

VENEZUELA-UNITED STATES - A New Chance for Relations?

Humberto Márquez, IPS

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IPS - The outcome of Venezuela's presidential elections may hold out a possibility of a thaw in relations with the United States, within a hemispheric context of greater openness to negotiation and dialogue.

"We've always looked for ways to deepen the dialogue with the government of President Chávez, and our hopes are that maybe at this moment he will show a greater interest," said U.S. Undersecretary of State for Latin America Thomas Shannon.

"We do not want a relationship of confrontation," he added, saying the U.S. was hoping for more positive relations in areas like trade, energy and the fight against drugs and terrorism.

After crushing his opponent, Manuel Rosales, by 63 to 37 percent Sunday, President Hugo Chávez said that "if they want to talk as equals, we are willing to engage in dialogue, but I doubt that the government (of George W. Bush) is sincere. It has financed conspiratorial activities..."

The Venezuelan leader accuses the U.S. government of financing the short-lived April 2002 coup in which he was overthrown by dissident senior military officers and businessmen.

Chávez called for "transparent dialogue, without conditions, that respects our sovereignty."

U.S. Ambassador William Brownfield said "The two governments have publicly sent signals and messages...It is premature to say when we are going to start the talks or whether we are heading in that direction. However, the U.S. administration is ready, enthusiastic and willing to do so."

But "Both governments must approach each other, and the process must be gradual," he added.

Referring to Shannon's statements, Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim said it was "a good start for dialogue between the United States and Venezuela...It is also good that there is reciprocity."

In Washington, "there seems to be a shift towards greater pragmatism, based on a clear improvement in the last few weeks in the global climate of international relations in favour of peace and negotiation," Carlos Romero, director of graduate studies in international relations at Venezuela's Central University, told IPS.

Among the elements of that global context, Romero pointed to the new search for a bipartisan foreign policy in the U.S. in the wake of November's legislative elections, in which the Democrats won control of both houses of Congress; European Union attempts to forge closer ties with Russia and China; and Beijing's efforts in talks with North Korea.

In Latin America, meanwhile, the moderate nature of left-leaning governments in large countries like Argentina and Brazil should help curb the potential radicalism of presidents-elect Rafael Correa in Ecuador and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua. In addition, Raúl Castro, who currently holds the reins in Cuba while his brother Fidel convalesces, has said he is open to talks with Washington.

"Furthermore, and regardless of how paradoxical it may seem, Venezuela...is one of the most stable countries in Latin America today, with hardly any political violence," said Romero.

U.S. State Department press officer Eric Watnik said "We look forward to having the opportunity to work with the Venezuelan government on issues of mutual interest."

Venezuela provides the U.S. market with 1.2 million barrels a day of oil, making it the United States' fourth biggest supplier, after Canada, Mexico and Saudi Arabia.

Overall trade between the two countries, which has almost doubled over the last three years, could reach 50 billion dollars by the end of 2006, according to the binational chamber of commerce in Caracas.

Analysts in the United States have also referred to the need for a change in the way Washington deals with its differences with the Venezuelan government.

Cynthia Arnson, head of the Latin America programme at the Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars in Washington, said "My sense is that the U.S. can do more to work multilaterally to contain Chávez and not respond to every rhetorical provocation.." That way, "long-term U.S. interests will be better served," she argued.

"However, the administration is not of one mind on dealing with Chávez, so it's very hard to predict where policy will go in the next months and years," she added.

Chávez set out Wednesday for the Southern Cone region, after receiving Nicaragua's Ortega. He will meet with presidents Néstor Kirchner of Argentina, Tabaré Vázquez of Uruguay, and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil before taking part Friday and Saturday in the South American summit in Cochabamba, Bolivia.

Michael Shifter, vice president of Inter-American Dialogue, a Washington-based forum for opinion leaders and policymakers on Western Hemisphere affairs, agreed that "The best thing is not to go for the bait, and respond to (Chávez's) provocations. I think the U.S. has learned that hasn't worked."

"But I don't think the U.S. should ignore him either; he's got a clear agenda and enormous resources, and I think the U.S. would be wise to try to engage a little bit more with the Latin American governments that are looking for ways to deal with Washington," he said.

"His victory underscores that the United States needs to be more involved; it's been much too withdrawn and indifferent to what's happening in the region," he told IPS in Washington. "The U.S. needs to close the big gap between the agenda in Washington and the agenda in Latin America, which is more concerned with social questions. The U.S. has seemed indifferent to that. What we know is that Latin American governments that show some concern about the plight of the poor are rewarded."

Brownfield said that just as Venezuela and the United States have "traditionally been very cooperative in...areas such as drug trafficking, oil and terrorism".... "We have serious, deep and wide differences in such areas as socialism, capitalism, free trade, hemispheric organisation, and relations with countries like Iran and North Korea."

Chávez, who sees his resounding victory as a mandate to set out on "a Venezuelan route to socialism," has been at the forefront of those who have opposed the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) pushed by Washington, while promoting South American integration — in a "multipolar world" — through the Mercosur (Southern Common Market) trade bloc made up of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay and, most recently, Venezuela.

The Venezuelan government has also reached deals for joint business ventures as well as purchases of military hardware with countries like Russia, China and Iran, while expressing support for Iran's nuclear programme.

Sunday's elections also brought certain international recognition for the opposition, which managed to unite around a single candidate who, in a 180-degree shift from the strategy followed in the past few years, immediately acknowledged defeat while accepting the election results as valid.

Watnik said "The opposition demonstrated its ability to put forth an important, peaceful and democratic campaign and it garnered a significant share of the vote."

Vicki Gass, with the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), said "The ray of light is that the opposition didn't claim fraud....(because) had they done so, they would've been isolated completely."

"The opposition now has to determine a more strategic way of dealing with Chávez and engaging him instead of just calling him a dictator. That much is positive," she added.

In Shifter's view, "For the first time, the opposition showed some political skill...I think the main lesson is that really they need to have political experience and should not go back to having labour and business leaders run the opposition."

"They have a tremendous opportunity to build on this"

Arnson said "The only real surprise of (Sunday's) election is how strong the showing was for the opposition."

According to Gass, "The reality is that the situation in Venezuela has changed forever. It will never go back to where the majority of the population was excluded from having a voice in government on policies that really affect them. (The U.S.) can recognise that and work with it."

"Unfortunately, this administration is looking for a way to explain the so-called "pink tide" in Latin America - Nicaragua, Ecuador, Bolivia, Brazil, almost Mexico, and of course Venezuela. The U.S. is trying to find a reason for this, and rather than acknowledging and appreciating the very real democratic debate that's going on in these countries, they're deciding it's the evil influence of some actor, and that's Hugo Chávez."

In the Southern Cone countries, Chávez's victory was welcomed as beneficial to regional integration, especially on the energy front. Both Lula and Kirchner had wished the president luck in the final stretch of his campaign.

But Amorim specifically commented on Chávez's proposal to reform the constitution to allow for indefinite reelection.

"If he tries to do that, I suppose he won't do so by decree, but in a manner that takes into account the people's will. There is a strong current in Venezuela opposed to that. The possibility of alternating in power, in equal conditions in elections, is very important for democracy," Brazil's foreign minister warned.

* Jim Lobe in Washington contributed to this report.

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