Presidential elections in Venezuela: Towards 20 years of Bolivarian Revolution?

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Incumbent President Hugo Chávez Frías was the clear winner of the Venezuelan presidential elections on 7 October 2012. With 55% of the votes, Chávez received a clear mandate to pursue his 'Bolivarian socialism'. Elected President for the first time in 1998, Chávez will assume the Presidency for a third six-year term and —his fourth term overall— on 10 January 2013. If he completes this new term, he will have been in power for 20 years, the longest period of any President in Venezuela's history.

Chávez' victory was unquestionable, but his main rival, the moderate Henrique Capriles Radonski from the opposition alliance the Democratic Unity Roundtable (Mesa de la Unidad Democrática, MUD), received a greater share of votes than any other opposition candidate to have challenged Chávez since he came to power.

Despite the opposition's gains and calls for a government more open to dialogue, it is doubtful whether the elections will lead to a less confrontational political environment or any substantial change in policies.

The result

President Hugo Chávez won his fourth presidential election, with 55.1% of the vote, almost 11% more than his main rival, Henrique Capriles, the candidate of a united opposition.

This was the fourth presidential election won by Chávez since 1998 and the third time he was re-elected (he also won in 2000 and 2006), thanks to a constitutional amendment adopted by referendum in 2009, that eliminated term limits for the President, members of the National Assembly and mayors.

More than 15 million people voted, resulting in a participation rate of 80.5% —the highest turnout in a presidential election since 1988, when it was 81.9%. Compared to the 2006 elections, almost 3.35 million new electors participated in the poll.

Chávez was the most voted candidate in the Capital District and all
Voter turnout was very high and voting took place in a calm atmosphere, with no irregularities reported.

except two of Venezuela’s 23 states. The race was very close in Capriles’s home-state, Miranda, where Chávez only won with a margin of 0.44 % or less than 7000 votes).

Although Chávez obtained an absolute majority —and nearly 11% more than Henrique Capriles, his 55 % of the votes was the lowest of the four elections he has won. In the 1998, 2000 and 2006 elections he achieved 56.2 %, 59.8 % and 62.8 % respectively. While the absolute number of votes for President Chávez was some 876 000 higher than in 2006, the difference in percentage terms between Chávez and Capriles was remarkably smaller than Chávez’s margin of victory in previous elections (in 2006, it was 25.9 %).

Capriles performed substantially better than had the principal opposition candidate, Manuel Rosales, in 2006; Capriles garnered around 2 290 000 more votes (53 % more) than Rosales’s 2006 tally. This suggests that a non-negligible number of electors who had supported Chávez on earlier occasions voted for the opposition candidate this time. Yet President Chávez’s personal popularity remains decisive for the chavista alliance, which received 2.73 million more votes than it had in the September 2010 elections to the National Assembly.

The voting took place in a climate of calmness and order, with no particular incidents or irregularities reported. This contrasts somewhat with tensions that flared during the campaign, culminating with the killing of three Capriles supporters on 29 September.

There was no proper international observation of the elections, as the competent authority, the National Electoral Council (Consejo Nacional Electoral, CNE) only invited foreign organisations and personalities to ‘accompany’ the elections. Some organisations, notably the Carter Center, declined the invitation to do so. However, the Center did carry out an independent evaluation of the preparations for the elections. Without making any definitive judgments, the Center did not identify elements incompatible with correct democratic elections.

The Electoral Council (Consejo Electoral) of the Union of South American Nations (Unión de Naciones Suramericanas, UNASUR), formed by the electoral authorities of its member states, followed the elections in its first mission ever. The head of the UNASUR mission described the elections as a ‘process of ‘excellence’ and the electoral system as ‘highly reliable’. The Secretary General of the Organisation of American States (OAS), José Miguel Insulza, congratulated the Venezuelan people on an ‘exemplary’ electoral day. A number of domestic organisations observed the polls. One of them, the Venezuelan Election Observatory (Observatorio Electoral Venezolano, OEV), noted the absolute normality and tranquillity of the elections and highlighted the participation rate. The OEV concluded that the results reflected the will of the electors.
President Hugo Chávez ran as candidate for the Great Patriotic Pole (Gran Polo Patriótico, GPP), an alliance of 12 political parties on the left whose members also include more than 34,000 local social organisations and grassroots movements. Within the alliance, the President's United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela, PSUV) was the dominant force; it obtained 43% of the total vote and 78% of the votes for Chávez. In second place came the Communist Party of Venezuela (Partido Comunista de Venezuela, PCV) with 3.3% of the total vote; the remainder obtained between 0.3% and 1.5%.

President Chávez campaigned on a platform of consolidating and deepening the project of 'socialism of the 21st century'. This implied continuing and reinforcing policies put in place since 1999 to create economic growth and social equality through wealth redistribution and to advance the transition of the economy and the society towards 'Bolivarian socialism'. The appeal to patriotism and nationalist sentiments and a strong direct identification of Chávez's person with the fatherland and social progress were key elements in the pro-Chávez campaign. Much of the popular support for Chávez should be seen as an expression of what has been described as a strong emotional link between the President and large sectors of society. Under Chávez, many Venezuelans have felt for the first time that the government is interested in their living conditions and they have witnessed a substantial improvement in their social standards (access to education and health, housing, etc.). According to official figures, the percentage...
Henrique Capriles was backed by an alliance integrating nearly all the opposition. Capriles campaigned on a platform advocating moderation and pragmatic solutions to solve Venezuela's problems.

Perspectives

Both candidates recognised the result of the elections and stated their commitment to dialogue.

In contrast to earlier elections, both candidates quickly acknowledged the results of the elections, diffusing the risks of conflicts between their followers. Both Chávez and Capriles also struck a conciliatory tone in their declarations, contrasting with the often harsh language used during the campaign. President Chávez acknowledged the democratic legitimacy of the opposition, pledged to become a 'better president' and called for national unity. On his side, Capriles recognised his defeat and made clear his willingness to dialogue with the government. The personal (telephone) conversation between the two candidates the day after the elections diffused some doubts on Capriles's proposals and may have cost him support.
However, it is doubtful whether this will lead to a more cooperative political climate.

State elections will take place in mid-December, meaning that the government-opposition rivalry continues.

Despite being cleared of cancer in July 2012, Chávez’s health has led some to doubt whether he will conclude his new six-year term. The appointment of Nicolas Maduro as Vice President could be considered a possible succession strategy.

Four months later, on 14 April 2013, municipal elections will take place.

The President’s health will remain an issue. In May 2012, Chávez returned from the last of a series of cancer treatments in Cuba, and in July he declared himself to be cancer-free. Nonetheless, doubts persist about Chávez’s physical condition; his electoral campaign involved fewer direct contacts with voters and more media appearances than had earlier campaigns, and the President himself has recognised that he was not fully fit during the campaign. According to the constitution, new elections will be held if the President’s office becomes vacant within the first four years of his term; if a vacancy arises during the last two years, the Vice President takes over. The replacement, on 11 October 2012, of Elías Jaua with Nicolas Maduro, foreign minister since 2006, as the country’s new Vice President has been seen as part of a possible succession strategy.

President Chávez and his government will need to tackle several challenges. One priority will be to address the increasing crime and
The re-elected President Chávez and his government will need to address a number of challenges. Among the most important are the increase in crime rates and violence.

Many analysts expect a devaluation of the currency, which could drive up the country’s already high inflation rates.

Yet, if oil prices remain high, the country should enjoy a substantial trade surplus and steady revenues, meaning that current economic policies are unlikely to change.

violence rates that have made Venezuela one of the most insecure countries in the region. The government’s inability to reverse growing public insecurity is probably the one issue that has contributed most to Chávez’s relative loss of support. A cabinet reshuffle on 13 October 2012, involving the appointment of a new Minister of Interior and Justice, has been perceived as a sign that anti-crime efforts will be stepped up. In general, the reshuffle, which also included the appointment of six new ministers, should be seen in connection with campaign promises to improve the efficiency of the government and public administration.

Despite robust economic growth since mid-2010 —expected to reach around 5% in 2012— and large surpluses on the trade and current account balances, the economy displays a number of problems. Unemployment remains relatively high by regional standards (7.3% in September 2012) and the inflation rates are among the highest in Latin America (in September 2012 inter-annual inflation reached 18%, although that was lower than the December 2011 peak of 28%). Price and foreign exchange controls, subsidised prices on a large number of staples and nationalisations in various key industries introduce distortions in the economy and cause problems of bureaucratic inefficiency and corruption.

The officially fixed exchange rate is considered overvalued, undermining the competitiveness of domestic production by making imports cheaper. A devaluation after the elections has been widely expected. Expansionary fiscal policies, combined with a strong exchange rate, have weakened fiscal accounts and lead to increased public debt. In this regard, a devaluation would boost oil revenues, thereby reducing the deficit, but could also spark increasing inflation. Inflation, which in turn would lead to further price controls and/or an increase in subsidies to limit higher prices on imported products.

The Venezuelan economy’s already significant dependence on oil exports has become even more pronounced in recent years: in the first half of 2012, oil exports represented 96% of total exports.

In view of the government’s pledge to avoid ‘neo-liberal policies’, the country’s large trade surplus and manageable levels of external and domestic debt, any substantial change of course in economic policy appears unlikely. As long as international oil prices remain at their current high levels, there are few prospects that pressures placed on the economic and social model championed by Hugo Chavez’ government will reach critical levels.