'nai B'rith Hebrew Fraternity (Fraternidad Hebrea B'nai B'rith) formed an umbrella body, the Confederation of Jewish Organizations in Venezuela (la Confederación de Asociaciones Israelitas de Venezuela, or CAIV) to represent Jewish interests before the government, in the media, and abroad.

In the late 1970s the Israelite Union and Israelite Association jointly established Hebraica, a social, cultural and sports center in Caracas that also housed the elementary and high schools. Some 90 percent of Jewish children and teenagers attended, about 35 percent of them on scholarship. The fact that both groups patronized these schools had the effect of encouraging marriages between Sephardi and Ashkenazi youngsters and blurring differences between the communities. The two main synagogues remained independent, and other small synagogues were later founded. A separate Orthodox school, Sinai, also functioned

The overwhelming majority of Venezuelan Jews worked in business and industry, or were professionals, such as doctors, engineers, architects, and, to a lesser degree, lawyers. They generally avoided politics. Among younger Jews there were some working in cinema, literature, and the visual arts.

The Jewish community newspaper, *El Nuevo Mundo Israelita*, appeared every Friday. The Center for Sephardic Studies published a magazine, *Maguén-Escudo*, four times a year, and the Chabad community had its own magazine, *Rumbo a tu Judaísmo* (Towards Your Judaism). The Morris E. Curiel Sephardic Museum did not have its own physical site, but curated exhibitions in a number of public places. The Israelite Union presented exhibitions and documentary films about the history of the Ashkenazi community, and published books about the experiences of the immigrants and Shoah survivors.

A number of women's organizations were active, the best known among them being WIZO. These groups cooperated in organized a joint body,

the Venezuelan Federation of Jewish Women, in 2001, which became a member of CAIV. The Jewish community operated a health center, Yolanda Katz, which gave free treatment to people of any religion who had no financial resources. Several organizations cared for elderly Jews and the poor.

Jewish life outside the capital was minimal. Thus, so many of the Jews who used to live in Maracaibo, in the state of Zulia, moved to Caracas, that the Maracaibo Jewish school had to accept gentile students in order to survive. There were small Jewish communities in Valencia, in the state of Carabobo—a two-hour ride from Caracas—and on Margarita Island.

Andrés Bello Catholic University, a Jesuit institution, administered the Sigmund and Annie Rotter Institute of Contemporary Judaism and Shoah Studies. The Rotters had been Holocaust survivors, and their children supported the institute. Its director, Prof. Carlos de Armas, developed a program that taught religious and ethnic tolerance to students majoring in education and journalism.

The most heavily attended event in the history of the Jewish community occurred on January 27, 2005, when CAIV commemorated the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. More than 2,000 people were present, about half of them non-Jews. Even though President Chávez and his ministers were invited, only Vice President Rangel attended. A Chavist member of the National Assembly read aloud a statement of solidarity approved unanimously by that body.

In 2006, despite the clear hostility of Chávez's government, Jews were not acting as an intimidated community. They kept up their normal activities, celebrating large weddings and attending synagogue services—the men with *kippot* on their heads. The community continued to maintain its Zionist identity and its close ties to Israel.

Twice during 2006—in July, when the National Assembly approved a resolution condemning Israel for the war in Lebanon, and in September, when the Iranian president visited—CAIV published statements of protest in some Caracas newspapers. What it would not do, however, was hold public demonstrations for Israel or against Ahmadinejad. Since the government did not shrink from mobilizing groups of rowdies to attack its opponents and break up rallies, taking to the streets was too risky.

The Venezuelan Jewish community, although still functioning more or less normally, was living a reality that was unlike that lived in the past, and certainly far different from the one lived by Jews elsewhere in the West.