



## CSIS HEMISPHERE FOCUS

### *Venezuela's Elections: The Fix Is In*

By Stephen Johnson

Some 19 million Venezuelan voters will be called to the polls on October 7 to elect a president for a new six-year term. It has been portrayed by the media as a David and Goliath contest between challenger Henrique Capriles, a telegenic 40-year-old former mayor and governor of Miranda state, and President Hugo Chávez, first elected in 1998 on a platform to clean up corruption, but whose 13 years in power have come to symbolize the term. To be sure, there are five other candidates, but none are as popular as Chávez and Capriles.

Toward any other country of 28 million people, there might not be heightened interest. However, Venezuela is home to the world's largest oil reserves besides Saudi Arabia; the current president has changed the constitution and laws to promote his longevity in power and has adopted a policy of hostility toward the United States, while cementing relations with regimes in Cuba, North

Korea, and particularly Iran. And there is the question of the president's health. Chávez has reportedly had surgery over the past year to remove cancerous lesions in his pelvis. Though he says he is cured, few know the real story.

Clearly, a victory by Capriles would shake things up and put Venezuela on a more democratic course. It would be favorable to the United States and other American democracies that have often been targets of Chávez's invectives. And it would be a setback to Iranian attempts to have an influence in the Western Hemisphere. Yet to the president's core support base, those who receive benefits from his social programs, those who have profited from doing business with the government, or to those who made fortunes serving in his administration, it would be an intolerable situation. Under those circumstances, is a free and fair election possible, and is an upset by a challenger likely? The answers—"maybe" and "no."

## Toward a Chávez Victory

While the election is likely to be close, several factors strongly favor a Chávez victory. The first is economic. Many of Venezuela's poor, who still make up around 27 percent of the population,<sup>1</sup> depend on government social programs that have become more generous under the charismatic populist. Despite rising violence, frequent power blackouts, food rationing, the disappearance of many private sector jobs, and inflation, many think they are better off than a decade and a half ago when the two dominant parties had driven the country into debt. And despite Capriles's promises to leave social programs intact, Chávez loyalists in poor neighborhoods say they fear what a change in leadership might bring. Most surveys during the past few months favor the president by double digits, although a late August poll found Capriles leading by 48 to 46 percent.<sup>2</sup> Even if Chávez does not have a solid edge, the choice may be up to those who favor neither Chávez nor Capriles, the so-called *ni-ni*'s. If they vote, their decision may be based on which candidate appears to expose them to less personal risk.

Few, including the opposition, think there will be outright fraud on election day. The *Mesa de la Unidad Democrática* (Democratic Unity Roundtable coalition, or MUD), which backs Capriles, says it will have trained and mobilized enough personnel to cover some 99 percent of the voting stations. But if opposition election judges were to lodge complaints, they may not have much echo since outside scrutiny by experienced international observers is constrained. Following elections in 2006, laws were changed to restrict external witness to campaign activities, voter registration, uploading software into voting machines, and auditing the count. Given such limits, both the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Atlanta-based Carter Center have so far declined to send teams. Instead, the government has invited the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) to send a small delegation of *acompañantes* (informal witnesses) for the day of the vote. Argentina's former vice president Carlos Alvarez will lead that delegation.

Notwithstanding the appearance of an orderly process with few visible irregularities, technical manipulations by the loyalist-dominated National Electoral Council (CNE) could help clinch a Chávez victory. This year, the council has attached fingerprint identification devices to each electronic voting machine, allowing voters to activate them. Unlike the United States, where voters in most jurisdictions need no personal identification, Venezuela requires a national identification card and a thumbprint. Two potential problems come to mind. Whether or not it does, the fingerprint-machine linkage may cause voters to think that government officials will be able to match their personal identities with their supposedly secret vote. In 2004, the names and addresses of people who signed a petition for a referendum on Chávez's rule were gathered by National Assemblyman Luis Tascón into a database that was made public and reportedly used to deny employment and social benefits. Another complication could be a corrupted or altered fingerprint registry that would block voting in some districts or allow multiple votes in others.

Then there is the tilted campaign playing field. In any democracy, including the United States, an incumbent enjoys certain advantages. Most anything a president says in public makes news. The president travels in official aircraft and vehicles, though such usage must often be reimbursed. Yet, in Venezuela, the chief executive enjoys more lopsided advantages. Many private media have been shuttered or forced to remove programming critical of the government. The president can require all radio and TV outlets to suspend regular programming to carry his frequent, long harangues that demean opponents. Moreover, the official media do not have to cover opposition campaign events or accept their advertisements. But the real elephant in the room is *Petróleos de Venezuela S.A.*, the state oil company that Chávez controls. With the second-largest petroleum reserves in the world, it supplies billions of

dollars to *chavista* social programs and off-the-books accounts for special projects like his campaigns. No opponent can match those resources.

An even more salient factor is the level of polarization stoked by the president himself. Through his familiar “us against them” rhetoric and references to civil war, Chávez probably hopes to scare non-*chavistas* away from the polls. Although he has been careful not to make threats himself, Chávez has said that his followers would not accept an opposition win and would take up arms if his socialist revolution was thwarted. In 2010, Chávez began gathering partisan militias. Last year, officials told reporters that they numbered more than 125,000 with an eventual goal of expanding them to 2 million. Although purportedly serving as a reserve to defend neighborhoods in case of foreign invasion, they also seem poised to take on domestic opponents whom Chávez identifies as proxies for the United States.<sup>3</sup> More troubling, defense minister General Henry Rangel Silva once stated that the armed forces would not recognize a Chávez defeat, but, in fact, remain loyal to him.<sup>4</sup> When he said that, he may have been thinking of his own safety. The U.S. Treasury Department considers Rangel Silva and other top officers drug kingpins for materially assisting the trafficking activities of Colombia’s FARC guerrillas.

### **An Alternate but Unlikely Scenario**

There is another possibility—one in which the Chávez base could shrink enough and independents could be emboldened enough to elect an opponent by more than the few percentage points that voter roll manipulations and software glitches could obscure. After 14 years in power, many of Chávez’s original promises are unrealized. Instead of cleaning up corruption, his policies have institutionalized it, taking control of the state oil company that accounts for some 95 percent of Venezuela’s export earnings<sup>5</sup> and appropriating revenues for Chávez’s purposes. Lacking reinvestment, the company has steadily experienced production declines. The president has allowed cronies to become



*Henrique Capriles*

rich running businesses that profited from government contracts, spawning a new wealthy class called the “*boligarchy*” after his so-called Bolivarian revolution. And while blaming food shortages on commercial food distributors, his programs aimed at supplanting the private sector at one time left nearly 2,300 shipping containers full of food to rot on various docks in Carabobo state.<sup>6</sup>

Further challenging the president’s chances, a number of social benefit programs have failed to make a qualitative difference. Even before Chávez took office, Venezuela has been plagued by chronic housing shortages. With help from Iran and Belarus, Chávez has been building some 80,000 housing units a year to fill a need for some 2.5 million low-income units. However, that is a rate similar to administrations in the past and would take decades to complete. The government also claims it has brought poverty down from 42 percent in 1999 to 27 percent in 2011, though the National Institute of Statistics adopted an opaque measurement methodology in 2005 that makes the claim difficult to validate.<sup>7</sup> Add private sector job losses and inflation at an annual rate of about 21 percent,<sup>8</sup> and the poor seem to be standing still. Sadly, lax law enforcement has allowed Venezuela to become the primary transit hub for illicit drugs in South America with one of the highest homicide rates in the hemisphere at 45 per 100,000 persons,<sup>9</sup> primarily impacting poor neighborhoods.

If enough voters decide such conditions must be changed, opponents will get more votes. But if enough opposition voters feel intimidated by *chavista* threats, or if wavering independents feel that a future without Chávez is too uncertain, many will opt to stay with what they know.

## Conclusion

Unless something changes regarding President Chávez's health, a "qualified" free election is possible in Venezuela, barring voter list tricks and tally fudging. However the deck is stacked against a fair election that even the strongest opponent could hope to win. To sum up, loyalists feel their entitlements are at stake, voter registry and technical manipulations could help turn out a Chávez victory if balloting is close, the president has a resource monopoly in all key aspects of the campaign, and threats of violence by Chávez supporters may dissuade independents and opposition voters from coming to the polls. Still, voter frustration opened the door to political outsider Hugo Chávez in 1998. Now if sentiments are strong enough to overcome the constraints the president has placed on his competition, they could also take him out.

For its part, the MUD, along with other independent parties, has been working hard to polish the image of the opposition. The peripatetic coalition candidate Henrique Capriles is a fresh face untainted by association with the old political order. Moreover, the MUD has been working within CNE guidelines to ensure local scrutiny. Teresa Albanes, the president

of the MUD's electoral committee, said the organization is identifying extra personnel for about 5,000 voting centers considered "high risk"—either geographically isolated or located in neighborhoods where Chávez militants reside. Moreover, the MUD, along with other independent parties, plans its own parallel quick count to compare with official results as they are announced. If opponents do not succeed in putting the brakes on a Chávez's life-presidency this time, it will not be for lack of trying. ■

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<sup>1</sup>"Venezuela," *The World Factbook*, U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, 2011, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ve.html>.

<sup>2</sup>See "Chávez ventaja por 34 puntos al candidato de la oposición," Telesur TV, June 19, 2012, <http://www.telesurtv.net/articulos/2012/06/19/encuestadora-asegura-que-57-por-ciento-de-los-venezolanos-apoya-a-chavez-8471.html>; and Marianna Parraga and Diego Ore, "Capriles leads in new Venezuela poll," Reuters, August 24, 2012, <http://www.iol.co.za/news/world/capriles-leads-in-new-venezuela-poll-1.1369482#.UFdOo0KRpSV>.

<sup>3</sup>"A Caribbean Tripoli?—Hugo Chávez grooms a militia," *The Economist*, April 7, 2011, <http://www.economist.com/node/18529829>.

<sup>4</sup>"Venezuelan military would 'not accept' an elected opposition government," MercoPress, November 8, 2010, <http://en.mercopress.com/2010/11/08/venezuelan-military-would-not-accept-an-elected-opposition-government>.

<sup>5</sup>"Venezuela, *World Factbook*.

<sup>6</sup>See "Food Fight: How to destroy an industry," *The Economist*, June 10, 2010, <http://www.economist.com/node/16326418>; and "Authorities find 1,103 containers with rotten food in Venezuelan seaport," *El Universal*, June 4, 2010, [http://www.eluniversal.com/2010/06/04/en\\_eco\\_art\\_authorities-find-1,1\\_04A3965291.shtml](http://www.eluniversal.com/2010/06/04/en_eco_art_authorities-find-1,1_04A3965291.shtml).

<sup>7</sup>Reportedly taking into account the value of social welfare programs and Cuban medical missions, Humberto Márquez, "Poverty Stats Also Politicized," *Inter Press Service News Agency*, December 22, 2006, <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=35952>.

<sup>8</sup>"Output, prices, and jobs," *The Economist*, September 22, 2012, <http://www.economist.com/node/21563317/print>.

<sup>9</sup>United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, UNODC Homicide Statistics, "Intentional homicide, count and rate per 100,000 population (1995–2011)," <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/homicide.html>.