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Health of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez Clouds Elections

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As Venezuela moves closer to the Oct. 7 presidential elections and the opposition's poll numbers decline, and as doubts about President Hugo Chávez's health are increasing, the governing party and the opposition have become embroiled in a battle of criticisms, accusations, and rumors that is corroding the political climate.

With slightly more than four months until the elections, polls indicate that Chávez would be re-elected for a third consecutive term by between 17 and 36 percentage points over Henrique Capriles (NotiSur, Feb. 24, 2012), the unity candidate for the opposition Mesa de Unidad Democrático (MUD).

Chávez, who just finished another round of cancer treatment (NotiSur, Aug. 12, 2011, and April 13, 2012), admitted that, because of his illness, he can no longer be "that runaway horse" that "never slept and worked 20 hours a day." Showing a religious fervor not evident before, he said that he "asks God to give me the strength of a buffalo to continue this revolutionary work that the Venezuelan people have entrusted to me."

Buoyed by the polls, on May 21 Chávez told the leadership of the governing Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV), "We can no longer be satisfied with 56% of the vote, let's work to win 10 million votes, which would put us at close to 70%.

Thus, even though he can count on the support of all the major media in the country as well as strong and active support from abroad, Capriles is unable to come across as a charismatic figure able to compete with Chávez. After succeeding, for the first time, to unite all its forces, the opposition seems headed toward throwing away the best opportunity it has had since the start of the Revolución Bolivariana in February 1999.

Foreign support for opposition counterproductive

At a forum at the Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV), sociologists and political analysts agreed, with very few differences, that the formidable foreign campaign for Capriles—which includes efforts by former US government officials and various European nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as well as Colombia's former President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) and almost all international news agencies and the major South American dailies—has been counterproductive for the opposition candidate. First, because it is giving the false impression that Capriles will be the sure winner in the elections. Second, because much of the foreign support comes from institutions or personalities that have a negative image in Venezuela, thus merely reinforcing the PSUV allegation that foreign governments and organizations are financing the opposition and that, if it were to win, it would be dependent from day one.

"A hypothetical opposition government would emerge subservient to the foreign policy of the US and its allies, assuming as its security paradigm the genocidal narcoparamilitary model applied by Uribe in Colombia," read the May 17 editorial in the Caracas daily Últimas Noticias.

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MUD leaders have said that Capriles' campaign office reportedly received advice from experts in "dirty" electoral campaigns, among them the controversial Ecuadoran political consultant Jamie Durán Barba, to tone down the wave of rumors that, as shown by the polls, is not producing the expected results.

Although the MUD tries to convey a unified image to the electorate, the differences among the nearly 20 groups it comprises are not minor. The result has been that the unity candidate often suffers from his advisors' contradictions so his own message is also contradictory.

On April 10, during one of his campaign swings through Caracas' barrios, Capriles said, "Chávez and his people are like we were in previous elections, directionless....Chávez has lost his way."

The Spanish news agency EFE reported that, only minutes later, in response to questions from one of the neighbors he visited, Capriles demonstrated his own lack of direction when he said that "the state's presence in the oil sector and the social programs that the government calls the 'missions' are the people's, and they should be not only maintained but improved and broadened."

Such recognition of those two points, which Chávez defines as "the two fundamental pillars of the Revolución Bolivariana," are not part of the right's discourse, but Capriles did not have a slip of the tongue when he spoke. Two days later, he said the same thing using almost the same words. What is happening is that it is obvious that developing health, sanitation, housing, and education programs—the "missions"—that Venezuelans embrace can be financed only with oil revenues.

Former State Department official leads foreign campaign against Chávez

The wave of rumors—the "psychological war," as Chávez calls it—is not only about the president's health or his "approaching death." Roger Noriega, former assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, is one of the leaders of the pro-opposition campaign abroad. For several months, the former diplomat has used the Miami Spanish-language daily El Nuevo Herald to launch his militant attacks against Venezuela.

On April 14, the former State Department official during the administration of US President George W. Bush told his Nuevo Herald readers (in an article that was reproduced in all the rightest dailies in South America) that in Venezuela a group of high-ranking military officers tied to drug trafficking, with the collaboration of Asamblea Legislativa (AL) president Diosdado Cabello, are alarmed by the state of Chávez's health and have "developed a plan to impose martial law if Chávez's deteriorating condition causes any hint of instability."

Noriega says the role of Cabello, who was appointed in January, is "to reassure a powerful cadre of narcomilitares...who have been branded drug 'kingpins' by the US government. These ruthless men will never surrender power and the impunity that goes with it—and they have no illusions that elections will confer 'legitimacy' on a Venezuelan narcostate....."

Noriega added that, according to his sources, "perhaps [Chávez] knows that his lieutenants and foreign allies are behaving as if he were already dead—consolidating power, fashioning a 'revolutionary junta,' and plotting repressive measures."

"In my estimation," writes Noriega, "the approaching death of the Venezuelan caudillo could put the country on the path toward a political and social meltdown. The military cadre installed by
Chávez in January already is behaving like a de facto regime determined to hold onto power at all costs. And Havana, Tehran, Moscow, and Beijing are moving to protect their interests."

**Colombia’s former president backs Capriles**

Capriles has received other foreign support as negative as Noriega's, such as that of Colombia's former President Álvaro Uribe, one of the politicians whose image is the most negative in Venezuela. German news agency Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA) said that, on May 13, Uribe sent 13 tweets on the Venezuelan situation, in each of which, every time that he wrote "Chávez," he put "assassin" in parentheses next to it. In each message, he also expressed his support for the MUD leader and assured that his victory would "end the (assassin) Chávez dictatorship."

The day before, the former paramilitary and drug-trafficking leader Salvatore Mancuso, in jail in the US, had given a telephone interview with a Colombian radio station in which he said that, through Uribe, he had contacted the Venezuelan opposition who wanted to set up a paramilitary network similar to the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), which Mancuso set up in Colombia during Uribe's administration, to try to attack and overthrow Chávez militarily *(NotiSur, May 25, 2012).*

That same day, the PSUV filled the pro-government press with a devastating accusation, "Uribe is the leader of the opposition."

Capriles and the MUD reacted, separately, 24 hours later, again making it clear that their messages are not the same and that unity is nothing more than a word. Capriles was the harshest: "I say to former President Uribe, and to any other head of state in any country, don't meddle in the Venezuelan electoral process because we Venezuelans are going to solve our problems and we don't want the interference of any country."

Uribe apparently did not get the message and, just hours later, sent a tweet that read, "As long as there is a dictatorship and protection of terrorists, we will express our opinion about Venezuela every day."

Amid the rumor campaign and the dirty war, the government announced, on April 26, that it had detected a money-laundering network for the drug mafia that is "tied to [opposition] governors of the states of Carabolo, Nueva Esparta, and Bolívar." Five persons were reportedly detained. Nothing more has been said about the matter, but the idea of drug-trafficking governors has been planted.

Each one of these attacks is reflected immediately in the polls, say Luis Vicente León of the polling firm Datanálasis and Oscar Schemel of Hinterlaces, the two most prestigious pollsters in the country. Both say that, if he changes direction radically, Capriles still has time to recover lost ground. Schemel says that what is most damaging for the opposition is that "its intellectuals continue thinking about a country that no longer exists, and they don't take into account that a new national and popular identity has emerged in Venezuela fostered by efficient government actions."

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