

## Hugo Chávez isn't down yet

Luis Hernández Navarro

The Guardian

24 Jul 2011

His cancer has caused turmoil both within Venezuela and abroad, among his friends and his enemies

When Paraguayan president Fernando Lugo was treated in Brazil for lymphatic cancer, the world barely noticed. When Dilma Rousseff suffered a lymphoma in 2009, it did not prevent her from winning Brazil's presidential election the next year. But [Hugo Chávez's](#) recent illness has caused turmoil both within Venezuela and abroad.

On the one hand, both Washington and Latin American oligarchies abhor him. On the other, centre-left governments in the region consider him a strategic ally, and many popular movements see him as an inspirational leader.

So it is little surprise that, since 11 June, when the Venezuelan president was treated in Havana for a pelvic abscess, his health has been a hot topic. When, nine days later, he submitted himself to a [second round of surgery](#) – this time to have a cancerous tumour removed – his government's silence fuelled rumours: the same mass media that announced Fidel Castro's death in 2006 talked of his grave illness, with some adding that it was the result of a botched liposuction.

The Venezuelan opposition has always sought to oust Chávez by whatever means it can. In 2002 it tried to organise a [coup](#). In 2004 it promoted a repeal referendum from which Chávez emerged stronger. Now it seeks to remove him from power on the basis that he is too ill to serve.

The coming presidential elections, in 2012, intensify the issue. The opposition has announced that it will nominate its candidate in February. Chávez has made it clear he will seek re-election.

According to a poll in late June, the president's popularity has decreased only slightly from its pre-illness level; he still has almost twice the level of support enjoyed by Henrique Capriles, the foremost opposition candidate.

Since 1999, when he became president, Chávez has won almost every election he has taken part in. He is a charismatic leader who sets the political agenda. By contrast, the Venezuelan opposition – in spite of USAid's financial support – is a divided conglomerate of organisations, individuals and media united only by an animosity to Chávez.

However, an eventual absence of Chávez, or his physical frailty, could compromise both the continuity of his political transformation project, known as "socialism for the 21st century", and the conduct of his party. The United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) was

founded in 2008 to unify all parties supporting Chavism. Despite this, there is no one who provides a clear counterbalance to the president's leadership.

Hugo Chávez's elder brother Adán, Nicolás Maduro, Elías Jaua and Diosdado Cabello are all talked about as possible successors. Adán is the governor of the state of Barinas and is, according to Chavez, "one of the people who has had the greatest political influence" on him. Nicolás Maduro, minister of foreign affairs, has played a key role in Venezuela's aggressive diplomacy and is considered Chávez's hand-picked successor. Elías Jaua is Venezuela's vice-president, and as such, the first in the constitutional succession line. Diosdado Cabello, a member of the chamber of deputies, is viewed as a representative of the so-called Chavism without Chávez.

For now, Chávez seems to be coping well with chemotherapy. Last Friday he held a cabinet meeting in Havana and met Ecuador's Rafael Correa and the Castro brothers. He has survived several attempts to remove him from power; some say he has nine lives. But whether he can make it through what seems to be the toughest challenge of his life so far remains to be seen.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/jul/24/hugo-chavez-cancer-popular>