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Venezuela After Chavez: U.S. Should Rally to Democracy

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On Tuesday, cancer claimed the life of Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez, silencing one of Latin America's most controversial leaders in the 21st century. Chavez's death opens the way to an uncertain succession process, continued polarization, and potential instability in oil-rich Venezuela.

Dealing with a post-Chavez Venezuela will require an ongoing U.S. commitment to free and fair presidential elections, to the defense of individual rights and liberties, and to leveraging future improvements in bilateral relations to genuine cooperation in the fight against transnational crime and terrorism. Working with Venezuela for a more stable and secure hemispheric energy market is also a desired, if still distant, objective.

From Coup-Maker to Kingmaker. During his 14-year

presidency (1999–2013), Chavez developed a unique combination of populism, authoritarianism, socialism, and combativeness that won him the adulation of the masses and a large international following. Born in 1954, the career military officer and failed military coup-maker of 1992 emerged as the self-proclaimed revolutionary kingmaker of Venezuela's politics. As president, Chavez survived an inept 2002 coup, a massive oil strike, a recall referendum, and a battle to institute term limits. He won re-elections in 2006 and 2012 by comfortable margins. His goal was to govern until 2032.

By tapping Venezuela's enormous oil wealth, Chavez advanced a hybrid economic program of nationalizations, socialist economics, free spending social programs, price and exchange controls, and crony capitalism dubbed "Socialism of the 21st Century." Under the banner of "participatory democracy," Chavez offered a grassroots strategy that gave limited authority to local communities, forged loyal political cadres, and created a network of citizen-clients. Subsidies, social missions, and patronage power were the ties holding the system together.

Via constitutional suicide, Chavez concentrated unprecedented powers

in the executive's hands. He ushered in a new model for elected authoritarianism that ended separation of powers and institutional autonomy in Venezuela while toppling rule of law and constricting basic rights and liberties. Admirers hailed him as the greatest Latin American since Fidel Castro. Chavez's legacy, they claim, is a genuine revolution of social justice that has improved the lives of millions. The October 2012 presidential re-election demonstrated that his style and plan for governance could still deliver electoral victories.

Nonetheless, Chavez's successor will face many challenges, including over-dependence on oil revenues and a comparatively stagnant oil industry starved of much-needed reinvestment. High inflation, a recent currency devaluation, capital flight, food shortages, and extremely high levels of homicide and criminal violence will be handed down. National investment has been haphazard, and infrastructure has crumbled. Venezuelan society remains polarized, overly militarized, and ripe with corruption. A fall in oil prices or a debt crisis could send it into recession. From economic freedom to perceptions of corruption, Venezuela raced relentlessly toward the bottom in global rankings.

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Drum Major of Anti-Americanism. Keen to emulate his hero Simon Bolivar, Chavez anointed himself the chief protagonist for South American integration. He helped forge a South American bloc of nations, cemented relations with the Peronists in Argentina, and gained support from Brazil's dominant, left-leaning Workers' Party. Establishment of the Union of South American States and Venezuela's 2012 entry into South America's common market were Chavez victories. A consistent objective for Chavez-led foreign policy was undercutting U.S. presence and influence in South America and in multilateral bodies.

Another foundational stone of Chavez's foreign policy was an alliance with Cuba, which was formalized in 2002. An estimated 60,000 Cubans serve in various sectors of the Venezuelan government in exchange for approximately 100,000 barrels of oil each day, leading many to see Havana as intimately involved in shaping the Bolivarian Revolution. Chavez's oil wealth and Cuban organization skills helped build the leftist Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas, which now has seven members.

Chavez's obsessive anti-Americanism compelled him to associate with U.S. competitors such as China (loans and technology for oil) and Russia (oil and arms) and with anti-democratic rogue leaders and insurgent and terrorist organizations (such as Hezbollah). He opposed NATO intervention in Libya and rendered support for the despotic Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria. The full range of Venezuela's ties with Iran—Chavez's "axis of unity"—is hidden from public scrutiny, but include undetermined degrees of military and security cooperation. In the age of globalized criminal and

terrorist networks, the absence of accountability and transparency in the regime, coupled with anti-American belligerency, still poses a threat to U.S. security.

Chavismo Without Chavez.

Chavez's death opens the way for presidential elections within 30 days. On December 7, before his final surgery in Cuba, Chavez anointed Vice President and Foreign Minister Nicholas Maduro as his successor, urging supporters to vote for Maduro and preserve unity within the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV).

Once a bus driver, the 51-year-old Cuban-trained activist became foreign minister in 2006 and vice president in October 2012. He reportedly enjoys the backing of the Castro regime. For now, Maduro has outdistanced potential rivals such as National Assembly President Diosdado Cabello. Fierce infighting in PSUV ranks representing the competing interests of the military, business, and unions is possible. Whoever emerges on top will preside over a weaker but still dominant PSUV. None can replicate Chavez's emotional connection with millions of Venezuelans.

Opportunity for the Opposition? With the help of the Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD, or Democratic Unity Roundtable), Venezuela's opposition has demonstrated impressive unity. The MUD conducted a presidential primary that selected presidential candidate Henrique Capriles, ran a vigorous campaign, and collected 5 million votes (45 percent of the electorate) in the October presidential elections. Some polls indicate that Capriles enjoys more popular support than Maduro does. But with elections within 30 days, Capriles or any other opposition candidate will face the same obstacles encountered

last October 7, with the electoral playing field tilted strongly in favor of Chavez's successor. The sympathy vote for and patronage power of *Chavismo* may be hard to overcome.

U.S. Policy Toward a Post-Chavez Venezuela. A principled U.S. policy toward Venezuela should be guided by continued commitments to broad-based—not just electoral—democracy enshrined in the 2001 Inter-American Democratic Charter. Preservation of the constitutional order in Venezuela requires new elections that are not only free but fair. The interests of the U.S. will be best served with the return of fully functioning democracy (separation of powers, rule of law, protection of individual rights and liberties) in Venezuela. To achieve these objectives, the Obama Administration should:

- Deliver by public diplomacy channels a comprehensive report on the costs and consequences of the Chavez regime;
- Insist on maintaining the 30-day electoral timetable and press for real international electoral observation;
- Signal clearly that anything other than free and fair elections will open the door to possible diplomatic and economic sanctions;
- Continue to investigate narco-corruption and collect intelligence on criminal, terrorist, and Iranian activity in Venezuela; and
- Refrain from restoring relations at the ambassadorial level without a firm Venezuelan commitment to cooperate in fighting drug trafficking and international terrorism.

Too Big to Ignore. The weeks and months ahead are a period of opportunity and peril in Venezuela. The Obama Administration should not be content with leading from behind or claiming more pressing engagements. From defending democracy to preserving stability, a post-Chavez Venezuela is too big to ignore.

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