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Venezuelan Cabinet Changes Seen as Effort to Control Constitutional Assembly

by LADB Staff

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Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez Frias has replaced five Cabinet members as part of the scramble for control of the Constituent Assembly. Elections for assembly delegates will be held in July. In early May, the Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE) postponed the date for electing the 131 assembly delegates to July 25. Chavez had hoped to inaugurate the Constitutional Assembly on Venezuela's Independence Day July 5, but the CNE said it needed more time to organize the vote. On May 18, Chavez announced that his Minister of the Presidency Alfredo Pena was leaving to run for the Constituent Assembly.

Pena's departure was followed by Ministers Luis Miquilena of Interior, Luis Reyes of Transportation and Communications, Atala Uriana of Environment, Leopoldo Puchi of Labor, and Alejandro Riera, of Agriculture. The new ministers are Ignacio Arcaya, Interior; Gen. Lucas Rincon, Presidency; Julio Montes, Transportation; Jesus Perez, Environment; Lino Martinez, Labor; and Juan Jesus Montilla, Agriculture.

Court rules against use of party symbols and colors

Revamping the Cabinet was apparently done to ensure that known faces would represent Chavez's coalition in the election for seats in the Constituent Assembly after the CNE ruled that the ballots could not contain party symbols or colors.

On May 15, the CNE ruled that Chavez and other public officials could not campaign for or against candidates for the Assembly nor could parties use their symbols or colors on the ballot. Analysts said the ruling would be most detrimental to the governing coalition, since its candidates are less well-known than those backed by the traditional parties. They say voters in Venezuela generally choose their candidate by the party symbol on the ballot.

Lawyers Jose Maria Zaa and Zolange Gonzales, who filed a petition with the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) to nullify the CNE measure, said 30% of the 11 million registered voters in Venezuela are illiterate. "It is a political maneuver," said Movimiento V Republica (MVR) representative to the CNE Sonia Miquilena, who said her party is prepared to take the matter to the CSJ.

"The CNE lacks the legal authority to prohibit the use of party emblems on the electoral ballot or to prevent Chavez from participating in the constituent process," said Luis Miquilena, then interior minister. He said the CSJ will probably have to rule on the matter. The opposition promptly accused Chavez of "dissolving" the government to get his people elected to the Assembly, and also of using this to get rid of certain ministers. Far from strengthening the Constituent Assembly with the most prominent people in his government, he is taking the opportunity to get rid of "incompetent" ministers, said Cesar Perez Vivas, head of a COPEI faction in Congress.

The Cabinet is not the only body being decimated because of the assembly election. Congress seems to be in a slow process of disintegration, with numerous lawmakers resigning to run for the Assembly. Many of them see the Assembly as an alternative to being out of work if the Assembly closes parliament. On May 25, First Lady Marisabel Rodriguez de Chavez, a former radio newscaster, announced that she will run for an assembly seat. "I plan to fight with all my heart to transform this nation and to fight within the Constituent Assembly to defend the rights of the family, children, women, and the poorest of the poor," she said.

All sides battle for control of Assembly

On May 21, the opposition said it is considering creating a united front to prevent the president from controlling the constituent process and "plunging the country into institutional chaos." Opposition Deputy Alberto Franceschi said their strategy was to elect a majority of "democrats" and keep Chavez from "taking the country to hell" through total control of the Assembly.

Chavez said he will participate in the electoral process to prevent the Assembly from falling into the hands of the traditional parties, which would thwart the aim of reforming the "worn out" political and judicial system.

On May 24, Chavez asked the CSJ to rule on whether he had violated the Constitution. The daily El Universal published accusations by Accion Democratica (AD) president Carlos Canache that the president violated the Constitution by campaigning for his candidates to the Assembly. "Nothing could be further from the truth," said Chavez, explaining that he was merely "announcing that a group of ministers left the government to become candidates for the Constituent Assembly." Chavez, who completed 100 days in office May 12, has made the Constituent Assembly his priority. His determination to bring about the Assembly has brought frequent conflicts with the legislative and judicial branches.

Opponents also say that Chavez's obsession with the Assembly has come at the expense of a coherent economic plan. Chavez is accused of political persecution. Meanwhile, Chavez's critics charge the president with trying to stifle opposition. They say the May 1 arrest and indictment of Gen. Ruben Rojas Perez on corruption charges is Chavez's latest attempt to silence his political opponents. Rojas, son-in-law of Chavez's predecessor, former president Rafael Caldera, was charged with illegal enrichment. The indictment says his properties and other possessions far exceed what he could have legally obtained with his salary.

Rojas's brother, Gen. Domingo Rojas, also was indicted. But Chavez said the arrest of Rojas was simply part of a campaign to crack down on rampant corruption. The investigation of Rojas began before Chavez was elected last December, prompted in part by newspaper articles by investigative journalist Jose Vicente Rangel, now Chavez's foreign minister. Rojas, who also headed the presidential guard under Caldera, was removed by Chavez when he took office. Rojas's indictment "raises all kinds of suspicions that we are returning to the...use of the justice system for political and personal ends," said historian Jorge Olavarria, who resigned as head of Chavez's commission on writing a new constitution.

Several other top former officials also have been indicted recently, including Jose Lazo Ricardi, former director of the Policia Tecnica Judicial (PTJ). "It is unacceptable that every time a court makes a decision regarding crimes against the public it is automatically questioned," said Rangel. "With this attitude, the country will never be able to punish corruption." Cuts in state workers could cost Chavez support On May 14, the government said it plans to dismiss 500,000 public employees as part of its effort to reduce the state bureaucracy, but said it would not happen overnight.

Unions said they were on a "state of alert" upon hearing of the proposed layoffs, given the increase in the level of unemployment, which rose from 12% at the beginning of the year to 16.3% in April. The Confederacion de Trabajadores de Venezuela (CTV) asked the president in March to decree a six-month freeze on layoffs, which topped 50,000 in two months. The business sector had asked Chavez to approve a change from fixed salaries to hourly pay as a production incentive, but unions opposed the measure saying it would increase unemployment. [Sources: Reuters, 05/03/99, 05/05/99; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 05/04/99, 05/09/99, 05/11/99, 05/17/99; Inter Press Service, 05/11/99, 05/17/99; CNN, 05/19/99; Notimex, 05/11/99, 05/12/99, 05/16/99, 05/17/99, 05/19-21/99; Associated Press, 05/03/99, 05/14/99, 05/25/99; Spanish news service EFE, 05/05/99, 05/06/99, 05/15/99, 05/18/99, 05/24/99, 05/25/99]

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