

12-16-2005

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Disputed Election Gives Power to Pro-chavez Parties

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Venezuela

Published: 2005-12-16

Every seat in the Venezuelan Asamblea Nacional (AN) has gone to parties favoring President Hugo Chavez after Dec. 4 congressional elections. Several opposition parties boycotted the vote, complaining of unfair conditions leading up to the balloting and effectively locking themselves out of electoral power. Voter absenteeism reached about 75%, leading several international monitoring groups and commentators to express concern about popular political involvement in Venezuela.

The vote resulted in Chavez's Movimiento V Republica (MVR), or Fifth Republic Movement, winning 114 seats and allied parties winning the rest of the seats in the 167-seat unicameral Congress. The win will probably help Chavez win more terms in the Miraflores presidential palace, if the Congress passes reforms changing the 1999 Constitution to allow him to run for a third consecutive term in 2012 without having to call a referendum. Chavez will be running for re-election in 2006.

International monitors say vote "fair, transparent"

International monitoring groups, such as those from the European Union (EU) and the Organization of American States (OAS), ultimately reported that the election was fair, with European observers saying on Dec. 6 that they were fair and transparent despite opposition claims of irregularities and a low voter turnout.

Jose Silva, head of the EU team, said the vote was clean, and he praised the Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE). "For us, there was transparency in the electoral process," said Silva, who oversaw about 160 observers. He said, however, that many Venezuelans did not trust the nation's election system, leading them to abstain from voting. The Dec. 4 voter turnout of about 25% was lower than in recent Venezuelan congressional elections in 1998 and 2000, when about 50% to 60% turned out. The abstention rate during nonpresidential elections last year was about two-thirds, but the new high this month led international observers to express apprehensions regarding the Venezuelan political climate, though they did not question the legitimacy of the AN election.

Observer criticisms about Chavez's media usage did cause a rhetorical clash between the president and the international groups. Chavez accused the observers from the EU and the OAS of being part of a US-backed plan "to destabilize" Venezuela, saying they belonged to "parties of the extreme right" and their reports contained "lies." The EU noted that Chavez's government used television and radio broadcasts as "an excessive resource" during the election campaign.

The OAS delegation observed "political propaganda from high-level public officials, including federal, state, and municipal officials."

Chavez defended his right to appear on TV something he does almost daily and denied that he urged Venezuelans to vote for pro-government candidates. "The observers accuse me of having an excessive presence on television and radio," Chavez said. "Do they want me to remain quiet? I never called on people to vote for anyone, I called for participation."

The EU report also characterized the private media as "frequently neglecting basic journalistic principles" by expressing open preference for opposition politicians in their broadcasts. Some pro-Chavez commentators, including Chavez, minimized the importance of the low turnout, saying it merely reflected the voter apathy that traditionally accompanies nonpresidential races.

In municipal elections in 2004, over 60% of eligible voters did not come to the polls, just a few months after a record number had mobilized to decide a recall referendum against Chavez (see NotiSur, 2004-08-20 and 2005-11-19). The abstention rate was compounded by the noncompetitive nature of the race, with only 3.6 million of the country's 14.4 million eligible voters participating.

CNE president Jorge Rodriguez said weather conditions were also partly responsible for the low turnout in the vote. "There was severe rain in some states today that impeded voting," he said. Boycott contributes to high abstention Chavez, who accused the opposition of plotting their boycott with the help of the US as part of a plot to "destabilize" the country, said Dec. 6 that the low turnout "must be looked at, analyzed, and considered." "Nobody can claim the abstention as a victory," Chavez told supporters in Caracas. "The group of parties from the old order pulled out of the elections without any good reason."

The boycotting parties expressed concerns about the voter registry and touch-screen voting machines. Election officials denied any problems, saying they made many concessions the opposition wanted. The OAS, which had 60 observers monitoring the vote, expressed concern about growing political divisions in Venezuela and urged election officials "to establish necessary conditions for the participation of all sectors" of Venezuelan society.

EU representative Silva told reporters the elections represented a "lost opportunity" for resolving differences that have caused "a fracture in Venezuelan society." The EU mission report stated, "Broad sectors of Venezuelan society do not have confidence in the electoral process nor in the independence of the electoral authority." It said there was fear that the secrecy of the ballot would be violated, but the group said that possibility was "remote."

The report also praised the CNE for a "positive effort to recover confidence in the electoral process" by taking "significant steps to open the automated voting system to external scrutiny and modifying several aspects criticized by the opposition" including the decision to eliminate fingerprinting units that would verify a voter's identity.

The EU observers said that decision was "opportune, effective, and constructive." The group found the boycott decision by opposition parties a "surprise." The voting was peaceful, according to the EU observation group.

Opposition leaders said they withdrew because of concerns that voter confidentiality was not secure, saying the government retaliated against people who signed a petition in 2004 seeking a recall vote to remove Chavez from office. The petition list became public after Luis Tascon, an MVR legislator, acquired a copy and disseminated it. Over 500 of more than 5,500 candidates pulled out of the race, according to official figures.

Among the most important boycotters were the Accion Democratica (AD), Proyecto Venezuela (PV), Primero Justicia (PJ), and social-Christian Comite de Organizacion Politica Electoral Independiente (COPEI). Perhaps the hardest hit among the parties is the PJ, which benefited from not being associated with the other groups' previous failures to break Chavez's power.

PJ presidential candidate for the 2006 vote

Julio Borges reportedly opposed the boycott, but the party joined it days after the AD, PV, and COPEI announced their plans to withdraw candidates. Borges will now likely have an even harder time organizing popular support for his run at the presidency. Borges called the day of the vote a sad day and said his party hoped to eventually achieve "total confidence" in elections. The AD, PV, and COPEI, which had 36 seats in the AN, said they would not participate in elections unless the CNE made changes to the voting machines to guarantee the confidentiality of voters. Yet observers had praised the CNE decision to remove fingerprinting machines prior to the opposition boycott, a key demand by the parties.

"In these conditions, we can't participate in the electoral process," Henry Ramos Allup, AD secretary-general, the country's largest opposition party, said at a news conference in Caracas. "The electoral council is biased." MVR supporters of President Chavez, who went into the election with 86 congressional seats, were thus able to expand their majority in congress by almost 30 seats.

The opposition parties withdrew from the election because they knew they would lose more seats in congress, said Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel. "They know they're defeated, that they don't have the votes," Rangel said in a speech on the state television station after the boycott was announced. "Fine, they can go to hell." Critics left and right described the boycott a political implosion for the opposition.

Mark Falcoff, a Latin American scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank in Washington, described the boycott as a "terrible mistake" that could weaken opposition prospects for challenging Chavez in future elections. Falcoff said Chavez is riding a wave of popularity by channeling record oil revenues into social programs. Falcoff believes that oil prices will eventually fall and with them Chavez's popularity. "Even if they lose the elections, as long as they participate that keeps them in the game when Venezuelans fall out of love with Chavez," Falcoff said. "There has to be an alternative in place."

Some Chavez allies called the boycott an effort to delegitimize the election and prepare the ground for further US intervention in Venezuelan politics. Vice President Rangel alleged that moves by opposition parties to pull out of elections were linked to the US Embassy. "We have sufficient intelligence and enough information suggesting that behind the card of not participating are aims

of destabilizing the country," Rangel said. "Behind it all, the US Embassy has been very active, extremely active."

US Embassy spokesman Brian Penn denied the allegations, saying the US did not "have anything to do with any of the actions of the political parties." Responding to Rangel's charges, US Ambassador William Brownfield said, "The United States is simply not responsible for everything that occurs in Venezuela."

Chavez to seek more consecutive terms

"The opposition in Venezuela has committed suicide by boycotting the elections," said political scientist Margarita Lopez-Maya. "They only have themselves to blame for the disastrous blunder of pulling out of the race." Lopez-Maya, who is sympathetic to the goals of Chavez's revolutionary politics, says that Venezuela's firebrand leader has a tendency of concentrating and centralizing power. "The democratic spaces in the Venezuelan state are being closed off and before too long there will be an imbalance of power in the state's institutions," she said. Lopez-Maya argues, however, that there is a trade-off in Venezuela.

As the conventional understanding of democratic governance diminishes, there is a lot more social democratization than ever before, such as the range of social programs available in the slums, funded by Venezuela's oil bonanza. Now that Chavez has control in the Congress, he will be able to pass constitutional changes allowing him to run for further terms in power.

AN president and MVR leader Nicolas Maduro said the president's mandate could now extend beyond 2012. "The contribution of this new Assembly will be that it consolidates the revolution, legislates so that Chavez doesn't lead until 2021, but until 2030," said Maduro in a public speech.

Oil pipeline attacked

A major Venezuelan oil pipeline was bombed the night before the elections. The president of Venezuela's state oil company Petroleos de Venezuela S.A. (PDVSA), Rafael Ramirez, said groups "trying to create a climate of violence in our country were involved in this." The bomb destroyed part of the Ule-Amuay oil pipeline at 9:30 p.m. on Dec. 3. The pipeline goes from the center of Venezuela's oil industry, Lake Maracaibo, to Paraguana. The Paraguana oil complex is the world's largest oil refinery.

Ramirez said that the bomb created a large fire but that it was quickly put out. The pipeline normally supplies the Paraguana refinery with 400,000 barrels of oil a day. Ramirez said within two days the pipe should be fixed. Ramirez blamed opposition activists, saying, "The same people behind the oil sabotage three years ago...are trying to create fear in our country."

Venezuelan Minister of the Interior Jesse Chacon said his ministry "knows who is behind this situation, and we have made some arrests." Government officials said 24 kg of the military explosive C4 were discovered on Dec. 2 in the state of Zulia by Venezuelan military operatives. Other weapons

and grenades were also discovered. Government officials said C4 was used to attack the pipeline. In the lead up to the election, a series of small bombs exploded in Caracas. Government officials said many Molotov cocktails had been confiscated before the elections.

On Dec. 8, AN president Maduro presented what he said were proofs of a plot to destabilize the country. Maduro and fellow MVR deputies said they had intelligence showing that active and retired military personnel were coordinated and financed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to violently disrupt the Dec. 4 vote.

Deputy Cilia Flores said she had taped conversations showing that retired Army Col. Carlos Gonzales Caraballo and other unidentified persons had planned destabilizing actions for the day of the vote. "They wanted to suspend the elections, attack the president, and kill key government leaders," Maduro said at a news conference. The US has repeatedly denied involvement in covert actions against the Venezuelan government.

US Embassy spokesman Penn rejected the MVR claims. "Accusations of this type are unfounded," he said.

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