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Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez consolidated his power base in Oct. 31 state and local elections, with "Chavista" governors taking 20 of 22 states that were up for grabs. The triumph signaled further failure for Chavez's opposition, with opponents of the regime accusing the former paratrooper of building an "electoral dictatorship." Low turnout marked the vote, although international observers said it showed "transparency and technical rigor."

Low turnout

This is the second national vote to take place in Venezuela since August and the second of three elections set for this year. In an August recall referendum against President Chavez, record numbers of Venezuelans turned out to vote to keep the controversial president in power by a wide margin (see NotiSur, 2004-08-20). As if they had exhausted their interest in voting with the August vote, Venezuelans stayed home in numbers almost as great as they turned out on Aug. 15, with abstention rates estimated at over 60%.

At stake in the vote were 337 mayoral seats, along with 249 deputies and 22 regional governors. Nov. 2 reports from the Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE) said 270 of the mayoral offices went to parties that backed Chavez. The only opposition party that managed to avoid total devastation was the social-democratic Accion Democratica (AD), which obtained 50 mayors' seats, while other opposition parties only took single-digit municipal victories.

AD secretary general Henry Ramos predicted that the opposition would continue to lose elections against Chavez as long as their message was directed to the middle class, which is a minority, and they did not try to attract the impoverished majority, which supports "Chavismo." Hotly contested governors' races in the central states of Carabobo and Yaracuy went to Chavistas after recounts.

A Chavez ally also won the farming state of Miranda, which includes a large part of Caracas. A ballot recount showed Chavez's candidate winning in Carabobo, which was split between him and the state's current governor, said Jorge Rodriguez, a CNE director.

Retired Gen. Luis Acosta ended up with 51.25% of the vote while Henrique Salas Feo, the incumbent and opponent of Chavez, ended with 48.01%. The opposition candidate of Yaracuy accepted defeat, as did Salas, though he insisted that he had been cheated out of his victory. Chavez had threatened governors who were up for re-election with jail if they lost and refused to leave their post.

Military forces took up positions in the seats of government in the states of Yaracuy, Carabobo, and Miranda to prevent violent acts, given the close results of the voting. Interior Minister Jess Chacon said the presence of the military was coordinated with the current governments after there were confrontations in some parts of those states on Nov. 1.
Spanish university professor Jose Asensi, head of a nearly 100-member observation team, ratified the election process, saying it showed "transparency" and "technical rigor." The delegation of observers, which included parliamentarians, academics, and personalities from various countries, approved of the CNE handling of elections. The text read by Asensi said, "The electoral process has offered satisfactory guarantees of reliability and is based on premises that do the utmost to reduce irregularities and faithfully reflect the will of the voters."

**Opposition flails**

This is the second large-scale public rejection of opposition to Chavez in four months, leaving the formerly formidable Coordinadora Democratica (CD) opposition coalition in tatters. AD secretary general Ramos said the sectors of the opposition should outline their own paths because "the Coordinadora Democratica is over" and the unity it was predicated on "was a fetish." The president of the social-Christian party Comite de Organizacion Politica Electoral Independiente (COPEI), Cesar Perez Vivas, said that the coming hegemony of the Chavez regime would require new political strategies.

A leader in the social democrat Alianza Bravo Pueblo (ABP), Esteban Araujo, said they would need a strategy that would allow the country's voters to get out of a "totalitarian" government. ABP president Antonio Ledezma said there would have to be a united opposition front "to rescue an authentic democracy for Venezuela."

**Government announces "revolution within revolution"**

In the days after almost the entire country went red for the "Bolivarian revolution," the Chavez government announced a "revolution within the revolution" to combat poverty.

Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel told journalists that the ten-point initiative came out of the broad electoral victory and sought to optimize the economic, social, and cultural administration of the country with the participation of regional and municipal governments. Expected to be implemented in January, the plan includes strategies to democratize the broadcast spectrum, fight corruption with a police corps especially designed to address this issue, and strengthen civilian-military relations, among others.

During a news conference on Nov. 15, Communications and Information Minister Andres Izarra announced the plan that is to govern the country at least from 2004 to 2006. Izarra summarized the goals of the project: first, "moving forward in creating a new social structure." Izarra said this includes fighting poverty, boosting education, access to housing, and public health, reforming social security, and rescuing children living on the streets.

Second, "articulating and optimizing a new communications strategy," which is intended to develop more efficient messages, create a new domestic audiovisual industry, and strengthen community media.
Third, "promoting the construction of the new popular democratic model," which includes passing a citizenry-participation bill, retraining public officials, and integrating municipal and local councils for strategic planning. The fourth goal is "speeding up the creation of a new sense of institution within the state apparatus," which is to focus on designing efficient institutions devoted to fighting bureaucracy.

Further goals include changing electoral strategies, "installing a new territorial structure," and "speeding up the creation of a new production model, on the way to design a new economic model," which Izarra described as a humanitarian and egalitarian social economy transcending capitalism and based on internal development.

Finally, Chavez and his supporters agreed to "continue boosting the new international multipolar system" by building associations with countries in Asia, Africa, and South America.

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