

Venezuelan legislature postpones Chavez inauguration

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The postponement of the inauguration of cancer-stricken Hugo Chavez for a fourth presidential term has ratcheted up political tensions in Venezuela, with the country's right-wing opposition demanding an immediate transfer of power.

Venezuela's National Assembly on Tuesday voted to approve a request from Chavez, who is hospitalized in Cuba following his fourth cancer surgery, to postpone his inauguration, which was scheduled for January 10.

The legislature, which is dominated by Chavez's ruling PSUV (United Socialist Party of Venezuela), voted to grant the president as long as he needed to recuperate from his illness.

The ruling party is going ahead with a mass rally in Caracas on Thursday, which is to be attended by presidents Jose Mujica of Uruguay and Evo Morales of Bolivia. Argentina's president, Cristina Fernandez Kirchner, is flying to Havana to visit Chavez. In an indication of its concern for stability in the oil-rich country, Latin America's leading power, Brazil, threw its support to the National Assembly decision, calling the delay in the inauguration "prudent" and "perfectly covered by constitutional measures."

For its part, the US State Department has repeatedly denied that it is attempting to impose "a made-in-America solution for Venezuela's transition," while acknowledging that US officials have been in discussions both with Vice President Maduro and opposition leaders.

Chavez has not been seen in public since a December 8 television appearance in which announced that he would be forced to take a leave of absence because of his health crisis. Since then, official announcements on his status have been less than encouraging, with early reports that he suffered hemorrhaging and lung failure after the surgery. Since then, his condition has been

given as "stable."

The attempt by the Venezuelan right to use Chavez's absence to shift the political situation suffered a setback Wednesday when the country's Supreme Court dismissed claims that the incumbent president could not continue in office if he failed to appear for the swearing-in ceremony.

Luisa Estrella Morales, the president of the court, told a news conference that the formality of the January 10 ceremony was not necessary because "there exists an administrative continuity."

Chavez's absence from the country had been approved by the National Assembly, as required by the constitution, she said. The same document provides that in the event the president cannot, for whatever reason, be sworn in before the National Assembly, the Supreme Court may administer the oath of office. Asked if such a ceremony could be held at his hospital in Havana, Cuba, Morales answered that "the condition of time, place and manner of the swearing-in of the president" had not been set.

Ironically, the right-wing opposition, backed by Venezuela's Catholic Church hierarchy, had postured as the defender of the constitution, a document which it had bitterly opposed when it was created under Chavez in 1999, changing the country's name to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

"Right now in Venezuela, without any doubt whatsoever, a constitutional conflict has arisen," declared opposition leader Henrique Capriles, the governor of Miranda state, who lost to Chavez by a 10 percent margin in last October's presidential election.

Capriles warned that a decision by the Supreme Court upholding the National Assembly's decision postponing the inauguration "could contribute to anarchy... a scenario of not recognizing the constitution

and anarchy isn't convenient for anyone in Venezuela." He went on to suggest that the country's military, the Bolivarian Armed Forces, would "support the constitution and are willing to enforce its application."

Capriles was deeply implicated in the CIA-backed coup that briefly toppled and imprisoned Chavez in 2002, and was himself jailed in its aftermath for his role in leading a violent demonstration outside the Cuban embassy, where Chavez supporters were believed to have taken refuge.

The opposition, organized into the coalition known as MUD (Mesa de la Unidad Democratica), has insisted that under the constitution Chavez should be declared temporarily incapacitated and the speaker of the National Assembly, Diosdado Cabello, rather than Vice President Nicolas Maduro, should take the reins of power as a caretaker president.

While couched in constitutional terms, the demand represents a political tactic to exploit internal divisions within the Chavista PSUV, which the opposition hopes will rise to the surface once Chavez either dies or is declared unable to govern.

While Cabello and Maduro have been portrayed as representing widely divergent tendencies, the military and civilian wings of Chavismo, both men trace their connection to Chavez back to the failed 1992 military coup led by the former paratrooper commander.

Cabello, a former army lieutenant, was one of Chavez's fellow military conspirators. Maduro, a bus driver and union leader who became a member of the Maoist Liga Socialista in his youth, is married to the lawyer Celia Flores, who defended Chavez and secured his release from prison two years after his coup attempt.

Cabello has been not only president of the National Assembly, but also governor of Miranda (defeated by Capriles), minister of public works, and vice-president of the ruling PSUV. He has close ties to senior military officers and has been charged with corruption and enriching himself through his political connections. Some sections of the media have suggested that he has reservations about the close ties forged by Chavez with Cuba and is an anti-communist.

Maduro was Venezuela's foreign minister before being appointed by Chavez as his vice president. His wife, Celia Flores, is the country's attorney general. In his December 8 broadcast, Chavez named Maduro as

his successor, his choice as the PSUV candidate in event of his demise or incapacitation. The right-wing media has portrayed him as a leftist and puppet of the Castro regime in Cuba.

Cabello and Maduro have denied any tensions between them and have denounced claims to the contrary as provocations by the political right. The motivation behind these provocations, however, is to exploit tensions within the bourgeois nationalist and populist movement created by Chavez that are very real.

Chavez has played a Bonapartist role, balancing between the disparate social forces that formed his base. These included not only oppressed layers of the population that benefited from social assistance programs he financed through oil export earnings, but the so-called *boliburguesia*, a layer of Venezuelan capitalists that have enriched themselves off of government connections and financial speculation.

A key institutional foundation of the regime remained the military from which Chavez came. Half of Venezuela's state governors are former military officers and they are also heavily represented in Chavez's cabinet.

The ability of either Maduro or Cabello to play this same role in managing Chavismo without Chavez is by no means certain, raising the prospect of a protracted political crisis and a sharpening of the class struggle in Venezuela.



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