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Venezuela Shaken by President Hugo Chávez's Illness

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Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez is suffering from cancer, which he admitted after four weeks of speculation regarding the state of his health (NotiSur, June 24, 2011). The president's illness has raised doubts about the future of the Revolución Bolivariana, sustained in large part by his leadership and charisma. Next year will bring presidential elections, and a positive health outcome for Chávez will largely determine whether his political party can hold onto the government and postpone for another six years the hopes of an opposition that claims to be united but has failed to create a unified leadership capable of confronting and overcoming the phenomenon of a president who, after 19 uninterrupted years leading the country, continues to captivate large sectors of society.

Not only Venezuela is waiting. The leadership Chávez has achieved in Latin America means that from Cuba, in the Caribbean, to Argentina, in the heart of the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR), there is concern for the future, because his "solidary internationalism" and his penchant for promoting integration agencies have made him a central figure in a region involved in change processes that have found in Chávez an unconditional ally.

No one yet knows for sure how serious Chávez's illness is—except him, the Cuban doctors treating him, and Fidel Castro. "Thanks to Fidel, who 'insisted' that I have the checkups that found the illness," said Chávez just after returning from Havana, where he was visiting and where he was operated on, first for what was said to be a pelvic abscess and then a malignant tumor.

Later, little by little, other details emerged, as the president was visibly thinner and the chemotherapy was causing him to lose his hair so that he shaved his head. The lack of official information and a macabre wave of rumors that some, maliciously, say were started by his close associates, prompted the opposition—which still has not found the formula enabling it to overshadow the president—to denounce the government's lack of transparency and bring up the urgent need to transfer power to Vice President Elías Jaua.

Chávez's illness brings talk of succession

Under the Venezuelan Constitution, the natural successor in cases of illness or death—"temporary absence" or "absolute absence" are the terms used in the Constitution—is the vice president, who, contrary to what happens in most of the world, is not elected along with the president but is appointed by him and can be replaced just like any minister or official.

Nevertheless, names of possible successors began to be floated. Among those made public were Jaua, obviously, Ministers Tareck el Aissami (Interior and Justice), Nicolás Maduro (Foreign Relations), and Rafael Ramírez (Energy and Mines), Deputy Diosdado Cabello, and even Adán Chávez, older brother of the president and governor of the state of Barinas. The list, which at one time contained other names (even that of María Gabriela, the president's oldest daughter), was authored by the press and opposition leaders, even knowing, one and all, that in case of a transfer of power, the only possibility was Jaua—not only because he is vice president but also because that is what the Constitution stipulates. The objective of these rumors was clearly to plant the idea that Chávez's days are numbered.
The Constitution deals with presidential absence in two ways—temporary absence and permanent absence. During a temporary leave, the president would turn the government over to the vice president. A permanent absence, which would occur because of death, abandonment of office, or permanent incapacity—would inevitably culminate in a special election unless it occurred during the last two years of a president's term, in which case the vice president would finish the term.

In this case, then, if Chávez had to take a permanent leave, the vice president would take over until the presidential elections next year. Thus, none of the names on the lists would be in the running. The rumors about Adán and María Gabriela have the sole objective of using the president's illness to denounce his supposed despotism and tendency to resort to nepotism and violate and make a mockery of the constitutional provisions.

However, Article 238 says specifically that the vice president "cannot be related by blood or marriage" to the president. Thus, if Chávez wanted to replace Jaua, he could do so with anyone he chose but not with his brother or his daughter.

"The opposition is creating a macabre show around my health; they say that I'm ready [to die]. They and the empire are having a party because 'Chávez is dying,' they are saying that he has cancer, that it has metastasized, that they have performed a colostomy on me," said the president. "But they also say that I am putting on a show, that I have nothing wrong with me. Well, a thief believes everyone else steals, there they are in their misery."

The opposition is clearly trying to give the impression that, despite their differences, they have compassion for the president's situation. Nevertheless, "there's a bit of hypocrisy in these laments," said analyst Cristina González, a professor at the school of journalism at the state Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV), a bastion of the youth opposition to the Revolución Bolivariana.

"The president is a human being for whom we desire the best, that he take care of himself, that he get better, and we want to ask people to be understanding, because we are talking about a person who has been in office for 13 years, who is now close to 60 years old, and well...it's normal that he get sick," said Deputy Julio Borges, one of the candidates who will participate in the February 2012 primaries, in which the opposition will try to select a unified leader to run against Chávez.

"It's necessary to have patience and understanding to close this cycle and to be able to open among everyone a new cycle for a new generation," said opposition Deputy Miguel Ángel Rodríguez. By contrast, Deputy Pablo Medina did not hide his desires, saying that "the president has abandoned his office, so the Asamblea Nacional should begin the constitutional process to replace him."

**Chávez's personal leadership style could present problems**

"Knowing the real situation of a president's health is always fundamental, but more so in cases like that of Chávez," said analyst Manuel Sierra, a reporter for the Uruguayan weekly Brecha. "Chávez is not a conventional leader, he is a protective leader on whom many things depend directly, and he is not at the head of just any government but a revolutionary government that proposes to change society. It is a government that he leads personally and with the style of a boss."

Even his boosters admit that one major defect of the Bolivarian process is the excessive personalization of the leadership, the dependence on a charismatic leader. "There are important mid-level leaders, well-prepared cadres, but none has the charisma of the comandante [Chávez],"
and the failure to form government teams that transcend him has been one of his errors," said a member of the governing Partido Socialista Unificadodo de Venezuela (PSUV) as quoted by the BBC.

If Chávez had to move to the sidelines, "that would be a catastrophe for the PSUV," analyst Luis Vicente León, director of the polling firm Datanálisis, told the news agency Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA), "because a good part of Chávez's connection with the people comes from that impression of invincibility that he gives, of being a person who overcomes all obstacles, who protects and cherishes his own and destroys the adversary."

The opposition did not have the sharp instincts to observe the enormous international and, above all, regional repercussions that the announcement of the president's illness unleashed. In addition to expressions of solidarity from around the world, on the same day that Chávez returned from Cuba following his operation, waiting for him in Caracas were Presidents Evo Morales (Bolivia), Rafael Correa (Ecuador), and José Mujica (Uruguay). They came without telling him, violating all protocol, just to embrace him in an unusual show of affection and respect. Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo was going to come on the same plane, but his own cancer, from which he is recovering, forced him to changes his plans at the last minute.

The opposition preferred to exploit internally the image of Chávez allied with Cuba, which is true, but the progressive governments' appreciation of him is deservedly a great point in his favor.

On June 8, when he arrived in Havana and did not know that he would have to be there for a month and undergo two operations, Cuba and Venezuela signed some 100 cooperation agreements in various areas valued at more than US$1.3 billion. Among them, ratification of Cuba's continuance in Petrocaribe, an initiative of the Caribbean countries that allows Cuba to break the US blockade and receive 100,000 barrels per day of oil from Venezuela under preferential terms: payment of 50% in 90 days and the rest over 25 years, at an annual interest rate of 1%.

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