

Why Hugo Chavez's Illness Matters

Written by Joel D. Hirst

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JOEL D. HIRST, JUL 1 2011

On June 10th, 2011 President Hugo Chavez went under the knife in Havana to remove what Venezuelan officials called a pelvic abscess. Since that date, Chavez has been out of the public eye. For a loquacious president fond of giving seven hour speeches to a bleary-eyed audience, this is an extraordinary amount of time to maintain silence.

This extended absence has, naturally, led to widespread speculation among both Venezuelan citizens as well as the international community. The rumors are legion. In one version, President Chavez suffered from a botched liposuction surgery – carried out under the advice of his political assessors who said a “slimmer” Chavez was needed for the upcoming presidential election of 2012. Another report states he is suffering from prostate cancer and is convalescing in Cuba. Yet another has him on death’s doorstep, awaiting the boatman to ferry him across the River Stix.

He is said to be physically located at the same hospital where the much lauded miracle of modern Cuban medicine almost killed his mentor, Fidel Castro, in 2006. Should they be the same doctors as Fidel’s, it is not hard to imagine the story of a bungled surgery.

The final rumor is that President Chavez, suffering from a free-fall in public polling due to the uncontrollable violence, the food rationing and the electricity shortages that his “revolution” has visited upon Venezuelans rich and poor alike, is hiding out in Cuba in order to make a miraculous re-appearance. Such an occasion would see his poll numbers surge and the wind sucked unceremoniously out of the sails of an over-enthusiastic and immature opposition. This story has lost momentum due to the announcement of the Government of Venezuela that they were cancelling the July 5th celebration of 200 years of independence from Spain. This would have been a perfect time for Chavez to reappear. Heads of state from all over the region were invited, and it is something for which they have been preparing, holding events in each country and even set up a special project within the ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance). It is something that he would not have willingly missed.

Whatever the case may be, this silent absence of the larger than life figure of Hugo Chavez from the Venezuelan political landscape has provided some interesting lessons. The first is that his anti-institutional approach to governance has worked, at least for him. The Venezuelan constitution (which Chavez is so fond of violating) states that during any protracted period where the executive cannot govern, authority must be handed over to the second in the chain of continuity of government. In this case that is Vice-President Elias Jaua. This did not happen. Jaua, probably afraid of being seen as grabbing power, has made it very clear he is not in the driver’s seat. Instead, Chavez continues to manage Venezuelan affairs via twitter (and the occasional phone call). This has led to disaster. During his period of recovery, a kerfuffle arose in two of the dangerous prisons that dot the Venezuelan judicial landscape. This is not uncommon, prison conditions are notoriously terrible and prisoners revolt almost every week. However, without the (voice of reason?) of Hugo Chavez, things quickly escalated. An incompetent and arrogant interior minister, Tarek El Aissami, ordered a full scale invasion of the prison. 5000 security personnel, including 3500 National Guards and 500 elite paratroopers attacked the prison – and were driven back. Meanwhile, other security services haphazardly launched tear gas at the press and the families of the prisoners, who were approaching the prison to attempt to better understand the situation. Ridiculous Bolivarians set up a stage outside the prison where they held a revolutionary event in support of the National Guard. At last count (according to an unsubstantiated claim by prisoners) this action has led to 160 prisoner deaths, an astonishing number. As I write this,

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the second prison Rodeo II is still under control of armed bands. Chavez's model of one-man government held in place by cronies has not developed institutions that function responsibly (or even at all).

Another important lesson is that, unfortunately, the opposition remains hopelessly obsessed with Hugo Chavez. During his absence, the Venezuelan news media, twitter feed, political declarations and discussion remain focused on the health of the president. There is a hopeful gleam in the eyes of the opposition, as if the death of their longtime nemesis will allow them to avoid the uncomfortable and challenging task of actually seeking unity, building an electoral platform, creating a plan of government and selling all the above to the wary Venezuelan citizenry. This does not bode well. Chavez could well be back, and their noticeable disappointment in the return of the most popular figure in Venezuela (personally, if not politically) will drive many undecided back into the fold.

Finally, the lesson we have learned about the future of a Venezuela with Hugo Chavez at the helm is not encouraging. As mentioned before, the atrophy within the institutions of government in Venezuela is apparent during periods of stress – like this one. Chavez has succeeded in building a country around his enormous personality. No decision is made, no treaty negotiated, no project advanced (however small) without the direct instruction of the president.

Case in point, this week, according to the PSUV (Chavez's political party) leadership, Chavez instructed the government (via telephone) to visit each and every home of the people who had signed up for his new populist program – Mission Housing. Immediately, the entire government – including the Vice President, the Minister of Economy, the Minister of Planning, Governors and others – dropped the daily administrative duties of governance to knock on 1.2 million doors, reassuring the people that they would indeed receive their homes. This micro-management is ridiculous, and dangerously incompetent. Any good manager understands that you must choose the right people and let them work, not nano-manage their every action. Should Chavez win in 2012, this will lead the entropy that Venezuela has been experiencing for more than a decade to new and perilous levels. Those who watch Venezuela – and worse those who live in that gutted country – should strap themselves in and prepare for a wild ride.

Whatever the outcome of Hugo Chavez's illness – and I'm not one to make wild predictions so I will refrain from trying – the story of Revolutionary Venezuela is not a good one. It is a story of corruption, of the personalization and abuse of power, of violence and incompetence and misery. This has been held in place for 13 years by the charismatic presence of an oversized president (no pun intended) and an incompetent opposition who are unwilling to look for the people where they are at, find them, and walk with them – preferring instead to bemoan their state of affairs from the opulent neighborhoods that amazingly still exist in the capitals of the country.

Despite this sad story, there is a silver lining. Out of this political nightmare has come a younger generation of Venezuelan leaders who have been able to break with both pasts – the past represented by the deaf elite and the past represented by Chavez and his crony corruption – and make their own way. Candidates who were only in their teens when Chavez took power have found their place in the new Venezuela and are trying to tell a different story and remake their country in a new way. Let's hope they succeed.

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