4-13-2012

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Uncertainty about Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's Health Affects Presidential Campaign

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Category/Department: Venezuela
Published: 2012-04-13

Perhaps in no other country, six months before extremely polarized presidential elections, has the candidate whom all the polls predict will win undergone emergency surgery—for cancer—with the candidate who opposes him celebrating that misfortune in private but not daring to say so publically, falling into the most confusing campaign rather than taking advantage of the situation. That is what is happening today in Venezuela.

On Feb. 26, President Hugo Chávez, running for re-election, was operated on for the second time in eight months, and, after receiving chemotherapy and now underdoing radiation treatment, he has confounded friends and foes with the dynamism that he has stamped on his administration. In the opposition, with the exception of the mainstream media, which toy daily with the idea of Chávez's death, no one dares to predict out loud how much time the president may have left; everything is based on rumors. But both approaches fail and work against Henrique Capriles, the man the Mesa de Unidad Democrática (MUD) and the press chose to run against Chávez in the Oct. 7 election (NotiSur, Feb. 24, 2012).

Newspapers like El Universal and El Nacional not only put a date on when the president will die but also complain that Venezuelans are victims of a dictatorship that has eliminated freedom of speech. Since they write this every day, both the premature death notice as well as the serious denunciations carried on their front pages collapse under their own weight, as do the rumors. Chávez was operated on for the first time in June 2011, and, since then, rather than watching his funeral, society has watched a man who exhibits unusual energy for someone suffering from cancer (NotiSur, Aug. 12, 2011).

**Lack of information leads to wild rumors**

No one doubts the seriousness of Chávez's illness. His ministers and supporters act as if nothing is happening, but in private all admit that they cannot imagine a future without him, although they have to consider the possibility. Opposition leaders know that the president's death or engraining the idea of his death in society increases their possibilities for taking over the government and ending the Revolución Bolivariana. But they do not know how to act. Some believe that this is the best time to speed up the rumor mill. Others—among them Capriles—think that they need to show compassion, participating in spreading rumors but publically showing solidarity with the president. "I wish him a long life," says the MUD candidate in almost every speech.

When Chávez requested permission from the Asamblea Nacional (AN) to temporarily leave the country—for Cuba, where he had surgery and received radiation treatment—some deputies said that they would approve the request only out of pity but that what the president should do was transfer power to Vice President Elías Jaua. In the AN corridors, they said, without embarrassment, that that was the first step to later asking for Chávez's removal for a hypothetical "permanent absence," a provision established in Article 233 of the Constitution in "cases of death, resignation, physical or mental incapacity."
Chávez saw the game they were playing. In a few hours, he called his supporters together to accompany him to the airport where he would leave for Havana. He made a formidable show of power. The crowds that filled the streets silenced the opposition. The administration in turn enacts new measures every day that will undoubtedly have strong electoral repercussions.

Chávez travels regularly to Cuba. He stays five days in Havana to have radiation treatment, then returns for to Caracas for five days, to then repeat the cycle. While in Venezuela, he is highly visible and speaks, which is his most effective way of captivating the crowds. He mixes poetic phrases—"Each time one returns home it's impossible not to feel an indomitable pounding surging from the depths of ones insides"—with others that are harsher and directed at the opposition and the US.

On March 17, for example, he spoke from a balcony of the Palacio de Miraflores, the seat of government, addressing Capriles without naming him, and telling Venezuelans that "in the October elections we are going to give an unforgettable beating…to the fascist, violent, perverse, poisonous opposition that acts at the service of the empire [referring to the US]."

**Sparring with US continues**

In the same speech, Chávez attacked one of the rumors launched "to instill fear in the people," according to which, he said, the head of the Pentagon's Southern Command Gen. Douglas Fraser had said SOUTHCOM's functions include watching out for "possible turbulences" in Cuba, Venezuela, or Bolivia."

That same day, in Washington, another round of the permanent dispute between Venezuela and the US played out. Invited by the Organization of American States (OAS) to discuss the Summit of the Americas scheduled for April 14-15 in Colombia, US Rep. Eliot Engel (D-NY), the ranking member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee's subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, took the opportunity to ask that the OAS send a "robust observer mission" to Venezuela to ensure that Venezuelans can have confidence in their elections, which Engel said were critical.

Venezuelan Ambassador to the OAS Roy Chaderton quickly responded to Engels. The German news agency Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA) reported that Chaderton first accused Engel of being a "real provocateur" before thanking him "for assailing Venezuela's democracy because some in his country do not tolerate dissident democracies and they do their best to destabilize. It is a tradition."

Finally, with heavy sarcasm, Chaderton addressed Engel, saying, "If elections concern you, we are willing to offer you some advice. In Venezuela, as in most countries in the world, the candidate who obtains the most votes wins, as opposed to the US electoral system, where unfortunately Mr. Al Gore could not become president for reasons that we all know and where the Supreme Court voted for the candidate who came in second," referring to the 2000 US elections, in which the justices ruled in favor of George W. Bush.

The opposition is not playing fair. Along with concrete acts of violence—including burning municipal waste containers and cloning government officials’ email addresses to send out false notices—are alarming rumors, for example that the public water system is contaminated or that "a secret medical opinion" says that Chávez will not live past November.

The opposition has even exalted the stature of a doctor living in Florida, who day after day transmits supposed information on the president’s health. The doctor is Venezuelan José Rafael Marquina, who says that his information sources are the Cuban doctors who operated on Chávez. "Three
months from now, he will no longer be able to continue swaggering around, we will see him ill, he will die between November 2012 and April 2013," said the last opinion published by all the opposition media.

In early April, most of the mainstream Latin American press and Spain's El Mundo printed long stories that seemed to be part of a rightist international campaign to enhance Dr. Marquina and strengthen the "bombshell that will favor Capriles in the days before the election," said an unidentified Chávez supporter quoted by the ANSA news agency.

**Journalist calls Chávez the country's cancer**

One journalist touting Marquina is Santiago Fontiveros, an analyst of the Caracas daily El Universal, who has recently stopped being the sharp analyst that he once was. On Feb. 28, two days after Chávez's last operation, when the country was upset by the news, he published a commentary asking, "Who gave cancer to whom?" And he wrote, "A few days ago, the president again put the country in suspense with the announcement of an operation in Cuba. We are well-aware of his bout with cancer, which Venezuelans follow more closely than the English follow the weather.

But one wonders, who gave cancer to whom? Haven't we had thirteen years of chemotherapy to eradicate the malignant tumor [referring to Chávez] that we created after so many years of bad government?" Fontiveros then went on about the "lack of freedoms" and other supposed "dictatorial characteristics" of the Chávez administration.

Some alternative media in Caracas said the Capriles campaign committee criticized Fontiveros, but the government did not censure or sue El Universal "because the Revolución Bolivariana guarantees even the right to lie and denigrate," said Vice President Jaua when asked what the government planned to do about such newspapers.

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