

## **THE 'PEACEMAKER' FROM VENEZUELA. DOMESTIC-POLICY MOTIVES FOR FOREIGN-POLICY ESCALATION**

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It was not only for foreign-policy reasons that Venezuela's President, Hugo Chávez, took advantage of Colombia's military action against FARC fighters on Ecuadorian territory and the subsequent conflict between Bogotá and Quito to interfere and provoke a crisis in the region. Many motives of the populist, who allowed himself to be lionized as a peacemaker in his home country after the problem was settled at the Rio Summit of Santo Domingo, sprang from Venezuela's domestic policy. Mr Chávez has been in touch with Colombia's guerrilla, the FARC, for some time now. When, in 2007, he set himself up as the liberator of hostages who were in the hands of this terrorist organization, which is regarded as a key player in drug trafficking and violent crime in the region, Colombia's head of state cancelled his mandate. Nevertheless, Venezuela's President let himself be fêted ostentatiously as a successful mediator with the maximum media appeal.

However, when Mr Chávez demanded that the FARC be recognized as a political organization this was too much even for the former hostages. The verbal conflict with Colombia culminated when its military killed Raúl Reyes, the number two in the FARC, in Ecuador without informing the government there. The problem might have remained a matter between Ecuador and Colombia, but Hugo Chávez' meddling and his successful endeavours to put his counterparts under pressure gave a new dimension to the conflict.

One motive for Mr Chávez' line of action may have been his fear that Colombia might crack down on the FARC on Venezuela's own territory. What is more, Venezuela's President fears that an evaluation of the computers the Colombians confiscated in the camp of the dead rebels might provide solid evidence of the substantial support given by Venezuela's government to the FARC. Mr Chávez himself, whose collision course with Colombia is more or less rejected by the people of his own country, claims that he has never provided the FARC with money or weapons.

Now, what induced Mr Chávez to do what he did? His defeat in the referendum on the constitution held at the end of 2007 lost him much of his power, rousing him from his dream of everlasting presidency. By now, Venezuela's population has started thinking about a time after Mr Chávez. The gubernatorial and mayoral elections scheduled for November this year might weaken the President's nimbus even further. Many people are frustrated because it seems that the project of a United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) will be denied any sweeping success. As early as March, a

ballot was to be held in which the rank-and-file of the party were to give a mandate to a new executive. However, the poll in which no more than 87,000 members took part turned into a farce, causing many delegates to sign a stinging letter to Mr Chávez, voicing their discontent with corruption, clientelism, lack of transparency, and attempts at manipulating the life of the party. What is more, criticism of the concentration of power, personality worship, and the quest for personal enrichment that are characteristic of Mr Chávez is growing louder and louder.

By now, dissatisfaction with the strong man of Caracas after nine years in office is spreading among the population. The supply situation is disastrous, and staple foods have become highly treasured goods on the black market. The crime rate is increasing further, and conditions in the prisons are unspeakable. According to official figures, inflation was at 22.5 percent in 2007, while unofficial sources put it at 30 percent. The state has expanded its sphere of action considerably but results have been meagre since 1999. To be sure, employing Cuban doctors and/or implementing social programmes did have its desired temporary effect here and there but could certainly not be said to constitute a course towards improving the structural quality of Venezuela's social life.

Hugo Chávez' true intentions cannot be identified that easily. When supporters of the President, led by activist Lina Ron, stormed the official residence of the Archbishop in March and later explained that they had intended to attack the Catholic Church, the entrepreneurial class, and Globovisión, a station which is critical towards Mr Chávez, in order to defend the Bolivarian revolution, Mr Chávez condemned this action, talking about an infiltration of the revolution by the CIA. Mr Chávez' flexibility does indeed make an analysis of his stage appearance difficult: First, he acts the polarizer, then the 'mollifier'.

In view of all this, the show of reconciliation at the meeting of the Rio Group in Santo Domingo should not be surprising, and it quite impressed the population of Venezuela. The Colombian issue still serves Hugo Chávez as an arena in which he seeks to score on the international plane and to keep his following at home together by playing the nationalist trump card for all it is worth. Lured by this goal, not even exchanging a brotherly embrace with Mr Uribe, whom he usually calls a 'lap dog of the US imperialists', was too high a price to pay.

Mr Chávez will hardly be pleased with the path the opposition in Venezuela is currently pursuing. It has obtained a broad following by now and is no longer concentrating solely on the anti-Chávez discourse. At the end of January, eight political parties signed an agreement on presenting common candidates to challenge the governing party in the next elections. It is particularly

precarious for the President that some of his former supporters from the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) and elsewhere have defected to the camp of his opponents. One of the weak points of the opposition is its lack of leaders and programmatic alternatives to the current policy. It really has not yet been able to give convincing answers to the country's urgent questions.

It remains to be said that Venezuela's current government, if not actually supportive of the Colombian FARC, at least regards its doings with favour. The putative reconciliation in Santo Domingo did not change this situation, and Mr Chávez will continue his polarizing in foreign policy. The domestic situation alone should be reason enough, as it is essential for him to keep the increasingly promising opposition down, stop or even prevent the disintegration of his own camp, and divert the attention of the broad masses from his own dilemma. Supply shortages in Venezuela can be readily explained by pointing at illegal food exports to Colombia.

It remains to be seen whether the Chávez government will be able to master Venezuela's big problems, at least those in the country, and whether the opposition will succeed in appearing as a united camp in the next gubernatorial and mayoral elections. At the moment, there is little chance of a peaceful change of government in the near future. Rather, we may expect new impulses from Caracas to destabilize the region further. The dictate of the hour for Washington and Bogotá is to deal with the matter sensitively.

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