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Chavez's Death A Huge Opportunity -- If Venezuelans Can Seize It **By Lawrence J. Haas**

The death of Venezuelan strongman Hugo Chavez prompts two questions, the answers to which will have enormous implications not just for his country but for the United States, Latin America, and points far beyond.

First, will the government Chavez left behind conduct a fair election to replace him, which is supposed to occur within 30 days? Second, if the Venezuelan people get the opportunity of a fair election, will they choose wisely? The early signs don't necessarily point to governmental acquiescence in a free and fair plebiscite.

Chavez's heir apparent, Vice President Nicolas Maduro, has sought to rally public support by charging that the U.S. was somehow behind the cancer that claimed the boisterous petro-dictator at the age of 58. He also kicked two U.S. military attaches out of the country, alleging they sought to destabilize Venezuela.

Maduro's outlandish charges smack of the kind of populist demagoguery that Chavez practiced to such great effect with the country's teeming masses, and it suggests Maduro may try to retain power however he can.

The great stakes involved in Venezuela's future demand that Washington and its allies, in the region and beyond, pressure Caracas to give its people a chance to chart a new course for their country.

Washington and its allies also should give some serious thought to providing covert aid, as appropriate, to the likely opposition candidate, Henrique Capriles Radonski, who lost a relatively close race to Chavez in October and who had pledged to steer Venezuela in a dramatically new, pro-Western direction.

Consider what Chavez wrought at home and abroad:

Having failed to seize power in a military coup in 1992 (and then serving two years in prison for his efforts), Chavez won the presidency in 1998, fueled by public disgust over the corruption of his democratically elected predecessors.

Once in office, however, he ruled as a populist despot – nationalizing industries, seizing farms and businesses, boosting his own powers through constitutional change, weakening the judiciary, and cracking down on political opponents, labor leaders, media, and anyone else who might get in his way.

He built support among his country's many poor people by sending oil-generated government revenues their way, but his economic and fiscal mismanagement left the country with roaring

inflation, exploding debt, shortages of food and medicine, unreliable electricity, dirty drinking water, and an economy that was excessively dependent on the vicissitudes of global energy prices.

While mismanaging his country, he opened a huge hemispheric cleavage with the “21st Century socialism” he sought to extend across a region that, until he arrived on the scene, was coalescing around U.S.-led free markets.

Before long, he was heading up an anti-American coalition of autocrats, dubbed the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas, that included Bolivia’s Evo Morales, Ecuador’s Rafael Correa, and Nicaragua’s Daniel Ortega – all of whom he showered with aid – and that presented a sizable regional challenge to the U.S. model of freedom and democracy.

Chavez also supported the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, the terrorist group that fought a years-long effort to overthrow a key U.S. ally in Bogota while bringing murder and mayhem to the streets of Colombia.

Worse, Chavez nourished strong ties to the radical regime in Tehran, assisting Iran’s state and terrorist allies. He visited Iran more than nine times, helped Tehran evade global financial sanctions over its nuclear program, allowed Iran to mine for uranium in his country, signed numerous agreements with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and allowed plane flights to shuttle terrorists between Tehran and Caracas.

Chavez sent oil to Syria’s Bashar al-Assad, Iran’s most important Middle Eastern ally, as the Syrian dictator continued to slaughter his people. He also has sent arms to Hezbollah and given safe haven to its trainers, operatives, recruiters, and fundraisers who roam relatively freely south of our border.

Now, ponder a future that the death of Chavez, followed by a victory for Capriles, would bring.

All at once, the region’s socialist axis, which has already suffered a sharp blow with the death of its charismatic leader, would weaken further as Capriles closed the financial pipeline through which Caracas propped up the dictators, loosened his government’s control of the economy, and moved to U.S.-style free markets.

All at once, Iran and Hezbollah would lose their biggest supporter in Latin America, severely crimping their ability to roam the region and threaten the U.S. from within its own hemisphere.

All at once, a Tehran that’s already desperate to keep al-Assad in power will find itself without another important ally – this one in Caracas.

All at once, the U.S. would replace a raging adversary to its south with a promising new ally, while its most dangerous adversary on the world stage (Iran) would find itself significantly weakened and increasingly isolated.

All of that demands that Washington force a global spotlight on the transition to a new government in Caracas, making clear that the U.S. and its allies expect a free election through which Venezuelans can choose their own destiny.

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