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IS DEMOCRACY DOOMED IN VENEZUELA?

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Venezuela is Latin America's oldest democracy. There is a danger, however, that it may soon lose that distinction. On December 6, 1998, after 20 years of economic decline and political corruption, Venezuela's voters turned against the old parties and elected Hugo Chavez Frias as president. The 44-year-old former army colonel was elected to a five-year term after promising to sweep out the traditional two-party system and to inaugurate radical change in Venezuelan life and politics.

Since taking power last February, Chavez has instituted broad changes and has moved the country perilously close to one-man rule. The next several months should be critical to the country's fate: A new constitution is expected in December, and congressional and local elections are scheduled for early next year. It is possible that these changes will consolidate presidential power even further.

Chavez first captured national attention in 1992 when he participated in an armed insurrection and assassination plot against President Carlos Andres Perez. The coup failed but Colonel Chavez became an overnight celebrity when he defiantly told television cameras, "I am surrendering—for now." Court-martialed and sentenced to a long prison term, Chavez was pardoned after only two years and granted his civic rights, thus making him eligible to run for public office.

Consolidating Power. Chavez has moved swiftly toward one-man rule. Since taking office, he has concentrated more power in the presidency than any leader since the ouster of dictator Marcos Perez

Jimenez in 1958. A charismatic figure, who espouses a populist-nationalism, Chavez has won over more than three-quarters of the population to his side while simultaneously dismantling civilian power centers and turning them over to be run by his old allies in the military. He is on the verge of turning one of Latin America's richest (and most corrupt) countries toward the kind of strong-man rule that dominated the region in the 1940s and 1950s, typified most dramatically by Argentina's Juan Peron.

In April, Chavez won a referendum that mandated the writing of a new constitution; and in July, Chavez candidates won 121 of the 128 seats in the Assembly assigned to write the new constitution. One of the Assembly's first acts was to announce a "legislative emergency" and to close the Congress. Although the ensuing backlash forced a reversal, many observers believe they can see the handwriting on the wall.

Relying on the Military. To "rebuild the fallen house," as he likes to put it, Chavez has turned to the military to implement his programs and has systematically staffed most of the civilian-led institutions with military personnel. His touted "Plan

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Bolivar," a vast social welfare program, is utilizing 50,000 soldiers to conduct "theaters of social operations." The armed forces also run a \$900 million program to create 440,000 jobs in public works. Traditional school curricula are being replaced with military-style courses stressing discipline, hierarchy, and obedience to the state. Inside his Miraflores Palace, Chavez has come to rely on the advice of about 20 military colleagues over his civilian Cabinet. Some 170 military officers have been put in charge of almost all key government positions, including tax-collection, judiciary, police, and customs.

Revolutionary Populism. Chavez's grip on power, his charisma, and his attraction to Venezuela's poor are deeply rooted in a contradictory, left-right political belief system he calls "Bolivarian Messianism." A blend of romantic idealism, militarism, and socialism, this ideological side of Chavez comes from his passion for the famed "Liberator" of Venezuelan history and from his own family tradition of revolutionary politics (his ancestors were popular revolutionaries). This passion translates into a revolutionary populism that makes Venezuela's masses revere "El Comandante." Chavez is also fond of making the rounds of the slums. He conducts weekly radio and TV call-in shows and has been known to award jobs to callers, sight unseen.

President Chavez is beginning to look disturbingly like some of history's other popular soldier-politicians who began as reformers but ended their careers as tyrants. Chavez maintains great popularity throughout the country and his reform movement has been greeted enthusiastically on the street. But can democracy in Venezuela survive his administration?

The presidency in Venezuelan history has often been a precarious office and Chavez may well discover, as many of his predecessors have, that the

tiger he rides could devour him. The economy, for instance, is in recession and has shrunk by 5 percent since he took over. Unemployment has doubled to 20 percent and demand for consumer goods has fallen by more than half. These factors may restrain Chavez and may cool his popularity.

What Should the U.S. Do? The United States has a stake in the future of a stable and democratic Venezuela. Not only is Venezuela the top U.S. oil supplier but the bilateral relationship is critical for counter-drug efforts. Chavez has refused permission for U.S. anti-drug planes to use Venezuelan airspace. Moreover, he has initiated informal contacts with guerrillas from Colombia that regularly cross the border into Venezuela, a step that potentially will further complicate the Colombian government's efforts to resolve the conflict.

Thus far, U.S. policy has been appropriately low-key. In their September 21 meeting in New York City, President Bill Clinton told President Chavez that the United States favored reforms in Venezuela that "take place within the framework of constitutional, democratic and legal procedures." For his part, Chavez stated that he had "every intention" of maintaining democracy.

The next few months will show whether Chavez takes his own statement seriously. In the meantime, the United States should continue to reiterate President Clinton's message of support for democratic processes. Moreover, it should continue to press for Venezuela's cooperation in counter-drug efforts, and should work especially to persuade President Chavez to refrain from actions that might enhance the position of the Colombian guerrillas vis-à-vis the Colombian government.

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