

Venezuelan's Diatribe at U.N. May Have Backfired

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[UNITED NATIONS](#), Oct. 24 — [Venezuela's](#) populist leader, [Hugo Chávez](#), earned giggles and guffaws at the United Nations last month with his mass appeal diatribe ridiculing President Bush as the devil. Mr. Chávez said he could still smell the telltale scent of sulfur on the [General Assembly](#) rostrum where Mr. Bush had spoken the day before.

Now it appears that Mr. Chávez's histrionic performance — styled to win him support from the United States' many detractors at the United Nations — may have cost his country the seat on the Security Council that he has conducted a global campaign to win.

Developing nations make up a vast majority of the 192 countries in the General Assembly and generally warm to rants against Washington. But they also value the United Nations as a place where their voices can be heard in a dignified setting, and both supporters and detractors here say Mr. Chávez may have miscalculated in turning it into his bully pulpit.

Delegates said they also feared that the performance demonstrated the kind of behavior Venezuela might bring to the orderly confines of the Council chamber.

As the General Assembly resumes voting on Wednesday on who should occupy the seat being vacated by Argentina, Venezuela's candidacy is already considered finished. In 35 rounds over three days last week, the ambassadors kept Venezuela's competitor, [Guatemala](#), far in front, though not in ready reach of the two-thirds majority needed to win the seat.

In a twist to Venezuela's quest for the seat, President Evo Morales of [Bolivia](#), Mr. Chávez's closest political ally in South America, said Tuesday that Mr. Chávez had asked him to put Bolivia forward as an alternate candidate to Venezuela. But a spokeswoman for the Venezuelan Foreign Ministry later said the nomination of Bolivia was just one option under consideration. In any case, the decision to select a new candidate would be up to the Latin American and Caribbean group at the United Nations.

Venezuela's poor results came as a surprise, and many people, including those favoring Caracas in the voting, point to Mr. Chávez's performance as the cause.

“The speech played the most important role in what happened,” said Riordan Roett, the director of the Latin American Studies Program at [Johns Hopkins University](#). “You can talk like that in Latin America, and people will have a chuckle, but there is traditional respect for protocol, and it was not amusing to a lot of people who see the U.N. as the forum for expressing third world views.”

“The speech really hurt his case,” said Enrique Berruga, the ambassador of Mexico. “Most members don’t want this place to be turned into a mockery. In the General Assembly, there are limits, and he went way beyond them.”

Another Latin ambassador, who said he knew of many countries that voted against Venezuela because of the speech, agreed that Mr. Chávez had stepped over a line.

“U.S.-bashing is acceptable, but not the U.N.-bashing that they thought Chávez’s speech amounted to because in the end this is everyone’s house, and a speech like that goes down the same dirty drain as the bitter criticisms of the U.S.,” the envoy said. He asked not to be identified because he was commenting on the leader of another South American country.

Asked if Mr. Chávez’s popularity might be flagging closer to home, Mr. Roett pointed out that presidential candidates who have been identified with Mr. Chávez in recent elections in Ecuador, Peru and Mexico all did badly. “For sure he’s not gone as a force, but people are less impressed with him than they were four or five years ago,” he said.

The expectation at the United Nations has been that the inconclusive balloting will drag on for many days as Venezuela and Guatemala refuse to step down and the Latin American group is consequently unable to turn to a compromise candidate.

The calculus could change if Venezuela does decide to drop out.

The unseemly process is embarrassing to Latin diplomats who acknowledge that the 33-nation Latin American and Caribbean group at the United Nations has often shown disunity, while the 53-nation African group and the 54-country Asian group yearly produce candidates without dispute.

“We probably have the least amount of time difference between our countries of any group, but we have the greatest difficulties getting together,” said Eduardo

J. Sevilla Somoza, the ambassador of Nicaragua. His country lost its bid for a Security Council seat last year to Peru.

The disarray that the Venezuela-Guatemala standoff has produced at the United Nations reflects divisions within the region itself.

First, there is the role of the United States, which has lobbied vigorously for Guatemala in an effort to keep Venezuela off the Security Council and whose attempts to influence Latin America have long divided the region.

“Both countries feel victimized, Guatemala because of Venezuela and Venezuela because of the United States,” said Ronaldo Sardenberg, the ambassador of Brazil. “It’s a very complicated moment.”

Another part of the divide is a regional tug-of-war pitting the small countries of Central America and the Caribbean against the large nations of South America.

Guatemala has never been on the Security Council. Venezuela has been a member four times, and the powers of the continent, Brazil and Argentina, have held a seat nine and eight times respectively.

But the division most on the minds of Latin Americans today is the one provoked by Mr. Chávez and his adoption of an authoritarian, state-centered leadership model that he is trying to spread through the region, which has in recent years adopted market economics and democracy.

Kenneth R. Maxwell, a senior fellow at the [David Rockefeller](#) Center for Latin American Studies at [Harvard](#), said he believed there was a “tectonic shift” that was dividing Latin America three ways — a northern sphere encompassing Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean; a southern part based in the large countries of South America; and an Andean stretch where indigenous leaders were coming to power.

He said that shift had created an instability that had given Mr. Chávez an opportunity to win over other countries to his thinking, particularly as long as he can tap Venezuela’s oil proceeds for his political goals.

Arturo Valenzuela, the director of Georgetown’s Center for Latin American Studies, said he thought the divisions were serious, but not as deep as the

ideological schism that befell the region during the cold war when many countries were ruled by military dictatorships.