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# Latin America's Authoritarian Drift

## CHAVISMO AFTER CHÁVEZ?

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When the “third wave” of democratization reached Latin America in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Venezuela was one of only three countries in the region (Colombia and Costa Rica were the others) that could already be counted as a democracy. Although often touted as exceptionally stable thanks to a 1958 arrangement (the Pact of Punto Fijo) that set up a two-party system, the Venezuelan polity underwent a series of acute crises in the 1980s and 1990s that culminated in the election of former army officer and convicted coupmaker Hugo Chávez in December 1998. Chávez’s rise to power on the strength of vows to “refound the republic” and install a participatory democracy—which he would later call “twenty-first-century socialism” and, still later, the “communal state”—radically transformed the country’s politics and institutions.

At the same time, Chávez transformed his country’s role on the regional and international stage, making oil-rich Venezuela one of the forces behind the so-called global democratic recession that has followed the third wave. Once again, Venezuela is swimming against the current, this time not by being one of the few democracies in an authoritarian region, but rather by experimenting with authoritarian and socialist ways (and leading something of a subregional trend toward them) within a wider Latin American world that generally has set a course toward democracy, political centrism, and market-based economies.

Following Chavez’s election to the presidency, where he remained

from 1999 till his death from cancer in March 2013, Venezuela went from being a representative, albeit flawed, democracy (1958–98) to being an “electoral authoritarian” or “competitive authoritarian” regime.<sup>1</sup> The “hybrid” model that characterizes Venezuelan politics can be seen in other realms as well. The economic system combines state capitalism with a market economy, while the institutional framework under *chavismo* merges principles of liberal democracy with those of the “communal state.” Drawing from a broad range of ideological traditions—from Marxism and socialism to Catholic social teaching, the Third Way, Latin American positivism, and Bolivarianism—the model combines diverse constructs even as it compounds their contradictions.<sup>2</sup>

This model rests on many pillars, including the development of its own institutional structure as set out in the Chávez-engineered 1999 Constitution and accompanying laws; the availability of ample state-controlled oil revenues; nationalization and other forms of state intervention in the economy; patronage networks tied to the state and its rulers;<sup>3</sup> a polarizing majoritarian vision that rejects party politics in favor of a friend-enemy dichotomy and favors frequent trips to the polls; the squeezing of basic rights and freedoms; the erosion of key democratic principles such as the separation of powers; military encroachments on civilian life; and a changed international profile prominently featuring a close alliance with communist Cuba. Perhaps most important of all, however, the model rests—or rested—on Hugo Chávez’s charismatic leadership style and the degree to which power was personalized by and embodied in him.

Can the *chavista* model survive the demise of the strongman from whom it takes its name? By all appearances it has begun to break down with surprising speed since his death. In the 14 April 2013 special presidential election, Chávez’s handpicked successor Nicolás Maduro edged opposition candidate Henrique Capriles by the small and disputed margin of just 1.49 percentage points. (Only the previous October, an ailing Chávez had won his final presidential election over Capriles by 55 to 44 percent.) As fraud charges flew, the opposition challenged the special election’s result before the relevant national authorities. At the time of this writing in early June 2013, the controversy remains unresolved.

Leaving some of the Venezuelan saga’s idiosyncrasies aside, an examination of the *chavista* regime and the developments that affected it following Chávez’s death may not only suggest to us what that regime’s fate may be, but may also offer us insights regarding the dynamics and tensions inherent in competitive authoritarian regimes everywhere. This discussion poses the following questions: What is the relative influence of structural factors, as opposed to political ones such as the presence or absence of Chávez’s leadership, on the prospects for consolidating or changing this model? What are the chances that *chavismo*, and the

political model of the past fourteen years, will survive now that Chávez is gone? What does the Venezuelan case have to say about the self-entrenchment—or the reform—of electoral authoritarian regimes?

## Elections and Democracy in Venezuela

The hybrid political systems that began to proliferate with the end of the Cold War had both democratic and authoritarian features in various proportions and combinations. Examples of these systems in Latin America included Mexico (1917–2000), Nicaragua (1983–90), and the Dominican Republic (1986–96); and more recently, the presidencies of Alberto Fujimori in Peru (1990–2000) and Chávez in Venezuela. The governments of Evo Morales in Bolivia since 2006, Rafael Correa in Ecuador since 2007, and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua since 2007 are contemporary examples of this hybrid model.

These systems share similar political dynamics. For example, although public officials are chosen through elections, electoral processes are so strongly tilted in favor of the ruling party that its defeat at the polls becomes virtually impossible. Elections—and politics in general—take place against a backdrop of institutions that are stacked in the incumbents' favor. The intrinsic advantage handed to those in power, like the systematic disadvantage forced upon their rivals, is sustained by the grossly unbalanced allocation of public resources, by control over the media, and by the discretionary use of legal instruments.<sup>4</sup> Kenneth F. Greene calls this the “hyper-incumbency advantage.”<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, these systems may differ from one another in other important areas. They may lean toward capitalism, as did Fujimori's Peru and as does Vladimir Putin's Russia, or toward socialism, like *chavista*-ruled Venezuela. Although Venezuela fits the general mold of competitive or electoral authoritarianism, it has other unique characteristics: a powerful petro-state, a Cuba-inspired socialist ideology, a highly personalized form of governance, and a prominent military presence, all of which coexist with a democratic political culture that was nurtured by four decades of life under a representative two-party system, and whose habits remain deeply ingrained.

One of the significant things to note about Venezuela is that the retreat of democracy there has been accompanied and sustained by voting—Chávez came to power via a competitive, free, and fair presidential balloting in 1998, and since then elections have been frequent. From 1999 to 2013, Venezuela held four presidential, four regional, three legislative, and two municipal elections, in addition to six national referenda and one election for delegates to a constituent assembly. The three most recent on this long list were the presidential election of 7 October 2012, in which the terminally ill Chávez was reelected to a fourth six-year term; the state-legislative and gubernatorial balloting of 16 De-

ember 2012, which handed Chávez's governing coalition a victory in 20 of the country's 23 states; and the 14 April 2013 special election to succeed Chávez.

Each of these electoral processes was marked by disputes about whether a free, fair, and competitive contest was taking place. Elections indeed became increasingly competitive over the course of Chávez's rule—yet at the same time became less free and fair. The opposition took part in every voting process except the 2005 legislative balloting. Oppositionists opted to boycott that election just a week before the polling date, fearing that the vote counting would be fraudulent. The government's candidates and positions prevailed in nearly all these elections. The only exceptions were the December 2007 referendum on constitutional changes (Chávez favored the changes, which lost narrowly) and the September 2010 balloting for the 165-member unicameral National Assembly (the ruling party lost 41 seats and saw its majority diminished).

The dates of those contests are significant: Since 2007, the opposition has gained ground. In December 1998, Chávez won his first presidential election by a margin of more than 16 percentage points, and increased that to more than 22 points two years later in the first election held under the 1999 Constitution. In 2006, he swamped his opponent by 26 points. That was his high point. In 2012, under the shadow cast by a cancer whose presence he had announced in June 2011 and whose exact nature has never been officially disclosed, Chávez defeated Governor Henrique Capriles of Miranda (a state next to the Capital District of Caracas) by slightly less than 11 points. With Chávez's death, the *chavista* vote collapsed badly enough that, as we have seen, Maduro barely edged Capriles, amid numerous accusations that the government had cheated.

This combination of unfair electoral processes—incumbents have stacked institutions, the media, state resources, and funding in their own favor—with growing support for the opposition is one of the most interesting aspects of contemporary Venezuelan politics.

### More Elections, Less Democracy?

Despite what would appear to be a direct and clear correlation between elections and democratic consolidation, the relationship between the two can be more complicated in an electoral authoritarian system or a low-quality democracy. Despite optimistic claims that the more elections go forward in a transitional country, the more democratic it is likely to become,<sup>6</sup> the political and institutional dynamics of electoral authoritarian regimes—and the Venezuelan case in particular—suggest that this correlation is far from automatic. Indeed, what if more elections end up making for a *less* democratic system? Some analysts have reached the conclusion that, as a rule, repeated elections have not improved the quality of democracy in Latin America.<sup>7</sup>

The relationship between democracy and elections plays out in at least two spheres. The first is the purely electoral sphere, where the frequency of electoral processes may contribute to the holding of increasingly free, fair, and competitive races. The second is the capacity of those elections to expand and deepen civil and political rights and generally strengthen institutions and the rule of law. At both levels, Venezuela's numerous elections over the past decade and a half have not strengthened human, civil, and political rights or the rule of law generally, nor have these ballots produced improvements in the democratic quality of the country's electoral processes.<sup>8</sup>

The rule of law in Venezuela deteriorated markedly under Chávez, and has continued to do so during the first months of the Maduro administration. Separation of powers; human, civil, and political rights; the freedoms of expression and association; and judicial independence have all suffered. Numerous national, regional, and international reports have documented the damage.<sup>9</sup>

Freedom House (FH) reports that the rule of law has been losing ground in Venezuela. The country dropped off FH's list of "electoral democracies" in the comprehensive annual "Freedom in the World" survey covering the year 2009. This was following the politically motivated disqualification of more than three-hundred candidates—most of them from the opposition—from running for elected office. Since that initial downgrading, Venezuela has not made it back onto the electoral-democracy list. Before this finding, FH had been pointing out the lack of equity in the electoral process, the adverse conditions imposed on the opposition, and the damage done to the separation of powers by Chávez's efforts to gather ever more authority into his own hands.

Following Chávez's rise to the presidency, Venezuela's FH scores for Political Rights and Civil Liberties grew worse. These scores run from 1 to 7, with the former signifying "most free." Over the period encompassing 1998 through 2012 (the most recent year covered by FH), Venezuela's average FH score decayed from 2.5 to 5, denoting a major decline in freedom.

Since 2002, the Polilat company and Germany's Konrad Adenauer Foundation have measured democratic development in eighteen of Latin America's nineteen countries using an "Index of Development and Democracy in Latin America" that covers political rights and civil liberties, institutional quality and political efficiency, and the ability of governments to deliver. From the outset, Venezuela's democratic-development score has been lower than the regional average. Venezuela has been placed in the class of countries marked by "minimum development," where democracy is most at risk. In 2012, Venezuela received the lowest score of any country in the region (2,418), while Costa Rica obtained the highest (10,000).<sup>10</sup>

In 2003, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR)

published its first detailed report on the deteriorating rights situation in Venezuela. Since 2007, each IACHR annual report has included a dense section on Venezuela's flaws and derelictions in the area of rights protection. Until 2011, Colombia, Cuba, Haiti, and Honduras were also included in that chapter, and Cuba and Honduras were featured along with Venezuela in the 2012 report. The IACHR reports offer detailed examinations of matters including: 1) the lack of judicial independence; 2) limits on the freedoms of speech and the press, including physical attacks on journalists and obstacles to accessing public information and reporting on events of public interest; 3) citizen insecurity severe enough to infringe on the right to life; 4) the use of the military to perform public-safety tasks; 5) assaults on the political rights of opposition voters, candidates, and elected officials; 6) gross mistreatment of prison inmates; 7) threats against human-rights defenders; 8) jailings, beatings, and murders of trade-union leaders; and 9) human-rights violations targeting indigenous people.<sup>11</sup>

The Venezuelan government has consistently refused to allow the IACHR to visit the country to follow up on its recommendations from its last mission in 2002. In September 2012, the government condemned the American Convention on Human Rights and confirmed Venezuela's withdrawal from the IACHR, thereby repudiating any obligation to comply with the decisions and recommendations issued by that human-rights body.

Although some of these failings were present in previous administrations, they have become increasingly serious since 1999, creating widespread defenselessness among citizens and leading to direct violations of the rights of individuals and organizations with opposition ties or merely a record of criticizing the government.

Electoral rights have not been spared. Since 1999, Venezuela has held seventeen electoral events. Yet amid polarization and exclusion, this proliferation of elections has brought flagrant rights violations in its train. Prominent examples include blacklists such as the infamous "Tascón List," which held the names of the 3.4 million voters who had signed the request to revoke Chávez's mandate in 2004. Many signatories continue to be targets of government discrimination. Since the April 2013 special election, the opposition has collected about five-thousand complaints from public-sector workers who have lost their jobs, seen their employment conditions downgraded, or been refused public goods and services after having been identified as Capriles voters.<sup>12</sup>

Venezuela has a fully automated voting system. Its reliability has significantly increased since it was fully implemented in 2004, during the presidential-recall referendum. Despite this technical improvement, however, the overall institutional and political environment surrounding elections has decayed. The National Electoral Council (CNE) comprises five directors, four of whom are *chavistas*; government candidates have

full access to public fiscal, media, and institutional resources that they use prior to, during, and following election day; the CNE has banned international observation missions and only allows nonprofessional “accompaniment missions”; massive social programs are launched during election campaigns and voters are threatened with loss of benefits if they vote against government candidates; public resources are used by incumbents to mobilize and intimidate voters, among other ills.<sup>13</sup> The overall lack of a level playing field—in addition to detailed reports about numerous irregularities that took place before, during, and after the April 2013 special election—tends to support the opposition’s claim that Maduro’s narrow margin of victory was in fact spurious.<sup>14</sup>

In short, both the quality of elections and the general quality of democracy have declined in Venezuela since 1999. Yet however degraded, elections remain the single most important legitimate vehicle by means of which citizens can take part in politics, key offices can be filled, interests can be aggregated, and sociopolitical conflicts can be kept within nonviolent bounds. Despite all that has been done to stop it, the opposition has successfully used elections to expand its influence, and has established the ballot as the legitimate path to power.

### **More Competition, Less Pluralism?**

How has the opposition managed to score such impressive gains under such adverse conditions? And what difference has it made? The answer to the first question lies in the opposition’s success at achieving high levels of both tactical and strategic coordination among prodemocratic individuals, parties, and civil society groups. After critically appraising its 2005 boycott, the opposition made a conscious decision to embrace the electoral path. Thus a single candidate (Manuel Rosales) ran against Chávez in 2006. Chávez won that race with an overwhelming 63 to 37 percent, but just a year later, the unified opposition—including student and youth groups—scored a success at the polls when voters narrowly rejected his proposed constitutional changes amid numerous abstentions. In 2008, there was a united opposition candidate or ticket in about 80 percent of the gubernatorial, state-legislative, and mayoral races throughout Venezuela. In 2009, the opposition rallied again to present a common front against a Chávez-backed constitutional amendment overturning term limits, losing this time by 55 to 45 percent.

Since its founding in 2008, the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) has been the formal setting in which approximately twenty parties with a wide range of ideologies deliberate over strategy and tactics and frame a common message.<sup>15</sup> The MUD has devised democratic candidate-selection procedures that in 2010 produced a unified opposition slate in more than nine of every ten legislative districts. In early 2012, the MUD used open primaries—more than three-million



people voted in them—to select its presidential contender as well as some of its regional and municipal candidates. Capriles campaigned on the MUD’s written platform in October 2012, and enjoyed MUD support in the special election six months later as well.

Ironically, it was the difficult environment and rules of the game which Chávez created that spurred his opponents to come together. Even though the 1999 Constitution enshrines a mixed electoral system, ad hoc changes have turned it into a majoritarian system featuring two large coalitions, the MUD and the *chavistas*’ Great Patriotic Pole.<sup>16</sup> The reduced access to funds, media coverage, and institutional support that Chávez imposed on the opposition has prodded it to become nimbler and smarter.

How much difference have all these opposition efforts made in terms of offices won and policies adopted? The answer is not much, or at least not as much as one might expect given the opposition’s expanding electoral weight. In a manner typical of competitive authoritarian regimes, the ruling forces in Venezuela have put up barriers that have reduced the opposition’s political impact. Strong showings in elections have not necessarily spelled new correlations of power or significant changes in public policy.

Chávez may have lost the 2007 referendum, for instance, but he got what he wanted anyway by having the National Assembly pass close to four-fifths of his preferred constitutional changes as legislation, including provisions to enshrine a socialist and communal state.<sup>17</sup> When the opposition did well in the 2008 state and local elections, winning a number of high-profile governorships and mayoralties including that of Caracas, Chávez reacted by upsetting the game board and rewriting the rules. He imposed the centralized management of ports, airports, highways, and hospitals, had governors stripped of key competencies, and even placed a special authority above the Caracas mayor’s office.<sup>18</sup> The intent in each case was clear: to deny opposition elected officials any ability to conduct effective governance and fulfill voters’ expectations.

When the opposition won nearly 52 percent of the vote in the October 2010 National Assembly elections, the government both sheltered behind preset barriers and moved to drain this showing of significance. The 2009 electoral law imposed a “reverse bonus” on the opposition, leaving it with just 40 percent of the seats despite its having won more than half the vote. Moreover, the outgoing Assembly (elected in 2005 when the opposition boycotted) used the interval before the new Assembly’s seating in January 2011 to pass 27 laws in addition to a special law that gave the president powers to legislate on a wide range of matters for eighteen months. Another measure curtailed Assembly sessions, barred independent media from access to them, and reduced the relevance of the legislative branch as a whole. In consequence, the opposition’s legislative influence has been severely hampered and its presence in the

National Assembly has failed to produce a more pluralistic legislative process.

### What's Next?

How might things unfold now that Hugo Chávez is no longer around? At present, the leading facts on the ground are the opposition's growing political and electoral strength, and the government's waning fiscal and managerial capacity. A main weakness is the apparent lack of leadership strong enough to hold the broad *chavista* coalition together despite its significant internal tensions. These have been rising, though they have not yet (at the time of this writing in early June 2013) led to formal divisions or overt confrontations within the regime.<sup>19</sup> *Chavistas* have enough incentives, strengths, and roots in Venezuela to aspire to continue participating in political life.<sup>20</sup> The main question is whether their path to involvement will be democratic or authoritarian.

Some possible courses of events are described below. Although I present them as distinct scenarios, I would add that in all likelihood, the route Venezuela actually takes will combine elements taken from several of them. That said, the possibilities may be described as follows:

**1) *Open or thinly disguised repression and dictatorship.*** With the legitimacy of its origins questioned, Maduro's administration is off to a weak start that is hampering its ability to govern. An additional source of tension and instability is the urgent need to address the dire state of the economy and public administration inherited from Chávez. As the existing order fails to deliver basic goods and services—in May 2013, there were severe shortages of items as basic as toilet paper, milk, and coffee, and by June accumulated inflation had already reached 20 percent—the government finds itself facing widespread protests, in many cases spearheaded by sectors that are close to the regime itself.<sup>21</sup>

The authorities could react to these myriad challenges with overt repression, inspired perhaps by the Cuban model. The close relationship forged between the governments of Cuba and Venezuela over the past fourteen years—and made stronger during the time of Chávez's illness—has continued into the first months of the new administration. Indeed, Nicolás Maduro is known as a longtime "Castrophile" whose ties to Cuba date back to before Chávez's rise to power.

The ruling coalition, however, also includes key civil, military, and political elements that do not identify with the Cuban model specifically, or with any other overtly dictatorial solution. The Venezuelan public does not regard authoritarianism, much less dictatorship, as an acceptable model. In order to impose a dictatorial system—for example by installing a civilian-military junta that suspends civil and political rights and bans the opposition—the government would have to employ

extremely repressive tactics and would face powerful resistance not only from the general public and the organized opposition, but also from within its own coalition and the ranks of the military.

Moreover, the Latin American region and the international community would repudiate such a move. The same adverse reactions would be roused by *any* form of coup or dictatorial takeover, whether it came in the shape of an attempt by Maduro to stage a self-coup somewhat in the manner of Alberto Fujimori; of an anti-Maduro coup launched by disgruntled elements of the ruling coalition; of an antigovernment coup originated by opposition forces; or some combination of the above.

A partial verdict against the repressive-radicalization scenario came in at the end of April 2013. National Assembly president Diosdado Cabello refused to permit opposition lawmakers to take part in debates and allowed violent physical aggression against them, leaving several with serious injuries. Cabello claimed that if opposition deputies were unwilling to recognize Maduro as the legitimate president, he was unwilling to recognize them as legitimate lawmakers. This seemed like an attempt to eliminate the opposition from the legislative branch. This disturbing behavior in the National Assembly drew vigorous domestic, regional, and international condemnation—not only from critics of the Venezuelan government, but from some of its allies as well. In addition to inviting international censure, these actions have handed the opposition a high-profile opportunity to condemn the government's authoritarian tendencies.

Nonetheless, neither the democratic governments of the Western Hemisphere, the regional bodies that they have formed, nor the instruments (such as the Inter-American Democratic Charter or IADC) that these bodies have produced have proven effective at curbing the authoritarian tendencies of the *chavista* model. Chávez himself walked right up to the edge of what the IADC, adopted by the Organization of American States in 2001, defines as interruption of the democratic order. He distorted Venezuela's democratic political and institutional apparatus to the point of alteration, which the Charter equally condemns, without meeting much of a response. But a blatant interruption would probably arouse a more forceful regional and international reaction, as happened in April 2002 during the short-lived coup against Chávez and then again eleven years later after the recent violent attacks on opposition lawmakers.

Still, the government could choose—indeed, it already has chosen—to step up its repressive actions. Since the April 2013 election and the protests that followed it, *chavista* authorities have unleashed a powerful wave of repression and systematic defamation against the opposition. Faced with adversity, the government has reacted by giving freer rein to its authoritarian instincts. The possibility that it might increase its use of selective repression to quell dissidence and social protest cannot be ruled out.

If this strategy of preemptive intimidation fails and mass unrest does break out, how far will the Venezuelan armed forces be willing to go in seeking to repress an angry populace? During the April 2002 coup against Chávez, most of the officer corps refused to obey the president's orders to use force against antiregime demonstrators who staged huge protests in Caracas. After more than a decade of revolutionary indoctrination and Cubanization, it is unclear whether the military would again ignore such a presidential order.<sup>22</sup> Would the prospect of international condemnation, even from the government's own allies, stay the military's hand? The role of the military changed dramatically under *chavista* rule. Chávez carried out special efforts to incorporate the armed forces into his political model with a view to making them into loyal supporters of his personal rule and of the "Bolivarian revolution." Now, with Chávez no longer present, it is unclear where their loyalties will go and whether they would be willing to support an overt dictatorial undertaking.

**2) *Recovering democracy and expanding pluralism.*** The *chavista* coalition faces a major challenge in rebuilding its leadership from within and presenting a united front to both Venezuelans and the world. Maduro will need to make up for his lack of personal stature by building a collegial leadership with other key *chavistas* such as Cabello and Rafael Ramírez, the head of PDVSA, Venezuela's state oil company. In order to accommodate the different internal factions and interests in the face of growing domestic and international pressures, the ruling coalition will have to moderate its exclusionary practices and rhetoric, redefine relevant traits of its economic model, and improve its respect for rights. It remains to be seen whether the authoritarian instinct will prevail over the pragmatism that sometimes influences the *chavistas*.

While the forces of *chavismo* are interested in identifying ways to craft internal alliances that will enable the coalition to remain relevant and in power, the opposition is looking at ways to develop governability agreements to allow for a more pluralistic and democratic coexistence for the two sides. Municipal elections are set for 8 December 2013. The opposition will most likely do well. The next balloting after that—the 2015 National Assembly election—should see the opposition expand its share of the National Assembly.

The opposition forces' growth might have a gradually moderating effect on institutions currently controlled by the *chavistas*, thereby fostering greater pluralism and a less uneven distribution of power. A sort of bipartisan system could stabilize around the two main coalitions, the MUD and the Great Patriotic Pole, assuming each retains the bulk of its constituents. The opposition's advance in the face of a weak government with waning popular support could spur a "thaw" of sorts in which the governing apparatus becomes less distracted by partisanship and politicization and hence better at basic tasks.

This process would be incremental rather than abrupt. The political and institutional dynamics of moderation would leave the radical extremes from each bloc feeling elbowed out, which would make them ready to break away and form parties of their own. As in the Chilean or Spanish cases, pacts could be defined to move toward the full recovery of democracy and pluralism. It must be noted, however, that the Venezuelan case differs from those in that Venezuela has not plunged into a fully dictatorial regime and is ruled by an ideologically leftist coalition, whereas the regimes in both Franco's Spain and Pinochet's Chile were rightist. An amalgam of compromises and partial agreements could gradually depolarize the political arena and pluralize institutions and policy making. According to Ramón Guillermo Avelo, the head of the MUD, the goal of the democratic alternative in Venezuela, like that of its Spanish and Chilean forerunners, is "to disarticulate the authoritarian [form of] legality without disrupting legality [itself]."<sup>23</sup>

The main obstacles to this scenario are the taste for fire-breathing and polarizing rhetoric that Chávez introduced and flooded the public sphere with for fourteen long years, plus the hegemonic and exclusionary conception of politics and power that the *chavista* leadership favors. Yet even that might be surmounted: There are cases from Latin America and elsewhere of societies far more traumatized than Venezuela's that have nonetheless found ways to craft compromises and normalize political life despite conflicts. In addition to Chile, Argentina and Brazil have known military dictatorship well within living memory. El Salvador and Honduras endured decades of bloody internal warfare. South Africa had to cope with racial apartheid and its terrible legacy. Before the Pact of Punto Fijo, Venezuela itself had survived a failed first attempt at democracy (1945–48) followed by a decade of dictatorship under General Marcos Pérez Jiménez.

Under *chavista* rule, Venezuela has not experienced an open dictatorship or internal armed strife, nor has it been afflicted by formal racial or other kinds of segregation. Nonetheless, there have been serious outbursts of violence, intolerance, and exclusion—and not just on the level of rhetoric. The example of Fidel Castro's Cuba and its half-century-old dictatorship is baleful. Radical revolutionaries distrust elections and pluralistic rule due to their inherent uncertainty. As a prominent *chavista* said to a Cuban intelligence official in a now-notorious exchange, Fidel Castro "told me that he did not understand why Comandante Chávez had never finished with bourgeois elections. Because the people make mistakes, and I absolutely agree—I absolutely and totally agree."<sup>24</sup>

The example of the long-ruling Castro regime in Cuba fills members of Venezuela's ruling coalition with expectations of enjoying a similarly lasting and hegemonic grip on power, and of permanently implanting "Bolivarian socialism." Such expectations work against efforts to normalize and pluralize political life. Thus, while the Venezuelan case does

not exhibit the extremes seen in other nations, we should still expect to see at least a sizeable portion of the ruling elite strenuously oppose any transition to pluralism.

**3) *The Mexican model of a hegemonic party turned democratic.*** It might seem foolish to think that the *chavistas* could come to accept true pluralism and liberal democracy. Yet Mexico's long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) seems to have managed such a feat in the years leading up to its loss of the presidency to the National Action Party in 2000. The 2012 election returned the PRI to the presidency. Despite its failings, the PRI does appear to have dropped its hegemonic aspirations and has shown a willingness to adapt to the rules of the multiparty game. After the hard lesson of the 1948 coup, Venezuela's Democratic Action party underwent a similar change, exchanging the hegemonic ambitions of 1945 for the level-headed openness to power sharing of 1958 and the years following.

**4) *The Nicaraguan model of a hegemonic party unresigned to sharing power.*** But then there is the geographically and ideologically closer case of Nicaragua, which must give pause. There, the radical leftists of the Sandinista movement combine a tactical acceptance of the need to play the pluralistic game with a strategic vision focused on hegemony and an exclusive grip on power. Accustomed to the quasi-monopolistic exercise of power—and with expectations of imposing an enduring hegemonic model—Venezuela's current ruling coalition might grudgingly and temporarily accept, with little democratic conviction, the rules and results of pluralization. It may well, however, remain on the lookout for opportunities to return to a hegemonic approach, as has occurred in Nicaragua under Daniel Ortega and his Sandinista Front. Among those Latin American countries that Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way have identified as competitive authoritarian regimes that became democratic (the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Peru), only Nicaragua has regressed to a form of hybrid authoritarianism.

Aspiring hegemonies prosper if they have public support and if other political stakeholders and potentially countervailing institutions are weak or inattentive. In Venezuela, the forces of democracy have made considerable progress, but the country's institutions are a mess: politicized, fragile, and in a state of disarray that imperils their reconstruction and pluralization in the short term. Rebuilding them will be a long-term job at best. In the meantime—and it could be a long time—those who can dream of no other political path than the monopolistic exercise of power will be tempted to turn that dream into a waking nightmare for an already deeply troubled country. Yet in contrast to Nicaragua, Venezuela's previous four decades of democratic rule, combined with the intense "learning experience" that the fourteen years of democratic decay have imposed, may provide a firmer basis for deterring an antidemocratic regression.

## NOTES

1. These terms come from, respectively, Andreas Schedler, ed., *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2006); and Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

2. For the combination of ideological influences on Chávez and *chavismo*, see Agustín Blanco Muñoz, *Habla el comandante* (Caracas: Fundación Cátedra Pío Tamayo, 1998); Cristina Marcano and Alberto Barrera, *Hugo Chávez sin uniforme: Una historia personal* (Mexico: Debate, 2005), and Enrique Krauze, *El poder y el delirio* (Caracas: Editorial Alfa, 2008).

3. The interplay of these features is described in Javier Corrales and Michael Penfold, “Venezuela: Crowding Out the Opposition,” *Journal of Democracy* 18 (April 2007): 99–113, as well as in the same authors’ book *Dragon in the Tropics: Hugo Chávez and the Political Economy of Revolution in Venezuela* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2011).

4. Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*, 9–12.

5. Kenneth F. Greene, *Why Dominant Parties Lose: Mexico’s Democratization in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

6. See Staffan I. Lindberg, *Democracy and Elections in Africa* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); and Staffan I. Lindberg, ed., *Democratization by Elections: A New Mode of Transition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

7. Jennifer McCoy and Jonathan Hartlyn, “The Relative Powerlessness of Elections in Latin America,” in Lindberg, *Democratization by Elections*, 47–76.

8. Miriam Kornblith, “Venezuela: Calidad de las elecciones y calidad de la democracia,” *América Latina Hoy*, no. 45, 2007, 109–24; and Daniel Levine and José Enrique Molina, “Calidad de la Democracia en Venezuela,” *América Latina Hoy*, no. 62, 2012, 157–75.

9. See, for example, the 2012–2013 report on the “Rule of Law Index” compiled by the World Justice Project, available at [www.worldjusticeproject.org](http://www.worldjusticeproject.org).

10. The Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and Polilat index is available at [www.idd-lat.org](http://www.idd-lat.org).

11. Organization of American States, *Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 2012 Annual Report* (Washington, D.C.: OAS, 2013).

12. A few days after the special election, Housing and Habitat Minister Ricardo Molina told his ministry’s staff: “I don’t care what the labor laws say. . . . I do not accept anyone coming here to speak badly of the revolution or to criticize Nicolás [Maduro]. . . . Anyone who wants to be an activist for Voluntad Popular [the opposition party] should resign, because if they don’t resign, I will personally kick them out.” *El Nacional* (Caracas), 22 April 2013.

13. On conditions surrounding the October 2012 presidential balloting, see Carter Center, *Study Mission to the October 7, 2012, Presidential Election in Venezuela: Final Report* (Atlanta: Carter Center, 2012).

14. In early May 2013, Capriles filed a claim before the Electoral Chamber of the Supreme Court requesting the annulment of the whole electoral process. The opposition platform filed a claim requesting the nullification of results and a revote involving more than two-million voters across more than 5,700 precincts.

15. Ramón Guillermo Avelo, the MUD's executive secretary, has affirmed in an interview that his coalition draws inspiration from Chile's multiparty prodemocratic alliance, the Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia. Ramón Guillermo Avelo, "Nuestro modelo ha sido la concertación chilena," *El País Internacional* (Madrid), 30 September 2012.

16. José E. Molina Vega, "La reforma informal del sistema electoral venezolano: De la representación proporcional al sistema mayoritario sin alterar una coma," in Arturo Fontaine et al., eds., *Reforma del sistema electoral chileno* (Santiago de Chile: UNDP, 2009): 139–64.

17. See Civilis, "Análisis comparativo de la constitución de 1999, la propuesta de reforma constitucional no aprobada de 2007, y las leyes del estado comunal aprobadas entre 2008–2012," available at <http://civilisac.worldpress.com>; and Margarita López Maya, *Democracia participativa en Venezuela (1999–2010): Orígenes, leyes, percepciones y desafíos* (Caracas: Centro Gumilla–UCAB, 2011).

18. Manuel Hidalgo, "Hugo Chávez's 'Petro-Socialism,'" *Journal of Democracy* 20 (April 2009): 78–92.

19. One source of strain is the tension between Maduro and National Assembly president Diosdado Cabello. Strong evidence of this tension was provided by the release on 20 May 2013 of a taped private conversation between Mario Silva, a prominent and radical *chavista* television presenter, and a Cuban agent from the G2 (Cuba's secret service) stationed in Venezuela. The exchange highlighted the alleged hostility of Cabello toward Maduro, and exposed a vast network of corruption and the massive mismanagement of public funds involving Cabello and other prominent civilian and military members of the *chavista* elite. The recording painted a dire picture of the inner circles of *chavismo*. A transcript is available at [www.noticiasclac.com/images/2013Mayo/TRANSCRIPCION.pdf](http://www.noticiasclac.com/images/2013Mayo/TRANSCRIPCION.pdf).

20. Javier Corrales and Manuel Hidalgo, "El régimen híbrido de Hugo Chávez en transición (2009–2013)," paper presented at the meeting of the Latin American Studies Association, Washington, D.C., 29 May–1 June 2013.

21. The Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social (Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict) has reported the occurrence of an increasing number of conflicts during 2013: 274 in January, 297 in February, 403 in April, 317 in May. The main areas of conflict are labor rights, housing, prisons, citizen security, political rights, access to justice and education. See [www.observatoriodeconflictos.org.ve](http://www.observatoriodeconflictos.org.ve).

22. The Cuban presence in Venezuela began as early as 1998, the year Chávez first ran for president. That presence was augmented further by the launch in 2003 of massive social programs that brought thousands of Cuban physicians, paramedics, sports trainers, and teachers to Venezuela. After fully embracing socialism in 2005, Chávez fostered an even closer alliance with Cuba in areas such as the armed forces, communications, and intelligence and secret services, besides a large variety of oil-related and economic agreements. Since 2007, Cuban military personnel have acted as advisors and implementers within the Venezuelan armed forces, and Venezuelan officers regularly travel to the island to receive training and advanced military education. Somewhere between 200 and 300 Cuban troops are stationed at Fort Tiuna in Caracas, with the task of providing advice and support for various military and intelligence activities. See Francisco Olivares, "Cubanos en Venezuela," *El Universal* (Caracas), 5 May 2013.

23. Avelo made this remark in the interview cited in note 15 above.

24. This comment appears on page 10 of the transcript cited in note 19 above.