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IN THE SPOTLIGHT

The Waiting Game Prolongs Succession Suspense in Venezuela

On Jan. 23, Venezuelans commemorated the anniversary of the fall of the Marcos Perez Jimenez dictatorship in 1958, and demonstrators gathered to celebrate democracy, their constitution, and political rights - but they were not united. The rally participants consisted of those for Chavez and those opposed, each group with its own idea of Venezuela's future. The 2013 rallies are particularly significant as Venezuela faces a potential constitutional crisis and inches ever closer to the brink of political turmoil. The formidable President Hugo Chavez Frias may have defeated a reinvigorated opposition in October (although by a disputable margin), but his fragile health may derail his dreams of a Bolivarian Revolution, catapulting Venezuela into an institutional crisis as his ruling party tries to maintain internal unity while the opposition calls for new elections. Venezuela is entering a critical period of readjustment and political maneuvering. Democratic integrity will likely be at stake as the incumbent administration gauges its options to maintain control of the nation's institutions and population, with or without its charismatic leader.

Current Situation

There is tangible political tension between the ruling party and members of the opposition in the country. Conspiracy theories and rumors run rampant as Chavez silently recuperates in Havana, Cuba. Absent since early December when he departed to undergo his fourth cancer surgery, the president missed his inauguration ceremony on Jan. 10. The Supreme Court ruled that the swearing-in could be postponed indefinitely since Chavez is an incumbent president. Currently, Vice-President Nicolas Maduro governs in Chavez's stead, feeding sound bytes to the Venezuelan people regarding the President's health, and even producing a document signed by the ailing leader at one point. In a surprising admission of his own mortality, Chavez singled out Maduro as his choice to lead his United Socialist Party (PSUV) should anything happen to him following surgery. As Chavez convalesces in Havana, Maduro has taken the reins, to the consternation of his political opponents.

The opposition suffered resounding defeats in the regional elections held on December 16, holding on to only three of the 23 state governorships. The loss was a bitter pill to swallow following the initial excitement that opposition leader Henrique Capriles Radonski's telegenic appeal inspired in the movement. While he was able to unify a long divided opposition movement for the presidential campaign, his loss to Chavez seriously damaged the movement's spirits in the regional elections. Capriles won his own reelection campaign in the state of Miranda and has placed himself at the forefront of the opposition's new campaign to call for fresh elections in Venezuela.

The opposition claims that Maduro's temporary hold on executive power violates constitutional protocol. Article 234 states that if a leader is incapacitated or too ill to assume normal duties, he/she has a period of 180 days to recover and be sworn in, during which time the head of the National Assembly steps in as the provisional leader. If the president-elect cannot perform his duties, new elections must be called within 30 days of the official absence from power. Conveniently for Maduro, both the National Assembly and the Supreme Court have PSUV members

as their leaders and will likely allow the guessing game to continue as long as possible before following - or changing - constitutional protocol for new elections.

Scenarios

It is likely that Chavez will return to Venezuela within the month in a fragile state of health, still too ill to rule and potentially on the brink of death. The longer Chavez remains isolated from his country and his adoring supporters, the more restless the country becomes. The near future brings three possible scenarios:

A continuation of the status quo: Chavez may remain in Cuba recuperating for up to six months - the full 180 days allowed under the constitution - while the PSUV maintains control and Maduro acts in his stead. This strategy will not bode well politically for Chavez supporters; the longer Chavez is absent, the less cohesive his party will likely become. The opposition has already called for new elections, crying foul on the part of the Supreme Court and the National Assembly when each branch deemed the inauguration to be a mere formality.

Internal PSUV factions could also fester and divide allegiances over who should be Chavez's successor. Though Maduro has been given the *dedazo* - "tap of the finger" - by Chavez as his preferred heir, National Assembly Leader Diosdado Cabello holds considerable sway within the party and could make a play for power by invoking Article 234. For now, Maduro and Cabello affirm that they are united in their desire to continue Chavez's policies, including his choice of Maduro as a political successor. In reality, neither figure has the ability to captivate and rally the people like his predecessor;

even if the state of Chavez's health is truly dire, the PSUV will likely be willing to wait if any recovery is possible.

New elections in the near future: Although the constitutional protocol has already been sidestepped, new elections are still a possibility. If Chavez returns to Venezuela and concedes that he is not well enough to rule - or dies within weeks of returning - constitutional protocol will be set in motion, and new elections would likely be held within 30 days.

While optimistic, this scenario is plausible. Before departing for Cuba on December 9, Chavez indicated that he would prefer Maduro as the PSUV candidate if anything happened to the leader post-operation. Aware of the legal protocol, Chavez indicated that elections would indeed be called if his surgery was unsuccessful. Considering that he was the main force behind the new constitution drafted in 1999, changing his own idealized legislation would be a type of betrayal of Chavez's own Bolivarian political ideology. Chavismo - the social and political policies tied to the populist leader - without Chavez could proffer a closer presidential race than did the October 2012 elections. The opposition would come out swinging with Capriles as its leader and might have a better chance of winning an election against Maduro, especially given that respected polls show that the public favors Capriles over any other Chavez alternative. Quiet optimism within the opposition is not unwarranted; however, the current climate of secrecy and obstruction does not suggest the potential for smooth democratic transition.

Chavez at the helm as an invalid: Chavez may return and remain an invalid but not concede his ability or prerogative to rule. With a clear PSUV

majority in the National Assembly and a Supreme Court stacked with pro-Chavez justices, it is realistic to suppose that either branch would amend the constitution to allow Vice-President Maduro to finish out Chavez's six-year term, which would end in 2018.

With this scenario, considerable political unrest would likely erupt from the opposition, leading to violent clashes with Chavez supporters and authorities in major cities. Violence and unrest could escalate very quickly, necessitating the need for military action. Chavez himself is a former military man and has a good relationship with its leaders. The military lives well in Venezuela and would likely maintain order at all costs. A probable course of action would see curfews imposed until unrest subsided. Recent food shortages would be exacerbated under conditions of temporary military rule. Another wildcard in the mix of political fallout is the impact of small, armed militias dispersed throughout the country. These bands are made up of staunch Chavez supporters, who received weapons from the regime to operate as an auxiliary National Guard. Although they are under the auspices of the military, these groups would be the most likely perpetrators of targeted violence against opposition groups, as the militias are partisan supporters rather than career military officers. This "worst-case scenario" would still be unlikely to create a prolonged state of emergency. The military would likely back Maduro as president, allowing Chavismo to live on, but without the charismatic persona that gives it real traction with the Venezuelan people.

Looking Forward

There are a few indicators that may signal

impending political turmoil. Any dissent between Nicolas Maduro and Diosdado Cabello would trigger moderate-to-serious fallout within the PSUV. Party members would have to pick sides, and there is certainly no guarantee that either leader would draw full majority support, as other politicians still hold considerable sway within the party and have their own presidential aspirations. Maduro has Chavez's blessing, but the longer Chavez remains silent and elections are avoided, the more difficult it will be for Maduro to secure the complete support of his party if elections are indeed called.

A second issue to monitor will be the stability of the constitution. Any move to make changes to the current constitution is a cause for alarm. This is the most obvious indicator for a chaotic political transition - any move to amend the charter would likely incur a volatile backlash from the opposition. While Capriles has always promoted a peaceful opposition movement, it is possible that not all his followers will abide with his wishes.

The Venezuelan majority love their leader: Chavez has spent the past 14 years securing the adoration of the poor, disenfranchised masses and the assurance that no one in his party's ranks can live up to his public persona. These savvy political tactics have assured Chavez complete support and control during his extended tenure as Venezuela's leader. Institutional integrity and the Chavez legacy are at stake. Time alone will tell whether Chavismo will live beyond the man himself, or come to an end with the health of its charismatic leader.

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