

# WebMemo



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## Hugo Chávez's Cancer, Authoritarianism, and the U.S.

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On June 10, Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez arrived in Havana for high-level meetings. Two days later, the press reported he underwent surgery to repair a pelvic abscess. Speculation regarding his health increased with each passing day. Possible diagnoses included acute peritonitis, prostate cancer, or liposuction gone wrong.

Two weeks later, Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro worried publicly that "Chávez is battling for his health." Other insiders reassured Venezuelans that the president would return by July 5.

On June 29, a silent video aired showing a thinner but relatively healthy-looking Chávez conversing with Fidel Castro, but word went around that Venezuela is canceling a Latin American leaders' summit scheduled for July 5. Finally, on June 30, Chávez informed his nation that he had undergone surgery to remove a tumor with "cancerous cells." Chávez's return is still to be determined.

The secret, Kremlesque management of Chávez's illness has demonstrated a major weakness in Venezuela's current political arrangement: its total dependence upon an elected autocrat and the cult of personality that has increasingly become *Chavismo*.

**Venezuela Under Chávez.** For 13 years, Venezuela has marched to the beat of Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution. While claiming to advance "socialism of the 21st century," the combative Chávez has polarized and wrecked his nation's economic, institutional, and political foundations. He has success-

fully gutted the customary checks and balances of a healthy democracy to render the Venezuelan political system dependent upon his leadership. Fear that Chávez might weaken his grip, become incapacitated for an extended period of time, or die has sent a jolt of anxiety rippling out from Chávez's inner circle to his supporters in the United Socialist Party (PSUV) and outward to the client states—from Cuba to Bolivia and Nicaragua—that have come to depend on Chávez's largesse.

**In Case of Succession.** Chávez's hospitalization in Havana has engendered frantic discussion about a potential succession. Venezuela's constitution states that Vice President Elias Juau would become interim president, unless the legislature and PSUV change the rules. Presidential elections are currently scheduled for December 2012.

If Chávez is incapacitated or dies, a struggled for succession will likely occur. A list of potential successors has been mentioned in the press. Vice President Juau is considered an activist and an ideologue wedded to Cuban-style socialism. Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro, a former Caracas bus driver and party activist, is loyal and close to Chávez. Former soldier and 1992 coup participant Diosdado

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Cabello has important backers in the PSUV and the Chávez-dominated legislature. Two power players also make the short list. They are Rafael Ramirez, Minister of Energy and Petroleum and head of PDVSA, the state-owned oil company, and Finance Minister Jorge Giordani.

None of the above possesses the charisma or bond with ordinary Venezuelans that Chávez has successfully developed. Current public opinion polls show popular support for Chávez, despite Venezuela's current travails, between 40 percent and 50 percent.

Dynastic succession cannot be ruled out. Chávez's older brother Adan, Governor of Barinas, sent a shiver down the spine of Venezuela when he quoted Che Guevara and spoke of the need to sustain the Bolivarian Revolution by reminding Chávez followers that authentic revolutionaries cannot forget "other forms of fighting." While these remarks may have signaled the older Chávez's readiness to step into Hugo's shoes, they could also be a warning sign of Venezuela's potential to slide into civil war without the current leader at the helm.

**Venezuela's Opposition Will Be Strengthened.** Assuming Chávez does return to govern in a state of relatively good health, the present crisis moment will reverberate in the opposition's favor and weaken the hold of Chávez and the PSUV. Venezuela's democratic opposition will be better positioned to remind future voters that a system of stable government cannot remain dependent on the health of a dominant individual. One-man rule and democracy are inherently incompatible—even via the ballot box.

Aspirants wanting to replace Chávez will need to avoid irreparable divisions and work together to develop a viable program capable of placing Venezuela on a stable path toward institutionalized democracy and more equitable development. They must project an image of competence and demonstrate that they represent a constructive alternative, not the counterrevolution Chávez-backers fear. They need to offer responsible policy options needed to revitalize their country, redirect oil revenue away from the current system of Chávez clients,

and build stable and secure relations with the U.S. and other democracies.

**The U.S. and Chávez.** In March, President Obama stated in Chile that "today, Latin America is democratic." He went on to define democracy as not only elections, but also "vibrant legislatures that provide oversight; independent judiciaries that uphold rule of law...[and] governments that are transparent and responsive to their citizens." What Venezuela is undergoing is not a demonstration of democracy but a reflection of the further decomposition of the political order. Venezuela is sliding into the same morass that swallowed the Cuba of the Castros. Washington policymakers need to seize the moment to:

- **Dispel the democracy myth.** The President and the State Department should feature in public discourse and diplomacy the fact that Venezuela has strayed dangerously far from democratic norms and now resembles an authoritarian state similar to Cuba. It should make clear that the use of violence to uphold one-man rule is unacceptable.
- **Make the watchdog bark.** The Administration should increase efforts to make the Organization of American States perform its promised role as democratic watchdog and guardian of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, especially as it contemplates celebrating the Charter's 10th anniversary.
- **Spotlight Chávez's dangerous foreign policy.** Recent congressional hearings focused on Chávez's ties with Iran and terrorism, including recent sanctions on PDVSA, but much remains to be discovered regarding Venezuela's role in drug trafficking, terrorism, support for Iran, and corruption and deception that has burrowed deep into the ranks of Chávez's inner circle. A weakened Chávez or an anarchic Venezuela will only invite more disorder.

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