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DESPITE UNCERTAINTY, VENEZUELA'S POLITICAL SCENARIOS NOT ALL BLEAK

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Despite Uncertainty, Venezuela's Political Scenarios Not All Bleak

By Jennifer McCoy and Michael McCarthy

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For 14 years, President Hugo Chávez has been a powerful unifying force in Venezuela, galvanizing his diverse supporters behind his lead, and uniting his opponents in their aversion to his policies and persona. Now, with the presidential inauguration still weeks away and Chávez apparently gravely ill, [these centrifugal forces will be much harder to hold together](#), and many observers have predicted political instability, debilitating infighting within both camps and even violence.

Nevertheless, three dynamics could help to prevent Venezuela from spinning out of control. First, Chávez began last week to prepare for a possible transition by warning Venezuelans of the risks of his illness and by naming the person he hopes will succeed him, thus forestalling an open fight for succession at least for the immediate future. Second, the opposition regained a leader when Henrique Capriles, who

position as the opposition's pre-eminent leader. Second, the re-election of another younger-generation opposition figure, former Chavista and Progressive Front for Change candidate Henry Falcón, in Lara state signals the dominance among the opposition of new parties and center-left policy positions over the remnants of traditional parties and center-right approaches.

Three immediate implications for Venezuela's prospects moving forward can be drawn from Sunday's vote. First, Capriles' victory gives the opposition a credible figure, previously lacking, to lead talks with the government on specific issues, including economic adjustments, funding for states and municipalities, long-term political detainees and personal insecurity.

Second, both the October and December elections demonstrated the governing party's ability to mobilize a majority of voters: It won 55 percent of the vote versus 44 percent for the opposition in both cases. Having more governors in place strengthens the PSUV mobilization capacity for any future elections.

Third, warning signs abound for both camps. The abstention rate for Sunday's elections was a relatively high 46 percent, compared to only 20 percent in the presidential election and 35 percent in the last regional elections in 2008. The low turnout is surprising given, on the one hand, the PSUV's appeal to its supporters based on Chávez's health and, on the other, the context of uncertainty, which seemed to offer a window of opportunity for the opposition. The upcoming Christmas holiday and election fatigue explain some of the abstention, but a lack of excitement about the options seemed to play a role as well.

If the Jan. 10 presidential inauguration proceeds as scheduled, the mandates represented by the October and December elections provide every incentive for the government to pursue its plans to deepen Chávez's so-called 21st century socialism, including the enhanced participatory model of the "communal state," which ch c ¶eepeidm t