Venezuela Enters Post-Chávez Era

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President Hugo Chávez, the American statesman with the greatest political impact in the last quarter century, died on March 5 in Venezuela. "Controversial, loved and hated, eclectic," wrote Uruguayan political analyst and Sen. Constanza Moreira. His death opened the door to a new electoral process that could lead to the definitive consolidation of the Revolución Bolivariana or to its demise.

Chávez entered politics in February 1992, after leading a failed coup attempt, the only one in the region against the neoliberal economic policies that battered South American societies in the 1990s (NotiSur, March 11, 1992). For his part in the attempted coup, he was jailed and demonized, accused of being dictatorial, authoritarian, a demagogue (NotiSur, April 29, 1994). Nevertheless, few have as meticulously observed with regularity and transparency the first commandment of the democratic creed: elections carried without fail, out come hell or high water, despite internal problems—a precept as valid for the US and France as for Iraq and Libya.

For those attempting to minimize his democratic credentials, it is worth noting that, since 1998, he submitted to the electoral will of the people 14 times, winning all but one of those elections. The last time was in October 2012, when he soundly defeated Henrique Capriles, the single candidate for a unified opposition that included traditional and new parties, major national and international media, business chambers, and the Catholic Church, as well as blatant interference from powerful outside propaganda machines (NotiSur, Oct. 19, 2012).

Since he first appeared on the Latin American political stage, Chávez was an enigma. He spoke of "21st century socialism" when global capitalism celebrated the fall of "real socialism" and the Berlin Wall. He did not have adversaries but enemies. From the beginning, the right saw him as someone to destroy. The left and progressives were slow to figure out that the Venezuelan was one of their own. The first to recognize it was Cuba's then President Fidel Castro.

Chávez's heterodoxy made room for everything. He was capable of weaving into the same sentence Karl Marx and the Apostles, liberation theologians and the Italian Marxist intellectual Antonio Gramsci, the greats of recent African history and American liberators from the early 18th century. "Chávez challenged the limits of the possible at a time when the possible was almost a dogma," wrote an analyst for the Argentine daily Tiempo.

"Give me your crown of thorns, Christ, and I will bleed for you. Give me your cross, Christ, 100 crosses, and I will carry them. But in exchange, give me life, because I still have a long way to go and much to do in the great Latin American homeland," Chávez said weeks before the cancer finished its destructive work.

Millions in Venezuela accompanied him and mourned him during the days of his funeral services. In something seldom seen, 57 presidents and heads of state from around the world came to Caracas to say goodbye.
Will new elections be repeat of October?

In compliance with the Constitution, the Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE) set April 14 as the date to choose the next president. As on Oct. 7, 2012, when Chávez of the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) defeated Capriles of the Mesa de Unidad Democrático (MUD) by 11 percentage points, seven candidates will be on the ballot, but only two have a chance of winning—the former foreign minister and Vice President Nicolás Maduro (PSUV) and Capriles, again running for the unified opposition.

Tensions are running high; the opposition and the governing party are at opposite ends of the political spectrum, with no point on which they agree, ruling out any possibility for dialogue. While Chávez was physically absent from Venezuela—he was in Cuba from Dec. 8 to Feb. 19, where he was operated on for the fourth time in less than two years—the opposition was unable to take political advantage of his absence. Since the Bolivarian leader's death, it persists in being confrontational, which is not helpful. The latest polls indicate that the electorate—including the MUD—is turning toward Maduro and away from Capriles.

In October, Chávez defeated Capriles 55.7% to 44.3%. On March 25, the last "independent" poll released, from the Venezuelan affiliate of US polling firm International Consulting Services (ICS), gave Maduro close to 60% voter preference while Capriles had about 40%. The 11-point difference between the two blocs in October could stretch to 20 points in April, and the poll shows not only an increase in the number of PSUV voters (more than 4%) but also a decline in MUD voters (also about 4%).

Political analysts caution that, in a country as polarized as Venezuela, a poll's value is relative. In general, consulting firms are contracted by one of the parties and produce what interests whoever is paying them. But in this case, observes agree that ICS is an independent agency, and last October its predictions were the closest to the actual results.

Political analysts generally accept the validity of the ICS numbers, saying that even MUD leaders agree that the Chavismo vote will be larger than it was in October. They say that is not only because of the emotional factor—the increased awareness generated first by Chávez's illness, then by his will to live, and finally by his death—but also because of the very poor image of the opposition, which has still not presented a plan of action and focuses on responding with an automatic "no" to any government proposal.

In addition, Capriles waited two days before agreeing to again be the united-opposition candidate because he did not want to appear responsible for a new defeat that could be definitive for opposition prospects. "It will be very difficult to continue working in unity if we lose two consecutive elections in barely six months," said MUD secretary-general Ramón Guillermo Aveledo at a meeting with foreign journalists on March 9 in Caracas, at the same time as Chavez's funeral ceremonies were being held.

That same day, David Smilde, an analyst with the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), told the French news service Agence France-Presse (AFP), "If [Capriles] says he doesn't want to run, I could totally understand that. He is likely to lose, and if he loses this election he's probably going to be done."
Wheels of government continue turning

While the opposition is disoriented, the governing party is dealing with the election but also governing. The day Chávez died, it declared personae non gratae and expelled two US military attaches, whom it accused of taking advantage of the president's illness to "entice many of our active-duty military to participate in destabilizing projects," said Foreign Minister Elías Jaua.

In his public statement, Jaua showed Chávez's firmness but also extended his hand, as did the Revolución Bolivariana leader on many occasions, proposing to the White House and the State Department a resumption of conversations that could lead to normalizing the damaged bilateral relations. He even suggested a Venezuelan negotiator—Roy Chaderton, the Venezuelan ambassador to the Organization of American States (OAS).

A month earlier, on Feb. 8, when it was becoming clear that Chávez would not be able to resume his duties, Chavismo had already taken the reins of government when it devalued the bolivar. At the time, Finance Minister Jorge Giordani said that the devaluation was "an attempt to correct some deviations in the use of oil revenue," the country's principal economic resource, and, consequently, the most important source of hard currency.

Giordani did not explain that the changes to regulations that govern the currency-exchange market were aimed at one of the weak points in the Bolivarian administration: the lack of control on the use of hard currency that businesses would obtain ostensibly to pay for imports but which they in fact sold on the black market for a profit of between 300% and 400%.

However, the right interpreted the monetary correction as a government concession to market pressure and even as a policy change in its favor. The opposition surmised that, given the coming end of Chávez's leadership, Chavismo was reviewing the model and beginning a period of moderation and reconciliation with power sectors and with the dictates of the market.

But Maduro's later statements, and even more the presence in the streets of a people who became the key actors in farewell celebrations for their leader, showed the other face of the devaluation: the search for more rigorous control of hard-currency earnings from oil exports and the subsequent follow-up on the currency when it is used to import goods.

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