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Venezuela's Presidential Primary: Capriles Radonski Ready to Challenge Chavez

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On February 12, nearly 3 million Venezuelans voted in the nation's first genuine presidential primary. Voters selected a single candidate—Henrique Capriles Radonski—to face Venezuela's authoritarian populist leader Hugo Chavez in a presidential contest on October 7.

Chavez, the bellicose anti-American architect of Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution, has occupied power since 1999. He has increasingly converted Venezuela's troubled democracy into a one-man, one-party electoral dictatorship, made himself the primary backer of the anti-American alliance of Latin American and Caribbean states known as ALBA, and become an ever-closer ally with Iran. A victory in October would give Chavez another six-year term. The stakes are clearly high.

Venezuela's First Presidential Primary. The February 12 primary was a result of the labor of the Coalition for Democratic Unity. Created in 2008, the coalition played a pivotal role in helping the fractured opposition build a structure for unity. In September 2010, the coalition was instrumental in fielding a slate of legislative candidates that won a majority of votes, although not a majority of seats in the National Assembly.

By 62 percent, voters selected Henrique Capriles Radonski, age 39, currently governor of the populous state of Miranda, out of a field of five. Capriles's closest rival, Governor Pablo Perez of Zulia, received 30 percent of the vote and was quick to endorse the victor.

Almost 3 million of Venezuela's 18 million registered voters turned out to vote on February 12. Prior to the elections, 2 million was considered a benchmark below which the capacity of the opposition to mobilize voters would have been questioned. The higher-than-expected turnout was an impressive show of opposition strength.

An Alternative Vision for Venezuela. The youthful Capriles has stressed the politics of moderation. He aims to distance himself from the past and offers a democratic

alternative to Chavez with a vision not unlike that of Brazil's popular ex-president Lula da Silva. Capriles downplayed confrontation and assured voters that Chavez's social programs or missions will not be gutted. He has promised better economic management, a halt to endless nationalizations, and a hope that economic freedom and opportunity will expand. Capriles has set his sights on restoring transparency and professional integrity within Venezuela's national oil company, PDVSA. Addressing public safety and citizen security will also be high on his agenda.

A Capriles victory in October would also open the door for a major reorientation of foreign policy away from support of radicalism and anti-Americanism. In all likelihood, it would lead to a rapid shrinking of the Cuban presence in Venezuela, an end to bankrolling the tyranny of the Castros with Venezuelan oil, and the severing of all non-diplomatic, non-commercial ties with Iran. The opposition candidate would put a greater premium on developing natural ties with Colombia and Brazil and open the door for quick normalization of relations with the U.S. and restoration of anti-drug and anti-terror cooperation.

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Can Chavez Be Defeated? What happens in the future hinges significantly upon Chavez's state of health. In June 2011, Chavez underwent surgery for a pelvic abscess and admitted to suffering from an undisclosed type of cancer. Since late 2011, Chavez claims he is cancer-free and has resumed an active schedule. The true state of Chavez's health is a national secret. In the event of his incapacity or death, succession struggle within leadership circles would likely occur.

Chavez is certainly vulnerable on many key issues. Rampant crime, inflation, food scarcity and shortages, failures to address infrastructure and electrical energy problems, and overall mismanagement of the economy are all easy targets for opposition criticism. The extent of corruption with the Chavez regime is another prominent theme. In general, the average Venezuelan wants life improvements and social benefits but does not support Chavez's campaigns of expropriation and the destruction of private property or efforts to follow the Cuban way for his country. Millions of Venezuelans also reject the relentless polarization of society, which has been another hallmark of the *Chavista* regime.

The challenge for Capriles, however, will be an uphill one. Chavez's current approval rating, for example, has risen in recent months to approximately 56 percent. At Chavez's command are cadres of loyalists and unlimited access to media, where he demonizes the opposition as "retrogrades" and worse. He will exploit the levers of patronage in a country where one in every four voters holds a government job. Oil revenue and

additional debt will allow Chavez to deliver more social spending and subsidies for the poor. Another tactic will be generating a fear that opposition victory will usher in a new era of violence and social disorder.

A recurring concern is whether a defeated Chavez would refuse to relinquish office. While Chavez says he would step down, others within the top national leadership—including Minister of Defense General Rangel Silva, head of the increasingly politicized armed forces—have stated that the military will not accept an unfavorable outcome at the polls and will defend the revolutionary path. The penetration of Cuban security and intelligence operatives into the regime do not augur well for a smooth transition.

The U.S. and Venezuela. While some argue that Chavez's influence in the region has declined, this offers little relief to Venezuelans. The indisputable fact is that with his personal command of oil wealth and his strident anti-U.S. stance, Chavez opposes U.S. interests and values. It is an unspoken assumption that a genuinely democratic turn in Venezuela is in the interests of the U.S. To advance a freedom agenda for Venezuela and the Americas, the U.S. should:

- **Support free and fair elections in October.** This means close scrutiny of the entire gamut of *Chavista* chicanery, not just guarding against fraud on election day.
- **Sustain pro-democracy efforts.** Despite the recent backlash against democracy promotion

in places as diverse as Egypt and Cuba, the U.S. should stand behind civil society, defenders of human rights, and the watchdogs of government integrity and should use the unique assets of the National Endowment for Democracy and other mechanisms of democratic support in Venezuela.

- **Press Chavez to honor a commitment to step down if defeated.** President Obama should press Chavez to step down if defeated and commit to an orderly transition to a Capriles government.
- **Begin contingency planning.** If the opposition wins in October, the labors of reconciliation and reform will require strong U.S. backing. Planning for such an eventuality should begin now.

Chavez's Delusions of Grandeur. For the moment, the Chavez drive for re-election will be formidable, and the opposition has a great distance to cover. However, the impressive response of voters on February 12 makes a change of leadership appear more possible. As Capriles observed, Chavez "believes he is God. He thinks he can't lose, and that's very good for us."¹

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1. William Neuman, "Opposition Voters in Venezuela Pick a Challenger for Chavez," *The New York Times*, February 12, 2012.