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Rosales Seen As Best Opposition Candidate

by LADB Staff

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Venezuela's opposition parties have closed ranks behind the governor of the northwestern state of Zulia, Manuel Rosales, as their sole candidate to stand against President Hugo Chavez in December. The rally around Rosales in early August obviated the need for a primary election among opposition parties, with an eye toward projecting unity and competence as they try to defeat the popular socialist president's bid for a third four-year term. Rosales still faces competition from a popular comedian, however, and it is not yet clear what effect that will have on the Dec. 3 election.

Opposition party primary election called off

Political opponents of President Chavez called off their primary election and joined forces Aug. 9 behind the popular state governor as their top choice to challenge the Venezuelan president in December. A number of candidates had joined the race, including Julio Borges of Primero Justicia (PJ) and former planning minister and newspaper editor Teodoro Petkoff (see NotiSur, 2006-07-21), but they dropped their bids in favor of Rosales. The latest big-name dropout came on Aug. 24, when former infrastructure minister Roberto Smith dropped his candidacy to back Rosales. The pullout of nine candidates prompted the cancellation of the Aug. 13 primary and cleared the way for Rosales to face Chavez, who was first elected in 1998.

"I will be the president of all Venezuelans regardless of their differences," Rosales told a cheering crowd, referring to complaints that Chavez has polarized society, stoking divisions between his poor supporters and wealthier opponents. Rosales, 54, accused Chavez of overspending on a military buildup and pledged that, if elected on Dec. 3, he would use Venezuela's oil wealth to help the poor and improve education and health care. "We will exchange warplanes for hospitals, tanks for schools and universities, missiles for preschools," he said. The opposition has called Chavez's spending on Russian warplanes, massive numbers of combat rifles, and other weapons a waste.

Chavez, who constantly clashes with the US, has said Venezuela must be prepared to defend itself against the US and has built close ties with countries like Iran and North Korea. His opponents also argue that, despite Chavez's heavy spending on social programs for the poor, the efforts are plagued with mismanagement. Rosales spoke after Borges, a conservative lawyer who leads the PJ party, announced that he and other leading opposition candidates had decided to back Rosales.

"For all who love this country, today is the day to put aside personal ambitions and think about the unity of Venezuela," Borges said. "Manuel Rosales, count on all of us. I offer you my support, the support of my party, and that of my generation."

On Aug. 4, Petkoff also dropped out in favor of a single candidate. Rosales said nine rival candidates had officially decided to back him, with Smith's later decision bringing the total to 10. Sumate,

a US-backed nongovernmental organization (NGO) that had planned to administer the Aug. 13 opposition primary, confirmed that the vote was off.

"Unity was achieved by another method," Sumate leader Alejandro Plaz told the Associated Press. Rosales began his political career in the 1970s as a councilman in his hometown of Santa Barbara del Zulia in the cattle-ranching plains of western Venezuela. Rosales, who leads his own small party, Un Nuevo Tiempo, is one of the few anti-Chavez politicians to head a state government. A former mayor of Maracaibo, he was elected governor of the western state in both 2000 and 2004, even as allies of Chavez swept state governorships and Asamblea Nacional (AN) seats (see NotiSur, 2005-12-16). He remains widely popular in Zulia, which has the second-largest concentration of voters after the capital Caracas and which has been home to a major drive for state autonomy from the central government.

Recent polls had shown Rosales leading Borges. However both lagged far behind Chavez. Rosales will have an extremely difficult time defeating Chavez, who has proven popular with voters in election after election (see NotiSur, 2000-08-04, 2004-08-20 and 2004-11-19). Recent polls put his popularity at about 55% and anticipate that voter turnout is likely to be light.

Opposition groups say there are irregularities in the voting system that will unfairly favor Chavez. The social Christian party *Comite de Organizacion Politica Electoral Independiente* (COPEI) has alleged that they found more than 2 million voters registered at the same address in Caracas, although at the time they made the announcement in late July they provided no evidence to prove their claims. A regular complaint among all opposition groups is that the nation's top electoral governing body, the 5-member *Corte Nacional Electoral* (CNE), is tilted in Chavez's favor.

The government has repeatedly alleged that the opposition is linked to the US and that the government of US President George W. Bush seeks to destabilize Venezuela's government with money sent disguised as funds for "democracy promotion." Sumate, for example, has faced repeated prosecutions for acting as a political party without registering as one.

Pro-Chavez party leader Lina Ron of *Unidad Popular Venezolana* (UPV) characterized Rosales on Aug. 9 as the candidate of the "oligarchy and of imperialism." She added, "He is a puppet, a dummy of the North American government of George Bush." Social spending nearly doubles Another major pillar in Chavez's popularity has been the continuing social-spending bonanza his government has been able to sustain as petroleum prices remain at high levels. Public spending has become a substantial factor fueling economic growth in Venezuela (NotiSur, 2006-08-18).

Given Chavez's ever-increasing social spending, voters could well reject Rosales' arguments and decide that it is possible to have both guns and butter with the incumbent. Government spending rose 97% in June compared with June 2006 as Chavez used record oil prices to fund health, food, and education programs. Spending rose 80% in the first half of the year, the fastest pace since the central bank began releasing monthly figures in 1999, as Chavez sought to reduce poverty by earmarking more funds for housing, scholarships, and subsidies for food and medicine.

The surge in spending helped spur economic growth of 9.6% in the first half of the year in Venezuela, the world's fifth-largest crude exporter. The 80% spending rise in the first half topped increases of 43% last year and 61% in 2004. The evidence of the spending increases will likely encourage Chavez's traditional base of voters to shrug off Rosales' promises of better-managed social spending. Comedian Benjamin Rausseo stays in the race Electoral boycotts, myopic strategy, and infighting have regularly stymied opposition efforts to oust Chavez (see NotiSur, 2002-04-19, 2002-05-03, 2002-07-19, 2003-01-31, 2003-02-28, 2004-05-14 and 2004-06-18). The opposition has made a fool of itself so many times in the eight years as it sought to unseat Chavez that now a comedian is also a serious candidate in the race.

Benjamin Rausseo, a highly popular standup comedian, announced his candidacy on Aug. 6, and, while opinion polls had yet to measure Rausseo's support, analysts say his colorful candidacy could make him a serious contender. Rausseo has said he could step aside later if another candidate turns out to have the best shot at defeating Chavez, but his presence in the race shows that not all opposition candidates have fallen in line behind Rosales. Rausseo, known as the Count of Guacharo, might be seen as a neither-nor candidate for those alienated by both the Chavez administration and its traditional foes. Luis Vicente Leon, director of the polling firm Datanalysis, said Rausseo's candidacy deals with "a connection with protest or emotional and personal charm."

For voters seeking to protest, argued the analyst, there is a dual character. "They see him as a form of protest against President Chavez but also as a form of protest against the opposition," said Leon, speaking about surveys taken before most candidates had dropped out in favor of Rosales. "It's the reflection of a serious problem, of a lack of serious leadership in the opposition," said Leon.

Rausseo announced his presidential bid in Caracas on July 28 as he registered his new party, PIEDRA, which means rock in Spanish. The jovial 45-year-old says he is not intimidated by polls that show Chavez heavily favored for re-election. "I'm the candidate of all of Venezuela," Rausseo said in an interview with Union Radio as he compared himself to Chavez, with whom he shares humble roots and a husky build. "He's ugly, I'm ugly....I talk, he talks. But the difference is I live in Venezuela," he quipped, in a gibe at the frequent overseas travels of the Venezuelan leader, who went on a three-continent tour in July and August. Rausseo became a household name in Venezuela as a standup comedian who aims his wit rapid-fire, irreverent, and loaded with vulgarities at everyone from his family to the Catholic Church.

Rausseo, who is also a successful businessman with hotels and other enterprises, grew up poor and left school at 11 to support his family shining shoes, as a street vendor, and as a taxi driver. He told supporters that, even if he cracks jokes on the campaign trail, he is serious about combating crime, creating jobs, winning the trust of foreign investors, and healing a divided nation.

Popular feelings of insecurity about crime have sparked a number of mass protests in recent months and may be a weak point for the Chavez administration. "Venezuelans are happy people, but since Chavez came to power that's changed," he said. "I've never seen Venezuelans so divided. Chavez has picked fights with the whole world and that's dangerous." Rausseo has jabbed the government by promising to build a "whiskyducto," a pipeline to transport whiskey directly from Scotland. The

joke mocks Chavez's plan to build a natural-gas megapipeline, or gasoducto, to supply much of South America (see NotiSur, 2006-03-03).

Chavez generally favors globetrotting over campaigning

President Chavez has been dedicating little time in recent weeks to domestic campaigning, choosing instead to travel to several overseas nations to sign deals and build political ties. His journeys saw public appearances and agreements in China, Syria, Vietnam, Belarus, Malaysia, and other countries in Africa and Asia. The global Chavez tour also comes as he is seeking support to gain a seat on the UN Security Council. The US is aggressively backing Guatemala for the seat (see NotiCen, 2006-07-27), but more countries like China and members of the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) are saying they will vote for Venezuela. One might interpret Chavez's decision to travel as a sign of his confidence about his chances for re-election. But with more than three months to go until the vote, he will have plenty of time to stump at home, a pastime for which he has proven to have a great talent.

"I am the candidate of the revolution, and without a doubt I am the candidate of the national majority, of those who continue transforming the country and saving it from the capitalist quagmire," Chavez said Aug. 12, returning home to stump in downtown Caracas and formally declare his candidacy.

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