

Venezuela: It seemed a good idea at the time...

by GWYNNE DYER

There have been plenty of cases where a ruler with dictatorial power just gave up and handed power over to the democratic majority ? Chile in 1988, Russia in 1991, South Africa in 1994 ? and yet people are always surprised when it actually happens.

There may be such a voluntary transition underway in Venezuela right now. The current strongman, President Nicolás Maduro, is letting Sunday's election play out freely even though the polls say that he will lose.

The ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), in power for the past 26 years, never actually uprooted democracy; it just rigged it. Indeed, back in the glory days of the 1990s, it didn't even have to cheat. It could afford to respect the democratic rules, because it won the elections fair and square.

Oil featured as prominently in Venezuela's economy as it does in Saudi Arabia's (around two-thirds of national income), and oil prices were very high in the 1990s. Hugo Chávez, the former military officer who founded the PSUV, won the 1998 election at just the right time. Money was no constraint, so he created a bogus welfare state.

There was a lot of corruption and mismanagement, but there was so much money sloshing around that most people ? especially people who never had comfortable lives before ? were broadly happy with ?Chavismo.?

His performative ?socialism? upset Washington, of course, but the United States never tried hard to overthrow him because he really posed no threat. Everybody else in Latin America knew that Chávez and his supporters were just living high on the proceeds of the country's oil wealth. It wasn't a model for anybody else.

Besides, the bloom was definitely coming off the rose by the time Chávez died of cancer in 2013, once again at just the right time. First, the world oil price crashed. Then Venezuela's oil production collapsed due to a decade and a half of low investment and no maintenance: it's now only a quarter of what it was fifteen years ago.

The sucker left holding the bag was Chávez's chosen successor, Nicolás Maduro. He's not charismatic, there's no oil money, and the fake prosperity evaporated a decade ago. Now the elections have to be rigged or the PSUV will lose power. Now the ?welfare state? is really just a rationing system, and not a generous one. It's no fun anymore.

So, try to put yourself in Maduro's mind. The good times are never coming back, and his daily task for eleven years has been trying to keep the ramshackle show on the road for just one more day. What's the point? Why not just let a free election happen, hand all the problems over to a democratically elected successor, and leave the stage with some grace?

I can't read Maduro's mind, but I spent a lot of time interviewing key players in Soviet Russia and later in apartheid South Africa when those regimes were gradually, half-unwittingly deciding to leave power voluntarily. Maduro's erratic movement towards what may finally be an acceptance of defeat reminds me of the behaviours I was seeing then.

First, last October, he agreed to hold national elections this year with foreign observers present to guarantee that they were free, in return for a suspension of US sanctions against Venezuela.

Then, in January, he pulled his old trick of ?disqualifying? María Corina Machado, the leader of the united opposition parties and candidate for the presidency. In fact, he did it twice, disqualifying the woman she chose as a stand-in leader as well. The US responded in April by reimposing sanctions.

At that point Maduro was warning against ?a bloodbath in Venezuela, a civil war brought about by the fascists.? But then he let

Machado's second choice for substitute run ? and that man, Edmundo González, is now at least 20 points ahead of Maduro in the polls.

If González and the opposition alliance win on Sunday, the whole Chavista era may be over. One promising sign is that the Biden administration re-started direct talks with the Maduro regime three weeks ago.

No counting chickens before they hatch, but there is at least a chance that Venezuela's recovery starts now.