

Another victorious presidential election – The Bolivarian Revolution and Venezuela

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When in 1992 a military officer with a group of leftist followers tried to seize power in Venezuela, the events were enough for fifteen minutes of fame, but not more. However when the same person, namely Hugo Chávez won the presidential election in an outstanding victory six years later and started his so-called Bolivarian Revolution and initiated new methods, new approaches with fast and clearly visible results, the international community started to pay more attention, especially when similar leftist political movements began to win the elections in other countries in the region. The aim of this article is to take a closer look at Chávez himself, it is a short brief on his past deeds as the possible reasons for his continuous popularity amongst Venezuelans. Finally we shall give an overview of the needed actions in order to achieve the necessary development in the country and insure the continuity of the Bolivarian Revolution even after the late-president's death.

"A victory for Chávez is not just a victory for the people of Venezuela, but also a victory for all the people of Latin America ... this victory will strike another blow against imperialism."

Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva,
Brazilian President (2003-2010)

In 1992, a previously unknown lieutenant colonel showed up on the political scene of Venezuela in an eventually failed coup attempt: Hugo Chávez Frías. In six years, after winning the presidential election he started his so called Bolivarian revolution in order to build out a completely new social and political system in the Latin American country. Though, this step was only the first one in the continent-wide series of changes that have shaped the face of Latin America. But who was Hugo Chávez? What has happened in Venezuela since he was elected for the first time and what is the reason that the often criticized president could keep his seat after four elections? Last, but not least, what is in store for Venezuela during the upcoming presidential term: what is at stake for Venezuela?

Hugo Chávez Frías

Although originally he wanted to become a priest, Chávez – born the son of middle-class school-teachers – decided to join the military, so in 1975, he graduated from the Venezuelan Academy of Military Sciences.² even though he was an army officer, he got involved more and more with politics, opposing the ruling governments, then in February 1992, he became the leader of a failed coup

1 Email: divad.legov@gmail.com

2 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/05/19/us-pope-chavez-iduSN1819661120070519> (10.04.2013.)

attempt, aiming to overthrow the cabinet of President Carlos Andres Perez.³ Two years later, after receiving a pardon, Chávez was released from prison, then after having left the army, he quickly established his own party, the Movement of the Fifth Republic and he started his political career, which reached its first success in a landslide victory against Henrique Salas in the presidential elections in 1998, winning by 56.2 percent, as opposed to Salas' 39.97 percent.⁴ Even the United States Department of State report declared the procedure “a good and clean election”, showing a great difference between the two candidates, since Jaime Lusinchi defeated his opponent, Rafael Caldera in 1983, 57 to 34 percent.⁵

In less than one and a half year, after taking office in February 1999, Chávez faced another challenge: as the first great step of his presidency, he changed the country's constitution, extending the duration of the presidential term to six years. In July 2000, he got elected for the second time in accordance with the new election law, so this time for six more years. Despite all his popularity, in April 2002 – just ten years after he tried to overthrow the government – he found himself in the same situation: he was temporarily removed from power for two days. Another two years with no disturbance followed, and then a recall referendum was initiated by the opposition that Chávez eventually managed to win, in August 2004. In December 2006 came another election victory, won by 62.57 percent to 37.18 percent against Manuel Rosales, the candidate of the opposing party, *un Nuevo Tiempo* (A New Era, *uNT*).⁶

Carrying on his Bolivarian revolution, in December 2007, El Presidente initiated a constitutional referendum to lift the presidential term limits. However the results were not in his favour, Chávez rephrased the question this time to include all the elected officials: the referendum then allowed him to run for the presidency without term limits. In September 2010, Chávez and his party *PSuV*, being still popular, won the elections for the National Assembly, however, the opposition got more than 40 percent, meaning a slight increase in their support.⁷

In regards to his private life, which affected his political career, in June 2011, Chávez revealed that he had been receiving cancer treatment and nine months later he had surgery in Cuba.⁸ The disease, he said, was cured so he ran for his third full term in October 2012, receiving 55.14 percent of the votes against Henrique Capriles Radonski running on the ballot of the *Movimiento Primero Justicia* (Justice First Movement), getting only 44.24 percent support of the voters, but still making it the tightest presidential race with Chávez involved.⁹

Even though the margin narrowed down to eleven percent, Chávez remained a controversial, but popular politician, even when compared to other North and South American leaders. According to the study ‘Approval of Presidents: America and the World’, done by *Consulta Mitofsky*, a Mexican polling firm, Hugo Chávez was the fourth most popular president among twenty on the American continents with a 64 percent approval rating, right after the 80 percent of the Ecuadoran

3 The roots of his movement can be traced back to 1982, when Chávez formed a secret group of military officers. This was in fact the first time he used the name ‘Simon Bolivar’ in connection with his political actions. Eventually, the riot of the revolutionary Bolivarian Movement was put down with 18 casualties, 60 people injured and Chávez giving up himself to the authorities. His fellow fighters tried to overthrow the regime nine months later, but failed again.

4 <http://www.electoralgeography.com/new/en/countries/v/venezuela/venezuela-presidential-election-1998.html> (28.11.2012.)

5 <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/143536.pdf> (28.11.2012.)

6 <http://www.electoralgeography.com/new/en/countries/v/venezuela/venezuela-presidential-election-2006.html> (29.11.2012.)

7 Even though *PSuV* won only slightly with its 48.20 percent over the 47.17 percent of the opposition, *Democratic Unity Roundtable* (*Mesa de la Unidad Democrática, MuD*), but due to the electoral system, it gained 96 seats, while the *MuD* obtained only 64 mandates. <http://electionguide.org/results.php?ID=1518> (11.04.2013.)

8 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-10086210> (17-10-2012)

9 <http://www.electoralgeography.com/new/en/countries/v/venezuela/venezuela-presidential-election-2012.html> (29.11.2012.)

President, Rafael Correa, President Mauricio Funes' 72 percent from El Salvador and the Guatemalan Otto Pérez with his 69 percent popularity rating.¹⁰ This score was not only 6 points higher than last year's, but also higher than the Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff's 62 percent, or that of US President Barack Obama who was only in tenth place, with a more modest 49 percent rating. But what could possibly cause such strong support for a leader who had been in power for fourteen years and had also been constantly criticised for his – sometimes radical – leftist views and political techniques and most of all because of his authoritarian attitude.

Chávez was handling issues in an opposite way to the majority of the world, he opposed the USA and had a warm relationship with Iran. Despite this, no one could have stated that he was alone with his politics, rather the opposite, he had several followers at home as well as abroad. Critics said that he was risking the future of Venezuela, he was wasting the huge oil income of the country on unnecessary projects at home and on supporting allied countries, that his system was highly corrupt and most of all that he would do anything to stay in power, taking the country to the very edge of collapse.

Four times in a row – but what was the reason behind it?

In order to have a clear picture on why Chávez was re-elected, we need to take a closer look at such important issues like the reform of the social structures: education and healthcare, and the figures showing the performance of the economy. If we compare the official data provided by the World Bank about the above mentioned topics, we can clearly see the difference between the time when Chávez took office, and data as of today. The positive development is evidently visible, and we cannot forget the fact that all social programs or big reforms need time for the implementation and for the first results to be noticeable. Besides all these, of course we need to take into consideration the negative effects of the world financial crises as well.

First, let's have a closer look at education, as one of the most important investments in a country's future. There are three important factors when talking about education and its effectiveness: government expenditure, literacy rate and the completion rate. Unfortunately not all the data for these are available on the Internet, but regarding the government spending on primary education per capita in percentage of the GDP, we can quote the data for 2006 and 2007, being 8 percent and 9 percent respectively,¹¹ showing a important increase in the educational budget. It is understandable that it is not only the money spent, but the outcome, and the efficiency that can give a more precise picture. In regards to the literacy rate¹² provided by the World Bank, we can see that the two given data referring to 2001 and 2007 show a two-percent increase from 93 to 95 percent, which is quite remarkable in such a short time.

An even wider set of data is available in connection with the primary completion rate between 1999 and 2010, showing an outstanding increase from 81 percent to 94 percent during the given

10 CAMPOS-HERNÁNDEZ (2012) p. 3-4.

11 Primary is the total public expenditure per student in primary education as a percentage of GDP per capita. Public expenditure (current and capital) includes government spending on educational institutions (both public and private), education administration as well as subsidies for private entities (students/households and other private entities). <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.XPD.PRIM.PC.ZS?page=1> (23.02.2013.)

12 According to the World Bank definition, literacy rate refers to the percentage of the population age 15 and above who can, with understanding, read and write a short, simple statement on their everyday life. Generally, 'literacy' also encompasses 'numeracy', the ability to make simple arithmetic calculations. This indicator is calculated by dividing the number of literates aged 15 years and over by the corresponding age group population and multiplying the result by 100. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS/countries?page=2> (23.02.2013.)

time of a little bit more than a decade, even reaching 98 percent in 2007.¹³

Though, not only education but the level of healthcare reveals a lot about a country's state. Regarding the health expenditure per capita between 1998 and 2010 a raise with a value of uSD 487 – from the very low level of uSD 176 to uSD 663 – means a real change in the quality and availability of the health care services, especially if we compare these numbers with those of Argentina, an increase of uSD 54, from uSD 688 to uSD 742 during the given period.¹⁴ These investments then contribute to another important factor when talking about a country's level of development: the infant mortality rate; this in Venezuela's case decreased by 35 percent from 20 per 1,000 in 1998 to 13 per 1,000 in 2011, beating Argentina's 31 percent.¹⁵

Access to improved sanitation facilities also reflects on the development of a state, this increased by 2 percent during the decade from 1998, from 88 percent to 90 percent, while during the same period Argentina could only maintain the same level of 90 percent.¹⁶

All the achievements behind these numbers are made possible by the economy's performance, mostly based on the rising of the price of the crude oil, that was as low as uSD 12.21 when Chávez took office (February 2, 1999), reached its highest value at USD 145.31 on July 3, 2008, but was at a quite high level of uSD 90.88, when the president died (March 5, 2013).¹⁷ In order to feel the impact of the huge increase in the income and the reality of the changes and the development, some relevant indicators must be examined.

The GDP per capita almost tripled. It increased from uSD 3,901 to uSD 10,810 in 14 years from 1998.¹⁸ Just to highlight the increase, let us compare Venezuela with another country from the region with similar data from 1998, like Panama with its uSD 3,845, but only uSD 7,498 in 2011, or with one of the regional powers, Argentina with a data of uSD 10,942 in 2011, reached only from a higher value, uSD 8,273 of 1998. Even though, the annual GDP growths during these years were quite extreme: they reached their lowest, -8.9 percent in 2002, but peaked in 2004 with

13 Total is the total number of new entrants in the last grade of primary education, regardless of age, expressed as percentage of the total population of the theoretical entrance age to the last grade of primary. This indicator is also known as "gross intake rate to the last grade of primary." The ratio can exceed 100% due to over-aged and under-aged children who enter primary school late/early and/or repeat grades. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.CMPT.ZS/countries?page=2> (23.02.2013.)

14 Total health expenditure is the sum of public and private health expenditures as a ratio of total population. It covers the provision of health services (preventive and curative), family planning activities, nutrition activities, and emergency aid designated for health but does not include provision of water and sanitation. Data are in current u.S. dollars. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.XPD.PCAP/countries?page=2> (25.02.2013.)

15 Infant mortality rate is the number of infants dying before reaching one year of age, per 1,000 live births in a given year. Level & Trends in Child Mortality, report 2011. Estimates Developed by the uN Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation (uNICEF, WHO, World Bank, uN DESA, uNPD). <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DY.N.IMR.TN/countries?page=2> (26.02.2013.)

16 Access to improved sanitation facilities refers to the percentage of the population with at least adequate access to excreta disposal facilities that can effectively prevent human, animal, and insect contact with excreta. Improved facilities range from simple but protected pit latrines to flush toilets with a sewerage connection. To be effective, facilities must be correctly constructed and properly maintained. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.STA.ACSN/countries?page=2> (26.02.2013.)

17 <http://www.quandl.com/DOE-uS-Department-of-Energy/rWTC-WTI-Crude-Oil-Spot-Price-Cushing-OK-FOB> (10.04.2013.)

18 GDP per capita is gross domestic product divided by midyear population. GDP is the sum of gross value added by all resident producers in the economy plus any product taxes and minus any subsidies not included in the value of the products. It is calculated without making deductions for depreciation of fabricated assets or for depletion and degradation of natural resources. Data are in current u.S. dollars. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/Ny.GDP.PCAP.CD?page=2> (24.02.2013.)

an outstanding 18.3 percent growth, being the fifth highest in the world that year.¹⁹ Other factors that could exemplify the positive progress in the economy are the current account balance and the volume of the IBRD loans.

From the extreme low uSD -4,432,000,000 current account balance in 1998, the 2011 value is 27,205,000,000 and even reached 34,098,000,000 in 2008.²⁰

The loans from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development were always very strong arguments in Chávez's rhetoric, representing the strong dependence on an organization that is controlled by the Western World, generally interpreted as an oppressive and hostile actor, so paying off the debts was one of the main aims of the Presidente: from uSD 1,219,012,000 in 1998 to the full repayment by 2007.²¹

One can say these figures are only portions of the whole picture and that is true, however, they are still valid and the positive changes they show still exist and can give an idea as to why Chávez got support from the Venezuelans.

Despite all the progress, the social programs and the money spent on lifting the living standards of the citizens, Chávez felt that the time had come for changes in his rhetoric as well. He always portrayed himself as a strong leader who is fighting against Western neo-colonisation, the growing influence of foreign companies and organisations, and he always saw his opposition – who, according to Chávez and even some independent sources, were financially supported from abroad – to be the allies of these foreign entities. So he always called for action against these groups, and parties, in the name of defending his country. However, feeling the wind of change amongst the population, he changed his approach to the opposition, switching to a more moderate tone when referring to them and even pledging that he would work with the opposition in the future, for the good of the country, saying that he wants to be a “better president”: “I want to include everybody, including sectors of the opposition [...] I commit to being a better president than I've been these past few years. [...] I thank God and ask him for life and health to keep serving the Venezuelan people.”²²

This latter statement was a strong reference to Chávez's fight against cancer that was treated in Cuba before the elections and even jeopardised the run for the presidency, but then he himself finally declared the cancer cured and his own health to be good for another six-year term as leader of the country.

Even though the initiator of the Bolivarian revolution has passed away, his fellow party leaders and followers want to carry on his programs and not only keep up the work, but to keep a greater focus on several issues that were addressed more strongly during Chávez's campaign. The weaknesses of his presidencies were issues such as extremely high crime rates, the urgent need for the reform of the heavily oil-dependent economy and last but not least to end the growing political

19 Annual percentage growth rate of GDP at market prices based on constant local currency. Aggregates are based on constant 2000 u.S. dollars. GDP is the sum of gross value added by all resident producers in the economy plus any product taxes and minus any subsidies not included in the value of the products. It is calculated without making deductions for depreciation of fabricated assets or for depletion and degradation of natural resources. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG/countries?page=2> (24.02.2013.)

20 Current account balance is the sum of net exports of goods, services, net income, and net current transfers. Data are in current u.S. dollars. 1998-2011. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BN.CAB.XOKA.CD/countries?page=2> (25.02.2013.)

21 IBRD loans and IDA credits are public and publicly guaranteed debt extended by the World Bank Group. The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) lends at market rates. Credits from the International Development Association (IDA) are at concessional rates. Data are in current u.S. dollars. <http://www.indexmundi.com/facts/venezuela/ibrd-loans-and-ida-credits> (25.02.2013.)

22 <http://www.rnw.nl/english/bulletin/chavez-pledges-become-better-president> (13.11.2012.)

gap between the two sides of the population, to unite the Venezuelans. Needless to say that the successful answers to these challenges are essential for Chávez's party, the united Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista unido de Venezuela, PSuV), in order to remain in power, not just in the presidential seat, but on other levels as well.

"Disappointed but not defeated" – was quoted many times by the international media, words coming from a Capriles student supporter, the sentence describes well the mixed feelings of the international community as well, both the united States and the European union stressing that the re-elected president should not ignore, but cooperate with the representatives of the 6.4 million voters of the opposition.²³

So what is in store for Venezuela after the elections?

Even though Chávez fought against cancer for a long time, and had received medical treatment in Cuba and Venezuela he felt strong enough for another term, the one he won, but was never sworn in for. Either he felt that the end was approaching or he wanted to have an even stronger government to match the united opposition. In order to keep his support, one of his steps at the time of the election was to move the right people to the right places, his reliable, close colleagues were put in key positions, not only in the central government, but he nominated them to run for governorships. Chávez named former Foreign Minister Nicolás Maduro to be his vice president, replacing Elias Jaua so he could run against Capriles for the governorship of Miranda, the second largest state of the country.²⁴ Although Jaua eventually lost the election²⁵ Chávez did not want to lose one of his best men, so he appointed Jaua foreign minister.

Another appointment worth mentioning is General Nestor Reverol's, who used to head the country's anti-drug efforts and. He was made the new minister of interior and justice, taking the place of Tareck El Aissami, who was named candidate for the governor's seat of Aragua.²⁶ Another high-ranking person from the military, Admiral Carmen Melendez – the first female to reach such a high rank in the history of Venezuela – was appointed the new head of the Office of the Presidency, replacing Erika Farias, who then successfully ran for the governorship of Cojedes.²⁷

When talking about newly appointed leaders²⁸ and about succession, we need to stop for a minute to look at a long-time aide and fellow reformist who happens to be the interim president of Venezuela now, after Chávez's death: Nicolás Maduro. He is considered to be one of the founders of Chávez's political movement (Movement of the Fifth Republic) and also one of the leading activists who fought for the release of Chávez when he was imprisoned for the failed coup attempt in 1992.²⁹ The 49-year old Maduro is said to have very good relations with fellow leftist leaders of Cuba, Raúl and Fidel Castro, and besides this to have extraordinary skills

23 <http://www.rnw.nl/english/bulletin/chavez-pledges-become-better-president> (13.11.2012.)

24 <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/huff-wires/20121013/lt-venezuela-cabinet-changes> (27.02.2013.)

25 <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-12-17/capriles-defeats-chavez-candidate-in-venezuela-regional-vote-1-.html> (27.02.2013.)

26 Eventually winning it by 55.55 percent. <http://www.elaragueno.com.ve/region/articulo/24322/tareck-el-aissami-electo-nuevo-gobernador-de-aragua> (27.02.2013)

27 Winning the election by 63.43 percent. <http://www.vtv.gob.ve/articulos/2012/12/19/erika-farias-proclamada-gobernadora-del-estado-cojedes-9227.html> (27.02.2013.)

28 Besides these, newly assigned ministers include the positions of the minister of Information and communication, environment, agriculture and indigenous peoples, also representing key elements of Chávez's Bolivarian revolution. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/huff-wires/20121013/lt-venezuela-cabinet-changes> (27.02.2013.)

29 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/dec/12/hugo-chavez-heir> (10.04.2013.)

and diverse experience in international politics, let us just think about the cooperation with ALBA and UNASUR, or about the improving relationships with Russia, China, Iran or Colombia amongst many others. During Chávez's almost one and a half decade long presidency, Maduro was his eighth vice-president, but maybe with the firmest leftist views and possibly one of those with the strongest belief in the state control of the economy, anti-imperialist foreign policy and centralized political power. In many ways his character is similar to the late Presidente, and so Maduro was the perfect candidate to be the successor of Chávez, especially if we consider the duties Maduro already took over while the president was not in satisfactory health.³⁰ The *raison d'être* for the presumption was at the beginning proven by the fact that local political think-tanks were already making surveys about Maduro's popularity when he was only the vice president.

The steps for insuring the political continuity and the strength of the Bolivarian system had been made already, according to the presidential program, the big social programs, housing and the investments in healthcare and education were going to continue with even greater financial support. In his speech, following the oath of the new cabinet, Chávez called for a greater efficiency in the government, and highlighted that the Bolivarian revolution needs to continue in order to achieve a true socialist state. Even though he was receiving medical treatment in hospital, Chávez headed the cabinet meetings, many of which focused on economic issues, such as one devaluating the national currency against the US dollar from 4.3 bolivar to 6.3 bolivar, meaning a large-scale increase in prices.³¹ Many have waited for this step for a long time, but there were other necessary decisions to be made soon after the new president is elected. The diversification of the country's economy and export goods, the urgent development of the country's infrastructure, most importantly the road – and the electric systems, the elimination of the ubiquitous corruption and last but not least the normalization of the shocking crime rates. The speeches of both candidates, Capriles and Maduro as well, reveal that they share the same focuses, and in several cases even some similar programs and solutions. With all these given, the presidential election of 2013 could not offer much difference than the one that was won by Chávez.

After Chávez's death and Maduro as the interim president running for the presidency, according to one of the latest polls, done by Hinterlaces, Maduro had a 20 percent lead against Capriles, only 10 days before the presidential election on April 14, 2013.³² Like at many political rallies and other occasions, and even in articles, such as the one Maduro published in *The Guardian* two days before the election, Chávez's political successor declared that the peaceful Bolivarian revolution will continue, stressing that "there are of course many challenges still to overcome, as Chávez himself acknowledged. Among my primary objectives is the need to intensify our efforts to curb crime and aggressively confront inefficiency and corruption in a nationwide campaign."³³

Thanks to the modern electronic voting system, the official results arrived shortly after the polling stations ('mesas') had closed their doors. The results were closer than expected, though they did not change the estimated outcome: at 11:49 PM EDT the National Electoral Council (Consejo Nacional Electoral, CNE) announced that with 78.71 voter participation, Nicolás Maduro had won with 50.66 percent of the votes cast versus Henrique Capriles Radonski's 49.07

30 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/11/nicolas-maduro-venezuela_n_1958546.html (17.10.2012.)

31 <http://www.americasquarterly.org/content/venezuelan-currency-devaluation-goes-effect> (10.04.2013.)

32 <http://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2013/04/08/venezuela-elect-president-opposition-stands-no-chance.html> (10.04.2013.)

33 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/apr/12/my-presidency-chavez-revolution-continue> (14.04.2013)

percent share.³⁴ In my opinion, these results have a double importance: on the one hand, all of course, they reveal that Chávez's heritage, the Bolivarian revolution and socialist ideology still have the massive support of the Venezuelan people, on the other hand they also show the added strength of the personal charisma of the late-president. The exceptionally low difference of only around 300 000 votes in favour of Maduro tells that despite all the positive development and the grandiose social programs the power of the governing party PSuV is decreasing, especially if we compare it with the growing popularity of the united opposition. Maduro is failing to show a strong leader's character so far, looking less energetic than his opponent, the ten year younger Capriles, he also seems to possess weaker rhetorical skills than his late master. So the question now is that whether the actions of his government can persuade the people that they need to continue to support Maduro and the PSuV, because we cannot forget about the fact that the president is recallable by referendum.

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34 <http://www.cepr.net/index.php/blogs/the-americas-blog/venezuelas-presidential-elections-2013-live-blog> (15.04.2013.)