Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez Benefits from Improved Relations with Colombia

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Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez Benefits from Improved Relations with Colombia
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At the highpoint in recent Colombia-Venezuela relations, when Presidents Juan Manuel Santos of Colombia and Hugo Chávez of Venezuela had found, despite deep ideological differences, a way to maintain a good balance in the relationship, a detachment of Colombian guerrillas, apparently hiding in Venezuelan territory, entered Colombia and ambushed and killed 12 Army soldiers who were patrolling the border area (NotiSur, June 22, 2012).

The incident happened at a critical moment in Venezuela. Little more than four months before the presidential elections, this rich South American country's highly charged and suffocating political climate is filled with daily accusations from both government supporters and opponents that the other is hatching apocalyptic plots to either stay in power or take it over.

Media analysts—Colombian, Venezuelan, and from other countries—found the incident difficult to explain or understand politically. The US and the Colombian right accuse the Venezuelan government of turning its territory into a "sanctuary" for the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) rebels. Although Chávez publically criticizes the guerrillas, the FARC was aware of the accusations and knew as well that the Venezuelan government was not its principal enemy, so it was hard to understand why the rebels would carry out this bloody incursion that would strain the chilly but basically good bilateral relations.

Two years ago, when Colombian President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) was in office, the two northeastern South American neighbors were in a pre-war situation, with military preparations on both sides of the border, which ended without a military confrontation but with broken diplomatic and trade relations (NotiSur, Aug. 6, 2010). That was the first time that there was talk of a "Venezuelan FARC sanctuary."

When he took office in August 2010, Santos had the intelligence and conciliatory attitude to immediately look for a rapprochement with Chávez. Within a few weeks, relations between the two neighbors began to normalize (NotiSur, Dec. 16, 2011).

"If Uribe were still in office today, we would certainly be covering a war," wrote a Radio Nederland journalist. Is that what the FARC was looking for with its ambush? The question remains unanswered.

FARC attack still unexplained
The bloody guerrilla attack occurred on May 21 in a rural area of Maicao in the northeastern department of La Guajira, 770 km from Bogotá. That day, an Associated Press journalist gave this apt description of the place: "Venezuela and Colombia share a 2,219 km border where bandits, drug traffickers, paramilitaries, and guerrillas take advantage of the remote and desolate area to operate. It is thousands and thousands of square kilometers of jungle and plains; it has everything," the journalist wrote, quoting Colombian Defense Minister Gen. Henry Rangel Silva. Again quoting
Rangel, he concluded: "In the end, those irregular groups will end up uniting or linking up with one another and forming a very, very complex picture."

The same day, Santos communicated with Chávez, and, hours later, the Ejército Bolivariano de Venezuela had sent 3,000 soldiers, accompanied by 12 helicopter gunships, to patrol every inch of the remote jungle and plains. Chávez promised Santos that he would not only "cleanse" irregular Colombians—guerrillas, drug traffickers, and paramilitaries—from the border area but also summarily extradite them to be prosecuted in Bogotá.

"The military reinforcements authorized by Venezuela show a notable change of attitude by the Chávez administration, which years ago had suggested recognizing the FARC and Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) guerrillas as a belligerent force (NotiSur, Feb. 8, 2008). It said at the time that the rebels not only controlled territory and exercised authority within it but that they also had a Bolivarian political project," Radio Nederland reported on May 28.

Later in the article, the Dutch journalist asked, "Are there guerrilla bases in Venezuela, or do the irregular Colombian fighters merely camp there when they flee or look for provisions?" And the writer responded, "When journalists like us travel around the border area, residents and those whom we interview talk about presence, transit, incursions, obtaining provisions, charging revolutionary taxes, and other crimes that they attribute to the guerrillas and paramilitaries, but they don't talk about stable camps."

Candidates officially register, kick off campaigns

The climate of cooperation reached between Santos and Chávez allowed Venezuelans to quickly return to the details of a tense electoral contest, which developed against the backdrop of the president's health problems—the cancer that, with extremely poor taste, some opposition spokespersons have called "the patriotic tumor."

June 11 was the deadline for candidates to register for the Oct. 7 elections. Since February, when the opposition Mesa de Unidad Democrática (MUD) chose its candidate in a primary, it has been clear that the two contenders would be the president, running for the constitutionally allowed second-consecutive re-election, and Henrique Capriles, a 39-year-old conservative politician with an enormous family fortune who governed the state of Miranda on Venezuela's central coast (NotiSur, Feb. 24, 2012). But the formal registration process was anticipated by everyone because they knew that both candidates would arrive with an entourage of supporters and would give the opening speech of their campaigns.

Capriles chose June 10 to kick off his campaign, making the mistake, according to analysts, of leaving the closing day for Chávez. Both convoked multitudinous marches to accompany them to the Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE) headquarters, where they formally registered their candidacies. Both spoke to their supporters.

However, while Capriles is not known as a great orator, Chávez is an outstanding communicator. Capriles spoke for 20 minutes and said nothing new. Chávez did not say anything new either, but he exhibited a surprising energy and physical condition. He covered dozens of kilometers standing in the vehicle that brought him to the CNE. He spoke for three hours, sang and even danced, drowning out the euphoria of the "patriotic tumor" enthusiasts.
**Chávez hits home run**

"What could have been a mere formality became an event that could be decisive for Venezuela’s future," wrote the magazine América XXI, which is published in Buenos Aires and distributed throughout the continent.

Many analysts agreed. More important than Capriles just giving an uninspiring speech, without any references to crucial economic issues, Chávez presented the country with an image of someone in good physical shape who can take on the complexities of leading the country. At least provisionally, Chávez derailed the opposition’s campaign argument that his illness would prevent him from governing.

Argentine analyst Alberto López wrote on June 16 in the daily Tiempo, "It would be interesting to know how many thousands of votes Capriles lost because of his poor delivery, but it would be even more interesting to know how many Chávez won with that incredible power of communication with which he captivates the crowds."

No one could answer those questions, but later polls—with all the reservations about consulting firms in these electoral times—pre-announced a clear victory for Chávez. Firms closest to Capriles predicted a 7-point victory for Chávez; others, up to a 30-point margin.

Perhaps the only really credible figures come not from knowing the percentage of votes that each candidate might take but from observing that the most impartial polls agree on two things: first, support for Chávez runs between 68% and 70%; second, intention to vote moves between 55% and 60% (most polls put the figure at 58%). If those two figures hold, Chávez will be re-elected president for six more years—until 2019.

Clearly, with more than three months until the elections, the suffocating campaign climate will become more so. At a seminar in mid-June at the Instituto Universitario de Tecnología de Cabimas (IUTC), on the eastern shore of Lake Maracaibo, Julio Escalona, Venezuela’s adjunct ambassador to the UN, made a worrisome observation: "It was noteworthy that Capriles' campaign kick-off speech lacked any references to the economy, poverty, or other issues that the opposition has tried to use for its political and electoral advantage. Was it an oversight by Capriles because of the pressure of the registration process? It could be, but there could also be another reason: the conviction of defeat and the flight toward destabilization."

Escalona ended his analysis saying, "The opposition's conviction that, at this point, no matter what it does, it is going to lose the election must be taking a toll, and it is therefore more and more committed to the scenario of destabilization and refusing to recognize the election results."

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