

NEWS & EVENTS

Javier Corrales, Professor, Department of Political Science, Amherst College **Participatory Cancer in Venezuela**

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Hugo Chávez, Venezuela's president, has cancer. His survival in office—and in life—is now in question. The third-longest-serving, democratically-elected president in the Americas might not make it alive—politically or otherwise—to the presidential elections scheduled for October 2012. There is a lot of talk about Chávez's cancer in Caracas and Washington, and even hope for a transition to a new post-Chávez era, but not enough discussion of the risks associated with an ailing president.

Initially, the government tried to hide the president's illness. He hid in Cuba to receive his first treatments. For a few weeks, ministers openly denied that the president was even sick, let alone hiding. But since July, cancer is all that Chávez wants to talk (or tweet) about. The few times that Chávez makes a public appearance nowadays, he won't fail to mention that he is beating this disease, getting better by the minute and undergoing a born-again experience. Oddly for a regime with Marxist leanings, the government now organizes collective prayer sessions throughout the country and abroad. From Havana last week, where Chávez was receiving his reportedly fourth chemotherapy session, Chávez called The Riverside Church near Harlem, New York, to thank parishioners for their prayers.

In the early years of the Chávez administration, the government talked incessantly about "participatory democracy," the idea that a more inclusive form of democracy was being born. Now, all the talk is about the president's cancer. Welcome to participatory cancer, the latest twist in the regime that Chávez is trying to implant in Venezuela.

As with participatory democracy back in the early 2000s, the term "participatory cancer" as a moniker for the current regime in Venezuela is probably a misnomer. Just as very few ordinary citizens actually got to participate in decision-making during the heyday of participatory democracy, an even more reduced number of Venezuelans knows anything, let alone participates in decisions about how to deal with the president's cancer. Not even his ministers seem to know for sure about Chávez's health status.

Nevertheless, also like participatory democracy six years ago, participatory cancer seems to be playing a political role. All the talk about participatory democracy was intended to expand Chávez's coalition beyond an initial radical-military faction into a mass movement, and perhaps hide how the president, more than any other actor, was slowly monopolizing the political system. Likewise, all this talk about cancer seems intended to attract votes, at least of the sympathy variety, and perhaps distract attention from serious problems in governance.

As an electoral trick, participatory democracy worked, garnering the government enormous electoral victories until 2006. Participatory cancer, in contrast, is not working.

It is obvious that the government is betting that all this talk about cancer and revival—with collective prayers and other tactics—will perform the expected miracle. Yet, all polls suggest that cancer is not improving the popularity of the president, which has been stuck at around 50 percent for the past several years. If anything, polls suggest that swing voters seem unlikely to vote for an ailing president, let alone a deceitful one, who claims to be getting better but is actually looking worse. With the economy in shambles and the president sick, things do not look good for the government as it approaches the October 2012 presidential elections.

Participatory cancer might not be having a positive impact on the government's electoral prospects, but it is nonetheless having an impact within the president's party, the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV). A party that not too long ago was famous for its obsequiousness and "yes, commander" mentality is now experiencing an earthquake. Before cancer, nobody would dare question the president. During cancer, the top party leadership (and military command) is thinking of succession, or at a minimum, on how to fill the power vacuum that exists.

Disarray and internal competition for succession within the party is predictable in any "cancerocracy." The moment party leaders began to contemplate that Chávez might not be around too much or too long, or be strong enough to run a political campaign, instinctive forces were unleashed within the party leadership to decide which of the orbiting planets would take the place of the Sun King.

The danger is not so much that the PSUV is thinking about succession while the president is thinking of re-election. The danger is rather that party leaders might start thinking of cheating their way through the elections. As the party recognizes that no chavista other than a healthy Chávez himself is electorally competitive, the party will enter a state of electoral panic. Since 2004, party leadership has been fully convinced that it can win elections. Now, it is not so sure. All it can think about is how not to lose.

One formula to avoid defeat was already provided by Adán Cnavez, the president's brother, who said it might be necessary to defend the revolution with arms. Another formula would be to encourage the opposition to run divided, something that all major opposition candidates have agreed to avoid. Another formula would be to resort to dirty tricks heading toward the elections.

There are already signs of future troubles. Harassment of journalists is increasing. Despite orders from an international court, the government continues to refuse to allow a well-liked opponent, Leopoldo López, to run for political office. The electoral calendar has already been changed to shorten the duration of the campaign, and to decouple presidential elections from regional elections. Furthermore, the government seems disinclined to invite international observers for the election, has moved dollar reserves into Caracas, where they are safer in case of international sanctions, and has given job promotions to individuals who have talked about "not recognizing" a victory by the opposition.

If the government, out of panic, intensifies electoral cheating, one additional scenario automatically becomes probable: Venezuela could succumb to an electoral crisis of the sort that we have seen elsewhere in the Color Revolutions that have undermined semi-autocracies in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), Kyrgyzstan (2005) and Egypt (2010-11), and in the repressions that occurred in Belarus (2005), Iran (2009) and Bahrain (2011). Electoral irregularities will most certainly scandalize the already-galvanized opposition. In the event of a disputed election, a showdown between government and opponents could break out. Participatory cancer will give way to participatory turmoil.

An electoral crisis next year might end up catching the United States by surprise. Whether we like the policy or not, the United States does have a policy to deal with Venezuela's anti-American foreign policy –talk softly, sanction government officials softly and stay on the alert. But the United States does not have a policy to deal with an electoral crisis in a regime that is looking to have a confrontation with the United States.

In such a crisis, the United States could end up easily in a lose-lose situation: if it tries to encourage protesters to calm down, the United States will be seen as betraying democracy. If instead the United States encourages the government to play clean, it will be accused of harassing a popular government.

It is time to think about the possibility of an electoral crisis in Venezuela. We have a bit of time--a year--to be exact. At the moment, conditions are aligning in the right direction for a perfect storm: the opposition is moving toward unity and the ruling party toward disunity.

The good news is that participatory cancer as a political regime-type tends not to last long. Either the cancer goes away, or the patient goes away. The problem is there is no certainty that this disappearing act will occur soon enough to save Venezuela from dangerous times.

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