



**Venezuela Research Trip
Center for Democracy in the Americas
February 17 – 20, 2010**

Introduction

The Center for Democracy in the Americas (CDA) is devoted to changing U.S. policy toward the countries of the Americas by basing our relations on mutual respect, fostering dialogue with those governments and movements with which U.S. policy is at odds, and recognizing positive trends in democracy and governance.

Consistent with this mission, CDA has been taking delegations to Venezuela since early 2006 to help U.S. policy makers understand the political dynamics in the country, to look for opportunities to create a positive discourse between leaders in Venezuela and the United States, and to learn whether U.S. policy toward Venezuela is effective or requires reform.

CDA has led eleven delegations and research trips to Venezuela since our program began. We have observed the last four elections in Venezuela. We have tried to understand the substance and purpose of Venezuela's social and political project. We have also focused on the important national security and economic issues affecting bilateral relations – considering the impact of world oil prices, the continuing availability of revenue for social projects, and the Chávez government's pursuit of its foreign policy goals. We continue to follow Venezuela's shifting economic fortunes and have reported concerns shared by many Venezuelans about government policies that threaten political spaces. Our trips, research, and reports attempt to capture the Venezuelan reality as it is, with all its complexity and contradictions.

This report provides an overview of the current political and economic situation in Venezuela, the state of U.S.-Venezuela relations, and related matters. It is primarily based on observations drawn from meetings and interviews in Venezuela from February 17 – 20, 2010. It contains our findings based on what our sources told us about these subjects:

- The prevailing economic and political conditions in Venezuela;
- The President's strategy leading up to the National Assembly elections;
- The status of Venezuela's political opposition;
- Conditions facing the media as a measure of the health of Venezuela's democracy;
- Perspectives on the upcoming National Assembly Elections;
- The state of U.S.-Venezuela relations; and,
- Venezuela's political future.

Our delegation included staff from three offices in the U.S. House of Representatives as well as Sarah Stephens, Executive Director, and Collin Lavery, Senior Program Associate, of the Center for Democracy in the Americas. On this trip we held meetings with Venezuelan government officials, businessmen, academics, representatives of nongovernmental organizations, community workers, everyday Venezuelans, journalists, and foreign and U.S. diplomats.

We chose to visit Venezuela at this time to make these assessments roughly six months before Venezuelans vote in elections for their National Assembly. These elections, scheduled for Sunday, September 26th, will be for every seat in the legislature, which consists of 167 deputies. CDA will return to Venezuela with a delegation to monitor those elections when they occur.

Economic and Political Conditions in Venezuela

President Hugo Chávez is facing an increasingly difficult economic and political situation at home. His popularity has fallen significantly as a result of high unemployment and economic stagnation, water and electricity shortages, and rampant crime. The troubling conditions of everyday life have affected the population's confidence in Chávez. How these most pressing issues are addressed will have a significant impact on September's elections for Venezuela's National Assembly and could alter the future political landscape of the country. Analysts told us that this is the most challenging situation Chávez has faced over the last several years.

According to recently released government statistics, Venezuela's economy contracted by 3.9 percent in 2009. At the same time, the country experienced an average inflation of about 30 percent. These economic conditions have greatly affected low-income individuals, who experienced increased unemployment, rising prices and reduced purchasing power, among other economic difficulties. These issues affect President Chávez's most loyal voting base and could help the opposition in September's elections if they persist.

A drought that began last year has resulted in severe shortages of electricity and water. Power generation companies say that with the current water levels, the system is not able to sustain the normal level of electricity output. At the beginning of the year, the government ordered planned power outages throughout the country to conserve energy, because it feared a complete collapse of the electricity grid. Blackouts in Caracas, which were badly managed and resulted in people getting stuck in elevators and other severe situations, had to be immediately canceled. Scheduled blackouts continue in other parts of the country, but have not resumed in the capital. Following the fiasco, Chávez removed Ángel Rodríguez, the Electricity Minister, and replaced him with Alí Rodríguez (no relation), previously the Minister of Finance.

The government blames the water and electricity shortages on drought, which it says is a result of the El Niño weather phenomenon and climate change. President Chávez has announced a billion dollar fund to address the issue and even called on God to "make it rain."

The opposition accuses the government of mismanagement and a failure to invest in new infrastructure. Opposition politicians have predicted a complete shutdown of the power grid by June, which would have significant implications for the September elections and stability in the country.

The government has ordered big business and government offices to reduce energy consumption by 20% and has threatened fines, closures and other measures for those who don't comply. Individuals at the Foreign Ministry told our delegation that most government offices were closing in the early afternoon to save energy, and workers were asked to perform community service the rest of the day. Other offices closed for over an hour at lunch time to keep consumption down. The government has also launched a public relations campaign to educate citizens about the importance of conserving energy. Community councils and the army are distributing energy-efficient light bulbs to millions of people.

The rainy season starts in May, so the government may receive some much-needed help from “Mother Nature.” Polls show that the electricity shortages have greatly affected the government’s approval ratings.

Polls also show that crime is still the number one issue of concern for Venezuelans. However, as one analyst explained, crime has been rampant in Venezuela for so long that people don’t attribute it to bad governance, but rather to a bad citizenry. One poll even found that over 60% of the population believes that no government could deal with crime. Therefore, the rise of crime under the Chávez government has not been as politically costly for him as one might expect.

Unemployment and inflation, however, are two issues that people increasingly identify as their greatest concern. These issues are attributed by the voters to bad governance and they hold the president responsible.

The President’s Strategy

The economy is the key political issue leading up to the election. If things stabilize or improve prior to September, people may think, “That’s as bad as it gets?” and will be inclined to continue supporting him and his party, said one analyst.

The government is taking steps to deal with the economy. One analyst pointed out that the government has assumed many of the “hard costs” now, months prior to the elections, in order to reap the benefits in September. One example is the government’s decision to devalue the currency last January. The move cut the rate of the Bolivar by about half – from 2.15 to 4.3 per dollar – for most imports and transactions. The central bank will also subsidize a stronger 2.6-per-dollar rate for imports of food, medicine and other essential items.

For President Chávez, the devaluation has greatly increased his budget after a year of declining growth. The government doubled the amount of domestic currency overnight, which it can now use to stimulate the economy. Analysts expect the government to spend heavily on infrastructure, offer raises for public sector employees, invest in social programs and increase spending in other areas before the September elections.

The government’s ability to address the high cost of living, unemployment, and power and water shortages will significantly affect the political playing field in the balloting for seats in the National Assembly. In the longer term, Chávez’s legitimacy and popularity might depend on how he comes out of the current crisis. Some observers said that the current conditions had gotten so bad that the government feared a tipping point. According to those close to Chávez, he wants to avoid at all costs any unrest that would even slightly resemble the Caracazo.¹ The government is aware of the social and economic discontent in the country, and President Chávez will use all of the tools at his disposal to improve conditions before the election.

¹ The Caracazo is the name given to the wave of protests, riots and looting that occurred on February 27, 1989 in Caracas and surrounding towns. The riots, the result of reforms linked to a structural reforms package, resulted in a death toll of anywhere between 275 and 3,000 deaths, mostly at the hands of security forces. They were the worst riots in the history of the country.

Venezuela's Political Opposition

With elections fast approaching in September, the opposition faces three main challenges:

- Can it unify and present a viable alternative to the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) and Chavismo;
- Can it develop a political project that engages more voters; and,
- Can it develop leaders who are popular at the national level?

Based on our conversations in Venezuela, it remains unclear whether the opposition will be able to unify and develop a message that addresses the economic challenges the country currently faces, capitalizes on the shortcomings of the Chávez government, and resonates with the voters.

Polls show that the favorability ratings for the opposition parties, which have been extremely low over the last several years, are now at about the same level as Chávez's party, the PSUV.

Because of the current crisis, the opposition is in a good position for the National Assembly elections and to build a movement toward the presidential elections in 2012. However, they have been in similar situations in the past, most notably in the lead-up to the referendum in 2004, and failed to meet their goals.

The opposition is organized under the umbrella "Mesa Unida Democrática" (MUD), consisting of six opposition parties: Acción Democrática, Copei, Nuevo Tiempo, Primero Justicia, Podemos and La Causa R.

According to opposition politicians, there has been some conflict among political parties in selecting candidates and where primaries should take place, but significant progress has been achieved compared to attempts to come together in earlier campaigns. Opposition leaders claim to be more united than ever, which they say bodes well for appealing to an electorate that is tired of polarization and wants the country to come together.

One analyst said that the opposition understands that highly publicized struggles about which candidates should run would diminish the trust they have built with the population over the last year. He contends that they will do everything possible to select candidates and carry out primaries with minimal friction. The opposition claims that together the six parties represent half of the population and that some calculations point to the possibility of them winning a majority in the Assembly.

However, others contend that the opposition is still fragmented and extremely weak. One analyst said that the opposition has lost with the same game plan in the past and still has not changed anything. "Chávez is playing chess, the opposition is playing monopoly," he said. In his opinion, the opposition doesn't have leaders, and can't formulate a sound program because of its dependence on special interests. "They need money," but the support from the private sector and the foundations in Washington on which they depend weakens their ability to construct a program that resonates with the electorate, he added.

The opposition, as in previous campaigns, has not had much success in either formulating concrete proposals for moving the country forward or simply developing an electoral platform on which to campaign. It lacks a narrative and is defined simply as “anti-Chávez” as it has been for ten years.

For example, analysts point to the current opposition slogan: “One, two, three strikes, crime, water and lights, Mr. President, you struck out!” It’s an anti-Chávez rallying point based on criticizing the government. While it effectively highlights inefficiencies of the Chávez government, it does not offer solutions or a project to address these issues, epitomizing the major shortcoming of the opposition over the years.

Another observer attributes the opposition’s inability to connect with voters to the themes around which it does rally. Opposition politicians preach about democracy, freedom, human rights and other issues that do not resonate with lower and middle class working citizens. “Getting food and money do,” he added. He pointed to protests by the opposition in the past that focused on what it deemed to be the government’s violation of university autonomy. For many less educated Venezuelans, “autonomy” is not a word in their vocabulary and the protests seem petty and foreign to them. The people want to hear about jobs, food and education, things for which the opposition doesn’t seem to have persuasive proposals.

One leading academic within the opposition disagrees. He believes the messaging is not the key issue, and the most important step is to prevent in-fighting before the selection of candidates and the primaries. In his view, all the opposition has to do is show the people that they are united and willing to work together, something they haven’t been able to do over the last decade, and it will win the people’s trust.

Another significant obstacle for the opposition is the absence of a charismatic, trustworthy leader who can become the face of their electoral movement at the national level. According to analysts, the opposition is still waiting for a strong political figure to emerge. But currently there is nobody within the opposition parties who is capable of attracting nation-wide support and challenging President Chávez, who makes every election about him and uses his connection with the electorate to get people to the voting booths. The opposition lacks such a national “mobilizer.” This has consequences not just for the 2012 election, but for getting its base to the polls in September.

For now, the opposition is drafting its legislative platform and the biggest challenge will be whether it can develop a message that convinces voters that it is offering a project to move the country forward.

The Media

For three years, President Chávez has been actively at odds with privately-owned media organizations in Venezuela. The steps that he has taken over that period of time are the subject of frequent criticism as indicative of the loss of political and democratic space in the country. Even greater scrutiny will take place between now and National Assembly elections.

Press freedom groups accuse the government of cracking down on dissenting voices by using the government's legal authority to intimidate and punish broadcasters who criticize the government and refuse to promote its political agenda. They say that Chávez's influence over all institutions of government allows him to pressure government agencies to "legally" attack his opposition.

Many analysts point to the closing of 34 radio stations for administrative breaches, and threats to review more than 200 others over the summer, as examples of increasing government control over the media. They also cited the issuance of constant warnings to opposition television stations, such as Globovisión. Critics say the government has been consistently pressuring Globovisión to soften its editorial line.

According to one analyst, the government has silenced almost all criticism on television. He argues that Venvisión and Televen, two privately-owned television stations, practice self-censorship to avoid government measures; RCTV is off the air; and it remains to be seen how the internal shuffle at Globovisión, which is also facing ongoing investigations by government regulators for alleged violations, will affect its programming.

In February, it was announced that Globovisión, the last wide-reaching opposition television station on the air, was undergoing internal changes that many said would alter its tough anti-government stance.

It's unclear exactly what happened, but the opposition accuses the government of using dirty tactics behind closed doors to influence, financially and bureaucratically, the owners of the station. For the time being, however, the strong anti-Chávez editorial line has continued.

Globovisión is now considered the last major opposition station in operation. Some anti-government stations operate outside of Caracas, but according to analysts, Caracas is the epicenter of the country and "what doesn't happen in Caracas, doesn't happen." One such analyst says this explains why Chávez is not concerned with smaller regional media outlets. Similarly, because of the popularity and wide viewership of television throughout the country, analysts contend that the government is most concerned with controlling that medium. "Chávez's concern is with TV because it has the ability to tip the scales," said one analyst.

Radio is also an important means of communication, and the majority of the 34 radio stations closed over the summer were opposition-run. Pro-government community radio stations can now be heard on the FM dial.

"Will he come after newspapers when he is done liquidating TV and Radio? Who knows?" said the editor of an opposition newspaper. One critic noted that there has been an increase of self-censorship in printed media since a majority of newspaper owners are businessmen who do not want to jeopardize their companies. He cited pressure by the government on companies not to advertise in opposition newspapers, which affects the financial stability of the papers. Further, the government has been successful at propping up pro-government newspapers, many available for free, to balance critical papers.

"There is a war taking place in the country over two different socio-economic projects...and the battles are being fought in the media," said one media analyst. She notes that when Chávez

announced the government wouldn't renew RCTV's broadcast license in 2007, he was dressed in military fatigues and personalized the decision by saying he was the one ordering the non-renewal. "The airwaves are the battlefield, and the Chávez army 'fusiló' (executed) RCTV," she added.

The battle over the media is about political control. In her analysis, Globovisión is a political party because its former director, Alberto Ravell, is a politician. Tal Cual, a political newspaper, is run by opposition politician Teodoro Petkoff. Similarly, pro-government media outlets are run by the government or Chávez sympathizers. Both sides fight for the ideological advantage in public opinion.

The government is winning the battle because it has the legal tools, such as the ability to renew and deny licenses, investigate violations, and ultimately, close the media outlets it chooses. She asserts that there is a difference between legality and legitimacy when it comes to the steps the government has taken. In her eyes, the government's method has been completely legal, but not completely legitimate.

Analysts say in the long term, the actions taken by the government to control the media will benefit President Chavez politically because they limit the space for the opposition to criticize the government and get its message out.

Upcoming Elections

The upcoming elections are pivotal, because they will determine the partisan composition of the National Assembly. During the last elections in 2005, the opposition abstained resulting in near total control of the assembly by pro-Chávez lawmakers. Some deputies have since split from the PSUV, but President Chávez still enjoys a super majority and limited resistance in the assembly.

Over 24 percent of the electorate defines itself as Chavista (government supporter), while about 17 percent consider itself opposition. The other 60 percent fall in the "ni, ni" category, which means neither for nor against Chávez. Traditionally, however, about two-thirds of the "ni, ni" voters support Chávez. This means that he relies on a lot of "soft support" to win elections, and the economic and social conditions at the time of the elections will affect voter turnout and the outcome.

According to one government insider, Chávez's coalition party, the PSUV, is hoping to maintain at least a simple majority in the legislature, which would mean winning 84 or more seats. Minimally, the opposition would like to prevent the government from achieving a super majority, and in a best case scenario they would take a simple majority.

Fearing that it might only achieve a simple majority, PSUV is pushing candidates that it views as the most loyal. It is concerned that if PSUV wins the majority by only a handful of seats, some deputies might leave PSUV, thus ending its majority status.

Although Chávez is weakened, he is not weak, warned one opposition analyst. Polls show that his popularity has always peaked around elections throughout the years. According to one

pollster, Chávez's popularity will be up at the time of the election, the question is by how much. He contends that "Chávez knows the DNA of Venezuelans, while the opposition cannot seem to connect with the population." They generally don't go to the poor areas where the problems are and are unable to develop an electoral platform that identifies solutions to the problems facing the poor demographic, he added.

As in the past, President Chávez will attempt to make the September election about him. "Chávez will be the candidate in all 167 districts," said one analyst. Chávez's ability to nationally mobilize his base gives the PSUV an advantage. Another advantage, according to one observer, is that the PSUV is better at getting its message out. There is less infighting and stronger consensus on message points. Despite the fact that the country is in crisis, "the government is very clear about why it is facing problems, and what ideas it has to try to address them."

While it is too early to predict the outcome, gains by the opposition would result in an elevated visibility and space to convey its message. Leading up to presidential elections in 2012, messaging by opposition legislators in the National Assembly, physical office space to organize and more formal political organization within the system could help strengthen the opposition's political voice. One of the opposition's greatest challenges has been its exclusion from official institutions and political space within the system.

Some analysts stressed not to overemphasize the legislative impact the election results could have. If the opposition wins a majority, the legislative landscape will certainly change significantly. However, if PSUV's representation is cut from a super-majority to a simple-majority it doesn't mean they will be unable to move forward with its legislative initiatives. Prior to 2005 the government (not yet PSUV) had a simple majority and was still able to pass important legislation, such as judicial reform.

With elections six months away there is still plenty of time for the economic and social conditions of the country to change. At the moment, despite the opposition's past failures, the current conditions play in its favor. "The benefits of the current government are shining less, and the threats and challenges associated with Chávez are more evident right now," said one analyst. However, if the government is able to address some of the challenges, it could result in a boost in Chávez's popularity, and subsequently, increased momentum and support for PSUV going into the elections. Furthermore, President Chávez's ability to get his supporters to the polls and his history of surging in popularity around elections should be taken into account.

Bilateral Relations

Although there was some early hope that bilateral relations between the United States and Venezuela would improve under President Obama, the relationship between the countries is similar to what prevailed during the Bush Administration. Speaking with representatives of the U.S. Embassy in Caracas and Members of the Venezuelan National Assembly's Foreign Affairs Committee, it is clear that mistrust, a lack of communication, and polarizing rhetoric still dominate the relationship.

“Commercial relations are very good, political relations are the difficult part,” said Roy Daza, Chairman of the National Assembly’s Foreign Affairs Committee. The U.S. Embassy accuses the Foreign Ministry of being unresponsive, while the Venezuelan government contends that the U.S. hasn’t made any attempt to have a serious dialogue.

Venezuelans aligned with President Chávez claim that the United States misunderstands the revolutionary process that is taking place, which they consider a project to construct a more representative democracy. They find it offensive that the U.S. considers their project a threat to U.S. interests.

In response to a question from our delegation about whether Venezuela is trying to export its revolution, Chairman Daza responded: “That’s never been successful. It doesn’t work. The U.S. has always wanted to export its political system and it has failed. It thinks it’s the only form. We say ‘take care of your own system, don’t meddle in ours’.”

According to Patrick Duddy, the U.S. Ambassador to Venezuela, the goals of the embassy are to cooperate with Venezuela to increase democracy, create more robust trade, establish a more unified hemisphere and develop counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics programs. The Inter-American charter is the cornerstone of U.S. policy in Venezuela, he said. “We want a good relationship with Venezuela, but democracy and human rights are very important and have implications for the whole region,” he added, implying that the current situation in Venezuela prevents the U.S. from engaging the Chávez government.

The Obama administration has maintained the policy of the later years of the Bush administration – toning down responses to Chávez’s remarks and criticisms. However, the United States views the Chávez government as becoming increasingly authoritarian, and accuses it of eroding democratic institutions, suppressing the private media and violating human rights.

Staff of the U.S. Embassy believe Venezuela is overly-sensitive to U.S. criticism. According to officials at the U.S. Embassy, “The U.S. has been trying to turn the page with Venezuela, but Venezuela is not interested in improving relations.” At the same time, the embassy also admitted that domestic politics in the U.S., such as strong criticism by Republicans in Congress and conservative media of the possibility of Obama engaging with Chávez, has had an effect on U.S. policy.

The U.S. embassy works with human rights groups and other civil society organizations to stress the importance of respecting human rights and building democratic space, Ambassador Duddy told the delegation. Some of their outreach consists of normal embassy activities, such as sports diplomacy, where the embassy interacts with youth through baseball training, and English classes.

However, other activities are more provocative to Venezuelans and counter-productive to the notion of “turning the page.” For example, the U.S. embassy recently hosted former Bush Administration official David Frum to talk about democracy. Frum often refers to Chávez as a

thug and dictator.² Similarly, the U.S. funds organizations such as Cedice, a think tank that promotes free markets, which is highly critical of the Chávez government and its policies. These activities are clearly provocative and allow Chávez to accuse the U.S. of working against him with the opposition. Several sources told us, when the U.S. does speak about Venezuela, the approach is similar to that of the Bush Administration.

“We’re not trying to undermine the government, we actually spend more time scolding the opposition to get their act together,” said an embassy official. “We tell them ‘just being against Chávez is not a message, boys and girls’.” However, the embassy’s lack of engagement with Chavista sectors of the government and society, and focus on interacting with businesses, organizations and political elites aligned with the opposition, feeds into Chávez’s claim that the U.S. is trying to undermine his government. It also gives the impression that the U.S. is aligned with the opposition.

Both sides blame each other for the lack of cooperation on drug interdiction. “We criticize them for not cooperating and they say they don’t cooperate because we criticize them,” said Ambassador Duddy. The U.S. says that cocaine trafficking in Venezuela has “skyrocketed,” going from an estimated 60 metric tons in 2004, the year before Chávez stopped collaborating with the DEA, to 260 metric tons in 2007.³

Chairman Daza says the government “ended cooperation with the DEA because they were not respecting Venezuela’s sovereignty.” Daza said the level of interdiction has actually increased since Venezuela ended cooperation with the U.S., and blames “Colombia’s inability to stop cultivation and exportation” for drug-trafficking in Venezuela.

As for Venezuela’s relationship with the FARC, the Chávez government denies any cooperation beyond facilitating hostage releases. The U.S. has accused the Chávez government of cooperating with the FARC in the past, but recent statements have been inconsistent. “We categorically deny that FARC operates in Venezuela,” said Daza, adding that “President Chávez told them that the armed struggle is not the way.”

The Venezuelan government blames the FARC for creating an “excuse for right wing elements in the U.S. to try and destroy the Revolution.” According to Daza, his government has had a firm and consistent policy toward the Colombian conflict, which they believe can only be solved politically. “If it could have been solved militarily it would have been over by now...it’s not a crime for acknowledging that,” he added.

Asked about U.S. policy, one opposition academic said the less the U.S. speaks the better it is for the opposition. According to him, the Cold War approach to Venezuela by the U.S. helps sustain support for the Bolivarian Revolution.⁴ “Every time the State Department says something it is heavenly music for Chávez,” he said.

² <http://network.nationalpost.com/np/blogs/fullcomment/archive/2010/01/23/david-frum-venezuela-falls-back-on-a-reliable-scapegoat.aspx>

³ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/18/AR2009071801785.html>

“By preaching, lecturing, criticizing and speaking down to him (Chávez) you play into his strategy of provoking fiction,” said one analyst. “If the U.S. could acknowledge some of the good things that Chávez has done it would confound him, he wouldn’t know how to respond, and it could build space for the U.S. to constructively criticize,” he added. A non-political statement, as simple as acknowledging that Venezuela is a viable trading partner or that the government has made gains in health and education, could go a long way in reducing tension and Chávez’s ability to paint the U.S. as a hostile aggressor. He said it currently it appears that neither country is interested in improving bilateral relations.

During our trip, the delegation met with students at the Bolivarian University of Venezuela, which is part of the government’s “Mission Sucre” program to provide free higher education to the poor. The encounter was instructive to us, because it demonstrated the political priorities of the Chavez base and their “theory of the case’ when it came to relations with the U.S.

The students accused the U.S. of “militarizing” Haiti following the earthquake, and one student even accused the U.S. of using technology to cause the tragedy. Many students also blamed the U.S. for “overthrowing Zelaya in Honduras and supporting the Micheletti government.”

The military base agreement between the U.S. and Colombia was also of great concern to the students. “I live by the border and one of the bases is a half an hour from my house. You tell me if I should feel concerned about the base or not,” challenged one student.

The students said that they did not feel like there had been any improvement in U.S. policy following the election of President Obama. “Just because you have a smiling president with reduced rhetoric doesn’t mean anything has changed. Policy changes with actions, not words,” said one student. “Your government didn’t change because the color of your President’s skin did,” responded another student. “We’re not pessimistic, we’re realistic that Obama is the same policy with a different face,” concluded the group.

The mistrust is deep. One student even insisted that at least one person from our delegation must be from the CIA.

Venezuela’s political future

A question commonly discussed in Venezuela is how President Chávez will react if he is ever defeated at the ballot box. Chávez accepted responsibility and conceded defeat after his failed attempt to overthrow the government of Carlos Andrés Pérez in 1992. When he was briefly ousted in 2002, Chávez left the presidential palace to prevent the military from bombing it. He was defeated electorally in December 2007 when his constitutional amendment package lost by a close margin, and again to some degree in state and local elections in November 2008 where pro-

⁴ The “Bolivarian Revolution” refers to the social movement and political process in Venezuela led by Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez. It is named after Simón Bolívar, the Venezuelan revolutionary leader credited with leading the fight in the Spanish American wars of independence, which resulted in independence for many countries in Latin America. According to Chávez, the Revolution is based on popular democracy, economic independence, equitable distribution of revenues, and an end to political corruption.

Chávez candidates won a majority of governorships and mayoralties, but lost some significant posts, such as the mayor of Caracas.

A pragmatic side of Chávez emerged in all three situations and he accepted defeat. Analysts point to these events as evidence of his willingness to concede if he is ever democratically voted out of office. Others argue that Chávez is intent on ruling for life and will do everything possible to avoid defeat. They claim that he is the most dangerous when his popularity ratings are low, because he might change the rules to avoid losing and maintain his grip on power. Although it is an important question – and might one day be played out in real terms – trying to psychoanalyze Chávez is an impossible task, said another analyst.

He is the president, and “learning how to interact with him is more productive than hypothetical daydreams of what he does when he loses his base,” he added.

Hugo Chávez is in power because he is popular. He is especially popular among low-income and previously marginalized Venezuelans, who have seen his economic program as directly benefitting their interests and the goals of his political project as according them dignity and recognition in unprecedented ways. Right now his numbers are down because the country is in crisis. The next few months are crucial to determining if his popularity will diminish further or if he is able to regain soft support from non-ideological citizens who fall outside of his hard-core base.

The issues, as we learned in February, are fundamental to the lives and well-being of Venezuelans – ranging from the most tangible, do they have access to clean water and can they afford food, to the most profound, does their political system support elections whose results correspond to the wishes and aspirations of the Venezuelan people.

Elections to the National Assembly, taking place in September, will provide some answers to these questions, although experience tells us that the answers may not be as conclusive or predictable as one might expect.