

NEWS ANALYSIS

Venezuelans Give Chávez a Mandate to Tighten His Grip

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CARACAS, [Venezuela](#), Dec. 4 — If President Hugo Chávez rules like an autocrat, as his critics in Washington and here charge, then he does so with the full permission of a substantial majority of the Venezuelan people, Sunday's election here showed.

Sent to power for a third time, Mr. Chávez seems intent on assuming the mantle from the fading [Fidel Castro](#) of chief Latin American scourge of the United States. He also has made no secret of his intent to consolidate his power further through legal and personnel changes.

He has spoken of a desire to unite his supporters in one political party and to alter legislation to allow him to remain in power past 2020.

Winning support for such measures may not be difficult in a country where his allies already control the legislature and the Supreme Court as well as governorships in all but two states, and where the military, the national oil company and other government bureaucracies and institutions have been systematically packed with Chávez boosters and stripped of opponents.

Now, facing an anemic opposition that could not win in any of Venezuela's 23 states or Caracas, Mr. Chávez is expected to tighten his grip, first and foremost over his own supporters in an effort to prevent challenges to his rule from emerging.

“A priority for Chávez right now is what he calls a ‘revolution within a revolution,’ ” said Steve Ellner, a political scientist at the Universidad de Oriente in eastern Venezuela. “This means a purging process of those associated with corruption or excess bureaucracy. In January you're going to see some heads being chopped.”

Venezuela leading newspapers, El Nacional and El Universal, published maps in their pages on Monday showing the entire country painted red, the color of Mr. Chávez's campaign, as a reflection of his convincing victory.

Red, in fact, colored not just the clothing and advertisements of the Chávez campaign. Rafael Ramírez, the energy minister, described the national oil company as “red, really red,” in comments caught on video in which he told workers that they had no place in the company if they were not supporters of the government.

Mr. Ramírez’s words, which Mr. Chávez promptly adopted as one of his refrains, point to a creeping “with us or against us” radicalization in Venezuelan society that goes beyond the government-run oil company to institutions like public schools and museums.

That polarization may now worsen, a prospect that clearly concerns leaders of Venezuela’s political opposition as they regroup after their defeat.

“Chávez is not a dictator,” Teodoro Petkoff, the editor of the newspaper *TalCual* and a key adviser to the president’s defeated opponent, Manuel Rosales, said in an interview. “But he’s not a [Thomas Jefferson](#) either.”

The reality of Venezuela’s democracy is indeed far more nuanced, as is Mr. Chávez’s “21st-century socialism” in an oil-exporting country experiencing a boom in conspicuous consumption.

Mr. Rosales’s campaign itself illustrated that complexity. Mr. Rosales, the governor of Zulia State, rose from near obscurity to lead a movement that won nearly 40 percent of the vote nationwide. Much of the established media in the capital, Caracas, clearly supported him, although in relatively restrained coverage compared with their previous opposition to Mr. Chávez.

Beyond Venezuela, Mr. Chávez’s rise to international prominence in Latin America and beyond has much to do with his supremacy in Venezuela.

With his new term and the slow demise of his hero Fidel Castro, who was too ill to attend his own 80th birthday celebrations in Havana over the weekend, Mr. Chávez may indeed solidify his place as the new the standard-bearer of the left in Latin America, where leftist candidates have won presidential elections in the last five weeks in Brazil, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Venezuela.

That left is indeed varied, and Mr. Chávez is not necessarily its most representative figure. But he is its most vocal one, especially when it comes to chiding President Bush.

Mr. Chávez's prominent position will continue to depend, of course, on the price of oil, the volatile commodity at the heart of Venezuela's economy. Those prices may remain high as the war in Iraq drags on and markets gaze nervously at the Middle East. Meanwhile, paradoxically, the United States remains the largest buyer of Venezuelan oil and has in effect helped to finance Mr. Chávez's ambitions.

"Chávez is getting stronger as an unintended consequence of war and globalization," said Kenneth Maxwell, a professor of Latin American history at [Harvard](#).

Despite Venezuela's tight commercial embrace of the United States, the obstacles to improving relations may now loom larger.

Washington remains wary of Venezuela's warm ties to Cuba, Iran and Syria. The Bush and Chávez administrations hold different views on hemispheric integration, with United States wanting to expand it, based on the model of trade agreements like Nafta, and Venezuela promoting Latin America first, before further integration with the North American economies.

"The chances for improvement are minimal for the remainder of the Bush administration," said Daniel Hellinger, a political scientist and an expert on Venezuela at Webster University in St. Louis. "More is involved here than the personal animosity between Bush and Chávez."