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By Jennifer McCoy and Michael McCarthy

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For 14 years, President Hugo Chávez has been a powerful unifying force in Venezuela, galvanizing his diverse supporters behind his lead, and uniting his opponents in their aversion to his policies and persona. Now, with the presidential inauguration still weeks away and Chávez apparently gravely ill, [these centrifugal forces will be much harder to hold together](#), and many observers have predicted political instability, debilitating infighting within both camps and even violence.

Nevertheless, three dynamics could help to prevent Venezuela from spinning out of control. First, Chávez began last week to prepare for a possible transition by warning Venezuelans of the risks of his illness and by naming the person he hopes will succeed him, thus forestalling an open fight for succession at least for the immediate future. Second, the opposition regained a leader when Henrique Capriles, who [lost the presidential election to Chávez in October](#), won re-election as governor of Miranda state in regional elections on Dec. 16. Third, both sides have clearly accepted democratic elections as the only legitimate route to power, a change from the dangerous volatility of a decade ago.

Last weekend, with Chávez in Havana, Cuba, undergoing a serious operation to combat the resurgence of his cancer in the run-up to the regional elections, emerging leaders for both Chavismo, his political movement, and the opposition found themselves engaged for the first time in a competition without Chávez's personal presence. Observers viewed the elections for governors and state legislatures as a test of the opposition's resiliency after a demoralizing defeat in October's presidential elections, and of Chavismo's potential for survival without its namesake there to support candidates on the campaign trail. Nevertheless, the ruling party made ample use of the president's illness to solicit supporters to vote as an act of love for the "comandante." Thus, though the December elections gave a boost to Chávez's party, the PSUV, they should not be seen as a true test of how Chavismo will fare without Chávez.

Voters selected PSUV candidates, including 10 former military leaders, in 20 of 23 states, amounting to a net gain of three governors. The PSUV also finally won the prize of Zulia -- the country's most populous and richest state and, until recently, an opposition stronghold -- as well as previously strong opposition states in the western Andean region. The explanations for the opposition's poor showing varies by state, but they include poor candidates and poor records in some cases, failure to establish deeper organizational linkages with the population where they did hold office, and continued "ventajismo," Venezuelan slang for lavish state spending and use of state resources by the governing party.

Despite the disappointing results for the opposition overall, two outcomes bode well for the Democratic Unity Table, the coalition of parties opposed to Chávez. Capriles, who campaigns on the center-left while running on the ticket of center-right party First Justice, defeated former Vice President Elias Jaua by four points to retain the Miranda governorship. Though not a particularly resounding margin, it avenged the 40-year-old Capriles' loss to Chávez in Miranda during the presidential election two months ago, and Sunday's result seems likely to further cement Capriles'

position as the opposition's pre-eminent leader. Second, the re-election of another younger-generation opposition figure, former Chavista and Progressive Front for Change candidate Henry Falcón, in Lara state signals the dominance among the opposition of new parties and center-left policy positions over the remnants of traditional parties and center-right approaches.

Three immediate implications for Venezuela's prospects moving forward can be drawn from Sunday's vote. First, Capriles' victory gives the opposition a credible figure, previously lacking, to lead talks with the government on specific issues, including economic adjustments, funding for states and municipalities, long-term political detainees and personal insecurity.

Second, both the October and December elections demonstrated the governing party's ability to mobilize a majority of voters: It won 55 percent of the vote versus 44 percent for the opposition in both cases. Having more governors in place strengthens the PSUV mobilization capacity for any future elections.

Third, warning signs abound for both camps. The abstention rate for Sunday's elections was a relatively high 46 percent, compared to only 20 percent in the presidential election and 35 percent in the last regional elections in 2008. The low turnout is surprising given, on the one hand, the PSUV's appeal to its supporters based on Chávez's health and, on the other, the context of uncertainty, which seemed to offer a window of opportunity for the opposition. The upcoming Christmas holiday and election fatigue explain some of the abstention, but a lack of excitement about the options seemed to play a role as well.

If the Jan. 10 presidential inauguration proceeds as scheduled, the mandates represented by the October and December elections provide every incentive for the government to pursue its plans to deepen Chávez's so-called 21st century socialism, including the enhanced participatory model of the "communal state," which challenges certain structures of representative democracy.

Should Chávez be unable to assume office, or if he becomes incapacitated in the first four years of his six-year term, however, the Venezuelan constitution requires new elections, providing the framework for a potential national transition. Under that scenario, internal rivalries and negotiations would doubtless ensue within each camp, but Capriles' relatively strong position within the opposition and Chávez's designation of Vice President Nicolás Maduro as the preferred PSUV successor temper the potential for a free-for-all.

A transition scenario, if and when it occurs, portends a renewed national discussion on the future direction of the country, with the potential for a substantive debate no longer focusing on a single personality. Such a debate would be meaningful for Venezuela if the compressed timeframe foreseen in a constitutional transition can be managed so as to provide for it, and if campaign conditions can be made more equitable. If not, the biggest potential losers are Venezuela's citizens, as important policy discussions would most likely be postponed during the competition of a new electoral cycle. For now, Venezuelans have no choice but to wait and see. □

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