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Opposition Makes Gains in Venezuelan State and City Elections

by Guest

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On Nov. 23, Venezuelans elected 22 state governors, 328 mayors, and 233 members of the Asamblea Nacional (AN). Neither the pre-election projections of President Hugo Chavez's governing party nor those of the opposition were on the mark. Wrong as well were the projections of the national and international communications media, generally opposed to the Chavez government, which had envisioned the onset of calamitous times for South America's largest oil producer a future of disintegration and unleashed fury. The elections took place without major incident. They were witnessed by 132 international observers, among them delegates of the Organization of American States (OAS), the European Union (EU), and experts from 34 countries in the region.

The two major parties accepted the results and confirmed that the process was clean and fair. Both sides looked at the outcome and found something to celebrate and something to worry about. Observers and analysts of different political persuasions and perspectives agreed that now is the time to look at the lessons to be learned, open up a dialogue, and begin, finally, to walk together and in the same direction.

The ANSA news agency's analysis was that the elections left in place the same basic situation of political confrontation that has existed since Chavez first came to power in February 1999, with the poorest sectors of society, part of the lower middle class, and workers backing the president's Revolucion Bolivariana, and the middle and upper classes supporting the opposition.

ANSA noted that, going into the elections, the opposition was split among 12 parties that ranged from the right to the left, that had no common platform, and that had come together on this occasion solely because of fears that the self-identified socialist president would fulfill his promise to implement a profound revolution.

Finally, ANSA's post-electoral evaluation found that, despite "its respectful acceptance of the results," the opposition "continues characterizing Chavez as a president who restricts democratic freedoms and threatens private property, while the government continues to denounce destabilization plans by its adversaries, generally claiming that they have strong US backing.

Going into the elections, of the 22 governorships at stake, two were in the hands of the opposition and five were held by "dissidents" governors elected in 2004 who had run as pro-Chavez candidates but who later broke with the president. The remaining 15 were fully aligned with the Partido

Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV), created at the end of 2007, which groups together all sectors committed to the Revolucion Bolivariana. After Nov. 23, the political map changed significantly.

The opposition came away from the elections with five governorships, keeping the two they had and capturing three more, one from the dissidents and two from Chavistas. Pro-government forces will govern the other 17 states. They lost two that they had before the vote but won four of the posts held by dissident governors. The dissident group disappeared.

Government has reasons to celebrate

All analysts agree that the government has two essential reasons to celebrate the election results. First, after an electoral process in which the national and international media supportive of the opposition reported with complete freedom, including blaming Chavez for a nonexistent fraud and attributing the worst dictatorial practices to his administration, both the opposition and the observers agreed that the elections were clean and carried out without problems. That allowed Chavez to say, "The elections showed that in Venezuela there is a democratic system and the decision of the people is respected."

Second, the government has won 11 of the 12 elections since 1999. It only lost the December 2007 constitutional-reform referendum that would have modified the economic structures of the country and allowed a new re-election of the president (see NotiSur, 2007-12-07). In that process, the government received 4.4 million votes, compared with 5.6 million, 25% more, on Nov. 23. The opposition, which received 4.6 million votes in the constitutional-reform balloting, only obtained 4.3 million on Nov. 23, about 7% less. Those figures allowed Chavez to say that he has regained his electorate and that the Venezuelan people have given a firm backing to his Revolucion Bolivariana.

Opposition also has two reasons to celebrate

Analysts also agreed that the opposition had two strong reasons to celebrate the results of the latest elections. First, although it did not have a common political program, for the first time in the last 12 elections it united around a common candidate in each of the 22 states. And it went from having two opposition governors to having five.

Patrick Esteruelas, an analyst for the US-based Eurasia Group, told Reuters that the results of this election signal that "the opposition has gained visibility and has gained political space, but it has not gained power." The Madrid daily El Pais quoted sociologist Ignacio Avalos who said, "These elections marked a clear defeat for the government, but it was a defeat with no winner because the opposition is now nothing more than a very heterogeneous and confused movement."

In an interview with Uruguayan radio station El Espectador, Venezuelan sociologist Luis Vicente Leon, director of Datanalisis consulting firm and one of the most respected opposition analysts, said, "Looking at the results numerically, what happened was what we expected, Chavez won more or less comfortably, but lost half the states in what we call 'the electoral corridor,' the eight states where 65% of the population live."

Leon was referring to Caracas, the capital and administrative center of the country; Miranda, the economically strongest state; Carabobo, center of the industrial region; and Zulia, the state that has

the most deputies in the Asamblea Nacional. "The government has lost ground in the heart of the country," said Leon, adding that, when Chavez says that the elections show that Venezuela has a fully functioning democratic system that respects the decisions of the people, "what he is doing is nothing less than putting a positive light on a defeat."

Second, of the five governorships that the opposition won, it defeated pro-government candidates in two and in a third defeated the dissidents. This helped erase from the political map a sector that was not strongly for or against either of the two competing forces. It helped clear the landscape, and now issues will have to be resolved between the Chavistas and the opposition.

The director of the Carter Center for the Americas, quoted by Reuters, estimated that "Chavez will have to take these results into account when thinking about what reforms he wants to propose to Venezuelans. The government will have to consider the results, but they will also have to consult with the leaders who can make it possible."

Obviously motivated by the good results on Nov. 23, a week later, Chavez returned to one of the themes defeated in December 2007. The president encouraged his supporters in the PSUV to mobilize "to obtain the constitutional reform that would approve unlimited re-elections," reported Prensa Latina. "They have my authorization to begin the debate and take legislative action that would lead to a popular consultation to reform the Constitution. After that, God willing, I am ready to remain in office until 2019 or 2021, whatever the people decide."

In the same speech, Chavez ordered the Colombian consul general in Maracaibo, capital of the rich border state of Zulia, to leave the country. "Either they recall him, or he will be thrown out of the country," said Chavez. He has maintained that Colombia encourages and supports destabilizing efforts and is promoting a separatist movement along the border area similar to the movement taking place in eastern Bolivia.

Insecurity plays role in voters' decisions

Most analysts did not focus on a phenomenon that might have been decisive in the Nov. 23 results, the effect of insecurity in a country with the highest indices of violence in the region, where every weekend hundreds of people die violent deaths. The only person who looked at that issue was Antonio Ledezma, the opposition candidate who won the mayoralty of Caracas.

In October, a Datanalisis survey found that insecurity was one of the major concerns of 82.4% of respondents. "Those who should feel defeated are the criminals," said Ledezma to The International Herald Tribune. The paper reported that the rising homicide rates in the major cities, precisely those cities that the opposition won, had been one of the most important issues in the electoral campaign.

Because of the weight that his words carry among the left and Latin American progressives, Fidel Castro's post-electoral analysis is worth noting. For the Cuban leader, a close friend of Chavez and his Revolucion Bolivariana, the Nov. 23 vote was a victory for Chavez and sent a clear message: "Venezuela can become a model of socialist development benefitting from the rich natural resources that the transnationals extract and through the sweat of their workers....No foreign power will determine its future."

In one of his regular commentaries in the official daily Granma, Castro concluded that, in Venezuela, "there is no opposition party, there is a group of opponents in a half-dozen parties."

For the Mexican newspaper La Jornada, also supportive of Chavez, "The elections confirmed that in Venezuela political conditions and institutions exist to move forward with social transformations democratically, and the coup aspirations instigated in Washington have been deactivated."

Less dogmatic and perhaps more reflexive, Manuel Paulus, an academic at the German university of Rostock, told Deutsche Welle that the elections laid "good foundations for social peace and indicated that a crisis like that in Bolivia would not be repeated in Venezuela, because Chavez can point to the democratic character of his government."

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