

THE SATURDAY PROFILE

A Former Guerrilla Reinvents Himself as a Candidate

THE NEW YORK TIMES
JULY 1, 2006

CARACAS, Venezuela - More than seven years into the government of the leftist president Hugo Chávez, people here barely raise an eyebrow to having former Marxist guerrillas in positions of power. One is foreign minister, another is the chief executive of the government's aluminum producer and yet another was one of Mr. Chávez's first representatives to OPEC.

Now, one of the country's most eminent ex-guerrillas, Teodoro Petkoff Malec, is seeking to oust Mr. Chávez in this year's presidential election. Mr. Petkoff is basing his bid on what he calls impeccable leftist credentials and a promise to end the polarization of Venezuelan society between Mr. Chávez's supporters and opponents.

With Mr. Chávez far ahead in the polls, Mr. Petkoff's campaign as an independent appears quixotic. But it is no more surprising than a political career that has spanned half a century and included not only armed struggle against the government and spectacular prison escapes but also a rebirth as a congressman and, later, as a planning minister who created an austerity program that won backing from the International Monetary Fund.

His most recent incarnation as aspirant to the presidency comes after several years as editor of *Tal Cual*, a newspaper sharply critical of Mr. Chávez's administration and the opposition's tactics. He still describes himself as "a man of the left," though he broke with Movement Toward Socialism, a party he helped build over nearly three decades, over its declaration of support for Mr. Chávez in 1998.

Assessing Mr. Chávez's rise through the Venezuelan Army and his role in a coup attempt in 1992, Mr. Petkoff was an early critic of what he said were Mr. Chávez's authoritarian tendencies.

Since becoming president, Mr. Chávez has steadily tightened his hold on power. He emerged more powerful than ever after his ouster in a brief coup in 2002 that soured many in Venezuela on a fractured opposition, which critics say has unwittingly done much to strengthen his hand.

With several months to go before the December election, Mr. Chávez seems to be benefiting from surging oil revenues, which have financed broadly popular social welfare programs. His approval rating stands at 57 percent, according to a recent poll by Alfredo Keller y Asociados.

That has not dampened Mr. Petkoff's enthusiasm. Though campaigning does not formally start until August, he has already filled the airwaves with advertisements championing his commitment to reduce fear, whether of political retribution or random violence.

Mr. Petkoff has also criticized signs of the government's increasing militarism, including the purchase of 100,000 machine guns from Russia and images of Mr. Chávez test-firing the weapons, as a distraction from democratic leftist principles.

"We're suffering from the inefficiencies of a system manipulated by the megalomania and delirium of one man," Mr. Petkoff, who is 74 but looks a decade or so younger, said in an interview at his frenetic campaign headquarters here in a run-down office building. "Chávez thinks this country is his private ranch."

One of Mr. Petkoff's main proposals is to redistribute Venezuela's oil wealth through government coupons similar to food stamps in the United States, an attempt to challenge Mr. Chávez on the strength of his anti-poverty programs, which have increased literacy and access to basic foodstuffs among much of the country's poor.

"Petkoff understands that associating these coupons with the oil boom is something that can reverberate among the poorest elements," said Luis Pedro España, an economist who studies poverty issues at Andrés Bello Catholic University in Caracas. "It's an electoral ploy, but if managed well, it could go beyond a direct subsidy to a more meaningful assistance policy."

Mr. Petkoff has been known for independent thinking in his trajectory from the revolutionary fringe to the political establishment. He distanced himself from Leninist dogmatism in the late 1960's with a critique of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, and he surprised many leftists when as planning minister in the 1990's he supported opening Venezuela's oil industry to foreign investment, along with other reforms that pleased investors from the United States and Europe.

These efforts included plans to sell state-controlled companies to private investors and raise domestic gasoline prices, which remain among the world's lowest.

Mr. Petkoff is perhaps best remembered, however, for his derring-do as a leftist rebel in the 1960's under the nom de guerre Roberto. Captured in 1963 and placed in San Carlos Prison in Caracas, he convinced the guards that he was painfully ill with an ulcer.

A supporter then obtained capsules of fresh calf's blood for him, which he swallowed and spit up, forcing his transfer to a military hospital. From there he descended to freedom down seven stories on a smuggled length of nylon rope, earning him iconic status within the Latin American left.

In an essay written in 1983 during one of Mr. Petkoff's two previous presidential campaigns, the Colombian Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez described him as "capable at the same time

of escaping from prison like a cinematic hero, dancing like a youth until dawn to fashionable music, or passing an entire evening, sometimes without one drink, discussing literature."

Despite his leftist credentials, as the son of European immigrants who arrived in Venezuela in the 1920's, Mr. Petkoff is still at risk of being considered just another member of Venezuela's elite in a country where Mr. Chávez uses his own mixed-race background, referring at times to his African and Indian ancestries, to win popular support. Some people insist on calling Mr. Petkoff a "catire" (pronounced kah-TEE-reh), a term describing someone fair-skinned with light hair. (His father was from Bulgaria and his mother of Polish Jewish origin.)

Still, his biggest obstacle to gaining the presidency may not be the color of his hair, now somewhat gray, but the stumbling efforts by a fractious opposition to rally around a single candidate. Some parts of the electorate even still favor sitting out the election, citing fears over voting fraud, a policy that last year put the national legislature firmly in the hands of Mr. Chávez and his supporters.

Two other potential candidates, Julio Borges of the First Justice party and Manuel Rosales, governor of the oil-rich Zulia state, recently met with Mr. Petkoff to discuss putting forth a single opposition candidate, but details on how such a front could be assembled remain vague.

Some polls have put support for any of the three potential candidates in single percentage points in a race against Mr. Chávez, though more than 30 percent of voters say they are still undecided or might not vote. One survey conducted in May by the Venezuelan Institute for Data Analysis and broadcast by state-owned radio put Mr. Chávez's support at 66 percent compared with 34 percent for a consensus opposition candidate, if one were to emerge.

[In a move that could further complicate the opposition's prospects, Súmate, one of Venezuela's leading nongovernmental organizations, said this week that it could not help organize primary elections to pick a single candidate, citing time constraints for recruiting volunteers and distributing electoral materials.]

In the interview, Mr. Petkoff acknowledged his candidacy was an uphill struggle. When asked about his prospects, he relied on a Venezuelan refrain, "Cada pulpero alaba su queso," which loosely translates as, "Every grocer boasts about his cheese."

Boasting about his threadbare campaign's chances to thrust him into the Venezuelan presidency, however, inevitably led him to reflect on the conditions that made possible yet another rebirth.

"Venezuela has been a very generous country," Mr. Petkoff said, referring to his successes in politics and intellectual life, despite his guerrilla past. "I'd like it to remain that way."