

# Scenarios facing Venezuela

Susanne Gratius

»» On 26 September a new chapter was opened in Venezuela. For the first time, the opposition was presented as a credible alternative to Chavism, which emerged weakened from the parliamentary elections. Looking ahead to 2012 and a possible re-election of the president, two potential scenarios lie on the horizon: either more authoritarianism and political polarisation, or the decline of the Bolivarian project and the emergence of an electoral alternative.

The European Union (EU) ought to promote the second option and take into account the new balance of power. More authoritarianism and greater political polarisation, combined with the widespread climate of violence in Venezuela, could lead to a drastic outcome. As the main donor to Venezuela and its principal ally in Europe, Spain will need to assume greater responsibility in the coming two years, as well as exercising the deterrent effect that many demand.

## A NEW BALANCE OF POWER

According to the Coalition for Democratic Unity (Mesa de Unidad Democrática, MUD), the opposition won 52 per cent of votes and half of the seats for the Latin American Parliament. The opposition and the governing party also drew in Caracas. Were it not for a new electoral law which changed part of the proportional system to a majoritarian one and defined new constituencies, what Chávez defined as 'a new victory of the people' would have turned into a defeat. Chavism obtained 98 seats, and the promise of the president to maintain a 'revolutionary, "redder than red" [*rojo rojito*, Chávez's slogan] National Assembly' was not fulfilled. He did not lose the elec-

## HIGHLIGHTS

- The future of the country is now in the hands of an opposition which has presented itself as an alternative power, but lacks a charismatic figure.
- In Venezuela there are two states: one is prevented from exercising power, the other is dysfunctional.
- Chávez will seek a way to diminish the power of the new National Assembly.
- The elections point to a decline in Chavism and the rise of the opposition.
- In the next two years, the challenge facing both the opposition and the international community is to work on the scenario of political pluralism.
- Given that public opinion considers crime as the country's main problem, the lack of a European response to such violence is noticeable.
- It will be difficult to instil the pluralism arising from these elections without diplomatic support from overseas.

»»»»» tion, but he will have to share his dubious victory with the opposition.

In spite of the imbalance between power and resources, Chávez's contenders achieved the goal they had set for themselves and won 67 of the 165 seats. Achieving unity worked in favour of the opposition, which in 2005 had decided not to participate in the elections, thereby clearing the way for Chavism. They learnt their lesson. They opted for unity with a healthy dose of realism, which included the scarce possibility of winning with a discriminatory law and hardly any media or resources, faced with the usual intimidation campaign and the prohibition or imprisonment of politicians. The opposition's slogan of reconciliation and its presentation of a common political programme portrayed it as stronger.

The Coalition for Democratic Unity (MUD) had spent over a year preparing itself and had managed to present common candidates. The difference between the MUD and the former Democratic Coordinator, created in 2002 and dissolved in 2004, was notable: the opposition abandoned the idea of conflict, achieved a greater democratic consensus, and paid more attention to the country's social problems. The five years of debate undertaken within the opposition while it was excluded from power made it evolve towards the realisation that achieving unity was the only means of taking part in the political game. The opposition had already made political headway in the 2008 regional elections, when it won the most seats in five states (Carabobo, Miranda, Nueva Esparta, Táchira and Zulia) and in the capital. The parties *Un Nuevo Tiempo* ('A New Era') and *Primero Justicia* ('Justice First') are emerging as the main political forces.

Although the opposition only has six deputies in the current Assembly, in the next it will have the power of veto. Without the opposition's support, Chávez can no longer approve his laws or name state authorities. For the first time since 2005, the opposition can also present its own initiatives. Its agenda includes proposals on destatisation, freedom of expression, public security reforms, control of expenditure and social rights.

Although it is unlikely that the MUD, which represents 18 national parties across the entire ideological spectrum, will achieve consensus in all of these areas, it will unite against political favouritism and Chavist laws. Until the 2012 presidential elections, this new power constellation could lead to two scenarios: confrontation or reconciliation. While Chavism advocates the first option, the key to the country's future is now in the hands of an opposition which presented itself as an alternative power at the latest elections, albeit without a charismatic figure.

### **SCENARIO 1: AUTHORITARIANISM AND POLARISATION**

Keeping the flame of polarisation alive as an excuse to approve authoritarian measures is the president's main power strategy. In his electoral campaign, he devised a list of the 'Ten Commandments of Victory' (Decálogo de la Victoria), the first of which was 'For Chávez'. With his usual belligerent discourse, the president insisted that 'we must win this fight on Sunday easily, by knockout, because [...] in December 2012 the Venezuelan people will choose the president of the Republic again, and I am already ready to continue building the "lovely fatherland" [*patria bonita*] with you'.

Chávez does not represent the Bolivarian revolution, but rather a dictatorship of law. Since 2001, he has approved 75 laws that have transformed the country. The president began a media and judicial campaign against the country's big businesses, such as Globovisión, which was nationalised by force, or the food company Polar, whose profits outdid those of the oil company PDVSA. Other initiatives include the Media Crimes Law, which facilitates censorship and puts licences in the hands of the executive; the Social Property Law, which will create communal businesses; and the International Cooperation Law, which has been under debate since 2006. Prohibiting these laws, and thereby state control of the media, the opposition, NGOs and private property, will be the opposition's main task.

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During the three remaining months of the current Assembly's mandate, Chávez could request the approval of a new authorising law which would enable him to carry out everything that remains pending since his electoral defeat in the December 2007 referendum. The lack of criticism being voiced from abroad shows that this type of authoritarian transition is more silent and much more subtle because it does not violate democratic laws, but rather uses them to concentrate power.

Chávez's political project represents a gradual judicial transition from democracy to authoritarianism. He has learnt the lesson from other populists such as Alberto Fujimori: rather than

shutting down democratic institutions, he creates others or transforms the existing ones into his own. It is a slow process, but given his length of time in government, it is a much more efficient way of controlling all power. Chávez is gradually building his own country which coexists alongside the Venezuela of

his enemies. In Venezuela there are two states: one is prevented from exercising power, and the other is dysfunctional. Each one has its own political bodies, media, universities, police, health systems, banks, supermarkets and schools.

Mediating institutions and deliberative spaces are lacking. Although the latest elections have reopened a democratic channel where all of the country's political forces meet, given his record, it is very unlikely that Chávez would accept a 'non-red' National Assembly. He would look for a means to take away its power. He has two options. Firstly, he can create a communal Parliament or a Parliament 'of the people', as the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista de Unidad

Venezuela, PSUV) announced on 28 September. In so doing, he would use the same strategy that he employed against the Caracas town hall under Antonio Ledezma, which was effectively stripped of its powers because a superior authority loyal to Chávez was created. Secondly, according to opposition sources, in the coming three months he could call a Constitutive Assembly to take up again the reforms proposed in 2007 and to propose a new institutional structure. If the president strips the National Assembly of its power, polarisation and confrontation will increase.

Maintaining this new space for dialogue also depends on the international community's reaction. Both the EU and Spain have deemed the results a good starting point for 'a renewed and fruitful political dialogue'. If they monitor this space for dialogue, they will contribute to the prevention of new political conflicts and will help to recover political debate. For the EU to remain silent in the face of the president's new manoeuvres would make it an accomplice of his authoritarian practices and would contravene its policy of creating states based on the rule of law. The episode involving the Spanish deputy Gustavo de Arístegui, one of the few non-nationals who observed the latest elections, makes it clear that European criticism matters to the Venezuelan government. After the intervention of the Spanish Foreign Affairs minister, the government revoked the deportation order issued against Arístegui. In a similar way to Brazil in the past, faced with the lack of mediating authorities, Spain can play a key role to contribute to pluralism and peaceful coexistence in Venezuela.

### **SCENARIO 2: DECLINE OF CHAVISM AND THE EMERGENCE OF AN ELECTORAL ALTERNATIVE**

If Chávez does not stand in the way, the latest elections will open up the possibility of reinstating dialogue between both political camps for the first time since the 2004 referendum. The Parliament will be a plural forum bringing together Chavist and opposition deputies. In spite of the

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»»»» two Venezuelas, beyond the political scene and contrary to the president's vision, the country today is less polarised than a few years back. Various indicators bear witness to this tendency.

Firstly, the elections took place peacefully without incidents of violence and, apart from the discriminatory electoral law, without evidence of mass fraud.

Secondly, unlike the government, the opposition is in favour of reconciliation and peace, which became the motto of its electoral campaign. Moreover, its political agenda does not point to a conflictive scenario, but rather it is reformist and devotes more attention to the country's social problems for the first time.

Thirdly, faced with the massive Chavist campaign and the mobilisation of a united opposition, it is striking that 33 per cent of voters abstained. These belong to the 'neither-nor' group which, according to Datanálisis, account for 54 per cent of Venezuelans. If the surveys are true, the vast majority of citizens represent the political centre. Rather than radicalising their messages, both Chavism and the opposition should concern themselves with recovering this political space which has been abandoned during so many years of confrontation.

Fourthly, an additional novelty is the emergence of an opposition from the left and the ranks of Chavism. In recent years, a greater labour and political mobilisation against the government has surfaced, new opposition groups have emerged and the governing party has fragmented. The PSUV is not a party, but rather an election mechanism designed to mobilise supporters with a vertical, hierarchical structure. In this legislature there were various rifts: six deputies from the political party *Podemos* ('We Can') refused to join the PSUV and became opposition. Recently, *Patria Para Todos* (PPT, 'Fatherland For All') separated from the governing party, presented its candidates and won two seats. Chávez can hardly class members of the opposition as ineffectual or *escuálidos* (derogatory term, literally meaning 'emaciated', which he uses to dismiss the opposition as weak and incapable); at the very most, he can label them 'traitors'.

The elections point to the decline of Chavism and the rise of the opposition. Although Chávez mobilised his supporters as if it were a presidential election – unlike the 2007 referendum –, he gained fewer votes than in the last regional and presidential elections. It is difficult to imagine how he could exceed the level of mobilisation undertaken in this election in the 2012 campaign. As well as implementing the PSUV's election mechanism and using state media for electoral propaganda, the president personally took charge of calling on his followers via Twitter and direct e-mail messages. Although he has maintained an electoral majority, he has not retained popular support. According to Hinterlaces, in the last year, his popularity fell from 53 per cent to 42 per cent, and 64 per cent of those interviewed indicated that they would prefer Chávez to abandon power in 2012.

As the economic crisis and widespread violence continue, Chávez will lose further supporters. The president's 'lovely fatherland' (*patria bonita*) comprises a homicide rate far higher than that of Mexico and Colombia; a recession of -3 per cent of GDP (the Venezuelan economy is the only one on the continent which is not growing); a rate of inflation which exceeds 33 per cent; and significant chaos at all levels of the state administration. The alliance with Cuba, the president's authoritarianism and a dysfunctional and patronage-based state have contributed to the decline of a Bolivarian revolution which makes promises that it fails to fulfil. The opposition could win this political space provided that it manages to maintain unity, because it is unlikely that one single party would win. From now on until 2012, through concrete proposals, it must demonstrate that it can be an alternative to Chávez's Bolivarian country.

Working on the potential for political pluralism is the shared challenge facing the opposition and the international community in the coming two years. By doing justice to their traditional policy of democratic pluralism, the EU as a neutral actor and Spain as the main European ally can contribute to this outlook. The European Parliament, which has criticised 'the authoritarian drift' of the govern-

ment, and the Euro-Latin American Parliamentary Assembly will have a key role to play in the process of strengthening the Venezuelan parliament. This would not be interference in Venezuela's domestic affairs, but rather a policy of conflict prevention and promotion of democratic dialogue.

### CAN A FAILED STATE BE AVOIDED?

The elections point to a leadership crisis and open up new political spaces in order to undertake the necessary reforms to rebuild the country and join together the two Venezuelas. The president has not only shown that he is incapable of resolving the country's problems, but he has also contributed to creating them with his polarising

discourse and a political inefficiency as never seen before in the country's history. Institutional weakness and the discrepancy between rhetoric and reality are the main differences between Chavism and the Cuban regime.

Unlike Castro, the Venezuelan patriarch does not have a successor. His departure would leave a big power vacuum and a

chaotic state divided in two. Added to this is the lack of a charismatic figure on the opposition side, which points to a post-populist ending and a return to the pre-Chávez era. It is a paradox that now, ten years after the failure of the democratic pact and in the absence of consolidated political parties, this power vacuum which finally led to the ascent of Chávez should be resuscitated. The real political challenge is to connect with this centre which the 'neither-nor' group represent, which reflect the desire of the majority of Venezuelans to overcome the polarisation and politicisation of dai-

ly life. The synergy between the Fourth and the Fifth Republics would be more social rights and greater citizen participation.

The European Commission's country strategy (2007-2013) foresees modernisation of the state and of Venezuelan institutions as one of the axes of cooperation. Likewise, it includes conflict prevention. Given that public opinion considers crime to be one of the country's main problems, the absence of a European response to the widespread violence is notable. Europe has not been particularly active in the field of institutional strengthening either. Therefore, putting these guidelines in practice and using the existing diplomatic fora (mainly Spain) to strengthen the new parliamentary space would fulfil these objectives. Without diplomatic support from overseas, it will be difficult to ensure that the pluralism that won the latest elections prevails.

In terms of conflict prevention policy, which the EU has committed to, any passive policy of indirect complicity with a government which has clearly shown that it is not only authoritarian, but also an abysmal, corrupt state administrator, must be abandoned. In the medium and long term, the solution must involve maintaining a political dialogue across the board and reaching agreements on projects which will strengthen institutions and contribute to improving public security. Doing nothing could be more costly than reacting in time.

As the main donor to the region and its principal political ally in Europe, Spain could take on a more active role in conflict prevention, mediation and deterrence. Meanwhile, nobody, either within the country or outside it, seems to want to rescue the new political centre which would allow the two Venezuelas to merge and would prevent a new failed state in the Americas and a drastic political outcome.

*Susanne Gratius is researcher at FRIDE*

**e-mail: [fride@fride.org](mailto:fride@fride.org)  
www.fride.org**

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