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Recommended Citation
GaudÃ­n, AndrÃ©s. "Venezuelan President Hugo ChÃ¡vez Unable to Attend Swearing In." (2013). https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/14116

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Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez Unable to Attend Swearing In

by Andrés Gaudín

Category/Department: Venezuela
Published: 2013-01-25

Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez announced on Dec. 8 that his health had taken a turn for the worse and that he would have to undergo a fourth operation in Havana, Cuba. He asked Venezuelans, if it became necessary to call new elections, to vote for Foreign Minister and Vice President Nicolás Maduro. Since that time, various sources have begun to predict an uncertain and unstable future for the Caribbean nation.

Chávez's announcement came only eight days before regional elections, an event that both the government and the opposition, looking ahead, had agreed was exceptionally important (NotiSur, Dec. 7, 2012). On Dec. 16, Venezuelans would choose governors for the country's 23 states, seven of which were in the hands of members of the opposition coalition Mesa de Unidad Democrático (MUD). It was also only 25 days before Chávez was to be sworn in as president for the 2013-2019 term. It would be his fourth term, which, if completed, would give him two decades in office (NotiSur, Oct. 19, 2012).

Chávez asks supporters to back vice president if necessary

Despite the elections' importance for the development and consolidation of the Revolución Bolivariana, in his brief appearance on Dec. 8, Chávez did not ask Venezuelans to vote for the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) candidates. He concentrated on putting Maduro at center stage. At the time, few realized that Chávez was saying that he would likely be unable to be sworn in on Jan. 10 and that, since the 1999 Constitution requires calling new elections 30 days after the initiation of a president's "absolute absence," he was suggesting Maduro as his successor. As it turned out, Chávez was unable to take the oath on Jan. 10 for the mandate for which he had been elected.

On Dec. 16, the governing party swept the regional elections—the PSUV candidates' combined vote in the 23 states was 2 percentage points more than its margin of victory against the MUD in the Oct. 7 presidential balloting. The opposition kept only three of the seven gubernatorial seats that it held before the elections, and two opposition winners were former Chavistas now opposed to the president.

The opposition's defeat in the Oct. 7 presidential elections (55% for Chávez, 44% for Henrique Capriles) left it badly damaged, with the need to redeem itself electorally in the gubernatorial elections. Therefore, the Dec. 16 loss was devastating. Before and after, the MUD saw core members defect, and those who remained had little political discipline. After the regional elections, the opposition basically fell apart and no longer acted with one voice in its discourse and positions.

On Jan. 8, when it was still unclear whether Chávez would be in Caracas for the inauguration, Capriles charged that the governing party was prepared to violate the Constitution and even asked the armed forces to take action. For the first time since the 2002 short-lived coup (in which Capriles played an active role), a political leader was looking for help from the barracks (NotiSur, April 19,
2002). In front of a group of foreign journalists, the MUD leader addressed the military, telling them, "You have a role to fulfill, you are called to defend the Constitution and act so that the laws are respected...and even more so when the president is absent."

The opposition continues counting on the support of the media, but the media, more than supporting the opposition, tries to set the pace. In the Asamblea Nacional (AN), opposition deputies vote in a bloc but act individually. The only two representative institutions that identify with the opposition, although they also intend to call the shots, are the business group FEDECAMERAS and the Catholic Church. Outside the country, the opposition has the support of the right, of the large newspapers belonging to the Sociedad Interamericana de Prensa (SIP), and of news agencies, but the Organization of American States (OAS) is no longer an ally.

Without Chávez's personal leadership, the governing party seems to be showing that the PSUV and the Revolución Bolivariana are much more than their creator and ideologue. While the president's health acts as a unifying factor, Chavistas have given a powerful political response, beyond prayers and prayer vigils, evident not only in the gubernatorial elections.

Although lacking Chávez's intensity, Maduro and his ministers continue governing and doing what needs to be done, despite having to deal almost daily with the opposition's onslaught, the "destabilization campaign," as PSUV leaders call it.

Opposition fails in call for indefinite strike

When, from Miami, a group of Venezuelans began using Twitter, Facebook, and other social networking sites to promote an "indefinite civic strike" along with shortages of basic products starting on Jan. 10, Maduro called for a political response. The reaction from the Chavistas was immediate. "We will respond to the coup-leaders' plans politically, with workers producing more and better," said Maduro.

MUD, ignoring reality, adopted as its own the call for a civic strike. It was a failure, not even getting off the ground, and the campaign to cause shortages was neutralized with a series of raids on storage facilities of businesses linked to the food sector. Among them was Pepsi Cola, which had to publish a newspaper ad saying that the 90,000 tons of sugar found in a warehouse on the outskirts of Caracas belonged to Pepsi but was for production of their well-known soft drink and not for sale on the black market.

The opposition is demanding more detailed information on Chávez's health but in such a way that it allows the administration to describe MUD leaders as "morbid," "necrophiles," and "vultures." While the government's information about the president's health has been short on details, it can also be argued that knowing where the tumor is, what medicines the president is taking, and whether he is being fed through a tube matters little. What does matter, and what the government says, is that Chávez's general condition is serious.

As it demanded more information, the opposition was thinking only about Jan. 10 and the possibility—later confirmed—that Chávez would be unable to be in Caracas to take the oath of office. It came up with a plan and, forgetting that politics is dynamic, did not deviate from it: to insist that Chávez's absence for the swearing in and Maduro's continued governance would violate the Constitution and warrant a response such as the indefinite civic strike and food shortages. Along with the major media, the Catholic Church supported that position.
On Jan. 7, at the opening session of the regular meetings of the Conferencia Episcopal Venezolana (CEV), Bishop Diego Padrón used particularly strong language to say that "the country is at a dangerous crossroads," that "the political and social stability of the country is at serious risk," and that continued conflict between the administration and the opposition will bring "violence," "anarchy," and "ungovernability." The bishop took up the MUD’s discourse and, getting ahead of the facts, said that "it is morally unacceptable to alter the Constitution."

On Jan. 9, the seven members of the Sala Constitucional of the Tribunal Supremo de Justicia (TSJ), including the two opposition justices, unanimously ruled that it was not imperative for Chávez to be sworn in on Jan. 10. "We know that the oath is constitutionally necessary, and undoubtedly it will be administered, but at this moment we cannot say when or where. What we do know is that it will be done when the reason [for the delay] has disappeared," said TSJ president Louisa Estrella Morales. The court also said that both Maduro and the Cabinet "have the authority to continue fully exercising their duties under the principle of administrative continuity."

The MUD called for an urgent condemnation by the OAS. After consulting constitutional experts from several countries in the region, on Jan. 11 the OAS denied the petition, saying it recognized "the full validity of decisions made by the constitutional powers of Venezuela."

**Huge rally replaces inauguration**

While the opposition continues its efforts without getting any traction, the administration receives significant demonstrations of support. On Jan. 20, instead of the president's inauguration, a huge rally was held, under the slogan "Today we are all Chávez and we all take the oath." Presidents, prime ministers, vice presidents, and foreign ministers from 22 countries in the region came to Caracas to attend the ceremony, as well as members of Petrocaribe, the Alternativa Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América (ALBA), the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR), the Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños (CELAC), and the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR).

The 22 leaders signed the Declaración de Caracas, a significant expression of regional solidarity and friendship. "The best way to honor Chávez and pray for his health is to continue working around the clock for Latin American unity," said Uruguayan President José Mujica.

The Declaración de Caracas is significant, but "I think that first we have to go back to the results of the regional elections. It was a qualitative victory, it is the advance of socialism as a project, and this is very noteworthy in a country where support for socialism never exceeded 6% of the electorate," analyst Alberto Aranguibel told Spanish news agency EFE. With the near certainty that new presidential elections will have to be called sometime during the year, political analysts are keeping Aranguibel's words in mind.

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