

Chávez Stays, Again

Michael Shifter and Cameron Combs

Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez fended off a spirited challenge by Governor Henrique Capriles this fall. But continuing questions about Chavez's health and the country's dismal governance suggest that change may be coming soon. Looking ahead, the opposition will need to address concerns by the very poor that social spending will dry up if Chávez is no longer in office. Meanwhile, political differences and power struggles, and a sense of demoralization, risk undermining Capriles' diverse coalition. The regional scenario would look very different without Chávez. External players should restrain from meddling during this period of uncertainty. Instead, support should focus on trying to ensure that Venezuelans continue to rely on the ballot box in determining the course of a country facing so many daunting problems.

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“¡Uh, ah, Chávez no se va!” (Ooh, ah, Chávez stays!), has proven an appropriate chant for supporters of Venezuela's president. Since being elected in 1998, Hugo Chávez has survived several electoral challenges and a failed coup – all the while consolidating his control over the country. He even draws power from his enemies, using their criticism to craft a colourful narrative of a country rising against bourgeois oppression that resonates with much of Venezuelan society.

The emergence this year of Governor Henrique Capriles – the fresh face of a newly unified opposition – challenged the president like no one had before. Clearly affected by his cancer treatments earlier in the year, Chávez could hardly keep pace with Capriles' breakneck campaign tour as his electoral advantage looked increasingly precarious. Yet while several polling firms had predicted a nail-biter, or even a Capriles upset, Chávez ultimately walked away with a comfortable 10-point victory.

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Through coup, cancer or Capriles, Chávez endures.

Despite Chávez' resiliency, however, October's presidential election may have marked the beginning of the end of *chavismo* – as his revolutionary agenda and movement are dubbed. Proclaiming a popular mandate, the president has vowed to further entrench a model of state control over the economy, consolidation of executive power, militarisation and top-down responses to social problems. But after 14 years of Chávez rule, discontent is growing over abysmal citizen security, deteriorating infrastructure and sky-high inflation. None of these problems are new, yet the president seems unwilling or incapable of changing course.

If we take Chávez at his word and expect more of the same, it seems unlikely he will continue his winning streak much longer. After many long years, the opposition has finally started to learn from their mistakes. The success of their new strategy is striking. Closing ranks behind a single candidate, they replaced their aggressive tone with one of reconciliation while reaching out to Chávez's key constituency – the poor. While they lost the presidency, the opposition has momentum that – if maintained – could impede the president's agenda or even defeat him in coming electoral contests.

This scenario assumes that Chávez' health permits him to govern another six years. Given that he has undergone two surgeries this year in addition to chemotherapy, that assumption remains questionable. The president has always been the central element that holds together the *chavista* marriage between the military and the poor. Chávez's unique background as a lieutenant colonel and his sentimental connection with the nation's destitute will not be easily replaced.

As both Chávez and his revolution show signs of fatigue, is Venezuela on the eve of a new era?

Who won in October?

The October election may have been the most important since Chávez was first voted into office, though the outcome did not provide a clear vision of what to expect over the next six years. Indeed, columnist for *Analítica.com* Enrique Viloría Vera¹ even suggested that there were two winners, though just one president.

For any president, winning re-election by ten points is no small feat, though a smaller margin than Chávez has enjoyed in the past. If one factors in frequent shortages of basic goods, inflation around 20 percent a year, deadly refinery explosions, and the continent's highest homicide rates, an incumbent victory becomes all the more impressive. No doubt, expansive state control over airwave media – the primary conduit for communication with the poor – and the use of extensive

¹E. Viloría Vera, "Dos ganadores: Un sólo Presidente", *Analítica.com*, 18 October 2012, <http://www.analitica.com/va/politica/opinion/9690643.asp>.

petroleum revenue for campaigning were both important factors in keeping the president's energetic challenger at bay. But critics quick to explain away the election by these factors alone risk overlooking a critical fact: a large segment of Venezuela continues to hold an emotional attachment to Chávez. Many citizens remain unconvinced that, despite the considerable shortcomings in the president's performance, a change in leadership would yield more positive results.

For Capriles, uniting a diverse coalition to challenge a president with far superior resources and media presence seemed an insurmountable task when he won his party's primary in February 2012. In 2000 and 2006, President Chávez won reelection by 22 and 26 points. In only a matter of months, Capriles reduced this advantage by more than half. He proved a quick learner and fierce campaigner, visiting almost 300 towns over the course of the general election (Chávez, in comparison, visited around 20). In a country long cast in Chávez' shadow, Capriles successfully made himself a household name.

Democracy in Venezuela has suffered some harsh bruises over the past 14 years. Press freedom and judicial independence have been diminished, while the government at all levels freely uses the country's oil revenues to shore up political support. To be sure, Venezuela was by no means an exemplar for responsible or representative governance before Chávez occupied the presidential palace. Yet the campaign this year was a stark reminder of how far the president has gone to tighten his grip. Exploiting laws he pushed through congress, Chávez enjoyed access to air time on television and radio that Capriles could not dream of (the president had a daily average of 43 minutes on national television whereas Capriles had three), in addition to the vast public funds that fuelled his get-out-the-vote efforts.

Campaign asymmetries aside, encouraging signs still emerged in October. Most importantly, worries of widespread violence proved unfounded. Instead, over 80 percent of those eligible cast a vote for president and neither side claimed fraud. Instead of crying foul over the results, the opposition has chosen to accept them and move forward, presenting the country with a clear choice in future elections. That the ballot box is recognised – by both the political class and the vast majority of Venezuelans – to decide the country's future is absolutely critical.

Continuing the momentum

Only 40 years old yet understandably disappointed by the first defeat of his political career, Governor Capriles would be wise to be patient and persistent. After all, it took Lula, now widely regarded as Latin America's premier political wizard, four attempts before he attained the Brazilian presidency. Capriles' conciliatory, high-minded discourse and successful electoral strategy of appealing to moderate Chávez supporters has constructively shaped the country's climate and

prepared the nation for a smoother transition, whenever that might happen. That is Capriles' greatest legacy to date.

Looking past the defeat, Capriles is now the undisputed leader of the country's opposition, though they have had little time to mourn their loss. Just days after the elections, Capriles' chief coordinator for 'national mobilisation' efforts was announcing a restructuring of their apparatus to get out the vote in the December 16 regional elections. And Capriles announced his candidacy for another term as governor of the state of Miranda.

Potential gains in coming contests are promising. In October, Capriles secured an additional 1.5 million votes for the opposition and captured 20 municipalities Chávez won in 2006. Furthermore, the president's surrogates do not typically fare as well as Chávez himself. For this reason, the opposition had already succeeded in making some inroads into his strongholds prior to October.

Yet leading such a heterogeneous coalition will require considerable effort and political manoeuvring on Capriles' part. While the opposition may be united in its will to replace Chávez, there is much less consensus when it comes to actual policy. Conservatives are already uneasy with the populist stance Capriles espoused when appealing to the poor, while the prominent Socialist Governor David De Lima publically rescinded his support for the candidate prior to the vote over concerns that his agenda was too 'neoliberal'. Appeasing critics from both left and right will be no easy task. This complication is compounded by the opposition's history as a regionalised and fragmented body, and the disinclination of the old anti-Chávez stalwarts of the Democratic Action and Christian Democratic parties to cede influence to younger figures. If electoral gains do not come soon, these splits are bound to deepen.

Another obstacle for the opposition is the sheer number of people who have come to depend on the government. Nearly 8 percent of Venezuela's population is federally employed. The *misiones*, oil-financed social programs ranging from health to education to housing, have helped millions. While Capriles asserted he would maintain these programs – only with more effective management – many remain unwilling to trust anyone else but Chávez with their benefits.

Until very recently, the opposition largely helped foster Chávez's connection with the poor by focusing entirely on deposing a leader they hated rather than on one of the major forces that swept him into office: gripping poverty in a nation with one of the planet's richest resource endowments. While their tone now seems to have changed, years of the opposition's notably dismissive attitude towards the poor will be hard to erase from many Venezuelans' minds.

President Chávez, meanwhile, will not sit idly by as his opponents work out their differences and hone their message. Already, former Vice President Elias Jaua has been dispatched to challenge Capriles' governorship, one of December's highly contested races. The use of *misiones* as a clientelistic tool will likely continue as a

barrier to challenging *chavista* incumbents. Michael Penfold of the Instituto de Estudios Superiores de Administración, for instance, has presented evidence of social spending being used to “buy votes” at the subnational level.²

The government has also engaged in gerrymandering districts to buttress the president’s congressional control. Furthermore, in 2008 the Chávez-loyal General Comptroller and Supreme Court banned 300 candidates from running for office over dubious corruption charges. Predictably, the vast majority on the list were opposition figures.

Chavismo’s uncertain future

But the president has more on his plate than just his opponents. As mentioned, the economy is bad and looking worse. With a black market exchange rate three times the official one, it is hard to imagine scenarios where such massive structural imbalances are corrected without considerable pain to the Venezuelan people.

Crime, meanwhile, has exploded with no end in sight. *InSight Crime* reports that homicides have risen from 19 per 100,000 when Chávez took office to somewhere between 52 and 74 per 100,000.³ To put the situation in perspective, in Colombia and Mexico, respectively, this figure is 36 and 18. Kidnappings, meanwhile, have risen twenty-fold. It remains to be seen how long the poor, disproportionately affected by this rampant insecurity, will continue to trust a president who is so inept at guaranteeing their safety.

Despite such troubling figures and the fact that nearly half the country voted against him in October, Chávez has promised continuity. If the opposition can successfully offer solutions to these problems while placating fears surrounding social programs, Chávez will seem much less invincible.

Chávez’ battle with cancer will also play a huge role in shaping the country’s future. The president’s health is a closely-guarded state secret and those outside his inner circle can only speculate. But if he is in fact operating on a timeline, he may very well double down and move as quickly as possible to ensure the survival of his revolution after his exit. His designation in October of Foreign Minister Nicolás Maduro as vice president may very well be Chávez naming a successor. As a moderate figure in the party’s civilian base, Maduro has been a loyal supporter of the president and would surely try to continue what Chávez started.

What is much less certain is how Venezuelans would react to a Maduro candidacy. As the law currently stands, if the president steps down within the first four years of his mandate, new elections would take place. In this scenario, Capriles

² Penfold-Becerra, *Clientelism and Social Funds*, http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTDECINEQ/Resources/1149208-1147789289867/IIIWB_Conference_Clientelism_and_Social_FundsREVISED.pdf.

³ J. McDermott, “With Chavez Win, Venezuelan Gangs Could Expand”, *InSight Crime*, 8 October 2012, <http://www.insightcrime.org/investigations/chavez-win-venezuelan-criminal-gangs>.

seems like the natural opposition candidate and would presumably be formidable a second time around. And while many Venezuelans love and trust their current president, this blind faith may not extend to his political project or protégé.

The president's departure would indeed leave an enormous vacuum both *chavistas* and the opposition will struggle to fill. During his concession speech, Capriles asserted, "We have planted many seeds from which many trees will grow bearing much fruit." Indeed, the preparations his coalition underwent when introducing the candidate and his message to the country may prove consequential in the not-so-distant future.

Regional outlook

Since the departure of his two favourite foils, Presidents Álvaro Uribe of Colombia and George W. Bush, President Chávez' hemispheric relations are decidedly less confrontational. He is friendly with Uribe's successor, President Juan Manuel Santos, and President Barack Obama has avoided engaging Chávez' anti-American rhetoric. He enjoys close relations with the presidents of Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador and Bolivia, to name a few, and Venezuela was recently admitted into the South American Common Market (Mercosur), the latest regional body in which Chávez will try to exert influence. He also provides considerable aid and energy assistance to several Caribbean and Central American countries.

Yet in the region, Chavez' political support – never as strong as commonly thought – has further dissipated. Brazil is undeniably the continent's most influential voice in political and economic matters and Venezuela's creation of a community of like-minded Latin American nations (the ALBA countries) has largely been a sideshow. Relations with the United States are unlikely to change while Chávez is president; both Democrats and Republicans would prefer to deal with a friendlier government. Whether friend or foe of Chávez, the United States and the region should follow Capriles' lead and resist the temptation to intervene in Venezuelan politics during this period of uncertainty.

An important area in which Chávez will continue to exert influence is in Colombian affairs, namely, the peace negotiations between the state and the country's largest insurgency, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The Venezuelan government has served as an important liaison between the Santos administration, the Marxist guerrillas and the Cuban government, host of the exploratory talks. The FARC also maintain camps in Venezuela in which several key leaders operate. Furthermore, the relationship between the guerrillas and the Chávez administration has been credibly established, as well as the fact that high-ranking officials in the Venezuelan government benefit⁴ from the FARC's drug

⁴Smith, *The FARC Files*.

operations. Venezuela's support will be critical for drawing the conflict to a close, though it remains to be determined if Chávez will take on powerful criminal interests within its own borders.

For now, Chávez stays. But now there is a definite sense of impermanence surrounding a man who has been so ubiquitous in the Americas for so long. Venezuelans will return to the polls several times before the president's name reappears on the ballot. Yet when the time does come to choose their next leader, Venezuelans will hopefully face a clear choice and can begin to heal the deep schisms plaguing their country. The challenges Venezuela faces are too profound for a nation so sharply divided.

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