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Venezuela's Succession Crisis

JAVIER CORRALES

Venezuela is known for some of the worst political crises in Latin America. In the past 25 years, it has experienced deadly riots, coup attempts, impeachment, party system volatility, polarization, electoral boycotts, rising labor protests, arrests of national figures, controversial nationalizations, and even war threats against neighboring Colombia. Short of civil war, Venezuela appears to have seen it all. And yet a new crisis now looms over Venezuela. This time, it's a succession crisis.

As of this writing, health issues were forcing Hugo Chávez, president since 1999, to leave office prematurely, bringing new heights of uncertainty to a country already famous for confounding forecasters. This succession crisis may or may not turn out to be Venezuela's worst crisis, but like previous ones it could transform the country, and possibly the region.

Succession crises are unusual in real democracies, since they are governed by rules (within constitutions, within the electoral system, and within presidential parties). In autocracies, successions are always indeterminate. Without the leader who embodies all branches of government, no one knows with certainty what rules need to be followed. The leader may have had his or her own wishes, but once he or she is deceased, there is no one with unquestionable authority to enforce those wishes. Anything can happen. This is why the late economist Mancur Olson said that succession crises are the curse of autocracies, even stable ones, and why autocracies have a harder time than democracies in safeguarding their legacies.

Venezuela, whose regime is a mixture of democracy and autocracy, is already in the midst of a suc-

cession crisis. Some rules are being followed; many others are not. It is hard to predict what will become of Venezuela after Chávez, yet it is possible to understand the forces at play during this process.

Two sets of forces in particular are important. The first is weaknesses in Chávez's electoral coalition, which is becoming too expensive to maintain. The second is a series of governance challenges that Chávez left behind.

NO PLAN B

The succession crisis erupted in November 2012 when Chávez, shortly after winning reelection for a third time, made two shocking announcements. First, he said that he needed to travel to Cuba, yet again, for more cancer treatment. Venezuelans had first been told of the cancer in June 2011, when Chávez was forced to publicly acknowledge widespread rumors that he was ill. But he spent most of his 2012 reelection campaign asserting that he was cured.

Many Venezuelans began to believe Chávez's optimism. His party, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), almost seemed to have forgotten about his health and focused on the reelection drive, coasting to a fourth consecutive victory for Chávez on October 7, 2012. When the news came just days after the election that Chávez needed more treatment, celebration turned to panic as reality set in. He had actually been faking it all along—his health was declining, and worse yet, there still was no Plan B. Party members wanted answers from their omniscient leader, but he was in seclusion in Cuba and uncharacteristically silent. Even his famously active Twitter account went quiet.

Then came the biggest shock. Chávez interrupted his treatment in Cuba to fly back to Caracas for a weekend. On the medical front, he had nothing good to report—another surgery was needed, urgently. On the political front, however, he had major news: He was finally ready to reveal his chosen

JAVIER CORRALES, a professor of political science at Amherst College, is the co-author with Carlos A. Romero of *US-Venezuela Relations Since the 1990s: Coping with Middle Level Security Threats* (Routledge 2013).

successor. In a televised speech on December 8, surrounded by his closest political allies (and candidates for succession), Chávez anointed Nicolás Maduro, the foreign minister since 2006 and vice president since 2012.

Until that point, Chávez had refused to talk about succession. The silence was so conspicuous that the topic likely had been banned in press conferences and party events. The president's abrupt decision to announce his choice of successor indicates that a crisis was in the making, with too many actors hoping to lead Venezuela. The announcement did calm nerves in the party, lessening speculation among his followers, the Chavistas.

Still, it was strangely unsettling. The choice of Maduro introduced new mysteries. The president who had become the epitome of ubiquity—dominating headlines and airwaves since he first ran for president 15 years ago—chose one of the least known figures in his group to succeed him. As the blogger Francisco Toro noted, few Venezuelans—Chavista or otherwise—knew Maduro at all. As Chávez's top diplomat since 2006, Maduro had spent most of his time abroad. No one doubted that he was loyal to Chávez, but everything else about him was open to speculation. The yes-man was a mystery man.

Chávez's choice was both rule-bound and rule-defiant.

According to the Venezuelan constitution, if the president is "absolutely absent" from power, then power is transferred to the vice president and he must call an election. That Chávez chose Maduro in some ways revealed a certain adherence to the constitution that Chávez himself designed in 1999. Yet Chávez also said that Maduro would be the party's candidate for any future election—a sign of imperiousness. Specifically, the announcement communicated to party members that they had no say in the matter: Primaries, who needs them?

THE PEOPLE'S CEREMONY

The succession crisis reached a new level of uncertainty as the inauguration date, January 10, 2013, approached. By late December, it was clear that Chávez, still in Cuba, would not be able to attend. He was suffering from a "post-operative pulmonary infection," and was being kept in "absolute rest." The administration needed to decide whom to swear in.

The constitution offered some rules. It sets the date of the inauguration. It states that in the event the president-elect is deemed to be in "absolute absence," the president of the National Assembly (in this case, a former military official, state governor, and wealthy Chavista named Diosdado Cabello) would need to be sworn in.

Absolute absence in the Venezuelan constitution does not just mean death; it could also be invoked in cases of physical or mental incapacity to govern. Either way, Maduro and Cabello were not ready to declare Chávez in such a state, so they proposed postponing the inauguration date until further notice. This decision made world headlines. Non-Chavistas at home and abroad were appalled. They argued that the president-elect ought to have been declared, if not in "absolute absence," then in "temporary absence," a designation that exists in the Venezuelan constitution for presidents, though not for presidents-elect.

But Maduro seemed to have no interest in seeing Cabello become president, even if temporarily. So to prevent him from taking office, the only option was to postpone Chávez's swearing-in ceremony. Cabello went along.

In defense of their postponement decision, Maduro and Cabello invoked quintessentially populist logic: We are respecting the people's "sovereignty"—the citizenry reelected Chávez in October, and thus the swearing-in ceremony mandated by the constitution was a mere formality. For almost everyone else, however, the decision was emblematic of all that was undemocratic about the regime. A constitutional rule (the expiration date of a presidential term) was dismissed, proving again the government's low regard for the rule of law.

The decision to postpone was made in Cuba (Maduro and Cabello traveled to Havana before announcing the decision), almost certainly with input from the Cuban government, demonstrating the extent to which Venezuela had surrendered sovereignty to a foreign nation, one that incidentally was undemocratic. The Supreme Tribunal sided entirely with the government, confirming the opposition's view that the court represented a mere adjunct to the cabinet rather than a separate branch of government.

Under normal circumstances and in most democracies, the spectacle of an unelected official from an outgoing administration cavalierly declar-

Venezuela has come to exhibit features typically associated with failed states.

ing that its authority had no expiration date would be considered a grave transgression. In Venezuela, the government called it an act of “administrative continuity.”

So on January 10, rather than holding a swearing-in ceremony, the government organized a pro-government rally. Instead of the president, it was those in attendance who were sworn in—and they were asked to pledge “absolute loyalty” to Chávez. In what resembled nothing less than a beatification ceremony, chants, prayers, crucifixes, and tears, all led by Marxists, were presented on behalf of the unseen Chávez. The sociologist Margarita López-Maya said the day would go down in history as one of the best examples of “Latin American exuberance” when it comes to defiance of the rule of law.

At the rally, threatening words against the opposition were spoken. Maduro talked about taking “legally very forceful actions” against “some governors.” Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, one of three Latin American presidents attending the event, called the opposition “vultures,” moments after he called for peace. Just the day before, the state’s media regulatory agency had imposed more fines on Globovisión, one of the few independent news outlets left in the country, accusing it of violating the constitution by disagreeing with the government’s interpretation of what needed to happen on inauguration day.

Venezuela after January 10 was thus left with at least two strong men. Maduro stayed as the unelected vice president, acting on behalf of the unsworn-in Chávez, while Cabello stayed as a potential interim president—a veritable two-headed regime. Both men started the year making joint presidential decisions, repeating the need for more socialism, and embracing Chávez’s belligerence toward opponents, in words and deeds.

Nobody knows now who will become the ultimate decision maker. Whoever does, his tasks will necessarily involve fixing not only the many problems in the country left behind by Chávez, but also the inevitable disarray that Chávez left within his own party. Neither task will be easy.

A PERFECT VICTORY?

What kind of political legacy will Chávez’s successor inherit? One way to answer this is to analyze the results of the October 7 presidential election. There are two possible readings. One is that the election was the revolution’s finest moment. After 14 years in office, Chávez won by a convincing margin of 11.1 percentage points. The

president himself declared it a “perfect victory.” Chávez’s margin was large enough to dampen the opposition’s energy.

A small margin of victory would have done the opposite. As Oxford’s Laurence Whitehead has argued, close electoral results in the context of mistrusted electoral rules are a recipe for instability, with the losing side claiming frequently that the margin of irregularity surpasses the margin of victory. Two pollsters out of eight had suggested that the results would be close, and Patrick Duddy, a former US ambassador in Caracas, wrote that Venezuela could experience “significant political unrest and violence” after the election.

Chávez’s winning margin put these fears to rest. He significantly expanded his overall number of votes from the PSUV share in the 2010 parliamentary elections. He won in all states except two, even winning (by a tiny margin) in Miranda, the state where his main challenger, the energetic 40-year-old Henrique Capriles, had been governor until recently.

In the gubernatorial elections that took place two months later, the PSUV achieved another landslide. Although abstention rates skyrocketed (to 47 percent, from 19 percent in the presidential election), this affected both the government and the opposition almost equally, so the end result was similar: The PSUV prevailed by an overall margin of 11 points, and won governorships in 20 of 23 states, taking 4 away from the opposition. The government committed many illegalities during the campaign, but few irregularities occurred on the election days. As a consequence, the opposition was quick to accept the results of both the presidential and gubernatorial elections (except in the state of Bolívar).

The victories of 2012 could be considered perfect, therefore, in that they were large enough to demonstrate once again that Chávez and his party enjoy electoral dominance over the country. What makes these victories all the more remarkable is that the PSUV was running with little help from Chávez, whose health precluded him from campaigning at full power. During the presidential campaign, Chávez managed to visit fewer than 15 cities, a very low number relative to previous elections and to the more than 60 cities visited by Capriles. And during the gubernatorial campaign, Chávez spent most of his time in Havana receiving cancer treatment.

The alternative view of the Venezuelan presidential election, however, sees underperformance by the Chávez government. Chávez’s 11.1-point margin was small in relation to regional trends

for incumbents running for reelection. According to my estimates, the average winning margin for Latin American presidents running for reelection since 1984 is 28 points, a testament to the region's acute case of incumbent's advantage. In fact, Chávez's margin of victory was the smallest for an incumbent in Latin America since 1990.

In addition, Chávez's margin was small relative to his own electoral record—he won reelection in 2000 by 22 points and in 2006 by 26 points. The president lost in large cities, which is where most poor Venezuelans live. (The PSUV is electorally dominant, but mostly in non-urban settings.) Chávez's 2012 vote share of 55 percent was considerably lower than his surveyed level of popularity right before the election, which hovered around 63 percent.

Chávez's popularity level, incidentally, sounded impressive in relation to incumbents in the United States since the late 1990s, but it was not that impressive for Latin America, where approval ratings for presidents, even those in their second terms, are often quite high. For instance, Mauricio Funes in El Salvador, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (in 1998) and Dilma Rousseff in Brazil, Michelle Bachelet in Chile (2010), Álvaro Uribe in Colombia (2010), and Otto Pérez Molina in Guatemala have all had approval ratings of 64 percent or higher, and none of them benefited from the sympathy effect that cancer had on Chávez's popularity after 2011. The president's reelection thus was clearly less than perfect.

INCUMBENT'S ADVANTAGE

One could make the counterargument that Chávez did well considering that he was running for a third consecutive reelection, something that no Latin American president except Peru's Alberto Fujimori has done because of constitutional prohibitions. Chávez survived the typical public exhaustion that comes with long duration in office—in this case, 14 years—making his reelection the more remarkable. However, no other Latin American president has ever run for reelection with the type of economic and institutional advantages that Chávez enjoyed in 2012.

First, no other Latin American president governs a petro-state. No other country in the region, except Trinidad and Tobago, has the level of com-

modity dependence that Venezuela has on oil, which accounts for 95 percent of its exports. In Mexico, another major oil producer, fuels account for only 54 percent of exports. In terms of revenues, the 2004–12 period has been the best ever for petro-states, given the record-high levels of oil prices: This was the largest oil boom since the 1970s. Indeed, the Venezuelan government has received Latin America's largest windfall of all time in dollar-based per capita government revenues.

Second, the Venezuelan state has monopolistic control of the export sector. While other countries in the region are experiencing a commodity price boom, governments are benefiting from it indirectly through taxes on the private sector, which typically owns these exports. In Venezuela, by contrast, the state owns the booming export commodity. The commodity boom affecting the entire region is benefiting the Venezuelan state disproportionately, relative to all other states, as well as to other actors within the country.

Third, Venezuela is not only a monopolistic petro-state, but a semi-authoritarian state. One feature of all semi-authoritarian states is that few checks exist on the power of the president, especially the spending power. And in Venezuela under Chávez, the president's formal powers to manage the oil sector were not semi-authoritarian, but entirely authoritarian: There simply are no checks on how the president manages the funds coming into Venezuela through oil sales. In the year before the election, expenditures increased more than 40 percent in real terms to represent 51 percent of GDP, the highest level in Latin America. The budget deficit surpassed 17 percent of GDP, a record level, in the year of the highest average oil price in history.

As a petro-state with strong authoritarian tinges, Venezuela does not have a fair electoral environment. Under Chávez the country adopted a hybrid system in which elections and some freedoms coexist with unfair electoral practices. A salient feature is the uneven application of laws: The government is allowed to operate with impunity, while the opposition faces aggressively enforced draconian laws.

A perfect example during the 2012 campaign was airtime. The opposition was forced to adhere to the Electoral Council's strict limit of three minutes of free airtime coverage per day. The govern-

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ment had on average 48 additional minutes per day to broadcast, under the guise of “public announcements,” all the information it cared to disseminate across all stations, private or public. Equally unfair, the government applied a constitutional ban on public financing to all parties except the PSUV.

A fourth advantage enjoyed by the incumbent flows from the fact that Venezuela is not a conventional emerging market. It has one of the least business-friendly environments in the world, according to a 2013 *Doing Business* report by the World Bank. Chávez’s policy toward the private sector was designed to prevent it from being the country’s primary economic engine. Whereas in most countries today, governments explore various partnerships with the private sector to incentivize investment, in Venezuela the state tries to go it alone and imposes antiquated regulations on business—including price controls, exchange rate controls, and stiff taxation and penalties—that discourage investment. A 2012 survey of industrialists showed that 56 percent were not making new investments, and the sector as a whole was operating at 47.5 percent capacity. The result has been underperformance of the private sector, with capital flight, meager job creation, and virtually no new exports.

Strangling the private sector may not be great for development, but it works wonders electorally. The state, presenting itself as the best hope for the poor, can promise more welfare spending. A recent poll shows that the percentage of Venezuelans benefiting from the Missions (the government’s welfare programs) went from an already high 40 percent in 2011 to 44 percent in mid-2012. One would not expect welfare dependence to increase amid a booming economy, but under Chávez, this was a reelection strategy.

And finally, of course, there is the “coerced” vote. In previous elections the opposition complained that the regime was unwilling to guarantee the right to secret voting. In 2004–05, Venezuelans who backed a referendum to recall Chávez were heavily penalized. The opposition fought hard to ensure that this would not happen again, but the government chose instead to focus on coercing Chavista votes. By midday of the 2012 election, the government was able to determine how many people had not yet voted, and compared them with its lists of people registered for Misión Vivienda, a housing program with a million applicants. Party

representatives visited the homes of these people and insinuated that eligibility for housing benefits was contingent on voting.

In short, the combination of record-level oil resources, arbitrary application of power, and growing weakness of the private sector, together with yet another government-stimulated consumption boom, gave Chávez an extraordinary economic and institutional advantage. Few other democratic presidents in the world enjoy such advantages.

AILING GOVERNANCE

Because the incumbent’s advantage is so strong in Venezuela, perhaps the appropriate question to ask is not so much what explained Chávez’s victory, but rather, why didn’t Chávez win by a wider margin? As the energy expert Francisco Monaldi, and I observed at a lecture at Harvard this past fall, the economy and the institutional environment were so decisively and, dare one say, illegally tilted toward the incumbent that one should have expected the president to double his margin of victory and thus come closer to the Latin American average of a 28-point difference. Considering the overwhelming resources committed by the state, why did the PSUV obtain only 55 percent of the vote? Why did Chávez’s victory cost the government so much?

To understand Chávez’s electoral underperformance, it is important to recognize the two most important trends in Venezuela undermining the revolution: a gradual decline in governance overall, and the impressive achievements of the opposition leading up to last year’s elections. These two factors have taken a huge toll on the ruling party’s popularity. They are also the most pressing issues that will face Chávez’s successor.

Venezuela is seriously afflicted by governance ailments, which are different from basic macroeconomic problems. In terms of growth rates, unemployment, and inflation rates—three indicators typically used to measure the probability of incumbents’ victories—Venezuela was not doing badly in 2012. The country’s economy was growing again, recovering from a 2008–10 recession. Inflation and unemployment were high but stable. And the government had been able to raise real wages significantly since 2011. Venezuela in 2012 was under the spell of a massive government-induced economic stimulus. This alone was

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enough to predict a large victory for the incumbent. The real problem was governance.

Venezuela has come to exhibit features typically associated with failed states. The country is suffering from declining productivity, underinvestment, growing indebtedness, and even capital flight in the energy sector, which is unusual for a petro-state in boom times. Venezuela in 2012 was importing gasoline, and faced electricity outages regularly. Infrastructure projects were either advancing slowly or collapsing. Last year Venezuela experienced the world's worst gas explosion, and the collapse of an important interstate highway bridge.

The government's nationalization campaign, which picked up speed in 2007, has brought new ailments. Since its nationalization in 2008, for example, the steel company Sidor has generated losses of \$580 million. Most nationalized companies suffer declining outputs and declining service, and in some cases are shut down for good. In 2012, Conviasa, the state-run airline, became the only Latin American airline to be banned by the European Union for safety unreliability.

In another sign of state incompetence, Venezuela in 2012 had the world's highest murder rate. Despite more than 20 crime-prevention initiatives, it came close to registering 70 murders per 100,000. This is probably the highest that any country at peace has ever seen, other than El Salvador in 2011, and certainly far above what is typical of countries of comparable income levels. Crime is so pervasive in Venezuela, especially in the poorest neighborhoods, that it is by far the most lucrative and increasingly preferred business activity among low-income Venezuelans.

Ironically for a "socialist government," labor disputes and other disturbances also have been on the rise. According to PROVEA, a respected non-governmental organization focusing on human rights, incidents of civil protests in Venezuela rose from a record high of 1,576 in the 2006–07 period, to a new record of 4,543 in 2010–11.

It is instructive to compare Venezuela with the Arab Gulf states. In the 2000s, the Gulf states became, in the words of David Held and Kristian Ulrichsen, editors of a recent book on the topic, the "center of geo-economic gravity in West Asia." The region is now an infrastructure, transportation, architectural, job market, business, and financial world hub, demonstrating that it is possible for petro-states to transition away from being do-nothing states. Venezuela shows that an alternative path for petro-states is in the direction of

declining state capacity. When even the government's most sacred milk cow, the state-owned oil company, is struggling, you know managerial competence is not this regime's strong suit.

A TRANSFORMED OPPOSITION

In addition to governance problems, Chávez's lower-than-expected margin resulted from remarkable attributes displayed by the opposition. For many years, the Venezuelan opposition was infamous for its mistakes and disarray. However, by 2012, it had transformed itself almost beyond recognition. This recovery, too, will color the political legacy that Chávez's successor will inherit.

Cornell's Valerie Bunce and George Washington University's Sharon L. Wolchik provide a checklist of goals that an opposition needs to achieve in order to beat a semi-authoritarian regime: unity, an ambitious campaign, voter registration and turnout drives, pressure on election commissions, collaboration with civil society and youth movements, public opinion polls, exit polls, and parallel voter tabulation. As Toro the blogger has argued, except for polling, the Venezuelan opposition has met all these goals, and more.

One important additional achievement is leadership renewal. Very few of the figures who led the opposition *Coordinadora Democrática* in the early stages of confrontation with Chávez in the early 2000s have been leaders of the coalition that has replaced it, the *Democratic Unity Roundtable* (MUD), since 2010.

Moderation of discourse has been another achievement. In the early years of the Chávez administration, the opposition would respond to insults from the government in kind. Capriles avoided *ad hominem* verbal attacks on Chávez, focusing instead on policy. While Chávez was running as an avowed radical ideologist-in-chief, Capriles ran as a sort of repairman-in-chief. His message was: Let's improve the state's competence, from collecting garbage to fighting crime.

Thanks to this extreme makeover, among other factors, the opposition presented a unified front. In most Latin American countries, the opposition to popular incumbents tends to fragment. (It did so in 2009–10 even in Chile, a country where the effective number of parties is small.)

The combination of governance problems and opposition achievements explains the opposition's impressive turnout in the presidential election. Chávez prevailed not so much because of popularity, which both sides possessed, but through his

resource and institutional advantages, which the opposition lacked.

COMPETING FACTIONS

Will Chávez's successor, either Maduro or someone else, be able to deal with Venezuela's governance troubles? The successor no doubt will enjoy Chávez's institutional advantages. And if the heavy oil reserves in the Orinoco Belt, which have recently been deemed recoverable, are managed well, he will reap more resources than Chávez ever had.

But the successor will face two major political challenges. The first is dealing with internal factions among adherents of Chávez's leftist ideology, Chavismo. There are at least three factions, and possibly a fourth. One faction is the military, whose institutional stature has never been higher, as a result of Chávez's own determination to elevate it within his government. Of the 20 elected PSUV state governors, 11 have military backgrounds. Two governors in particular, Ramón Rodríguez Chacín of Guárico state and Henry Rangel Silva of Trujillo, have alleged links to Colombian guerrillas and to drug trafficking, according to the US Treasury Department. A day after Chávez spoke about Maduro, the armed forces publicly reiterated their loyalty to Chávez the "person," to the "Revolution," and to the "people," but notably failed to mention loyalty to the vice president or even to Chávez's wishes.

The next two factions within Chavismo are opposites. One is a group of corrupt tycoons, known as the *boliburgueses*, who have profited from business deals with the state. They have plenty of money and thus ability to cause trouble. The other faction consists of radical ideologues. They want a more extreme revolution than Chávez delivered. They have plenty of passion and impatience, and so they too can cause trouble.

These three factions—the military, the *boliburgueses*, and the radicals—won't disappear with Chávez's departure, and it is unclear how any successor will manage them. Maduro is clearly aligned with the radicals. But Cabello has stronger ties to the military and the *boliburgueses*.

The way Chávez dealt with internal factions was to always blame others for any setback, to offer huge rewards to those who laughed at his jokes, and to suppress dissent from within. As Teodoro

Petkoff, the editor of the newspaper *Tal Cual*, once famously remarked, nowhere is freedom of expression more lacking in Venezuela than within the ranks of Chavismo.

Moreover, a fourth faction could emerge in the coming years, formed by the new crop of elected Chavista governors. In the December gubernatorial elections, several Chavista candidates had fantastic showings at the polls. Under Chávez, Chavista governors knew that they owed their political fortunes to both Chávez (who selected them as candidates) and their voters. With Chávez gone, Chavista governors will feel that their base of support is the voters, not Chávez's successor, and thus will act with more independence from central authority. These governors owe nothing to Maduro, and could act as counterweights to him.

It is easy to imagine how addressing the governance problems left by Chávez could accentuate disagreements among these factions. For instance, to confront the growing fiscal deficit and an imbalance in external accounts, a Chávez successor may

need to devalue the currency and cut spending. Various factions will have different priorities in cutting. The generals will defend military spending, the business tycoons will defend their government contracts, the radicals will defend programs

that support mobilized Chavista civil groups, and the governors will defend their region-based constituencies.

Another potentially contentious issue is crime. The corrupt business groups will welcome a hard-line approach, but the military will want complete autonomy and impunity in conducting the war on crime, while radical ideologues will resent any effort that targets loyal groups.

Even some of the core policies of Chavismo, if continued after Chávez, could prove divisive. One of Chávez's hallmarks was the gradual erosion of the power of governors (and subnational actors in general). The president's favorite "communal councils," formed by unelected citizens, were supposed to receive prerogatives from the state, bypassing elected officials. Chavista governors grudgingly tolerated this process of recentralization because it was Chávez's decision (and no one challenged him), and because it was viewed as a necessary step to lessen the powers of the eight opposition governors who were in office between 2008 and 2012.

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But if Chávez's successor decides to continue recentralization, Chavista governors are likely to resist. Popular governors never liked recentralization anyway, and will like it even less if Chávez is no longer around to enforce it, with the opposition being less central to subnational politics following the December election.

Dealing with the governance issues left behind by Chávez will surely deepen the splits within Chavismo. Chávez's successor will face an epochal choice in dealing with these splits: either introduce political competitiveness inside the PSUV to allow the internal currents to contend among themselves, or impose order from above. If he chooses the former, he may end up being a one-term president. If he chooses the latter, he may survive in office longer, but he will have no choice other than to imitate some of the hard-line practices that his mentor deployed to unify his followers.

TALKING TO OPPONENTS

A second challenge confronting any successor to Chávez is the opposition. If the successor's most pressing goal within Chavismo is fostering unity, his most urgent task with regard to the opposition could be said to be the exact opposite: provoking disunity. Capriles's most impressive achievement has been to preserve the opposition's unity. The fact that he was one of the three members of the opposition who won gubernatorial elections in December 2012 means that he will remain a key leader. Yet the opposition in Venezuela, as in many semi-authoritarian settings, is highly prone to fragmentation. There are so many different ideologies, strategies, constituencies, and parties represented that it would not take much for it to splinter.

One thing that would increase the chances of an opposition split would be a decision by Chávez's successor to adopt a more conciliatory approach toward the opposition. The opposition would surely split along a soft-versus-hard-line divide. Some members of the opposition would feel that it is advantageous to negotiate with the government. Others would see negotiation as a form of betrayal that would benefit only the regime.

Whether Maduro and Cabello have what it takes to be more conciliatory toward the opposition, in contrast to their mentor, or whether they will prove equally belligerent, as has been the case so far, is the key political question of the moment. Chávez's successor might discover that abandoning the party line and Chávez's legacy with respect to government-opposition relations could actually

prove electorally rewarding. Some argue Maduro has a pragmatic side that could make him more likely than Chávez to understand the need to talk with political opponents. This is both good news and bad news for the opposition. For now, no one in Venezuela has seen this softer side.

LESSONS FROM THE 1960S

To consider what may happen in the future, comparativists often look for similar historical examples. Within the region, there is no question that one could find parallels to the Venezuelan post-Chávez situation by looking at other transitions, such as in Argentina at the end of Juan Domingo Perón's tenure (a case of nationalist semi-military populism), Peru at the end of Juan Velasco Alvarado's regime (leftist military populism), Mexico at the end of Institutional Revolutionary Party rule (electoral populism), or even Cuba after Fidel Castro (socialist-military populism). However, it could be that the best historical parallel lies within Venezuela itself—during the mid-1960s.

Back then, one populist party (Democratic Action, or AD) had held undisputed electoral dominance over the country for almost two decades. Like the PSUV today, AD in the mid-1960s was hegemonic in non-urban areas. It was also beginning to undergo leadership rotation. A new president emerged from within AD, Raúl Leoni. But he was unable to maintain party unity and a major split emerged in 1967, resulting in the People's Electoral Movement party. In contrast to the splintering AD, the Christian Democrats were able to gain strength under the charismatic leadership of Rafael Caldera. With a ruling party moving away from its founding leaders and divided, and an opposition increasingly united, Venezuela in 1968 experienced the first democratic election in which the seemingly invincible AD was defeated.

Today, the opposition in Venezuela hopes to repeat the same feat if elections are held after Chávez departs the scene. Although the PSUV and the MUD exhibit very different ideologies from the ruling party and the leading opposition party in the 1960s, they share similar electoral positions. The lesson from the past is clear: For the opposition to win, the regime must become fairer and more democratic, the ruling party must split, and the opposition must remain united. If Maduro or someone else wants the Chávez legacy to last, he can look at the 1960s to discover what he needs to avoid at all costs. Chávez's successor, in many ways, has his work cut out for him. ■