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Chávez Calls for Unity After Victory in Venezuela

CARACAS, Venezuela — President [Hugo Chávez](#) followed his least convincing election victory — a still powerful 55 percent of the vote — with a phone call to his challenger on Monday and an appeal for national unity. But there appeared to be little prospect of concessions to the opposition, despite its relatively strong showing.

With 97 percent of the vote counted, Mr. Chávez won with 8 million votes, compared with 6.4 million votes and 44 percent for his rival, Henrique Capriles Radonski, the closest race since Mr. Chávez took office in 1999. In the last election, in 2006, Mr. Chávez won by 26 percent.

Both Mr. Chávez and Mr. Capriles mentioned the call in Twitter posts, referring to unity and mutual respect. That was something of a change, particularly for Mr. Chávez, who spent much of the campaign calling his opponent “good for nothing” or “little Yankee.” In a news conference on Monday, Mr. Capriles’ campaign manager, Armando Briquet, related that Mr. Capriles said of the call that Mr. Chávez had, for the first time, called him by his proper name.

But there was little indication of a warmer tone on display at a news conference held by the National Assembly president, Diosdado Cabello, a leader in Mr. Chávez’s party, who called the vote for Mr. Chávez “a resounding majority.”



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“You hear some people now, the opposition, saying, you’ve got to recognize the six million-and-some who voted against the government,” Mr. Cabello said. “Oh please! Don’t forget about the eight million who voted for Chávez.”

Mr. Chávez will start his new six-year term in January, after 14 years in power. But there is uncertainty about at least some of his direction.

On Sunday night, he said he planned to take the country farther down the road to his version of “21st century socialism” — but he has yet to make clear what that means.

Analysts said it could include steps to extend state control further over portions of the economy, possibly through a new wave of expropriations of privately owned companies.

He is likely to increase emphasis on a system of thousands of so-called communes, community councils that are meant to encourage grass-roots democracy like the creation of communally run businesses. But Mr. Chávez may be hindered in the short term by a looming economic reckoning, which economists said could include a sharp cut in government spending, a devaluation of the currency, and an increase in inflation.

The government used a huge spending increase to boost the economy and consolidate support before the election, according to Ricardo Hausmann, the director of the Center for International Development at Harvard University. At the same time it used price controls and cheap imports to tamp down inflation.

“They engineered an electoral year boomlet that is now going to fizzle,” said Mr. Hausmann, who supported Mr. Capriles. He predicted a recession that could bring political

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consequences. “I think there’s going to be disappointment with Chávez fairly soon,” he said.

Mr. Chávez’s health is a major question. He has been fighting cancer, and his illness forced him to maintain a reduced schedule during the campaign. But he has refused to provide details about the cancer, including the type and where it was found. That has led to speculation that he may become too ill to govern and may eventually have to step down.

Mr. Chávez has built a highly centralized and personalized administration in which he makes most important decisions, and he commands near savior status among some supporters. That combination is unmatched by anyone in his circle, complicating succession.

If a president dies or leaves office in the first four years of his term, the Constitution calls for a new election. In the event that Mr. Chávez’s health deteriorated, that provision could offer the opposition another shot at the presidency.

Francisco Rodríguez, an economist with Bank of America Merrill Lynch, speculated that Mr. Chávez might propose changing the succession rules so that the vice president, who is selected by the president, serves out the remainder of a vacated presidency. If the opposition weakens from its defeat, the change might win the necessary popular approval.

“He can catch the opposition in a state of disarray and get that passed without much trouble and then he would control the succession issue,” Mr. Rodríguez said.



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At a news conference on Monday, Ramón Guillermo Aveledo, a leader of the opposition coalition that backed Mr. Capriles, called Sunday's election clean but not fair because, he said, Mr. Chávez had used vast state resources to promote his campaign.

Mr. Aveledo said the coalition looked forward to state governor elections in December. "The only risk for the opposition is to not keep going," he said.

What seems unlikely to change is Mr. Chávez's list of international detractors and supporters. Venezuela is a major oil supplier to the United States, but political relations are tense. Mr. Chávez criticizes the United States as an imperialist power bent on having its way in Latin America and elsewhere. On Monday, the White House press secretary, Jay Carney, acknowledged "differences with President Chávez," but congratulated "the Venezuelan people" on a peaceful election.

Cuba offered a message of support for Mr. Chávez, who helps prop up the Cuban economy with cheap oil. President Raúl Castro congratulated Mr. Chávez in a message published in Granma, Cuba's state newspaper, saying his re-election showed the strength of his revolution "and its unquestionable popular support."

Tomado del diario The New York Times

María Eugenia Díaz contributed reporting.

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