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CHAVEZ – THE BEGINNING OF THE END

By

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The President of Venezuela, Hugo Chavez, is on the way into the history books. Although he is still positioned to create problems for the Venezuelan people, the Colombians, and others throughout the Western Hemisphere that he chooses to victimize, he is no longer on the ascent.

Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chavez Frias attempted a coup d'état in 1992, spent 2 years in jail, but then triumphantly donned the Presidential sash by election in 1998. Since then, he has proved to be an irritant to a long list of people, organizations, and states. He went from strength to strength, riding high on the price of oil, winning political contests, and gathering friends and allies from Bolivia to Iran.

Chavez came to power espousing a noble cause—to free the Venezuelan people from the oligarchy that had dominated Venezuelan politics since 1958. In spite of riches produced by the Western Hemisphere's largest oil reserves, inequality was high and poverty was widespread. Chavez promised a revolution to provide for the poor—and they supported him in large numbers. After his election, he followed a socialist agenda. Although he did provide services to the poor, he alienated the other elements of Venezuelan society. As the poor constituted over half of the population, he was able to base his political power entirely on their votes and succeed.

Chavez modified the Venezuelan constitution in 1999. One modification was to change the presidential service from one term of 5 years (typical in Latin America) to two terms of 6 years apiece. His first term did not count towards the two terms because he had not been elected under the newest constitution. He was reelected in 2000, survived a coup in April 2002, survived a recall referendum in 2004, and was reelected again in 2006.

The next elections are scheduled for 2012. Under Article 230 of the current Constitution, the president may only be reelected “for only one time, for an additional period” of service. Therefore, Chavez is not eligible for reelection, in spite of his willingness to continue to serve. In 2007 he and his supporters proposed 69 additional changes to the 1999 constitution, one of which would allow for unlimited presidential

reelections. This proved to be one power grab too many for the Venezuelan people. Former supporters came out against the changes. Students organized protests. The people narrowly voted against the reforms on December 2, 2007. In isolation, this defeat does not portend the end of Chavez, but combined with a recent pattern of increasingly erratic behavior, it marks the beginning of the end.

Internally, Chavez has masterminded the state takeover of a variety of industries. He has nationalized oil fields, telecoms, the steel industry, and the cement industry. Unfortunately for Venezuelans of all stripes, there has been less and less investment in infrastructure, and foodstuffs are harder to obtain. Inflation is present; however, the economy seems to be growing. As long as oil remains over \$100 per barrel, President Chavez will be able to sustain economic growth.

Externally, Chavez is following a strategy very similar to that of the Argentine junta of the early 1980s. When their abysmal management of the economy provoked a negative reaction by the people, the junta sought to unify the country by vilifying an external foe. Chavez seeks to do the same by increasing his negative rhetoric against both Colombia and the United States. He recently involved himself when Colombia executed an operation into Ecuadorian territory to kill the second in command of the FARC. While the President of Ecuador initially seemed to be satisfied to look the other way, Chavez insisted that Colombia had violated Ecuador's sovereignty and demanded OAS action. This forced everyone in the hemisphere to officially take notice of the operation and left President Correa of Ecuador with no option but to protest. Chavez also mobilized the military and moved units to the Venezuelan-Colombian border. Even more recently, Chavez has threatened Colombia over a proposed U.S. counter-drug base in Colombia to replace the current base in Manta, Ecuador.

The future will bring more of the same. Chavez will continue to seek to distract the Venezuelan people using rhetoric. He will continue to support nefarious nonstate actors in South America and the Caribbean. He will also continue to irritate Colombia, but will not do anything overt. He cannot afford to get into a shooting war as the Colombian military totally outclasses the heavily politicized Venezuelan military, which has been subordinated to Chavez' whims at the cost of operational effectiveness. He will maintain a high level of rhetoric against the United States to distract the Venezuelan people while he continues attempting to advance his revolution. He will also manipulate the economy, seeking to use it to regain his lost support.

Most importantly, Chavez will attempt another referendum on the same subject. Never one to tolerate a defeat, he will try to perpetuate his rule indefinitely. Some time in 2009 or 2010, he will present another referendum to the people. It will be worded differently, and the government will adopt a different approach designed to achieve success in the face of opposition. But the desired result will be the same—an allowance for indefinite reelection of the president. Although the opposition is motivated by the previous defeat of Chavez and is alert for his further attempts to consolidate power, he is a canny political operative and stands a good chance of succeeding.

But we only need to be patient. Colombia and the United States need to continue operations against the FARC. The United States should continue to try engaging the

Venezuelan government and the people. We need to refuse to take the bait that Chavez repeatedly provides. If the U.S. Government gets into an argument with Chavez, it will lose. The current policy of virtually ignoring him is the most appropriate course. It infuriates him and prevents the United States from making a mistake that Chavez would manipulate for his benefit. Additionally, the rest of the hemisphere needs to be aware that Chavez will continue his campaign to subordinate Venezuelan democracy to his own goals. When he attempts another referendum, the other countries of the hemisphere should support the Venezuelan people and ensure a free and fair referendum.

Although Chavez remains an irritant to the rest of the world and still poses a potential problem for countries like Colombia and the United States, he has lost his first major battle. This has weakened him. He is still powerful within Venezuela, but the opposition now knows that he can be defeated. His star is no longer in the ascent. It is the beginning of the end.

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