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Analysts: Chavez close to Castro in politics, not economics

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CARACAS, Venezuela _ As analysts try to dissect the latest twists in Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's quixotic revolution and fiery rhetoric, which have included favorable references to Marx, Lenin, Trotsky and Mao, one name keeps popping up: Cuban President Fidel Castro.

The question, analysts say, isn't whether Chavez is emulating Castro, his longtime mentor, but exactly what pieces of Castro's regime is Chavez trying to reproduce in Venezuela.

The issue has taken on added importance because of Castro's illness and disappearance from public life since July, Chavez's acceleration of his own "21st Century Socialism" at home and his seeming attempt to inherit Castro's mantle as leader of the Latin American left when the Cuban leader dies.

But while analysts believe that Chavez's intention is similar to Castro's, in that he seeks to create a single-party state where he has total control, they add that he faces more obstacles than the Cuban leader did when he seized power in 1959.

"The model is totalitarian, headed by one person," said Americo Martin, a former leftist Venezuelan guerrilla who spent years in Cuba and now opposes Chavez.

"It's getting close to this model, but this train is going to fall off its tracks before it arrives at the station," he added, referring to resistance he expected Chavez will face at home.

To be sure, Venezuela is still very different from Cuba.

Venezuela's National Assembly recently handed Chavez the power to rule by decree for the next 18 months. But prior to that, Chavez had won three elections and a recall referendum, all of them with international oversight. There are opposition parties and a vibrant news media, frequent street protests and very critical editorials.

Even Chavez's recent announcement that the government would seize the telecommunications and electricity industries, and assume majority stake in all oil-related projects, might be seen as a return to the 1980s when the Venezuelan state completely controlled those industries.

"The origin of Cuban socialism is completely different from that of Venezuelan socialism," Venezuela's ambassador to Cuba, Ali Rodriguez, told state television recently.

Chavez, however, has somewhat mirrored Castro by moving to assume total control of the Central Bank and confiscate "idle" lands and factories. The Venezuelan president has also said he would seek to end presidential term limits.

Chavez also has moved to consolidate the leftist factions that support him into one party, and has said he will not renew the license of the country's most prominent private television station.

The moves _ alongside Chavez's steady attacks on the United States and interminable speeches _ have reminded many of Cuba in the 1960s, when Castro created a one-party system and seized all private industry, businesses and news media.

"This is a type of caudillo politics, and you see it in Fidel as well," said Teodoro Petkoff, a longtime leftist and former guerrilla who is now editor of the *TalCual* newspaper and a Chavez critic.

However, analysts note that the context of Chavez' policies is significantly different from the Cold War world of the 1960s, a factor that they say permitted Castro to accelerate his process in Cuba.

There are more human rights and media watchdog groups scrutinizing governments, and business interests, especially those tied to Venezuela's oil industry, which make it difficult for Chavez to push too quickly or boldly.

Indeed, the U.S. government, Chavez's principal foe, remains Venezuela's principal oil client and longtime ties to U.S. private oil companies operating in Venezuela would make any separation messy and expensive.

"What we're seeing is a regime that wants to integrate changes," said Agustin Blanco Munoz, a political science professor and biographer of Chavez. "But what we can't forget is that this regime is intimately linked to capitalism."

Chavez's moves toward "socialism" have investors on the run. Foreign direct investment is down 81 percent through November 2006 compared to 2005, according to the government's own Superintendent of Foreign Investment.

But Venezuela remains a largely capitalist nation with consumerist tendencies that surpass most in Latin America. In Caracas alone, four shopping malls are currently under construction, including one touted as Latin America's "largest."

Chavez seems to understand some of his limitations, and his rhetoric is often stronger than his deeds.

His recent announcement of plans to nationalize telecommunications and electricity companies scared many businessmen, but in the first of the nationalizations his government and the U.S. owners of the Caracas power company reached agreement on compensation.

His aides have said it will not expropriate any company without compensation. What's more, it appears that there is still room for private investors, especially in the oil sector, where the government has said it hopes for \$50 billion in foreign investment through 2012.

The political aspects of Chavez's "revolution" more closely mirror Cuba's, analysts say.

His administration has expanded the government's presence in the media by funding a regional news television station, *Telesur*, and using the already government-owned TV, radio and newspapers to spread his ideology.

Chavez also has politicized the armed forces by rewarding loyalty to him and creating a parallel reserve force directly under his command. And like Cuba, Venezuela has trained civilians to prepare for any possible U.S. attacks.

Chavez has refashioned his own party several times and now is warning his allies that those who do not join his new party will be left behind in the revolutionary process. And Chavez has called for "socialist" education for Venezuelan youth.

The National Assembly, whose 167 members all support Chavez, has passed legislation curbing the activities of non-governmental institutions and may pass similar legislation to control sports organizations in what Petkoff says is a concerted effort by the government to control all the cultural and political space in Venezuela.

Chavez has also said he would accelerate the move towards participatory democracy via "communal councils." Analysts fear the councils would eliminate the need for mayors and governors, and give Chavez more overall control a la Castro. "He's bent on doing away with representative democracy," said Demetrio Boersner, a history professor and former diplomat. "Theoretically, communal councils are controlled from the bottom up, but really they're controlled by the party, which ... controls the people from the top down."

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