

# Opinion

## The Hugo Chavez revolution

By Edwin Madunagu

BEFORE finally settling for the title that appears here, I had considered, and serially abandoned, three other captions: *Hugo Chavez's revolution*, *Hugo Chavez's socialism* and *Hugo Chavez's 21st century socialism*. Although any of these rejected captions could have served my purpose, I chose *The Hugo Chavez revolution* because, on the one hand, I wanted to avoid anything that smells of the notion that what happened in Venezuela under Hugo Chavez was an experiment in governmental style, or Hugo Chavez's "thing" that would disappear like bad dream, that would not survive the man; on the other hand I have not been comfortable with the slogan "21st century socialism". I call what happened in Venezuela *The Hugo Chavez revolution* simply as an acknowledgement of the critical and decisive leadership role played by the man in the revolutionary process while he lived.

Hugo Chavez, who had been president of Venezuela for 14 years, died on Tuesday, March 5, 2013. But several weeks before then any person interested in that country, for whatever reasons, knew that for the army paratrooper it was a matter of time before he departed the planet earth. For someone re-elected president in a keenly contested election and whose opponent had the explicit support of the world's only super power to be unable to take his oath of office for reasons of ill-health is not like failing to attend an event for "unavoidable circumstances". I knew from that moment that not only was Chavez marching to the exit door but also that the revolutionary process in Venezuela was approaching a definitive crossroads.

Like Fidel Castro, his mentor, Latin American compatriot and friend, who also revealed that he was seriously ill and then handed over his state duties to his deputy, Chavez made public his affliction, kept the public abreast of its development and the fight against it, and urged the people to support the vice president should he become permanently incapable of resuming his duties. Adults should know what that meant, and what to expect.

However, I believe, or rather, strongly suspect, that Hugo Chavez's ailment, like that of Yasser Arafat about a decade ago, was artificially in-

duced. This is not the question of my being a Nigerian for whom there is hardly a natural death. Just think of a situation where the foreign ministry of the world's only super power (a department of state next in power only to the presidency itself) would establish a separate directorate to coordinate a project to liquidate, by all means, a popular social experiment going on in a poor, but independent Third World country and discredit its example! Several "experts" in medical sciences in North America have said it is impossible to induce an illness like cancer. I am also aware that one particular "expert" had declared such belief an "insanity". My immediate response is that we should all wait for revelations.

Worldwide reactions to Chavez's death came in torrents. We all saw mass expressions of pain. For television viewers across the globe what happened inside Venezuela and in some other South America countries need no retelling. You may compare this to reactions to those that came at the death of President Abdel Nasser of Egypt in September 1970 or that of General Secretary Joseph Stalin in March 1953, all depending on your reading of history and mass psychology and your current ideological persuasion. However, no ruler, no revolutionary leader, would have wished for a more glorious departure than that of Hugo Chavez.

What I consider important to this article are the reactions of current rulers of this world and the more representative opinions of non-ruling, ordinary people. But I shall make only a short selection. Let me, however, say upfront, that my main concern here is the *lessons of the Hugo Chavez revolution*. This is not for "academic" reasons or to "live up to expectation". I am taking up this issue because I have been convinced for a long time that, ultimately, there will be a fundamental, non-sectarian and mass-engineered rupture in the structure and content of the Nigerian state. What I may now add is that I believe that the rupture here will be a historically-determined variant of what took place in Hugo Chavez's Venezuela, if I may use that expression for precise historical periodisation. Some would like to amend this proposition by adding the phrase "that is, if Nigeria survives its current systemic crisis". My

response will be that the rupture I am talking about is fast becoming a condition for Nigeria's "survival".

When Hugo Chavez died: From Ontario, Canada, Paul Kokoski, writing under the caption *The death of Hugo Chavez* in his letter to the editor of *The Guardian* in the paper's issue of March 11, 2013, said: "Venezuelan President, Hugo Chavez was a communist dictator whose heroes were Fidel Castro, Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, Robert Mugabe, and Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah. One of his major goals was to integrate Cuba, Venezuela, Honduras, Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Ecuador under one Marxist-socialist government umbrella..." Then followed a bitter denunciation, ending with: "Like Stalin, he will not be missed." Kokoski thus listed some of the main grievances of the bitterest opposition to Hugo Chavez.

Under the caption, *Hugo Chavez's rotten legacy*, *The Economist*, in its editorial ("leader") of March 9, 2013, said that, "with luck, *chavismo* (that is, the Chavez - inspired revolutionary movement) will now have lost much of its sting. His death could help break the deadlock that has stalled Latin American integration. The Chavez formula - exploiting inequality and social grievances to demonise the opposition - will remain a powerful one. But now that the man has gone Latin America's democrats have an easier task". *The Economist* thus intellectualized Kokoski's opinion.

President Barack Obama of the United States of America carefully and decently selected his words, but his thrust was clear: "At this challenging time of President Hugo Chavez's passing, the United States re-affirms its support for the Venezuelan people and its interest in developing a constructive relationship with the Venezuelan government. As Venezuela begins a new chapter in its history, the United States remains committed to policies to promote democratic principles, the rule of law, and respect for human rights". (*The Guardian*, March 7). A former American president, Jimmy Carter, pointed at something he saw. He said that Chavez "will be remembered for his bold assertion of the autonomy and independence for Latin

American governments". (*The Guardian*, March 7). This is a different thing from what Kokoski and *The Economist* saw, or a different interpretation of the same thing that Kokoski and *The Economist* saw.

The government of the Peoples Republic of China, towing its well-known line of "non-interference," simply said that Hugo Chavez was a "great friend of the Chinese people" and a "great leader of Venezuela who had made an important contribution to the friendly and cooperative relations between China and Venezuela" (*The Guardian*, March 7). The Russian President, Vladimir Putin, said that Hugo Chavez was an "uncommon strongman who looked into the future and always set the highest target for himself" and thanked him for "laying the solid basis for Russia-Venezuela relations". The European Union (EU) said that, "Venezuela has stood out for its social development and for contribution to South America's regional integration". The governments of Cuba, Iran and Syria also sent messages. But we all know the lines all these "villains" of the American power would tow. The details may therefore be omitted.

Coming home now: The Nigerian President, Goodluck Jonathan, said that Hugo Chavez "greatly endeared himself to the ordinary people of his country with his admirable efforts to improve the living conditions of underprivileged Venezuelans" and that the late president did the very best that he could to uplift his people and country in the 14 years of his presidency. Oh! Mr. President! Your words are too weak. And they are not political.

Then came a star representative tribute. Writing under the caption *The colonel in heavenly cockpit*, Tatalo Alamu (in his *The Nation* on Sunday column, Snooping around) of March 10, 2013, said: "With the passing this past week at the age of 58, of Hugo Chavez the late Venezuelan leader, Latin America has lost one of its most colourful leaders and potent force against global imperialism... But more importantly, by allowing the Venezuelan people to enjoy their god-given bounty, Chavez has returned us to the first principles of sovereignty: that power and national resources belong first and foremost to the people and not to a thieving political elite. The world and humanity at large may yet have the Latin Americans to thank for providing us with a way out of the 600 years epistemological *cul de sac* of western modernity... Three powerful theses.

• To be continued next Thursday.

# Opinion

## The Hugo Chavez revolution (2)

By Edwin Madunagu

LAST Thursday, in the opening segment of this series, I surveyed the tributes, positive and negative, that followed the death of President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela on March 5, 2013. I intend to stay close to these tributes. In 2005, the Monthly Review Press, New York, released a book: *Understanding the Venezuelan revolution: Hugo Chavez talks to Marta Harnecker*. The interview was recorded in June 2002, two months after the failed military coup against President Chavez. Marta Harnecker is a respected and well-known researcher and author in Latin American leftist politics. The 200-page, well-annotated and smooth-flowing book was the first comprehensive account of Venezuela's revolutionary process to come my way. Before then most of what I knew about what was going on in the country were accounts by the Euroamerican press. The hostility of this press, as we all know, is categorical.

The presidential election that brought Hugo Chavez to power took place in December 1998, and the inauguration was held early in 1999. So, the interview I referred to took place three years and a half into the regime. Areas covered by Hugo Chavez included the background to the revolutionary process, the transition to 'Chavezism' (a transition that was unbelievably peaceful, constitutional, democratic and "institutional"); the role of the military in the revolution (and counterrevolution); revolutionary socioeconomic intervention (by the state); foreign policy; and the April 11, 2002 failed coup d'état. Commenting on the book, Saul Landau, an author said: "Marta Harnecker's penetrating questions bring out the profundity of Hugo Chavez's intelligence and his sense of commitment – as well as sense of humour. This book is indispensable for understanding the revolutionary process in Venezuela". I agree. Get the book and hear the man himself talk – in different situations.

Michael Parenti, another author, said: "The calumny heaped upon Venezuela's courageous president by U.S. officialdom and major media has misled a lot of people, including many who claim to be on the left (emphasis mine). This well-crafted, well-edited, and engaging book is a bracing antidote and a pleasure to read. Here you will discover the real Hugo Chavez: a highly educated, brilliant, democratic revolutionary leader, and a man of deep and thoroughly admirable human-

ity". Samir Amin does not require an introduction. He commented: "Marta Harnecker's important book helps clarify the challenges facing Venezuela's ongoing revolutionary process. The decisive role played by Hugo Chavez in initiating the revolutionary process and the immense support he continues to receive from the popular classes make this book necessary reading for understanding the forces at work in what may well become a stage in the long-run transformation of the global system".

Samir Amin's tribute and that of Tatalo Alamu of *The Nation* on Sunday point in the same direction: Whereas Samir Amin says "...in what may well become a stage in the long-run transformation of the global system", Tatalo Alamu talks of "providing us with a way out of the six hundred years of epistemological cul de sac of western modernity..." (*The Nation* on Sunday, March 17, 2013). The optimism expressed in these two tributes leads us back to history.

The United States of America exported the executive presidential system of government to the countries of Latin America. The various types of monstrosities this export then developed in each recipient country depended on that country's historical peculiarities and specificities. But, generally, America's "protectorates", colonies and dependencies to the south were not prosperous enough to refine the rough faces and edges of the absolute monarchy which executive presidency so resembled. America did not introduce democracy to Latin America. The new colonialists taking over from Spain and Portugal did not consider democracy necessary to guarantee their exploitation and domination. Having domesticated and consolidated the executive presidential system, the rulers of the nominally independent countries of Latin America then made their own contributions to modern politics: highly politicized military, coups d'état, military dictatorship, armed struggle and guerrilla warfare.

For a period covering a greater part of the 19th and 20th centuries, there was no country in Latin America where a guerrilla warfare was not going on at each point in time. In other words, at each point in time, whoever was in power – a military junta or a civilian government, elected or selected – there were serious armed insurrections challenging the state. Serving military officers spent their time plan-

ning coups d'état and insurrections; retired officers did the same: waiting for recall or self-recall to active duty, in politics or in the military. I read somewhere that a standard joke in Colombia at a time was this dialogue between a serving army officer and a retiring one:

Serving officer: "What will you be doing now that you are retiring?"

Retiring officer: "What do you mean? Planning insurrections, of course."

Military officers moved from the barracks to presidential palaces and government houses, and back; public servants, priests, teachers and students moved easily into the jungle and back again. To wish to contest for power was understood to mean going either through the barrel of the gun or the ballot box, or both. Politics and political power had direct, unmediated definition in Latin America. So, when Hugo Chavez said, in the 2002 interview that the process that brought him to power via presidential election in December 1998 was "peaceful, but not disarmed" I understood him both literally and metaphorically. Whether a particular coup d'état was good or bad depended on whether it was *Left* or *Right*, not whether it was armed or unarmed, peaceful or violent.

The Latin American political culture described here was not chosen by the people. To go to its roots is to examine how brutal and utterly enslaving the forms of colonialism and neocolonialism that those people passed through. To put the matter directly, the experiences of the Latin American people under Spanish and Portuguese colonialism, American neocolonialism and "native" dictatorship made peaceful change almost impossible. Unlike in America and Canada, democratic change was completely ruled out under successive phases of Latin America's modern history.

Regis Debray is a prominent French-born historian of armed struggles in Latin America. In 1965, he put out the book: *Latin America: Some problems of revolutionary strategy*. He said somewhere in the book: "The Venezuelans were the first to experience in the country most directly colonized by the United States because of its oil and iron, what the 'people's war' has become in post-Cuban conditions. They paid dearly for their pioneering role". The emphasis, for me, is not

only on "paying dearly", for the masses throughout Latin America paid 'dearly' under colonial, semi-colonial and neocolonial regimes. The emphasis is also on "the country most directly colonized because of its oil and iron". Hugo Chavez knew and encountered the two phenomena as a boy. He was conscious of these in 1970 when, at the age of 16, he entered the Academy of Military Sciences.

Today, 48 years after Regis Debray made his analysis, and 13 years into the Hugo Chavez revolutionary process, and several American presidents (Democrats and Republicans) later, the people of Venezuela are still "paying dearly" in defence of their "oil and iron". It is, therefore, not surprising that under this historical conditional Hugo Chavez found himself in a conspiratorial political group within the Military Academy. He, of course, had a choice of going *left* or *right*, but he chose *left* or, perhaps, the *left* chose him. On December 17, 1982, four captains in the Venezuelan army, including Hugo Chavez, (aged 28) formed the *Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement* (MBR 200) and swore an oath of commitment to liberating the nation. The organisation was named after *Simon Bolivar* (1783 – 1830), popularly regarded, and named, the *Liberator of South America*. Bolivar was born in Caracas, now capital of Venezuela; but he led and fought a liberation war almost across the entire continent.

The Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement (MBR 200) was named to commemorate the second centenary of Bolivar's birth. It is also not surprising, given the background I had earlier sketched, that MBR 200 immediately linked up with leftist groups outside the military. In late February 1989, eight years after the formation of MBR 200, a massacre took place in Venezuela. An increase in fuel prices had been decreed by the government and this sparked spontaneous, popular, but unarmed, insurrection throughout the country. Human rights groups reported that over 5,000 people were killed by the military in the course of restoring "law and order".

Hugo Chavez and his military comrades were, of course, sent out to restore "law and order". You may imagine how they felt. But they did what they must do to strike a balance between their consciousness, their conscience on the one hand and their recognition of the need not to be stupidly voluntaristic on the other: The 1989 "explosion", as you would expect, greatly sharpened MBR's consciousness, strengthened its organisation in the military and expanded its "contacts" in the civil society. Exactly three years later, in February 1992, they struck.

• To be continued next Thursday.

# Opinion

## The Hugo Chavez revolution (3)

By Edwin Madunagu

THE 1989 massacre in Venezuela, as we saw in the closing paragraph of the last segment, greatly sharpened revolutionary and patriotic consciousness in Hugo Chavez group in the army. The aftermath of that mass slaughter – in which an estimated 5,000 people died – also included the rapid expansion of the group's allies in the civil society and the group's firm determination to strike the regime and the system at the earliest opportunity.

Nigerians older than, say 35, may remember the mass protests sparked in Nigeria in May 1989 by the hardships generated by General Ibrahim Babangida's Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). Like in Venezuela, there were massacres, there were arrests and there were detentions. And taking part in the protests were labour unions, popular-democratic organisations, human rights activists, students, professionals, academics, market women and men and declassed individuals, the "wretched of the earth" and those Marx said were victims of "no particular injustice, but injustice in general". I cannot say if there were stirrings in the army on that occasion. But many arrests took place on the left: Tai Solarin (if I remember correctly), Gani Fawehinmi, Baba Omojola, Femi Falana, Beko Ransome-Kuti and several young activists produced by the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), etc. were detained. Some were later charged to court for treason.

Several political re-groupings were inspired on the left: These included the Gani Fawehinmi Solidarity Organisation (GFSO) and the Popular Democratic Front (PDF). But unlike what happened in Venezuela three months earlier, the revolutionary momentum generated by the May 1989 events in Nigeria was lost. There were at least 10 other lost revolutionary moments during the long Babangida - Abacha military dictatorship (1984 - 1998).

The period (1989-1992) was for Hugo Chavez's military group the period of mobilisation and organisation and, I would add, waiting. But the waiting period ended when a serious national teachers strike erupted in January 1992. On February 4, 1992, Lt. Col. Hugo Chavez initiated a country-wide "military uprising" in Venezuela. The rebels took a number of military barracks in Caracas, the capital, and some big cities, but could not take the presidential place. This allowed Pres-

ident Carlos Andres Perez to escape. The president then mobilised loyal troops and put down the rebellion. The rebels negotiated a surrender and Chavez was made to address "his companions in arms and the entire country on live TV from the Ministry of Defence." Marta Harnecker reported: "Hugo Chavez uttered the famous words 'I take responsibility' and 'for now' which catapulted him forward as a national leader. The MBR 200 was re-born nine years after its creation".

The terms of surrender included the detention, and then discharge, of a number of rebels, including Chavez himself, from the army and the re-absorption of others. On November 27, 1992, just a couple of months after the February 4, 1992 defeat, and with Chavez and some of his colleagues in prison, another military coup d'etat was attempted. This one also failed. On this occasion senior officers, including generals, participated and more targets were seized. The same results followed. On May 20, 1993, President Carlos Andres Perez was impeached by the Supreme Court for "misusing public funds"; on June 5, 1993, a transition government was installed to prepare for a presidential election; Hugo Chavez, from detention, called for "abstention" or, in his own words, "active abstention", that is, "no to the parties, no to the elections, and yes to the proposal for a people's constitutional assembly".

Hugo Chavez's revolutionary line greatly contributed to the achievement of 52 per cent abstention in the presidential election of November 4, 1993. Dr. Rafael Caldera, however, won. On March 26, 1994, the new president, who had included the pledge to release Hugo Chavez and his colleagues from prison in his manifesto, fulfilled this popular election promise. (That pledge had boosted his victory chances). The prisoners were released. The ex-military officers who now emerged from prison were mature revolutionaries in their own right, at comparable level of theoretical clarity and political experience with "established" civilian Leftist political leaders. They travelled round the country and, sometimes, outside. The group's initial campaign was "Constitutional Assembly Now!" Although it was a single-minded and consistent campaign, not distracted by enticing offers from the powers – that – were, it was soon to change strategically.

Shortly after his release from prison, Venezuelans, including activists and leftist leaders, started to agitate that MBR 200 should take part in the presidential elections scheduled for 1998 and that Hugo Chavez should contest. Responding in 1996, the MBR 200 carried out a survey "to see how people felt about a electoral participation and whether Hugo Chavez should be a candidate". The result was an overwhelming "yes" for electoral participation and Hugo Chavez's participation as presidential candidate. This was, by implication, a resolution of a debate that had been going on in the group for a long time, perhaps since Chavez and his comrades were in prison. That debate was: What should now be the attitude of MBR 200 and its allies to the question of armed struggle and armed rebellion, given recent and current developments including the failure of two successive military rebellions, one of them led by the group, and the increasing popularity of Hugo Chavez among the popular masses?

Hugo Chavez came out in support of participation and candidature and, by implication, the temporary or permanent suspension of armed struggle. Reinforcing the reasons already provided (failure of two military coups and his own increasing popularity), Hugo Chavez said categorically that the situation was "not ripe for another armed movement." On April 19, 1997 MBR 200's national congress decided to participate in the elections and to create a formal political party. That was how the Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) was formed on October 21, 1997. In the December 6, 1998 presidential election Chavez won with 56 per cent of the votes in the first round. He was sworn in as president early in the year 1999. Then began the revolutionary transformation, or the revolutionary process in Venezuela.

Having taken the strategic decision to seek power by electoral means, Hugo Chavez and his party, the MVR, now decided, after electoral victory, to pursue the revolutionary transformation by democratic and constitutional methods – whatever the provocations from the opposition and the permanent enemy, American imperialism. The first thing the new government did was to organize a referendum asking Venezuelans if a Consti-

tutional Assembly should be convoked. That was in February 1999, a few weeks after inauguration. The people said, "yes", that a Constitutional Assembly should be convoked to draft a new Constitution. Five months later, in July 1999, a Constitutional Assembly election was held. The assembly was convoked immediately after, in August 1999. The assembly drafted its own laws to regulate its proceedings. It also set up a participation commission to mobilise, receive and collate public participation.

The need for a new constitution had been on the agenda of national discourse for quite a long time and every active political group had taken a position on the matter. So it took only four months to come out with a new draft constitution. In the national referendum on the draft, a "yes" vote of over 70 per cent was recorded. President Hugo Chavez was now empowered to "move the country forward", as Nigerian politicians would say – without, of course, meaning to move anything except themselves.

The critical point that should be noted here – a point that has already been made, but has to be made again and again – is that for the revolutionary forces, the decision to seek and exercise power and transform the country by constitutional, democratic and peaceful means was a *strategic* one deliberately taken after a study of the correlation of forces – national and international. It was not a *tactical* decision, which could be changed overnight, at the slightest difficulty or problem or provocation. However, as I have also reported, the revolution, though peaceful, was not "disarmed". It was ready to defend itself – as it did in response to the April 11 - 13, 2002 abortive military coup (counter-revolution).

Right from inauguration, every action taken by President Chavez was backed by the Constitution. In particular, the president consulted the National Assembly on every major step his government intended to take even when the Constitution did not explicitly compel it. With the promulgation of the Constitution whose highlights included the responsibility of the government to articulate and pass empowerment, human rights, social equality, anti-poverty and anti-corruption laws, the Hugo Chavez government moved to strengthen the steps, which he had initiated under the provisions of the old basic law. The actions included the *Plan Bolivar*, which was a programme of revolutionary transformation, the opening up, of rural Venezuela – with oil money. Yes, with Venezuela's oil money. The date of its commencement, February 27, 1999, was deliberately and symbolically chosen.

• To be continued next Thursday.

# Opinion

## The Hugo Chavez revolution (4)

By Edwin Madunagu

THE most important facts and lessons to which I wish to draw attention in this article are concentrated in three historical periods: from Hugo Chavez's enrolment in the Venezuelan army (1970) to his attempted coup, and imprisonment, that is (1970–1994); from his formal entry into national politics to election as president (1994–1988); and from his first inauguration as president to the attempted counter-revolutionary coup against his government (1999–2002). From April 2002 (after the failed coup) to Hugo Chavez's death in March 2013, the revolutionary process was pre-occupied with two main tasks: defending itself against continuing (and indeed ever-increasing) America's imperialist hostility allied to the forces of internal counter-revolution and trying to deliver on what the regime had called a transition to 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism.

I shall not, in this particular article, dwell on the first engagement, which in any case, is an open book: a new chapter in a long history of aggression. As for the second, I shall generally, but briefly, make some comments embodying a reformulation of what the Hugo Chavez revolution was doing, or trying to do. Although a defence of Hugo Chavez is inevitable – and some would say mandatory for me, especially in the face of deliberate misinformation, falsification and slander – that is not my main focus here.

Hugo Chavez was in office between February 1999 and March 2013, that is, a period of 14 years and a month. Within this period he won re-election three times: July 2000; December 2006; and October 2012. In August 2004 he won a "recall referendum on whether he should serve out the rest of his term", that is, whether he should be removed from office. The people said No. In December 2007 he lost a constitutional referendum, which included the proposal to lift the restriction imposed on the number of times elected state officials (including the president) could run for the same office. Fourteen months after this, in February 2009, he won a repeat referendum on the same question.

The argument of the Bolivarian revolutionary movement on this question of "limitless" number of re-elections (of elected officials) was bold and straight forward: In this transi-

tion period which counter-revolutionary forces had literally turned into a war, competent and committed elected officials should be able to stay in office as long as the people, through democratic elections and referendums, want it to be so. Each election or referendum was hotly, and at times, bitterly fought – with American imperialism appearing as Chavez's strongest foe.

In the closing paragraph of the third segment, I said that the first stage of Chavez's socio-economic programme consisted of a series of radical populist interventions. It was a socio-economic reform programme quite alright, but its significance went beyond that: it was, more importantly, a radical announcement to the subject classes and groups of Venezuela and Latin America that a government that belonged to them, and would therefore truly serve them, had arrived. It was a wake-up call. That programme of radical interventions was called *Plan Bolivar* and was announced on February 27, 1999, the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1989 massacre when soldiers were sent to the streets to suppress a peaceful protest. Five thousand people were killed then.

Now, 10 year later, under *Plan Bolivar*, hundreds of soldiers returned to the people: opening up and linking forgotten communities, constructing or reconstructing roads, especially rural ones, building bridges, constructing drainages, building classroom blocks and rural health clinics, giving petty – commodity producers (such as fishermen) "soft" loans, in kind and in cash, removing certain categories of taxes and levies from the poor, etc. The soldiers told the people: "Ten years ago we came to you with guns; but today we are here to atone for that crime".

The political mobilization accompanying this programme was not confined to the lower classes and poor masses – although that was the strategic mobilization. The revolutionary movement saw the urgent need to broaden its campaign: it started constructing what Hugo Chavez called the "polynomial of power" or "power polynomial" whose "strategic goal" was the building of "alliances with sectors of the civil society like the church, businesses, intellectuals, academics, professionals, and so forth". This was how Chavez saw the task of mobilizing the middle and upper classes for the revolutionary process: "It is like a game of

chess; I have my pieces, I prepare my move in my head and then I go for it. But in front of me there is an extremely powerful adversary, with the capacity to influence these sectors, especially through control of the media, which has a huge impact on the middle class."

Nigerian Leftists of my own generation and, perhaps, a step younger, especially those who passed through practical experiences similar to mine would understand what Hugo Chavez called "power polynomial" although this did not go by that name here. Power polynomials are conceived as "defensive shields" not only for revolutionary regimes but also for revolutionary organisations struggling for power – either as an immediate political objective or as a distant one. And the political history of Latin America in the last 40 years has shown that given certain correlation of forces a genuine revolutionary regime can come to power through elections. However, power polynomials, properly conceived, are centres of genuine popular power; they must not degenerate into bands of fascist thugs that eventually get integrated into the state apparatus. Wherever this had happened in a modern revolution the result had been catastrophic: first for the people – including the "makers" of the revolution – and then for the revolution itself.

We may recall that while Hugo Chavez was being inaugurated president of Venezuela in February 1999, General Olusegun Obasanjo, recently released from prison, was passing through the final phases of "coronation" as president of Nigeria. In Venezuela, Chavez came to office through an election conducted by forces that were antagonistic to him, but in Nigeria, Obasanjo's coronation was done by forces that the masses had battled in the preceding 15 years. While in Venezuela Hugo Chavez started his administration with radical, though populist and reformist socio-economic interventions within the confines of the existing constitution, Obasanjo started in Nigeria by trying to destroy or neutralise centres of potential challenge to his regime.

In June 1993 the Nigerian Left helped in no small measure in ensuring the victory of Moshood Abiola in the presidential election; but it was ironic, to say the least, that six year later the Left could not prevent Obasanjo's coronation. That coronation was the root of the current stage of our national catastrophe. The

areas of socioeconomic intervention selected by the Hugo Chavez regime under *Plan Bolivar* were areas which any revolutionary movement anywhere should have seen even before coming to power. In Nigeria areas of intervention would include all those areas listed in *Plan Bolivar*, and more: problems like corruption, violence and unemployment would make the list.

Hugo Chavez's "21<sup>st</sup> century socialism" is a big subject and will be taken up, together with other aspects of the revolutionary process not touched upon here in a future article. But, for now, I would limit myself to a few notes on the nature of socialism. Socialism is not like bread, which you either have or do not have; it is not a state of things, which either exists or does not exist. I learnt along the route that brought my socialist consciousness to maturity that socialism is a complex social movement whose foundations must be consciously constructed but whose ultimate "destination" is so distant that to me it resembles the concept of "infinity." Infinity can be approached as closely as we may prescribe in concrete terms but it can never be reached. Attaining "full socialism" is like attaining infinity.

This point can be put differently: However large or distant something may be, as soon as you determine its size or measure its length, and represent these in numbers, it becomes less than infinity and can therefore be superseded, that is, improved upon. Socialist construction is like that. It follows that the question to ask about Chavez's Venezuela (or indeed China) is not whether the country is socialist or not but how far socialist construction has gone, how strong the foundations are, and the prospects for advance.

In posing and answering these questions, we should bear in mind that a socialist construction does not begin in a historical vacuum. This fact comes heavily into the programme of initial interventions. Also, socialist construction is a continuous and holistic critique of capitalism. This construction can start in a national territory but can only closely approach that "completeness", that "infinity", globally. Finally, for me, socialist construction means only one thing, in summary: a progressive, concrete, continuous and measurable transition into the realm of equality.

• Concluded.