Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez Confident as Election Nears

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Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez Confident as Election Nears

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Category/Department: Venezuela
Published: 2012-08-31

Thirteen years after Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez first took office in February 1999, Venezuelans are poised to elect a new head of state for the 2013-2019 term. On Oct. 7, nearly 19 million Venezuelans will cast their ballot for one of seven candidates, although only two have a chance of being elected: Chávez, who has won 12 of the 13 elections, plebiscites, and referendums held during his 13 years in office, and Henrique Capriles Radonski, the candidate for the opposition Mesa de Unidad Democrático MUD coalition (NotiSur, Feb. 24, 2012).

Amid enervating national polarization, polls show that Chávez will likely be re-elected by a wide margin that some consultants estimate at 15 percentage points, while others say the margin could be 27 points. Most, however, agree that Chávez will probably win by somewhere in the neighborhood of 20 points.

Neither the governing party nor the opposition gives much credence to the polls. They use them, but everyone in Venezuela knows that the firms conducting the polls are as polarized—some say contaminated—as society. Election day is fast approaching; barring some unforeseen event, the situation will not change radically.

Meanwhile, the candidates are trying to use ongoing events in their favor—including Venezuela's incorporation as a full member of the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR)—which seems to be a plus for Chávez. The opposition, which for the first time will be united in facing a politician with enormous communication skills and conviction, knows that it is not likely to have another opportunity like this to end Chávez's leadership.

Much of the campaigning has taken place outside Venezuela, not because the number of voters living abroad is decisive but because the opposition has the support of the South American right, which it trying to "help" Capriles. But demonizing the Revolución Bolivariana from afar has not been a good idea. The gruesome rumor war regarding Chávez's health (NotiSur, April 13, 2012, and June 1, 2012) has ended—he has undergone cancer surgery twice—and the domestic battle is now focused on the high percentage—between 25% and 30%—of poll respondents who say that they are neither committed to voting for Chávez nor committed to Capriles—the "ni-nis" or undecided voters.

Meanwhile, much of the opposition persists in efforts to generate a climate of distrust so that, in the event of an eventual defeat, they can claim fraud. They have done so in every election since 1999, without success, but they persist. The Organization of American States (OAS) and European Union (EU) observer missions and the Carter Center, among others, have always vouched for the validity of the elections and praised the automated voting system, which they describe as one of the most modern and reliable in the world.
Paraguayan coup becomes campaign issue

Since June 22, when Paraguay's constitutional President Fernando Lugo was overthrown ([NotiSur, July 13, 2012]), the Paraguayan rightist parties and the de facto government have tried to reach out to Capriles, making outlandish accusations against Venezuela. Five days after the coup, the Paraguayan Congress declared Venezuelan Foreign Minister Nicolás Maduro persona non grata ([NotiSur, Aug. 31, 2012]) in response to his statements that the 270-minute impeachment that ousted Lugo was "an abuse of democratic institutions."

A day later, the always pro-coup Asunción daily ABC Color accused Maduro of having tried to convince the Paraguayan military to take up arms to defend the constitutional government. Then, María Liz García, the defense minister of the de facto government, presented a short video—edited and without sound—that supposedly showed the foreign minister walking down a hallway of the Paraguayan government house alongside local officials and other regional ministers. Maduro had traveled to Paraguay together with his counterparts from the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR) to try to head off the democratic rupture.

This effort, filled with the strongest invective against Chávez, backfired on Capriles. The escalation reached a climax on July 4. That day, as by then seemed inevitable, Paraguay broke diplomatic relations with Venezuela, which gave Chávez the opening to do what he does best—engage in a hard-hitting debate.

Earlier, Colombian Foreign Minister María Ángela Holguín had the magnanimity to come out in defense of Maduro—she dismissed the allegations that he urged the military to oppose the coup—and, in passing, fired some heavy ammunition at former President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), a good friend of Capriles—although at every opportunity, Capriles has tried to distance himself from the Colombian ex-president.

Holguín's gesture was unexpected and doubly helpful to Chávez, contrasting sharply with some of Uribe's statements. After sending wishes for success to the opposition and Capriles—a real lead life jacket—Uribe said that, during his second term, he did not invade Venezuela militarily simply "because I didn't have time."

The Venezuelan government took advantage of this unfriendly exchange to complain that a group of Paraguayan senators, the same ones who overthrew Lugo, has asked for US$12 million to approve Venezuela's entry into MERCOSUR, on hold for four years precisely because the Paraguay lawmakers refused to vote on the matter even though their counterparts in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay had done so.

On July 6, when the Venezuelan opposition had rushed to say that Chávez's allegations were a crude invention, the conservative Brazilian daily O Globo verified, through Kennedy Alencar, one of its most respected columnists, that diplomatic sources had confirmed the charge.

Popularity of social programs gives Chávez comfortable lead in polls

Chávez has never doubted the outcome of the Oct. 7 election. He has always said he would win. In recent weeks, however, he has stressed the need for his campaign staff to step up their "face to face" contact with the people. Besides his charisma and the affection he has awakened in poorer sectors of society, Chávez knows that support for his "social missions" is a definite asset in the election.
social missions give people a right to food, health, and education and have been reinforced by the recent "grand missions" covering employment, housing, and security.

The missions are the centerpiece of the panoply of socioeconomic measures and laws enacted in the past year, such as the law governing labor relations (Ley Orgánica del Trabajo), passed on May 1, International Workers Day. Other measures include broadening social security coverage to include the poor, presenting a government plan regarding citizen security, and unveiling a new police model that emphasizes human rights.

"They are all measures that have a high social impact, which Chávez accompanies with a heavy dose of political audacity: in place of a classic electoral campaign, he presents them with a document to debate," said a correspondent with the Italian news agency ANSA.

Capriles also has his appeal, although his communications skills are a far cry from those of Chávez. He lacks charisma, and he has made the mistake of taking up some "Chavismo" themes, with the aim of improving them, which most think is impossible, said election analyst Roberto Vásquez.

**Capriles hopes to win over undecided voters**

Capriles is guided by self-proclaimed public-opinion experts. The missions, perhaps the government measure with the most support among the country's poor majority, are a case in point.

He has tried to win over the "ni-ni" sector, which one pollster quoted by BBC Mundo and funded by it said was made up "mostly of young, poor women, socially aware but more concerned with their daily problems than with politics, who reject polarization and believe there is insecurity, who have previously voted for Chávez or abstained, and who now do not know what to do." With capturing the support of this group as his goal, Capriles tries to use language that is rich and moving, like Chávez's, but that [skill] cannot be acquired or bought, it is innate, said the expert quoted by the British news agency.

The opposition candidate was, at age 25, the youngest deputy in Venezuela's history and even became president of the Asamblea Legislativa (AL). Later, as mayor of the municipality of Baruta, in Caracas, and as governor of the state of Miranda (the second-largest state), he received good marks for his administration. Although of Jewish roots, Capriles is a devout Catholic. His father left him a business empire that includes construction, insurance, transportation, real estate, and, most important, media companies (newspapers, magazines, radio, and television), an essential tool at this stage of his public life. From his mother, he received real estate enterprises and various companies linked to the entertainment industry, making him owner of the largest national chain of movie theaters. He is, in short, one of the richest people in Venezuela.

In 2002, Capriles was jailed for four months for involvement in the thwarted coup attempt against Chávez and for having joined the armed civilian commando group that entered the Cuban Embassy, painted graffiti on walls, broke furniture, and burned seven cars. In court, Capriles said that he did it "to prevent something worse from happening." The Cuban diplomatic mission is in Baruta, and, at the time of the attack, Capriles was the mayor.

Capriles is not married and, at age 40, is seen as an enviable catch for eligible young women. In February, he became the candidate of the unified opposition when, in the MUD primaries, he beat four other candidates who now support him in his campaign against the Revolución Bolivariana.
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