

## Fiery Chávez Aims For a Global Role

Venezuela Seeks Security Council Seat

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BOGOTA, Colombia, Sept. 22 -- Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's blistering attack on President Bush at the United Nations this week marked a striking crescendo in a campaign to project Venezuela as a country with the global reach to counter American initiatives.

Swimming in wealth from an oil bonanza, Venezuela has bestowed billions of dollars in aid and preferential deals across Latin America, burnishing Chávez's image as heir apparent to President Fidel Castro of Cuba, his mentor and close friend.

But in recent months, Chávez has been traveling the world -- not just seeking the economic deals his internationalist government has always wanted, but also pressing for influence in affairs far from Latin America, political analysts say. His immediate goal is to obtain enough backing to secure a two-year spot on the 15-member U.N. Security Council, a campaign the Bush administration is vigorously opposing by backing tiny Guatemala for the seat. But his long-term goal appears to be more far-reaching.

"Venezuela was too small for him; now I think Latin America is too small for him," said Michael Shifter, an analyst at the Inter-American Dialogue, a Washington policy group. "He wants to be a global leader who can shape the international agenda. This is sort of a shift to being involved in decision-making on very sensitive international and political affairs."

In one of the most derisive and caustic speeches in U.N. history, the Venezuelan leader on Wednesday labeled Bush "the devil" and "dear world dictator," leading to sustained applause at the General Assembly. On Thursday, speaking to the congregants of a church in Harlem, he called Bush an alcoholic and a sick man, "but very dangerous because he has lots of power."

Since July, Chávez's feverish travel schedule has taken him to Iran, Syria, Russia, China, Vietnam, Belarus and other nations whose governments are often on less than favorable terms with the United States.

He has come away with support for his bid to gain the Security Council seat next month -- among his backers are Russia and China, who hold permanent council seats -- and solidified alliances against the Bush administration. Chávez has railed against American efforts to neutralize Iran's nuclear efforts and the administration's support of Israel in its invasion of Lebanon.

Obtaining a Security Council seat would only further empower Chávez. "This is why he's putting on the full-court press for the Security Council," said Riordan Roett, director of Latin American studies at Johns Hopkins University. "He sees this as a launching pad for Venezuela on the U.N. stage, which is a global stage. And there's no question that he would use the U.N. as a personal hobbyhorse to harass the White House."

Venezuelan officials cast Chávez's diplomatic efforts as a high-minded necessity in the face of American imperialism. And they predicted that the General Assembly would approve Venezuela's entry into the Security Council.

"The president's discourse and metaphors can leave people surprised, but they also generate a lot of solidarity, too, which will be put to the test in the Security Council vote," Francisco Arias Cárdenas, the Venezuelan ambassador to the United Nations, said by telephone from New York. "Saying these truths do not do damage."

Yet the Venezuelan leader's foreign policy has had mixed results.

In Latin America, he has mined widespread aversion to the Bush administration and capitalized on American blunders, such as the White House's decision to give tacit support to the opposition leaders who briefly overthrew Chávez in 2002.

American financial backing of the opposition has also strengthened Chávez, since he rarely misses an opportunity to portray his foes as lap dogs of the Bush administration. Foreign governments from Argentina to tiny Dominica have also benefited from Venezuelan largess.

But Chávez's meddling in Peru's presidential election earlier this year doomed the candidacy of Ollanta Humala, a leftist whom Venezuela openly supported. Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the Mexican populist, saw his popularity fall ahead of July's election after his opponent, Felipe Calderón, portrayed him as the second coming of Chávez. Calderón won a close election.

Two more presidential elections in which leftists close to Chávez are running could also serve as a barometer of his appeal. In Ecuador, Rafael Correa, an economist, has a slight lead going into the Oct. 15 vote. And in Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega, the fierce Cold War opponent of the United States, has also led in polls as the country prepares for a Nov. 5 election.

"If he gives the impression of openly interfering or intervening in the elections in Ecuador and Nicaragua, it will backfire," said Wayne Smith, a former U.S. diplomat in Latin America who tracks Chávez. "Maybe he will learn from his mistakes."

In Venezuela, Chávez's railings against Bush have played well among his most fervent backers.

But pollsters in Caracas, the capital, say that while Venezuelans support the government's social programs, they do not back many of his international initiatives. More than 60 percent of Venezuelans reject the country's antagonistic relationship with the United States, according to the Datanalisis polling firm, while nearly 80 percent do not see Cuba as a model for Venezuela.

"Despite his popularity, he has some weaknesses, and Venezuelans complain that he is too aggressive verbally, and they frankly find it unpresidential," said Mark Feierstein, a former State Department official who works for Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, a Washington polling and political consulting firm that has operated in Venezuela.

Chávez, first elected in 1998, is running for another term in December's election. He enjoys a sizable advantage over the main opposition challenger, Manuel Rosales, the governor of oil-rich Zulia state. But Rosales has chipped away at the president's lead by highlighting crime, corruption and social decay.

Opposition leaders predict that Chávez's speech at the United Nations will only solidify support for Rosales. "This type of discourse just makes Venezuelans more and more worried about the future of our country," Antonio Ledezma, an opposition leader, said by phone from Caracas. "The president wants to be a world leader, and he sees little in Venezuela to occupy him."

Yet Luis Vicente Leon of Datanalisis said that focusing on international affairs is a tactical move designed to keep Rosales from effectively engaging Chávez on domestic issues. "When he attacks, he attacks Bush, not Rosales," Leon said. "He ignores Rosales completely."