

## MEXICO & VENEZUELA: LOSING THE SOFT POWER SWEEPSTAKES AT THE POLLS

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### Abstract

This research article compares how the public images of Venezuela and Mexico have been shaped by the presidential election cycle of 2012 in each country. The results show that political leaders in both countries seem much more concerned about domestic issues rather than projecting a more positive public diplomacy image. The paper focuses on the history and political culture of both countries, which inevitably frames how both dealt with negative international impressions resulting from the elections. Although Venezuela has had many more demonstrations of national plebiscites and elections than any other Latin American country during the era of President Hugo Chavez, the paper explores how the president's autocratic tendencies may have affected the image-making connected to the most recent elections. Likewise, the paper explores the political history of Mexico's PRI, the country's oldest political party, and how its ties to corruption and tainted elections also affected the most recent contest. The paper also explores these opportunities for altering public diplomacy in the context of modern Latin America where other countries have taken the lead in the public diplomacy arena, despite the influence of both Mexico and Venezuela.

### Key Words

Venezuela, Chavez, Mexico, elections, image, press freedom, media relations, issue management, reputation, political opposition, technology, geopolitics, foreign policy

### *Venezuela & Mexico: The Political Context*

President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela is campaigning hard to extend his term in office into 2019, with elections looming during the first week of October. However it is clear from the conduct of the campaign that soft power gains internationally are not part of his strategic goals. Indeed, like the other key election in Latin America this year in Mexico, it seems there is no interest in atonement for the sins of the past in the political sphere that have hurt Venezuela's international image.

Through the serendipity of the alignment of the electoral calendars in Venezuela and Mexico both countries scheduled presidential elections this year, and both did so with the potential to be watershed events. Such chance provides opportunity to compare these important political systems and how their political leaders are considering soft power equations, if at all, in the potential for advancing their public diplomacy agendas. Beyond the electoral calendar though, other parallels exist between Venezuela and Mexico. On the cusp of the new millennium, both countries underwent major political shifts. Following landslide elections, Chavez took office in 1999 and promptly moved to rewrite his country's constitution.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hellinger, Daniel, "Political Overview: The Breakdown of Puntofijismo and the Rise of Chavismo," in *Venezuelan Politics in the Chavez Era: Class Polarization & Conflict*, eds. Steve Ellner and Daniel Hellinger, p. 43.

Within 18 months of that change in Venezuela, Mexico would experience a similar tectonic political tremor. In 2000, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI by its Spanish acronym) would lose its first national electoral poll since the party was created to represent the industrial oligarchy that had emerged after the Mexican Revolution, ending a string of electoral success dating back more than 70 years.<sup>2</sup> The PRI was characterized by Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa as "the perfect dictatorship" during its successful years because it had the appearance of being the dominant party in a multi-party democracy; however, astute political observers knew the system was rigged.<sup>3</sup> Part of what made the PRI so "perfect" is that although Mexican presidents mostly enjoyed almost unlimited domestic power they would turn that power over to another member of the PRI when their term was done. The party's corporatist operating style also shifted ideologically so it was never easy to characterize on the typical political spectrum. The PRI's dominance skidded to a halt in 2000. President Ernest Zedillo of the PRI turned out not only to be a skilled technocrat but a democrat, and he demanded the presidential elections that year be conducted as cleanly as possible.<sup>4</sup> Led by the charismatic Vicente Fox, the National Action Party (PAN, by its Spanish acronym) swept to victory, ending the PRI's grip on power.

The PAN had served as Mexico's loyal opposition party since 1939, although the PRI had given it very few openings to truly challenge its dominance on a national level until 2000. The PAN was formed originally by Mexico's Catholics as reaction against the secularist stance of the PRI.<sup>5</sup> The party has followed conservative policies ever since, representing a pro-business, anti-abortion stance and representing what political analysts would call the rightwing of the political spectrum in Mexico.

However, by this year's elections, Mexico's experiment with the PAN's version of democracy had run its course. President Fox and his successor President Felipe Calderon proved to be Mexico's weakest modern presidents because they were unable to move their programs through Mexico's Congress, divided by Mexico's three major parties and minor parties too. Calderon had appeared to Mexico's public as weak literally from the start of his term: his official inauguration was marred by fistfights on the floor of Congress between rival legislators, some who claimed Calderon's victory was tainted.<sup>6</sup> Calderon's electoral victory in 2006 had been decided by Mexico's Federal Electoral Institute, which declared after a controversial recount that Calderon had won by a margin of less than a quarter of a million votes.<sup>7</sup> Stymied by political stasis and a growing war with drug cartels that had left much of the country unsafe, many Mexican voters seemed ready for change, perhaps for a shift back to the safety and security of the era of the PRI.<sup>8</sup> Mexico's national security officials admitted the public's concerns about security were valid with debates within government policy circles about whether the central government still controlled even half of the country.<sup>9</sup> This appearance of weakness opened the door again politically for the PRI.

In the 12 years it was absent from Mexico's highest office, the PRI had rebuilt itself, focusing on politics in Congress and regaining control of some of Mexico's states by contesting gubernatorial races. The party tabbed the young, telegenic Enrique Peña Nieto as its standard bearer, and his well-organized campaign did manage to recapture power for the PRI. Despite that victory however, the taint of corruption connected to some of the PRI's campaign methods damaged the party's image and the country's reputation internationally, reinforcing an older image of Mexico's Potempkin Village version of democracy.

The appearance of weakness is also a theme that underscored part of the media framing of the Venezuelan election in 2012, but for very different reasons. As Mexico tacked toward conservative rightwing politics in the new millennium, even without the success of the PAN to alter much of Mexico's national policies, Venezuela headed to the other end of the political spectrum. President Chavez installed a new political reality built around what he

<sup>2</sup> Skidmore, Thomas, Peter Smith, and James Green, *Modern Latin America*, (Oxford University Press, New York City, New York, 2010) p. 59.

<sup>3</sup> Carroll, Rory, "Are Mexicans About to Vote for the Return of the 'Perfect Dictatorship'?" *The Guardian*, June 30, 2012, available at: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jun/30/mexicans-vote-pri-pena-nieto>>.

<sup>4</sup> Skidmore, Smith and Green, *Modern Latin America*, p. 77.

<sup>5</sup> Skidmore, Smith and Green, *Modern Latin America*, p. 66.

<sup>6</sup> Campbell, Monica, "Calderon Inaugurated while Legislators Brawl," for *The San Francisco Chronicle* via *SFGate*, Dec. 2, 2006, available at: <<http://www.sfgate.com/politics/article/Calderon-inaugurated-while-lawmakers-brawl-2482927.php>>.

<sup>7</sup> Associated Press, "Mexican Official Rejects Recount," from *USA Today*, Aug. 5, 2006, available at: <[http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2006-08-05-mexico-recount\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2006-08-05-mexico-recount_x.htm)>.

<sup>8</sup> Carroll, "Are Mexicans About to Vote for the Return of the 'Perfect Dictatorship'?"

<sup>9</sup> Ramsey, Geoffrey, "Mexican Official Admits Some Areas Out of Government Control," from *Insight Crime*, Feb. 10, 2012, available from: <<http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/mexico-official-admits-some-areas-out-of-govt-control>>.

called “21st Century Socialism,” spurred on by the “Bolivarian Revolution.”<sup>10</sup> Some analysts such as Steve Ellner or Teodoro Petkoff of Venezuelan newspaper *Tal Cual* note that Chavez’ rhetoric and leadership is more nuanced than many of his opponents would make him out to be. Ellner and Petkoff paint Chavez as more than a mere populist with autocratic tendencies.<sup>11</sup> Instead, they characterize him as someone representing the under-privileged and those who would represent progressive causes within the Venezuelan political context. Petkoff notes that Chavez gives voice to more radical elements, which many paint as coming from the ideological left of the political spectrum. Other political analysts have characterized Chavez as typical of Latin American caudillos, strongmen who consolidate power, eliminating enemies along with institutions that would constrain their authority.<sup>12</sup>

Prior to officially declaring for re-election in 2012, Chavez entered the year in uncertain political straits. The issue was his health. In 2011, he fought a protracted battle with cancer, spending long periods in Cuba for special therapy. Some analysts openly wondered if he could campaign with anywhere near the vigor that he had displayed in governing Venezuela since 1999.<sup>13</sup>

### *Soft Power: Is Perception Reality?*

The political contexts of Venezuela and Mexico have left both countries with image problems on the global stage. Venezuela, although noted as an image leader among non-aligned countries in Latin America and around the globe, suffers from the media framing of its leader as a belligerent with designs on Fidel Castro’s long-time role as the international leader most willing to joust with the United States.<sup>14</sup> And like Castro, some see autocracy as a goal Chavez is pursuing. Likewise, Mexico has not shaken off the image Vargas Llosa hung on it as having the “perfect dictatorship” with some analysts wondering just how the PRI will handle a functioning if emerging democracy. These image issues have hindered both countries in the public diplomacy arena as well as their attempts to acquire soft power.

Neither Venezuela nor Mexico were listed in the annual Institute for Government-Monocle Soft Power Index (IfG-Monocle Index) of the top 30 leaders in soft power globally.<sup>15</sup> In Latin America, only Brazil (ranked 21) and Chile (ranked 24) made the list, yet both Venezuela and Mexico remain influential and important countries in diplomatic circles within the hemisphere and around the world. As the most populous Spanish-speaking country and a bulwark among the conservative tendency in Latin American politics, lately Mexico has developed its relationship with Colombia and others to serve as a counterbalance to Latin America’s leftward tilt that has often been led by Chavez. The rise of Chavez in Venezuela and his political assault on the country’s elite class have served as a model for what some analysts call Latin America’s “pink tide.”<sup>16</sup> Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and even Argentina have seemed to orbit around Chavez, and Venezuela emerged as the ascendant leader of the new left while Castro faded into the background in Cuba. However, as noted by the IfG-Monocle Index, both Brazil and Chile provided alternative models for the left to follow in the region (although through elections Chile’s government has moved back into the conservative camp).<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, such alternative examples of soft power in the region have been influential in swaying countries with left-leaning governments to follow models other than those provided by Venezuela. Thus, countries such as El Salvador have seemed to follow more of the Brazilian example rather than adopt the strong diplomatic stance pursued by Chavez and Venezuela to seemingly oppose the United States in the region at every turn.

<sup>10</sup> Skidmore, Smith and Green, *Modern Latin America*, p. 240.

<sup>11</sup> Ellner, Steve, *Rethinking Venezuelan Politics*, Lynne Rienner Publishers (Boulder, CO, 2008), 135-137.

<sup>12</sup> Skidmore, Smith and Green, *Modern Latin America*, p. 242-243.

<sup>13</sup> Villers Negroponete, Diana, “Venezuela: What Future for Chavismo without Chavez?” Global Post (online), July 25, 2012, available at: <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatches/news/regions/americas/venezuela/venezuela-chavismo-chavez-capriles>

<sup>14</sup> Skidmore, Smith and Green, *Modern Latin America*, p. 239.

<sup>15</sup> McClory, Jonathan, *The New Persuaders II*, the Institute for Government, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Rockwell, Rick, “Latin America,” in *Global Journalism: Topical Issues and Media Systems*, De Beer, Arnold and John C. Merrill, eds. (Pearson Education, Inc., Boston, MA, 2009), p. 409. See also: Skidmore, Smith and Green, *Modern Latin America*, p. 239. The term “pink tide” refers to the leftward tilt of politics in Latin America during the new millennium. Although this term was first used by academics, it was amplified by some traditional media outlets such as the BBC. The phrase has often been employed to use as a shorthand reference to the influence of Hugo Chavez in the region and his support for leftwing governments in Bolivia, Ecuador and elsewhere. The origin of the term notes that these governments are not communist but rather have socialist leanings.

<sup>17</sup> Al Jazeera (online), “Chile Cracks Down on Violent Student Protest,” Aug. 9, 2012, available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/americas/2012/08/201289761989960.html>.

Arguably the retreat of the world’s soft power leader, the United States, from almost two centuries of intensive interest in the region has opened the soft power sweepstakes in Latin America to competition between Brazil, Venezuela, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and others. (The IfG-Monocle Index lists the United States as the global leader on its soft power index. Author Joseph Nye, Jr., who coined the phrase “soft power” and defined its use in public diplomacy also agrees that the United States continues to lead in this area.)<sup>18</sup> Indeed polling in the region indicates that many in Latin America find Brazil to be the most influential country in the region.<sup>19</sup>

Referring to Nye’s theories on soft power, the rise of Brazil as a regional power and global player in soft power is no surprise. Nye writes in depth about the importance of Brazil in the region in his latest work *The Future of Power*.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the way the PT (the Brazilian Worker’s Party by its Portuguese acronym) has navigated an inclusive economic policy that moderated criticism of the country’s elites while still taking on some sectors of elite dominance, such as control of the media sector, has provided a leftist alternative in the region to the confrontational, blustery, and anti-elite rhetoric of Chavez. As Nye notes, “Soft power depends upon credibility, and when governments are perceived as manipulative and information is seen as propaganda, credibility is destroyed.... The best propaganda is not propaganda.”<sup>21</sup>

### *Venezuela’s Pre-Election Image*

The view from inside Venezuela concerning the communication tactics Chavez employs is decidedly mixed and often polarized. The urban poor, the Bolivarian political faithful, the government, and even the diplomatic corps seem strongly behind Chavez and echo his campaign sentiments.<sup>22</sup> Those representing the traditional forces who backed Venezuela’s elite democracy, the conservative student movement, and those who have grown tired of revolutionary slogans in the face of economic challenges and rising crime rates often see Chavez more critically.

One of the main strategies the president has used to maintain power is to shape the country’s media environment. After the unsuccessful coup in 2002 to unseat Chavez, this goal became more important as some believe that the media drove the coup attempt.<sup>23</sup> So are the messages emanating from the Venezuelan state meant to thwart some in the Venezuelan elite who would like a return to an older and less confrontational democracy? Are they meant to promote and further the Chavez political brand, especially in an election year? Believers in the Bolivarian rhetoric that often frames Venezuela’s political discourse say this communication is counter-hegemonic. Such messages are designed to negate Venezuela’s past when imperialism, as directed by the United States, was accepted.<sup>24</sup> Whether that presence is real or imagined, all these possibilities exist.

Halfway through his latest term in office, Chavez faced slipping credibility and slowly eroding support, even before he publicly revealed he was fighting cancer. According to a Latinobarometro poll released in 2009, Chavez had lost 20 points in popularity since his re-election in 2006. In its polling in 2006, Latinobarometro found 65 percent of Venezuelans supported Chavez, but that was down to 45 percent by 2009. The positive ratings of Chavez in Latin America regionally had dropped to 39 percent in 2009, compared to his rating of 45 percent regionally in 2007. Not only was he losing credibility at home, but he also ranked less favorably in the region by many outside Venezuela in regard to credibility and influence.<sup>25</sup> At the time of the poll, many other Latin American leaders surpassed Chavez in regional popularity.

The Latinobarometro poll tracked an interesting dichotomy between Chavez and the power of his public image. The image of Chavez as the vocal and charismatic pitchman, leading a wave of presidents who have tacked strongly leftward and sometimes bent the democratic rules of their countries (so much so that they are often labeled

<sup>18</sup> McClory, op.cit. Also see: Nye, Joseph S., Jr., *The Future of Power* (Public Affairs/Perseus Books Group, New York, NY, 2011)

<sup>19</sup> Latin America News Dispatch (online), “Survey Indicates Brazil Most Influential Country in Latin America,” Dec. 16, 2009, available at: <http://latindispatch.com/2009/12/16/survey-indicates-brazil-most-influential-country-in-latin-america/>.

<sup>20</sup> Nye, *The Future of Power*, p. 175.

<sup>21</sup> Nye, *The Future of Power*, p. 83.

<sup>22</sup> Neuman, William, “Chavez Forces Venezuela to Contemplate a Void,” from *The New York Times*, June 11, 2012, available from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/12/world/americas/hugo-chavez-forces-venezuela-to-contemplate-a-void.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Rockwell, “Latin America,” in *Global Journalism: Topical Issues and Media Systems*, p. 417.

<sup>24</sup> Ellner, *Rethinking Venezuelan Politics*, pp. 196-202.

<sup>25</sup> *The Economist* (online edition), “A Slow Maturing of Democracy,” Dec. 10, 2009, available at: [http://www.economist.com/node/15080535?story\\_id=15080535](http://www.economist.com/node/15080535?story_id=15080535).



as dictators<sup>26</sup>) has often backfired when it comes to international soft power. However, this strongman image, the image of the modern-day caudillo, is exactly what Venezuelans seem to want as a leader of their political class. Indeed, according to Latinobarometro polling, not only is the image of Chavez much more favorable on the domestic front, but Venezuelans also have a higher regard for the brand of democracy that Chavez has created than do citizens in any other democratic country. Venezuelans also have a higher regard for their democratic institutions and policies initiated by Chavez than do people of other countries.<sup>27</sup> Thus, despite declining popularity in political polls, Chavez still remains the most viable political candidate for Venezuela.

However, during the fall of 2011 and early 2012 when Chavez was shuttling back and forth to Cuba for cancer treatment and his public appearances were reduced drastically, this image of strength certainly receded. This perceived erosion of popularity for Chavez opened the door for the political opposition to organize and coalesce behind one candidate, Henrique Capriles Radonski, who has ties both to the old oligarchy and media sectors, but who also promised no return to the policies of the past if he managed to unseat the president. The significance of Capriles has been mostly as a singular face for a fractured opposition movement that in the past had been unable to coalesce behind a single challenger to Chavez. Arguably this is more important domestically to Venezuelans, but what it signaled to international observers was that Chavez would face a more focused opposition, which had the potential to unseat him. Some interested in Venezuelan investments seem to be betting on a Capriles' upset as investment reports connected to the country seemed to respond to the standing of the challenger in the polls.<sup>28</sup>

However, Capriles' campaign failed to gain traction after what appeared to be a strong start. In polls taken between May and August of 2012, Chavez maintained a consistent lead of 17 points; however, with a pool of 23 percent of voters maintaining they had not made up their minds yet, the potential remained for the challenger to win in a close race.<sup>29</sup> Polling from late in August of 2012 revealed Capriles had shaved that lead to less than 13 percentage points, but this was still high.<sup>30</sup> In Venezuelan campaigns, political polling has often become a point of contention for political debate with accusations that polls are skewed to create a bandwagon effect in which some voters are pressured by the sense that their peers are supporting another candidate and, therefore, they vote for the projected winner, rather than voting based on their ideological choice.<sup>31</sup> Some voters would rather back a winner instead of someone who represents their political views but who has a reduced chance of winning.<sup>32</sup> Political polling in Venezuela is often part of the partisan process which differs from the systems in other countries where top polling firms are seen as objective observers. During the Chavez era, polls proved to be widely divergent from the final outcomes of various elections and plebiscites.<sup>33</sup> State-run media and government sources early in the campaign counterattacked polls that showed Capriles running closely with Chavez, saying that such polls had political motivations rather than showing objective data.

Aggressive counterattacks against reports that undercut Chavez or challenge his role as the central leader characterize the combative nature of the communication system both inside Venezuela and in the international arena. This is one of the legacies of the 2002 coup, which served as a catalyst for Chavez and his followers that they would have to engage the media sector in different ways. The creation of TeleSUR (a multi-state media enterprise, primarily financed by the Venezuelan government and headquartered in Caracas which sends out most of its programming via satellite television), the shutdown of RCTV's over-the-air broadcast signal, the seizure of its transmitters and airspace by the Venezuelan state, and more aggressive review of content and licenses in the radio spectrum all followed. Political scientist Craig Hayden describes the messages broadcast by TeleSUR as the artillery in the Chavez arsenal to alter his image, the image of Venezuela, and the image of his political philosophy

in the international soft power sweepstakes.<sup>34</sup> Hayden argues that Chavez and the Venezuelan state have a very calculated soft power strategy and that their financing and programming of TeleSUR show a variant on the classic soft power communication strategy in the sphere of international communication. In his book *Hegemony and the Control of Communications*, Venezuelan researcher Marcelino Brisbal notes that the Venezuelan government's investment in TeleSUR is unprecedented and a very new projection of the Venezuelan image abroad.<sup>35</sup> TeleSUR has very little ratings impact domestically but is meant to project a positive image of Chavez and Venezuela abroad, along with positive views of other countries grouped among the "pink tide."<sup>36</sup> In its programs and on its website, TeleSUR continually frames news from a Venezuelan viewpoint meant to affect public diplomacy and the soft power in the region.

However, the field of 24/7 international cable networks reveals the Chinese, Russians, Qataris, and others following similar soft power variants. While some of those international broadcasting entities are seen merely as propaganda tools, which diminishes their soft power standing, other outlets, such as Al Jazeera, seem to have transcended the argument of whether they slant the news or frame the news for the political gain of their state sponsors from their primary audience's point of view. Indeed, Al Jazeera represents a network that has gained credibility for its independent views, separate from the dominant media frames imposed by media in the United States or elsewhere in the West.

Beyond TeleSUR, the image of Chavez and Venezuela on these other international media outlets provides additional insight into the strength of Venezuela's attempts to alter its image through public diplomacy during this crucial election period. Arguably, the news of the latest dispute between Chavez and the media received at least equal coverage during the summer of 2012 compared to coverage of the Venezuelan election campaign. At the end of June, Globovision, the sole Venezuelan network still in open opposition to Chavez, agreed to pay a fine of about \$2 million related to its coverage of a prison riot in 2011. The government accused Globovision of sensationalizing its coverage and the promotion of "hatred and intolerance for political reasons."<sup>37</sup> In a review of free speech problems in Latin America in July, Al Jazeera English focused directly on the Globovision fine and the chilling message it sent to media during the Venezuelan campaign. Al Jazeera also noted the Chavez government had closed 32 radio stations during its control of the country, plus the various denunciations of the government by international media groups.<sup>38</sup>

If the polls hold, as they are likely to do, what a Chavez victory means is Venezuela's relationship with United States will probably not change. The United States will continue to be used as a political prop by Chavez to boost his own image domestically through continued use of anti-imperialist rhetoric. If by some chance Capriles manages to capture most if not all of the undecided votes and takes an unexpected win, no doubt the relationship between the U.S. and Venezuela will shift, as Capriles represents the more traditional elite factions, which long had a special relationship with the United States.<sup>39</sup> Although Capriles has promised no retrenchment, given the business connections between his backers and commercial interests in the United States, some renewal of positive relations between Washington and Caracas seems inevitable if the opposition wins.

The image of Venezuela as seen through the frame of the power projected by Chavez is less and less one of progressive reform and more of unchecked presidential control. This is seen not only in the negative coverage of the chilling effect of the Globovision fine, but also in Al Jazeera's coverage of Chavez and a negative report by the Committee to Protect Journalists on how Chavez has used state-controlled media, including TeleSUR as propaganda tools while pressuring independent media sources inside Venezuela.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Skidmore, Smith and Green, *Modern Latin America*, pp. 239-243. Also, see: Ellner, *Rethinking Venezuelan Politics*, pp. 195-200.

<sup>27</sup> Corporacion Latinobarometro, *2011 Report*, Santiago, Chile, 2011, pp. 8 & 39.

<sup>28</sup> Bloomberg, "Chavez Lead Narrows in Latest Datanalisis Poll in Venezuela," Aug. 20, 2012, available at: < <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-08-20/chavez-lead-narrows-in-latest-datanalisis-poll-in-venezuela-1-.html> >.

<sup>29</sup> Villers Negroponte, "Venezuela: What Future for Chavismo without Chavez?" Global Post (online).

<sup>30</sup> Bloomberg, "Chavez Lead Narrows in Latest Datanalisis Poll in Venezuela."

<sup>31</sup> Delgado, Antonio, "Hugo Chavez, Henrique Capriles Disagree on Venezuelan Poll Results," *The Miami Herald*, Sept. 5, 2012, available at: < <http://www.miamiherald.com/2012/09/05/2987060/hugo-chavez-henrique-capriles.html> >.

<sup>32</sup> Nadeau, Richard, Cloutier, Edouard, Guay, J. H., "New Evidence About the Existence of a Bandwagon Effect in the Opinion Formation Process." *International Political Science Review* 14 (2): 1993, pp. 203-213.

<sup>33</sup> Ellsworth, Brian and Eyanir China, "Venezuela 'Poll Wars' Rage as Presidential Race Heats Up," Reuters, June 6, 2012, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/06/us-venezuela-election-polls-idUSBRE85512920120606>

<sup>34</sup> Hayden, Craig, *The Rhetoric of Soft Power: Public Diplomacy in Global Contexts* (Lexington Books, 2011 p. 133.

<sup>35</sup> Lauria, Carlos, "State Media Focus on Opposition, Critics; Stifle Debate," in *Under Chavez a Record of Repression, Control*, a report from the Committee to Protect Journalists, New York City, New York, 2012, available from: < <http://cpj.org/reports/2012/08/state-media-focus-on-opposition-critics-and-stifle.php> >.

<sup>36</sup> Lauria, Carlos, "State Media Focus on Opposition, Critics; Stifle Debate," in *Under Chavez a Record of Repression, Control*.

<sup>37</sup> BBC (online), "Anti-Chavez Venezuelan TV Globovision Pays \$2.1 Million Fine," June 29, 2012, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-18636210>

<sup>38</sup> Al Jazeera English, Inside Story Americas, "Is the Media Fair in Latin America?" July 6, 2012, available online at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fgVJ1TATXsc>

<sup>39</sup> Ellner, *Rethinking Venezuelan Politics*, p. 175.

<sup>40</sup> Lauria, "State Media Focus on Opposition, Critics; Stifle Debate," in *Under Chavez a Record of Repression, Control*.

*Mexico's Negative Post-Election Image*

However, beyond the media problems in Venezuela, that were featured on the Inside Story Americas program on Al Jazeera, in its coverage of elections in Latin America in the summer of 2012, Al Jazeera focused primarily on how Mexico's traditional media slanted the recent election in favor of the PRI. In effect, both Venezuela and Mexico took a drubbing in the soft power arena with the coverage of Inside Story Americas on Al Jazeera. This coverage of the elections of 2012 showed Al Jazeera's international audience negative images of both Venezuela and Mexico.

Upon publication of this article, the Mexican elections still had not shaken the stigma that the balloting was altered by a corrupt political hierarchy. Furthermore, Mexico's commercial television networks, a system characterized as an elite duopoly, faced criticism from international media that Mexico's television system had skewed coverage for months prior to the elections to convince voters that a return to a PRI-controlled government was inevitable. Certainly, Mexican electoral authorities held a recount and confirmed that the PRI's standard bearer, Peña Nieto, will be installed as Mexico's next president in December of 2012.<sup>41</sup> However, many supporters of Mexico's leftist party, the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD, by its Spanish acronym) and members of the student movement that calls itself #YoSoy132 refused to accept the election's outcome. The left-wing candidate, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, challenged the results based on allegations of a variety of corrupt practices: the PRI's distribution of retail gift cards to voters meant to sway their voting preference and the collusion of private media companies with the PRI's campaign. Student protests persisted in Mexico City for weeks after the election, including a day-long blockade of the offices of Televisa, the country's largest and most powerful network.<sup>42</sup> Protestors returned again in an attempt to ring the network's headquarters in early August. An investigation by British news organization *The Guardian* revealed in the week before Mexico's election that Televisa operated a special elections unit designed to boost Peña Nieto's television image leading up to election day.<sup>43</sup> Both Televisa and its rival TV Azteca also faced allegations that the networks had coddled Peña Nieto in their coverage, including refusing to cover the first Mexican presidential debate as a way of protecting the young candidate who made some notable verbal gaffes during the campaign. After the student movement took to the streets in May 2012, the networks agreed to televise the second and final presidential debate nationwide.<sup>44</sup> However, the major Mexican television networks continued their soft approach to Peña Nieto by avoiding any tough questioning of the candidate for the remainder of the campaign.

To its credit, however, Televisa provided renowned historian and political commentator Enrique Krauze air time during its election night coverage to criticize the network's coverage of the campaign. Krauze noted that although Televisa was no longer totally the voice of the PRI as it had been prior to the watershed elections of 2000, the network had a long way to go to show a greater diversity of voices in a Mexican system that is still going through evolutionary changes as it struggles with democratization. Political writer Jose "Pepe" Carreno of Mexico's *Excelsior* noted, "For good or for bad," the media are "faces of the system."<sup>45</sup> They represent the elite hierarchy of Mexico's corporatist system. The end result is an image at the end of the electoral season that Mexico had slipped backward politically, perhaps turning back the clock before 2000, to a time before the PAN took the presidency.

Mexico's primary radio and television outlets have served as propaganda outlets for the PRI for generations and even the PAN's electoral victory in 2000 was fought against the dominant phalanx of the media's voices. What will be determined going forward is if this summer's tainted electoral win signals a return to a past, a time when the PRI wrapped itself in the trappings of democracy but still operated a very closed, hierarchical system of power.

41 Reuters (online), "Mexican Vote Recount Confirms Pena Nieto Win," July 6, 2012, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/07/06/us-mexico-election-idUSBRE86416Q20120706>

42 Reuters, "Mexican Demonstrators Blockade Televisa Studios Over Election Scandal," via *The Guardian*, July 27, 2012, available online at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jul/27/mexican-blockade-televisa-election-scandal>

43 Tuckman, Jo, "Mexican Media Scandal: Secretive Televisa Unit Promoted PRI Candidate," *The Guardian*, June 26, 2012, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jun/26/mexican-media-scandal-televisa-pri-nieto>

44 Cave, Damien, "In Protests and Online, a Youth Movement Seeks to Sway Mexico's Election" in *The New York Times*' online blog *The Lede*, June 11, 2012, available at: <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/11/in-protests-and-online-the-yosoy132-movement-seeks-to-sway-mexicos-election/>

45 Carreno, Jose "Pepe" of *Excelsior* interview with Rick Rockwell June 29, 2012, Mexico City, available via the online radio program Latin Pulse at: < <http://soundcloud.com/latinpulse/presidents-mexico-elections-paraguay-controversy-change-lp6292012> >.

Alternatively, will the PRI need to navigate a new 21st Century Mexico where democratization is incomplete? Will the PRI deal with student protests differently and avoid using the heavy hand of murderous violence as in the 1960s with the Tlatelolco Massacre, which silenced Mexico's protest movement for a generation? Arguably, the tainted 2012 election is not a replay of 1988 when the PRI stole a victory from the PRD, as many political experts agree, but it certainly carries echoes of that time when the PRI was supposedly the unchallengeable force in Mexican politics.<sup>46</sup>

This summer's elections in Mexico could have provided a new script for the PRI to follow as a reformed party looking for a way to interact with Mexico's new and burgeoning democracy. Instead, the 2012 elections echo the criticism of the leftwing PRD from 2006 that the elections were tainted and rigged. This year's contest reinforces the image that Mexico's elections are a stage-managed affair instead of a truthful rendering of the will of the people through the ballot box. What the elections seem to broadcast to international observers is that nothing in Mexico has changed. The powerful television networks remain in league with an elite hierarchy, and that hierarchy is more focused on the domestic war against drug cartels now than focusing on its international influence and image. Once he is officially inaugurated, Peña Nieto isn't likely to deviate from the pragmatic and corporatist script that his party has followed with few exceptions for decades.

*Conclusion*

What these electoral contests reveal about both Mexico and Venezuela is that they are trapped in the public diplomacy issues of their pasts. Both face challenges in the international sphere at projecting the quality of their democracies to those beyond their borders. These image issues go beyond how U.S. media or European media might frame content about both countries. In the case of Mexico, its media system, especially its powerful television networks, has an international reputation for supporting candidates of the PRI, the party of the old "perfect dictatorship." In the case of Venezuela, the rise of a powerful state-run media sector under Chavez, especially TeleSUR, shows much of Venezuela's media are not honest brokers of the public image of the country and its diplomatic pursuits. Instead, the Venezuelan media are part of the government's image-making industry built around the personality of President Chavez.

In Mexico, the PRI will have to answer questions about how it will adapt to the new democratic challenges of this millennium, as Mexico's left and an activist student movement have been reminding the country about past abuses of corruption and collusion. Although elements of this protest movement are not new, the framing of such questions have not been so important to Mexico domestically or internationally since the PRI's presidential loss in 2000. The PRI did not have to frame its external political messages so carefully when it had absolute power in Mexico for most of the 20th Century. Now, instead of play-acting at democracy as it did during that era, the PRI and its new leader will have to work as part of a real democracy. Having to answer to a domestic protest movement will keep Mexico, despite its status as a cornerstone country in Latin America, from projecting itself as a leader of soft power in the region. That could change if Peña Nieto finds a way to ameliorate the PRD's complaints about corruption and the tainted election while finding some inclusive compromise with the student movement. Such an unexpected twist would prove to international observers that Mexico was not trapped by its old image.

Likewise, Venezuela has coped with a fractious opposition, which is often moved to street protests and finds inspiration from a domestic student movement. Street protests have played a large role in the opposition to Chavez throughout his tenure, but they gained further amplification when students coalesced to oppose the president, beginning in 2007. This protest movement has kept alive the idea internationally that Chavez is damaging the democratic system because of his autocratic tendencies. However, polling reveals that the wide majority of Venezuelans truly believe they have a functioning and dynamic democracy. This polling undercuts the arguments of those who oppose Chavez ideologically: the Venezuelan elite class, which has rallied behind Capriles; and internationally those who use the media and political rhetoric to cast Chavez as a bellicose clone of Castro. Although the ideological enemies of Chavez, both domestically and internationally have managed to sell the world an image of Chavez as a dictator, the very existence of a protest movement and the Venezuelan state's care to follow a democratic process (even if Chavez has removed many of the checks on his power) belie that description. Yet the Venezuelan state's tussles with the conservative media, which continue to surface, such as the

46 Thompson, Ginger, "Ex-President in Mexico Casts New Light on Rigged 1988 Election," *The New York Times*, March 9, 2004, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/09/world/ex-president-in-mexico-casts-new-light-on-rigged-1988-election.html>



excessive fines levied on the news network Globovision reinforce the image of Venezuela as a state headed toward authoritarianism.

Although Venezuela has been able to use its ample oil revenues to sway some neighboring countries to its point of view during much of the Chavez era,<sup>47</sup> the strength of that oil diplomacy likely peaked before the current global economic crisis. Although the Venezuelan government has used its increased media empire to sell the world on the idea that this year's elections are proof that the country has a strong democratic system, the Globovision controversy has clouded those results. Likewise, no matter the domestic media's power in Mexico to sell the PRI as a solution to the country's problems with governance and the violent drug war, the 2012 elections will always have the taint of corruption.

The result is that a window of opportunity to improve the soft power images of both Mexico and Venezuela through electoral contests has instead proved to reinforce negative images of both countries. Both results show why these otherwise powerful countries have not challenged Brazil or Chile in the regional soft power sweepstakes. If there is a virtual scoreboard for Venezuela and Mexico, mark this down as: opportunity lost.

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<sup>47</sup> Ellner, op.cit., pp. 204-208.

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