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Six More Years for Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez

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Venezuelans decided on Oct. 7 by an overwhelming majority that Hugo Chávez would continue in the presidency for another six years. The governing party won in 22 of the country's 24 states. The opposition, besides losing its hope for the presidency, lost three of the five states that it had controlled, including Miranda, where the last elected governor was Henrique Capriles, Chávez's opponent in this election.

When the next presidential elections are held in 2019, the leader of the Revolución Bolivariana will be 64 years old and will have been president for 19 years. The elections, in which Chávez defeated the Mesa de Unidad Democrática (MUD) candidate by more than 11 percentage points, were the first in the Bolivarian era in which the opposition attempted to set aside its jealousies, ambitions, and grudges to defeat the president.

In the next six years, Chávez's project for "21st century socialism" (NotiSur, Jan. 26, 2007), ratified democratically at the ballot box, will have some debts to pay that its own backers admit are urgent—inflation and insecurity, among others. However, the challenges ahead could be even greater for Capriles if he tries to hold onto his position as opposition leader, unaltered and without internal competition, until the 2019 elections.

Huge turnout gives Chávez strong mandate

Until two days before the elections, when the ban on campaigning went into effect, Chávez said that his goal was to obtain 10 million votes, an impossibility in a country of 19 million registered voters and a participation level that never surpassed 65% (some 12 million voters). It was merely campaign rhetoric aimed at bolstering the optimism of his followers. Chávez did, however, receive more than 8.5 million votes, allowing him, as never before, to legitimize his mandate, which will begin in January 2013.

This is, first and foremost, because Chávez faced a united opposition for the first time and especially because almost 81% of eligible voters went to the polls, a record for a country in which voting is optional. While this level of citizen commitment brought worldwide praise, most important for the Revolución Bolivariana is that even its enemies recognized that Venezuela has a fully functioning democratic system.

"It is impossible to challenge this election. The automated voting system is unique on our continent, and perhaps in the world, and does not allow the possibility of fraud," said rightist Argentina Deputy Gabriela Michetti, who was invited to Venezuela by the opposition to be an observer.

Dire predictions fail to materialize

During the month before election day, the future appeared bleak. The candidates missed no opportunity to disparage their opponents, and the national and foreign media—which had become, as in the rest of South America, ideologues for the opposition—warned of "electoral violence." They blamed the government for whatever might occur, said that electoral fraud was underway, and, as
a consequence, anticipated days of rage. The media refocused on the health of Chávez, who has undergone treatment for cancer (which, judging from his physical stamina during the campaign, appears to be in remission).

During that "anything-goes" effort against the Venezuelan administration, on Sept. 16, Christopher Toothaker, a correspondent for the Associated Press, wrote of the president's "mysterious cancer." He did this within a lengthy article aimed at informing readers about the electorate's "uneasiness" that Chávez did not have a running mate when his death during his next term is a real possibility. The journalist did note that Capriles also did not have a running mate; the Venezuelan Constitution does not provide for a vice president, which is an unelected position filled only after an election and by direct designation of the president, as if it were a cabinet ministry position. In his 13 years as president, Chávez has had seven vice presidents.

Even on election day, no one refrained from fanning the flames of possible violence. The country's major dailies—El Nacional and El Universal—posted on their Web sites, under the "up to the minute" and "breaking news" banners, an item about "the more than 1,000 serious incidents" reported during the voting process. El Nacional denounced the presence of "an armed band that allegedly shot at" voters in line in an election district in the capital.

Shortly after noon, Jorge Cardinal Urosa, archbishop of Caracas and a staunch Chávez critic, spoke in a dramatic tone on several radio stations, although nothing unusual had been reported in the almost five hours since the polls had opened. "Venezuelans, the church wants to stress the necessity that today proceed completely in peace, without violence, without attacks, and without any public disturbances," said the prelate.

Early in the day, a Washington Post editorial and an article by 2010 Nobel laureate in literature Mario Vargas Llosa were available. Under the title, "Venezuela Eyes Change," the Post said, "Mr. Chávez's illness probably means that his days as Venezuela's leader are numbered anyway. The question now is whether he will give way if he loses on Sunday. Venezuela's neighbors, and the Obama administration, should be ready to react if he attempts to remain in power by force." In the Spanish newspaper El País, Vargas Llosa predicted a victory for Capriles, referred to the president's "terminal cancer," and said that "Chávez's defeat will free Latin America from its greatest threat to the process of political democratization and modernization of its economies."

Neither the dailies, the Caracas cardinal, The Washington Post, nor the Peruvian writer were correct in their apocalyptic predictions. With "exemplary democratic maturity," as Chávez said, in the middle of the night on Oct. 7, four hours after the last polls closed, Capriles congratulated the president "for his victory" and called on his supporters to respectfully observe the victors' celebrations and "respect the verdict of the ballot box."

Two days later, when, from the anonymity of Internet social networks, rightist groups complained about an alleged fraud and called for refusing to recognize the election results, the MUD leader again addressed his supporters, telling them, "Let me be very clear, there was no fraud here."

Not even after Chávez's resounding victory and Capriles' statements did Venezuela's enemies abroad accept the democratic validity of the president's ratification. The US and Canadian governments merely "took note" of what had happened. Both in exactly the same words. The European Union (EU), mired in a dire crisis, with record unemployment and poverty, failing workers' wages, and disappearing social programs, "reminded" Chávez that "he must promote
fundamental freedoms, inclusion, and sustainable economic development." This was spelled out by Catherine Ashton, the EU's high representative for foreign affairs and security policy. The series of acts of blatant interference allowed Chávez to say that "we have defeated an international coalition."

**Capriles looks ahead**

By then, Capriles was fully aware that it would not be easy to maintain his position as opposition leader for six years from the political wilderness—that is, without an executive or legislative office. MUD, originally comprising 22 political parties, lost four members on Sept. 17. Manos por Venezuela, Unidad Democrática, Cambio Pana, and Piedra withdrew from the umbrella group, citing two reasons that Capriles should bear in mind: 1) his "authoritarianism," and 2) the lack of a program with "proposals that are not simply opposition to Chávez."

It was a wake-up call. On Oct. 8, it was clear that the program effectively did not exist and that hatred for Chávez was all that united those who voted for Capriles. The opposition fell into a real funk. That day, Capriles had to go out to encourage them, telling them, "A huge task lies ahead for us to win the future."

MUD executive secretary Guillermo Aveledo told them directly, "We understand the sadness, because we did not achieve what we wanted, but remember that there is no room for depression in politics." In an almost paternal tone, he added, "I remind you that it is forbidden to be depressed."

On Oct. 10, Capriles announced that he had decided to register to run for governor of Miranda in the Dec. 16 regional elections. Hours later, Chávez announced that he had just named Foreign Minister Nicolás Maduro to be his vice president because Elías Jaua, who had been vice president until that moment, was going to run for governor. Where? Miranda. The governing party is running one of its top two people against Capriles.

By running Jaua against the leader of the united opposition, the governing party is trying not only to use to its advantage the funk that has overtaken the opposition but also to give the kiss of death to Capriles' leadership. Many in Caracas wonder, "Can a leader suffer two thundering defeats in just two months?" If Jaua beats Capriles, it is not unreasonable to say that the opposition leader's star will definitively have faded.

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