

## Venezuela awaits news of Chavez surgery - Tehran Times

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**CARACAS (Reuters)** - Venezuelans waited on Tuesday for news of cancer surgery on President Hugo Chavez whose latest health downturn has thrown his future into jeopardy and upended politics in the South American OPEC nation. “They are going to operate today,” one official source said, asking not to be named, amid a frenzy of speculation on the 58-year-old socialist leader's precise state.

The president has returned to Cuba for a fourth operation since mid-2011 after a third bout of cancer was discovered in the pelvic area.

Venezuelan government officials have been parading on state TV to pledge loyalty to Chavez but given no details of his condition, which is treated virtually as a state secret here.

Chavez has named vice-president and foreign minister, Nicolas Maduro, as successor to lead his self-styled revolution in the South American nation should he be incapacitated.

Maduro, 50, a former bus driver and union activist, lacks his boss's charisma and political flair but would represent policy continuity should he take over.

The naming of Maduro has, however, irked some in Venezuela's opposition, who say voters - not Chavez - will decide who follows him if an election is held within 30 days of his leaving office as mandated by the constitution.

“Venezuela is not a monarchy with a prince as heir,” said one opposition leader, Antonio Ledezma.

Should an election be held, opposition flag bearer Henrique Capriles, who lost to Chavez in an October presidential poll but scored a record 6.5 million votes for the opposition, could have a second crack at power.

Chavez was believed to be a patient at Havana's Cimeq hospital, some political sources in Caracas said, though no official information on the situation was coming out of the communist-run Caribbean island.

Friends around the region have sent messages of support, and fellow leftist leader Rafael Correa, of Ecuador, flew to Cuba on Monday to visit Chavez.

“We saw Chavez and met with Raul and Fidel Castro,” Correa tweeted afterwards. “Chavez is in great spirits, it gives strength to us all.”

Chavez's health woes have sparked a rally in Venezuela bonds, given many investors' preference for more a business-friendly government in Caracas.

The health saga has once again eclipsed major national issues such as state elections on Sunday, a widely expected devaluation of the bolivar currency and a proposed amnesty for Chavez's jailed and exiled political foes.

Maduro, a committed socialist who has espoused Chavez's views on the international stage for the last six years, has indicated he would follow his policies, including heavy state control of the economy.

“Currency controls have worked well, and yes can be improved, are going to be improved,” he said on an issue worrying many Venezuelans who have been factoring in a probable devaluation of the local bolivar currency around the New Year.