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Hugo Chávez, Colombia, and the FARC: A Change of Heart?

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For months, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) were the darlings of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. He urged the public to consider the FARC noble freedom-fighters rather than a pack of narco-terrorists. He praised them as a Bolivarian Army on a sacred mission to drive the United States out of Colombia. Chávez even entered into secret talks with the FARC, promising the organization arms and money.

When the FARC's second-in-command, Raul Reyes, died in a Colombian military strike in Ecuador, Chávez eulogized him as a "good revolutionary" and ordered ten battalions of troops to the border with Colombia. Soon, storm clouds of war hovered over Caracas and the Andean region.

Suddenly, on June 8, 2008, these clouds appeared to part. During his weekly television show, *Hello Mr. President*, Venezuela's maverick leader urged the FARC's new commander, Alfonso Cano, to free hundreds of hostages held by the guerrillas. Making a 180 degree shift in policy, Chávez also encouraged the FARC to enter into peace talks with the government. "At this moment in Latin America," he declared, "an armed guerrilla movement is out of place."

An exploration of the factors behind Chávez's rhetorical shift reveals that now is not only the time to seek release of the hostages held by the FARC, but also an opportunity to bring lasting peace to Colombia.

The Chávez Shift. *Qué pasa?* Why the sudden change? For all his bluster, President Chávez knows

the computer files that belonged to Reyes held a cache of evidence documenting his government's material support of the FARC. For instance, by late 2007 and early 2008, Chávez was enmeshed in efforts to free FARC hostages. Under the pretense of creating a humanitarian accord, he secretly offered the FARC guns, money, and his public support.

The death of both Reyes and the FARC's historic leader Manuel Marulanda, along with the recovery of the FARC computers, seems to have dashed the possibility of any such offer, weakening ties between the Venezuelan leader and the FARC. In light of the FARC's recent setbacks, including the deaths of Marulanda and Reyes, Chávez may no longer view backing the FARC as a prudent political strategy. Indeed, short of providing massive arms assistance, Venezuela might not be able to aid the guerrillas effectively against a Colombian government that feels that its tough strategy is weakening the FARC.

It must also be noted that Chávez's effort to distance himself from the FARC came days after the Colombians arrested four men, including two Venezuelans, one of whom identified himself as a sergeant in Venezuela's national guard, transporting 40,000 rounds of AK-47 ammunition to the FARC.

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Such incidents have made Chávez's continued support of the FARC politically perilous.

Since Interpol authenticated the FARC files in May, Chávez has taken a serious pounding in the international press. He may also be a recipient of behind-the-scenes pressure from more responsible nations like Brazil and Chile, whose leaders know that it will be hard for Latin America to progress and prosper as long as the region's most visible president extols the armed path to power and bankrolls an army of narco-terrorists.

Trouble at Home. Chávez must also focus attention on his eroding domestic image, which has been negatively affected by a host of problems including food shortages, rising inflation, and soaring crime rates. Venezuelans are also reacting to a loss of individual liberties. Chávez's promulgation of a new intelligence services law was widely criticized as a giant step toward implementing Cuban-style totalitarian domestic spying. In response to public outrage, Chávez promised to withdraw the controversial measure on June 7.

Of immediate concern for Chávez are state and municipal elections scheduled for the coming November. Additionally, Chávez is likely to make another attempt at passing a constitutional referendum allowing additional presidential terms. If Chávez cannot engineer such a referendum, he will have to relinquish power in 2013. Given the challenges he is facing domestically, Chávez may have decided that supporting the FARC and meddling in Colombia's internal affairs is becoming a political liability at home. He may also be facing hidden pressure from key players inside Venezuela, including the military, to sever ties to the FARC.

Pressure from the North. Despite his bravado, Chávez's change of heart may also stem from his fear of being declared a state sponsor of terrorism by the U.S. As he commented in the June 8 speech, "You [the FARC] have become an excuse for the empire to threaten us all." Clearly, Chávez is not willing to be labeled a sponsor of FARC terrorism if the cost is his own political skin.

Is Chávez genuinely convinced that the day of the guerrilla is over? Will he turn words into concrete actions? The rule remains: Watch what Chávez does, not what he says. Chávez's ability to get the FARC to renounce terrorism, even temporarily, is also uncertain.

An Opportunity for Peace. Regardless of Chávez's motivations, the Latin American political climate appears propitious for a new initiative aimed at ending the conflict in Colombia. Ecuador and Colombia are meeting and appear ready to repair relations and develop a strategy aimed at controlling their ungoverned border. Ecuador has also called for the Organization of American States (OAS) to evaluate the evidence found in the FARC computers.

A new bonding of Latin American nations, the Union of South American Nations (UNSAUR), offers a potential foundation for a new era of peace. Latin America, plagued by crime and drug violence, may have grown weary of the FARC's hostage-taking, terrorism, and drug racketeering. If every Latin American voice is raised, the message stands a better chance of being heard in the FARC's remote ideological bastions.

Finally, it is time for the U.S. Congress to signal support for the Uribe government by passing the stalled free trade agreement. This will give the Colombians an extra fillip of confidence and legitimacy as they try to draw the FARC toward demobilization and peace.

On June 8, the clouds of confrontation may have lifted for a moment in the Andes. It is time to seize the opportunity provided by this reprieve and seek freedom for the FARC hostages and a concerted end to Colombia's bloody conflict.

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