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Slight Thaw in Relations Between Venezuela and U.S.

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Despite the harsh language used by Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and high-ranking leaders of the Revolución Bolivariana, the Venezuelan government is practicing a skillful diplomacy that even suggests the possibility for positive change in relations with the US. Diplomatic relations have been frozen since 2010, when both countries reduced their embassy missions to a minimal level.

Although Caracas has not stopped accusing Washington of interfering in its internal affairs, Foreign Minister Elías Jaua and Secretary of State John Kerry—who, like Maduro when he speaks of the US, resorts to harsh rhetoric when referring to the South American country—held an amiable meeting during the recent Organization of American States (OAS) General Assembly in Antigua, Guatemala (NotiCen, July 4, 2013).

But that was not all, either in bilateral relations or in the Venezuelan government's insertion into the global community following the death of former President Hugo Chávez (1999-2013).

Venezuela's successes included deepening dialogue and creating new business deals with Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil—the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) countries that facilitated Venezuela's entrance into the integration body—as well as the support received at the summit of Petrocaribe—an economic alliance between Venezuela and various Caribbean countries—and Maduro's auspicious trip to Russia (NotiSur, Aug. 12, 2005).

Most important, however, was the recognition Maduro received in Europe, as Spain and France moved away from the Venezuelan right represented by Henrique Capriles, and Pope Francis gave Maduro a blessing and spoke of the "strength" of Venezuelan democracy. Maduro presented the pope with an ambitious proposal for Venezuela and the Vatican to carry out a global version of Operación Milagro, which provides eye surgery and other vision care to low-income people who could not otherwise afford it.

A month before Maduro's European trip, which began in Portugal June 12 and ended in France a week later, Capriles, the defeated presidential candidate for the opposition Mesa de Unidad Democrática (MUD), was enjoying strong support from the western establishment. That support, expressed mainly through a virulent campaign against Maduro, was led by the administrations of US President Barack Obama and Spain's conservative Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy. Both had refused to recognize the new president following the April 14 elections.

The media owners' powerful Sociedad Interamericana de Prensa/Inter-American Press Association (SIP/IAPA) and the Asociación Interamericana de Radiodifusión (AIR) saw to it that the region's major dailies, radio stations, and television channels continually portrayed the Maduro administration as illegitimate and authoritarian, the product of alleged electoral fraud. The Venezuelan right had moved the seat of its fight against Venezuela's democratic, constitutional government outside the country.
With the June 5 meeting between Jaua and Kerry and the eventful week in Europe, the Venezuelan government accepted the challenge and also brought the issue to the international stage. Maduro demonstrated the diplomatic expertise he developed in almost six years as Chávez's foreign minister and was thus able to neutralize, at least for the moment, the support that Capriles was receiving from Washington and Madrid and to obtain the support of two important world players, Pope Francis and French President François Hollande. Capriles was left isolated, supported only by western media owners.

**Maduro makes relations with US a priority**

The most significant movement, however, concerned relations with the US. On May 12, the signs were still negative. That day, Maduro accused Obama of being used by the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and said that the US president was "making a grave mistake," listening to his advisors, who deceived him, telling him not to recognize the Venezuelan elections because Maduro would be quickly overthrown. Maduro made these statements after Kerry testified before a Senate committee that the White House might not recognize the results of the April 14 election because of the "huge irregularities" denounced by the opposition.

On May 18, the opposition daily El Universal published a story quoting "official sources" saying that "Maduro proposed as a foreign policy goal normalizing diplomatic relations with the US." A few days earlier Maduro had named Deputy Calixto Ortega the new chargé d'affaires at the Venezuelan Embassy in Washington.

The following day, Jaua and Kerry met in Guatemala. By then, Kerry had toned down his rhetoric, and he spoke of wanting to "establish a more constructive and positive relationship," praised Maduro, and thanked him for "releasing" documentary filmmaker Timothy Tracy. The Venezuelan government had described it slightly differently, saying that "the gringo, Timothy Tracy, caught spying in our country, has been expelled." In Washington, State Department spokesperson Jen Psaki repeated her boss's words and said that Tracy's was released thanks to Ortega's "fine work."

On June 3, Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Roberta Jacobson seemed to indicate that the White House doors were now closed to Capriles. Responding to the Venezuelan opposition's repeated demand that the OAS sanction Venezuela under Articles 3, 4, and 6 of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, she questioned whether that was the appropriate way to foster dialogue, something that the opposition preached but did not practice. "We need to continue to seek what the specific tool is that will be better to try to create dialogue in Venezuela," she said.

Analysts find it reasonable that the two sides are trying to reduce tensions. The US is Venezuela's number-one trading partner, buying 1.5 million of the 2.5 million barrels a day of oil that Venezuela exports. "We are interested in cultivating a friendly relationship with this great North American people," Ortega had said the day that he presented his credentials.

That is why, despite the tensions, Venezuela decided to maintain and expand the assistance that it provides to the poor in 25 states and the District of Colombia. Every winter since 2005, more than 100,000 families, 240 indigenous communities, and 200 homeless shelters have received more than 200 million gallons of free heating fuel. The generous assistance is provided by CITGO Petroleum Corporation, a subsidiary of the state Petróleos de Venezuela SA (PDVSA), and Citizens Energy Corporation, a nonprofit organization headed by Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.
Capriles losing ground in diplomatic war

In the face of the government's strategy, the opposition seems to have lost its way. It criticizes its former friends abroad and cozies up to far-right groups associated with paramilitary groups and drug traffickers to, says the government, destabilize Maduro's administration.

Capriles has tried to emulate the president's traveling diplomacy but so far has been received only by Presidents Juan Manuel Santos of Colombia and Horacio Cartes of Paraguay—elected in a tainted process following a coup that overthrew former President Fernando Lugo (2008-2012)—who invited Capriles to his inauguration (NotiSur, May 10, 2013). Capriles said that he was waiting for a response from Presidents Ollanta Humala of Peru and Sebastián Piñera of Chile to plan a visit to those countries.

Uruguay's President José Mujica turned down Capriles' request, and on June 19 Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto replied with a categorical "no" that was unusually blunt for diplomatic speech. "If the gentleman [Capriles] tries to make contact with me, I will not receive him. Mexico respects the principle of nonintervention and self-determination, and it is clear that Mexico has recognized the government democratically elected by the Venezuelans. We don't want to be used to be part of an internal conflict," said Peña Nieto when questioned about the matter while giving a conference in London's Chatham House, home of the Royal Institute of International Affairs.

On June 18, Pope Francis received Maduro at the Vatican. The same day, the Vatican Secretary for Relations with States Dominique Mamberti turned down a request for a papal audience from a group of Venezuelan lawmakers, acting on behalf of Capriles. The deputies had to address the pontiff through a paid advertisement published in the Rome daily La Repubblica.

On May 27, Maduro said that Venezuelan intelligence had learned that a group of Colombian paramilitaries, allied with the opposition, was prepared to enter the country for the purpose of destabilizing the government, adding that it was the first part of a wider plan. His comment seemed like a broadside, but later events showed that the opposition had moved onto the path of illegality.

On June 9, Reuters news agency reported that "nine members of two groups of Colombian paramilitaries were captured arriving to carry out acts of terrorism."

A week later, on June 16, 12 opposition deputies—including Julio Borges, Corina Machado, and William Dávila, three of MUD's most prominent spokespeople—participated in Colombia in a "democracy" forum, the Encuentro Binacional por la Democracia y las Libertades. Two associates of former President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) sponsored the forum. One was Uribe's former security advisor José Obdulio Gaviria. Two of his brothers were convicted of having ties to drug trafficking and paramilitary groups. Gaviria is a cousin of the late Pablo Escobar Gaviria, the notorious drug trafficker who headed the Medellin cartel. The other sponsor was Francisco Santos, former vice president under Uribe. Reuters said that he has long been linked to the paramilitary group Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC).

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