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ANTISEMITISM IN VENEZUELA'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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Since the 1998 presidential elections, Venezuela has undergone a political transformation which has had a significant impact on its tradition of cultural and religious tolerance. Following the election of Hugo Chavez as president, official attitudes in the country toward Jews, which till then had been basically positive, gradually turned into suspicion and hostility.²

While not concealing their sometimes virulent anti-Zionist rhetoric, Chavez and his government have denied charges of antisemitism, and have attempted to distinguish between their policy toward Israel and the Middle East, and their attitude towards Jews in general.³ However, recent years have witnessed a rise in antisemitic manifestations, including vandalism, media attacks, caricatures, and physical attacks on Venezuelan Jewish institutions.⁴

The roots of Chavez's antisemitism, and that of his followers, are various: racist, political, opportunistic, and in some cases, religious. Chavez was strongly influenced by the late Norberto Ceresole, an ultra-nationalist Argentinean antisemite and Holocaust denier, who served as his advisor and mentor from 1994. Chavez's strong links with Iran and the Arab world also play a significant role in his attitude towards Israel and Jews (despite his attempts to differentiate between them).⁵

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² Thanks to Beatriz Rittigstein and the La Confederación de Asociaciones Israelitas de Venezuela (CAIV) for their help in compiling the material.

³ RNV, September 17, 2010, <http://www.rnv.gov.ve/noticias/?act=ST&f=2&t=137301>; letter from President Hugo Chavez to the Secretary General of the United Nations, September 21, 2011, <http://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/6507>.

⁴ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, "Democracy and Human Rights in Venezuela," December 30, 2009, pp. 206, 208, <http://www.cidh.oas.org/pdf%20files/VENEZUELA%202009%20ENG.pdf>.

⁵ Claudio Lomnitz and Rafael Sánchez, "United By Hate," *Boston Review*, July-August 2009, http://bostonreview.net/BR34.4/lomnitz_sanchez.php; idem, "A Necessary Critique," July 16, 2009, http://bostonreview.net/BR34.4/lomnitz_sanchez2.php.

Antisemitic manifestations surfaced for the first time during the 1998 election campaigns, including minimization of the Holocaust in the popular press. Following an abortive coup against President Chavez in 2002, there was an escalation in antisemitic accusations made by political groups close to official circles, as well as in the media. Some leftwing groups identified with Chavez suggested that the coup was the work of foreign countries, mainly the US and Israel. They claimed that the CIA and the Israeli Mossad were acting to overthrow the Chavez regime. Conspiracy theories, especially about alleged Israeli involvement in the abortive coup, abounded in the official and semi-official press, expounded by figures linked to the government.⁶

Since then, there has been a persistent growth of antisemitic trends, partly in response to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and partly reflecting the reinforcement of Venezuela's economic and strategic links with the Iranian regime and increased hostility toward the US and Israel. Antisemitic messages feature in the speeches and publications of government circles, pro-government organizations and the left. The tone is set by Chavez himself, who generally blames the Jews and/or the Israeli government for perceived historical or contemporary injustices, such as his statement to the opposition leadership on August 25, 2004, a few days after his victory in a referendum aimed at ousting him from office: "Don't let yourselves be poisoned by those wandering Jews."⁷

This trend reached new heights with the election, on February 12, 2012, of Henrique Capriles Radonski, a Catholic of Jewish descent, as opposition candidate to Hugo Chavez in the presidential elections scheduled for October 2012. Radonski represents the Democratic Unity coalition, a collection of 30 parties that compose the bulk of Venezuela's opposition. Although Capriles himself belongs to the center-right party Primero Justicia (Justice First), he describes himself as moderate-left.

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Capriles' father was a Catholic of Sephardic Jewish descent (son of a converted Jew and a Catholic mother). His mother's family were Holocaust survivors from Russia and Poland and

⁶ "Venezuela 2002-2003," The Stephen Roth Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism and Racism, Country Reports (hereafter, SRI Reports), http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:4oL3Oj_pqaAJ:www.tau.ac.il/Anti-Semitism/asw2002-3/venezuela.htm+Stephen+Roth+Venezuela+antisemitism+country+report+2002&hl=iw&gl=il&prmd=imvns&strip=1.

⁷ "Venezuela 2004," SRI Reports, <http://www.tau.ac.il/Anti-Semitism/asw2004/venezuela.htm>, CFCA, August 25, 2004, <http://www.antisemitism.org.il/article/51300/venezuela-%E2%80%93-expresiones-del-presidente-contra-los-judiacuteos>.

his great-grandparents died in Treblinka concentration camp. Capriles does not hide his Jewish roots but considers himself a devout Catholic. He comes from a wealthy family on both sides. In the 1950s his paternal great-grandfather helped launch the entry of Kraft Foods into Venezuela and managed other important multi-national food brands. His maternal grandparents made their money in the movie industry.⁸

Capriles was elected to the Venezuelan Chamber of Deputies in December 1998, representing the Christian Democratic Party COPEI (*Comite de Organizacion Politica Electoral Independiente*), a center-right party also known as the Social Christian Party. He first served as vice president and then, for two years, as president of the Chamber of Deputies.

In 2000, Capriles co-founded the Primero Justicia Party and in July 2000, he was elected mayor of the Municipality of Baruta. He was re-elected in October 2004, obtaining 79 percent of the vote, and defeating Chavez's candidate, telenovela actor Simón Pestana. Capriles was mayor during the 2002 attempted coup against the Chavez government. During this period, protesters at the Cuban embassy in Baruta cut off water, gas and electricity, smashed windows, and blocked the Cuban ambassador, German Sanchez Otero, from leaving. Otero claimed that Capriles should have used his authority as mayor to disperse the demonstrators. For his part, Capriles said he helped avert more violence by preventing protesters from storming the embassy. In 2004, Capriles spent four months in jail on charges related to the aborted coup. In 2006 he was charged with fomenting violence during the siege of the Cuban embassy. He was acquitted but there have been several attempts to reopen the case (so far unsuccessfully). In 2008 Capriles was elected governor of the state of Miranda.⁹

Capriles' political background, his links to rightwing and conservative elements, his alleged role during the attempted coup and his family's wealthy background, are all utilized by his opponents against him, but a significant place in their campaign is dedicated to Capriles' Jewish roots.

Capriles' victory in the primaries gave rise to a blatant antisemitic campaign, which exploits both classic antisemitism (such as claims of deicide, usury, Jewish control of all wealth and the media, and antisemitic caricatures), and the new antisemitism – manifested mainly as hatred toward Israel and Zionism. In Venezuela it includes the accusation that Capriles is a Zionist agent planning to overthrow the government and conquer Venezuela with the help of the Mossad.

Antisemitic claims directed against Capriles are not new. He has been described by opponents as “fascist” and “Nazi,” and is repeatedly depicted in cartoons and caricatures

⁸ “Biografía de Henrique Capriles Radonski,” *De libre Opinion Politica*, March 14, 2012, <http://delibreopinionpolitica.blogspot.co.il/2012/03/biografia-de-henrique-capriles-radonski.html>.

⁹ Greg Morsbach, "Venezuela mayor tried over siege", BBC News, June 20, 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/5097734.stm>; “Biografía de Henrique Capriles Radonski.”

wearing a Star of David and/or swastikas and making the Nazi salute.¹⁰ During his campaign for governor in 2008 he was described by the Chavez-controlled media as a member of the “Jewish-Zionist bourgeoisie” and “genetically fascist.” In 2009, at the height of antisemitic activity in Venezuela, the governor’s house was surrounded by a mob, led by a pro-Chávez mayor, who chanted “Nazi fascist” and spray-painted red swastikas on the walls.¹¹ On October 19, 2011, during his campaign to win the Democratic Unity primaries, the semi-official pro-Chavez news site *Aporrea* published an article by Yoel Pérez Marcano, claiming Capriles’ candidacy was part of a counter-revolutionary plot by Venezuelan Zionism (see below). Claiming the poor would not be voting in the primaries, *Kikiriki*, a local weekly circulated in Valencia, published a photomontage of the candidates on January 28, 2012, depicting Capriles as a Jewish millionaire wearing a Star of David.¹² On February 8, 2012, the Venezuelan daily *Diario Vea* published an article denouncing the “ostentatious campaign” run by Capriles who was expecting millions of dollars from companies and bankers sympathetic to Jewish Zionism and who were interested in getting rid of Chavez and the Bolivarian revolution.¹³

The antisemitic campaign rose to new heights immediately following Capriles' election as opposition candidate to Chavez. On February 13, Venezuelan National Radio posted on its website an article by Adal Hernandez, titled “The Enemy is Zionism,” also duplicated on other sites such as *Aporrea*. It made use of both classic and new antisemitic stereotypes. Hernandez argued that in order to understand the interests that “the candidate of the Venezuelan and transnational oligarchy Capriles Radonski stands for, it is important to know what Zionism, the Israeli ideology that he deceitfully represents,” is – “without a doubt, the ideology of terror, the rottenest feelings representing humanity.” According to Hernandez:

Zionism is the owner of the majority of the financial institutions of the planet. It controls almost 80% of the world economy and almost the entire media industry. In addition, it maintains decision making positions in the US State Department and in Europe... This is our enemy, the Zionism represented today by Capriles Radonski, which has nothing to do with a national and independent approach.

¹⁰ Omar Cruz, "El Boxeador Majunche", *Martillo Rojo*, April 9, 2012,

<http://blogmartillorojo.blogspot.co.il/2012/04/el-boxeador-majunche.html>.

¹¹ “Chavistas pintan esvásticas en fachada de la Gobernación de Miranda,” *El Nacional*, June 18, 2009.

¹² “Adecos Ricachones vs. Judios Millonarios,” *Kikiriki*, 2801, February 2012.

¹³ “La Columna del Diablo,” *Diario Via*, February 8, 2012.

Thus, in October there will be two clear options for Venezuela: “the Bolivarian Revolution which works for Latin American unity and the interests of the people, and international Zionism which threatens the destruction of the planet we inhabit.”¹⁴

Similar calumnies were repeated in a virulent article by the commentator Basem Tajeldine, son of the Venezuelan ambassador to Libya, who is known for his antisemitic views, posted on February 15 on the websites Colarebo and Aporrea.¹⁵

Chavez himself did not mince words. On February 16, at a medical graduation ceremony in the province of Vargas, broadcast live by all radio and television stations, he said: “It doesn’t matter how many times you change your costume, low life; your pig’s tail still shows behind you as well as your pig’s ears. You snore like a pig. Well, what am I saying? You are a pig. Don’t try and hide it [*sic*].”¹⁶

The antisemitic campaign against Capriles is opportunistic, utilizing existing antisemitic bias and mobilizing antisemitic rhetoric to characterize the opposition as anti-national. It uses tools such as defamation (including demonization), intimidation and conspiracy theories to warn the public of the consequences of an opposition victory.

Defamation

On the one hand, Capriles is accused of being Jewish, with all the racist characteristics that this entails, while on the other, his opponents claim he once belonged to an ultra-rightist Catholic sect called Tradition, Family and Property, “where perverse religious rites were practiced and selective crimes were planned to attack everything that did not represent the national Aryan race and the high Venezuelan bourgeoisie”¹⁷; and, after the TFP's disbandment – to the Catholic fundamentalist Opus Dei. This allegation was repeated by Venezuelan TV a day after the primaries and also on various occasions by Hugo Chavez himself.¹⁸ It should be noted that Capriles could not have been a member of TFP since he was a child when it was disbanded.

There were several attempts to explain the apparent contradiction between Capriles’ alleged Opus Deist (“Christian”) and Zionist (“Jewish”) beliefs. Filmmaker Tamanaco de la

¹⁴ Adal Hernandez, “El Enemigo es el Sionismo: Un barranco como solapada promesa,” Radio Nacional de Venezuela, February 20, 2012,

<http://www.rnv.gob.ve/noticias/index.php?s=8426ea141e4fa1879c19128d7bd>

¹⁵ Basem Tajeldine, “El sionista Henrique Capriles Radonsky y la batalla que se nos viene,” *Colarebo*, February 15, 2012, <http://colarebo.wordpress.com/2012/02/15/revolucion-bolivariana-vs-sionismo-internacional/>.

¹⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GKtUsW2tDK8&feature=related>.

¹⁷ Hernandez, “El Enemigo es el Sionismo”; See also Enrique Policarpio, “Hay un Camino..! El opus dei y el libro de Capriles,” *Aporrea*, March 31, 2012, <http://www.aporrea.org/oposicion/a141099.html>.

¹⁸ “Hugo Chavez asegura que tildar de “Fascista o Corrupto” a Henrique Capriles no es Insulto,” *Nuestras Telenoticias 24*, <http://www.nten24.com/noticias/hugo-chavez-asegura-que-tildar-059485>.

Torre calls them “two ideological extremes of ultraconservative oligarchic classes which have resorted to state terrorism.”¹⁹ Bolivarian University of Venezuela professor Emilio Silva conducted a historical analysis of the alleged collaboration between Nazis and Zionists before World War II against other Jews in an attempt to clarify how the “Catholic-Zionist Ratonsky” might have served a “Nazi-fascist” sect.²⁰ The video “Capriles Radonski: Nazi-Zionist Agent,” posted by the blogspot *Martillo Rojo* (Red Hammer) on April 16, 2012 also attempts to explain the contradiction, stressing that not all Jews are Zionists.²¹

Hypocrisy

Capriles is also accused of hypocrisy. “He disguises himself as a Christian and prays to the Virgin for votes. In reality he is a Zionist. He hates Jesus and the Virgin,” tweeted Basem Tajeldine,²² while in his column “A Grain of Sand” in the daily *Diario VEA*, Toby Valderrama lists those who would vote for Capriles in the election. First, he places Caiaphas, high priest of the tribunal which condemned Christ to death, stating, this “is a sure vote for Capriles,” since they both belong to the same “miasma.” Then he names Hitler, since they supposedly both belong to the same ideological movement.²³

In another article, titled “How Capriles Radonski Is Trying to Disguise Himself,” Carlos Lanz Rodríguez, advisor to the education ministry, also mixes traditional and contemporary antisemitism. He denies being antisemitic, since Judaism is “a chosen race or consecrated elite, not only for religious motives, but for corporate interests,” and “when we denounce this racist and exclusive tendency, we are not subscribing to an antisemitic approach.” According to Lanz, “Zionism... will no longer need intermediaries: they will have Capriles Radonski as a spokesperson-agent.” He accuses Capriles of wearing a disguise, usurping patriotic and religious symbols, and attempting to disconnect himself from his link with international Zionism by using the excuse of antisemitism against his denouncers.²⁴

Intimidation

The public is continuously warned that a Capriles victory would inevitably be followed by Zionist infiltration of Venezuela. Voters are also cautioned that Israel would have no choice

¹⁹ Tamanaco de la Torre, “Henrique Capriles Radonski no es copia...!!!,” *Aporrea*, 04-03-12, <http://www.aporrea.org/oposicion/a139596.html>.

²⁰ Emilio Silva, “Capriles Ratonsky: contraejemplo de la supuesta divergencia entre Sionismo y Nazifascismo,” *Ensartaos*, March 8, 2012, <http://ensartaos.com.ve/?q=node/13295>.

²¹ Martillo Rojo, “Capriles Radonski: Agente Nazi-Sionista,” April 16, 2012, <http://vimeo.com/40452523>.

²² Basem Tajeldine, Twitter, February 18, 2012.

²³ Toby Valderrama, “La Encuesta de Capriles” in “Un Grano de Maiz,” *Diario Vea*, May 31, 2012, <http://diariovea.com.ve/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Grano-31-05-2012-jueves-LA-ENCUESTA-DE-CAPRILES-.jpg>.

²⁴ Alba TV, February 21, 2012, <http://albatv.org/Como-Capriles-Radonski-busca.html>.

but to intervene in Venezuela in order to guarantee that an “Israeli” citizen wins the presidential elections. According to Julio Escalona Venezuelan adjunct ambassador to the United Nations, “his inevitable defeat will also not be easily accepted. The Mossad has its own plans.”²⁵ On October 19, 2011, *Aporrea* published an article by Yoel Pérez Marcano, Venezuelan ambassador to St. Vincent and the Grenadines, claiming the candidacy was part of a counter-revolutionary plot by Venezuelan Zionism, “a 5th column of the Israeli Zionist entity and international Zionism,” to deceive the Venezuelan people and defeat Chavez and the Bolivarian revolution.²⁶ Another article posted to the site stated that, “in the impossible event of a government of Capriles and the opposition, those who govern here will be the masters of the Zionist Yankee monopolies.”²⁷

According to sociologist Mariadela Villanueva, “The candidacy of Henrique Capriles Radonski is no more than the tip of the iceberg of the vilest Zionism capital which aims to control and plunder Venezuela's and Latin America's immense wealth.”²⁸

On March 3, the local Valencia weekly *Kikiriki* declared on its front page: “We are f**ked if the Jews come to power.”²⁹

The visit to Israel on May 2012 of Antonio Ledezma, mayor of Caracas and a supporter of Capriles, and his promise to restore diplomatic relations between the two countries, was also used as proof of a Zionist plot.

Conspiracy Theories

Capriles is portrayed as a Zionist agent who will try to import the Zionist war in the Middle East into Venezuela.³⁰ He is repeatedly described as a candidate imposed on the opposition by the colonial Zionist Yankee power center in order to act against the country's interests in favor of the North American and the Jewish state.³¹

Several writers warned of the possibility of a Machiavellian plan by “reactionary forces” to assassinate Capriles in order to incriminate government circles and serve as a

²⁵ Julio Escalona, “Qué hay detrás del discurso de Capriles?” *Aporrea*, June 12, 2012, <http://www.aporrea.org/oposicion/a145075.html>.

²⁶ Yoel Pérez Marcano, “Con Radonsky el sionismo tiene candidato,” *Aporrea*, October 19, 2012, <http://www.aporrea.org/actualidad/a131922.html>.

²⁷ Javier Del Valle Monagas, “Capriles promete volver al pasado magro y empobrecedor,” *Aporrea*, June 10, 2012, <http://www.aporrea.org/actualidad/a144782.html>.

²⁸ Mariadela Villanueva, “Ahi Viene el Lobo!” *Correo del Orinoco*, May 18, 2012.

²⁹ *Kikiriki*, March 3, 2012, p. 1, <http://semanariokikiriki.blogspot.co.il/2012/03/edicion-386-del-03-al-09-de-marzo-del.html>.

³⁰ Basem Tajeldine, Twitter, February 13, 2012

³¹ Javier Del Valle Monagas Maita: “Miedo al pueblo, miedo a la verdad, miedo a la justicia, miedo a la historia,” *Aporrea*, March 1, 2012, <http://www.aporrea.org/oposicion/a139486.html>.

pretext for US and Israeli intervention.³² According to Raimundo Kabchi, “Capriles is of Jewish origin. Tomorrow they may say that it was the Arabs who made an attempt on his life.”³³

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The upsurge in antisemitism in Venezuela since the advent to power of Hugo Chavez reached new heights with the election of Henrique Capriles Radonski, a Catholic of Jewish descent, as opposition candidate to run against him in the October 2012 presidential election. Chavez and his supporters take advantage of Capriles' Jewish origins in order to vilify him and to warn of the dire consequences to Venezuela if he wins. This is done by a variety of methods, such as defamation, intimidation and conspiracy theories, many of which portray Capriles as a Zionist agent, and by mixing classic and neo-antisemitism. A Capriles victory, it is claimed, will inevitably lead to Zionist infiltration.

According to Claudio Lomnitz, professor of anthropology at Columbia University, and Rafael Sánchez, who teaches in the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies at New York University, in its attempts at delegitimation, the Chávez government has systematically targeted the internal opposition as "squalid" (*escuálidos*) and anti-national. The political exploitation of antisemitism is part and parcel of this strategy. All oppositional discourse is branded as foreign and treasonous.³⁴ In this context, the Jewish roots of the opposition candidate provide a convenient pretext.

At the time of Chavez's election in 1998, the Jewish population of Venezuela numbered 22,000. Today it has fallen to 10,000-14,000. While emigration is largely due to the political and economic crises the country is undergoing, increasing antisemitism also plays a significant role. No matter what the outcome of the election and the identity of the next president (since Chavez's health puts into question his ability to last another term), there is no doubt that Venezuela's Jews will not return to the situation they enjoyed in the pre-Chavez era.

³² See Humberto Gómez García, “Quieren matar a Radonski y él se hace el bobó,” *Aporrea*, <http://www.aporrea.org/oposicion/a140565.html>; Nil Nikandrov, “Sacrificio humano para desatar la revuelta en Venezuela,” *Aporrea*, April 4, 2012, <http://www.aporrea.org/oposicion/a141284.html>; Pedro Estacio, “Para el imperio, Radonski es necesariamente sacrificable,” National Radio of Venezuela, March 22, 2012, <http://www.rnv.gob.ve/noticias/index.php?act=ST&f=15&t=179847>.

³³ Raimundo Kabchi, Noticias 24, March 20, 2012, <http://www.noticias24.com/venezuela/noticia/97754/el-imperio-queria-derribar-a-chavez-para-tener-petroleo-y-poder-agredir-a-irak/>.

³⁴ Lomnitz and Sánchez, “United By Hate.”