



## VENEZUELA HEADS DEEPER INTO MILITANT NARCOTERRORISM

By Vanessa Neumann

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As if the world needed further evidence, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's new political appointments in the early days of January confirm his regime's descent into militant narcoterrorism and increases the possibility of a coup d'état by a military junta should Chávez lose his grip on power either through his cancer (from which he dubiously claims to now be cured) or through an electoral defeat on October 7.

The first of the alarming changes was the swearing in on January 5 of Diosdado Cabello as the president of the unicameral National Assembly. In his new capacity, Mr. Cabello, a long-time *chavista* and now one of Venezuela's wealthiest men, will be able to appoint Supreme Court justices and the members of the National Electoral Commission, who will oversee and count the votes in the three upcoming elections: for the presidency on October 7, for the governorships in December and for mayors in April 2013.<sup>1</sup> After highly controversial legislative elections in September 2010 that I covered for *The Weekly Standard*,<sup>2</sup> the National Assembly has 98 "officialist" PSUV (Chávez's United Socialist Party of Venezuela) members and 65 members from the opposition, despite the opposition having won nearly two-thirds of the popular vote.

While this enables Cabello to wield an enormous amount of power, he is no stranger to the Chávez administration, having held various posts within the regime: as the Vice-President who went into hiding during the 48-hour coup against Chávez in April 2002; as Minister of the Interior; as Minister of Justice; as Director of Conatel, the National Telecommunications Commission; and as Governor of the state of Miranda, until he lost to Henrique Capriles Radonski, now an opposition presidential candidate. Cabello's friendship with Chávez and support of the Bolivarian Revolution dates back to the early 1980s when they were in the military academy together, and Cabello was a *co-putschist* in the February 4, 1992 attempted coup that Chávez led and for which he was imprisoned, giving him cult hero status he then rode into the presidential palace seven years later.

But Cabello's relationship with Chávez has not been without friction. It is widely whispered in military circles that Cabello commands far more respect and loyalty from the military than Chávez, who has variously aggrieved them with impetuous appointments and using them for civilian projects in his *misiones* or for his gross incompetence in mishandling the April 2002 protests leading to bloodshed that in turn led to the 48-hour coup against him. While most Latin America observers considered former Foreign Minister Nicolás Maduro or former Vice-President Elías Jaua the likely successor to Chávez, I stated publicly at an FPRI talk in Manhattan in December that I thought it would be Diosdado Cabello, and it looks like I was right.

It is no secret that Chávez, like most dictators, is very wary of close associates with growing power or popularity, and he routinely shunts them aside—typically in his January cabinet reshufflings. In this month's reshuffling, Chávez has spun out many of his closest cabinet members to run for various governorships now held by the opposition: Foreign Minister Nicolás Maduro is being sent to run for the governorship of Carabobo; Interior Minister Tareck el-Aissami to Táchira; Defense Minister Gen. Carlos Mata Figueroa to Nueva Esparta; Vice-President Elías Jaua of Miranda, to name but a few. Chávez has yet to announce his new Vice-President, though the choice is rumored to be between Rafael Ramírez and Jesse Chacón.

So it might be surprising that Cabello has not only been brought back into the fold, but indeed been made the regime's second most-powerful man. This is clearly a calculated risk. On the one hand, Chávez is conceding that he needs the commanding

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.eluniversal.com/2011/09/13/elections-for-venezuelan-president-on-october-7-2012.shtml>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/hugo-ch-vez-and-venezuelan-election\\_508682.html](http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/hugo-ch-vez-and-venezuelan-election_508682.html)

Cabello to maintain power; on the other, Chávez is directly and indirectly militarizing the legislative, judiciary and electoral commission to defend and advance his increasingly unpopular Bolivarian Revolution.

The high-level reassignment of a militant *chavista* whose vast wealth cannot be attributed to any legitimate source, marries well with another controversial appointment Chávez made the very next day, January 6: Gen. Henry Rangel Silva as Defense Minister. This is bad news for Venezuela. Gen. Rangel Silva was one of several Venezuelan government officials sanctioned by the US Treasury Department in September 2008 as a drug-trafficker aiding the FARC,<sup>3</sup> a charge Chávez and Rangel Silva have of course roundly denied. Yet, Gen. Rangel Silva is certainly not known for his respect of the democratic process: as Minister of Defense he flatly stated in an interview on 28 November 2010 that the military would not recognize an opposition victory in 2012.<sup>4</sup>

In other news, on January 8, the U.S. Department of State expelled the Venezuelan Consul in Miami, Livia Acosta Noguera, in the wake of the Univision documentary “*La Amenaza Iraní*” (“The Iranian Threat”) that alleged that she was among a group of Venezuelan and Iranian diplomats who expressed interest in an offer from a group of Mexican hackers to infiltrate the websites of the White House, the FBI, the Pentagon and U.S. nuclear plants—a plot that began five years ago when Acosta Noguera was Cultural Attaché to the Venezuelan Embassy in Mexico City. Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Rep. David Rivera, Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart and Rep. Albio Sires wrote to U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in December and asked the State Department to require Acosta’s “immediate departure” from the United States if the Univision report proved true. Although the US State Department has not said whether it had found the allegations to be true, it is perhaps no coincidence that the day the announcement of her expulsion was made coincided with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s arrival on a state visit to Venezuela.

With terrorist plotters in its diplomatic missions to the US, and militant narcoterrorists at the helm of the armed forces, the legislature and, by extension, the Supreme Court and the Electoral Commission, the future is indeed looking bleak for my homeland, to which I have been advised I must not return while Chávez remains in power. Dissident members of the government have been telling me Chávez would not go peacefully through the ballot box, and it’s looking increasingly like they are right: indicators now point toward more bloodshed and the imposition of a military junta—a Bolivarian Revolution by all means necessary? Watching my most dire predictions come true, it may be a long time before I can return to my birthplace, which is becoming an increasingly real threat to my other home, the United States.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp1132.aspx> and <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/OFAC-Enforcement/Pages/20080912.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/07/henry-rangel-silva-defense-minister\\_n\\_1191188.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/07/henry-rangel-silva-defense-minister_n_1191188.html)