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Presidential Re-Election Back on Ballot in Venezuela

by LADB Staff

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With Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez facing various adverse situations significant electoral gains by the opposition and a drastic drop in oil revenue that until now has funded wide-ranging social projects and economic assistance to various Latin American countries and even to a good part of the poorest segment of the US population he has again proposed remaining in office for many more years. He managed to get the legislature to convoke, in record time, another referendum whose objective is to amend the Constitution and incorporate a clause allowing indefinite re-elections of the president and all elected officials (legislators, governors, and prefects). The plebiscite will be held Feb. 15.

In December 2007, after a similar proposal lost by 1.4% of the vote, Chavez said that he would not push his re-election agenda (see NotiSur, 2007-12-07). On Nov. 24, 2008, one day after the opposition made significant gains and took control of five key electoral districts, Chavez repeated that position before a group of foreign journalists. "Today, the constitutional amendment is not a priority, and I will not push it," said Chavez (see NotiSur, 2008-12-05).

However, a month later, Chavez changed his mind. According to most international news media, beyond Chavez's abrupt mood swings that Venezuelans have become accustomed to, this time other factors help explain the unexpected decision that he says will "deal a knockout blow to the fascist opposition."

In the Nov. 23, 2008, elections for governors and mayors, the opposition gained ground after having been trounced in 11 of the 12 elections since Chavez first assumed the presidency in 1999. Its gains were in five states and the most important municipalities. Although Chavez's Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) won in 17 of the 22 states in play, it lost in areas of the "electoral corridor," the coastal districts where most of the votes are concentrated.

Without its leadership intervening to stop the excesses, opposition militants attacked centers where more than 100 Cuban ophthalmologists stay who participate in "Operation Milagro," and they destroyed local schools, centers of the "social missions," and various government and PSUV offices. "Seeing these fascist attitudes, seeing more clearly than ever the threat that looms over the Venezuelan people, has made me determined to promote the constitutional amendment to be able to continue heading the government until 2019 or until the people decide," said Chavez.

The president said he pushed the Feb. 15 referendum because he was determined that "fascism will not take hold in Venezuela," but some analysts believe that his position change has other origins. The Associated Press quoted political analyst Ricardo Sucre saying that Chavez "decided to accelerate his plans to obtain indefinite re-election because that is a way to retake control of the political situation after the setback he suffered in the regional elections, when he failed to win all the governorships as he had hoped."

Collapse in oil prices a complication for Chavez

Along with this, Sucre adds an eventual economic decline because of the collapse of oil prices from US\$147 a barrel in July 2008 to around US\$39 a barrel in mid-January. The huge drop complicates government plans, since Venezuela has an absolute economic dependency on its production of crude, which represents 94% of exports and generates almost half the fiscal revenue. Thanks to oil income, or despite it, the government has been able to show some very positive social indicators in the midst of the referendum campaign.

In his annual message to the legislature on Jan. 13, Chavez said, "Deepening the Bolivarian Revolution has allowed us to say today that, in the last 12 months, 437,000 Venezuelans (2.7 million since we first took office in 1999) have left the ranks of the poor, and 94,000 (2.2 million in the last 10 years) are no longer indigent."

The president added, "While these measurements, carried out using classic methods recommended by ECLAC [Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean] and other international agencies, mean that tomorrow they will praise us before the entire world, we are not satisfied, our goal is that all suffering caused by the systems of exploitation that Venezuelans have suffered are definitively defeated."

However, Chavez knows that those positive indicators were achieved only because of the high oil prices of the past few years that allowed the country to accumulate sufficient reserves to subsidize various social-assistance programs. Perhaps that is why, given the fear that oil earnings will continue to fall, Chavez has in recent weeks looked for a rapprochement with the largest oil companies Chevron, Royal Dutch/Shell, Total of France, among others to offer to let them operate in the Orinoco reserves, the largest in the world, reported Simon Romero, Latin American reporter for The New York Times.

Romero wrote that food subsidies and social programs are financed with oil profits. Press prints accusations against Chavez In the midst of the campaign, the government has also had to deal with some situations that do not appear to have occurred by chance and that much of the media considers aimed at negatively influencing Chavez's electoral possibilities in the referendum.

Three major foreign newspapers in the third week in December published "the most serious accusations against our government, all with a common characteristic: a lack of sources to substantiate the facts that, for their importance, were picked up by more than 220 newspapers and news agencies throughout the world," said Venezuelan Minister of Foreign Relations Nicolas Maduro.

The Argentine daily Clarin quoted The Washington Post warning in an editorial of the intentions of the Venezuelan government to use force or fraud to win the referendum on presidential re-election. La Stampa, in Italy, reported that Venezuelan state airline Conviasa flights are used to transport, through Iran, the most sophisticated military technology for use by the Syrian government. And, El Mundo, in Spain, reported an agreement between the Basque separatist organization ETA and

an unknown group called the Fuerzas Bolivarianas de Liberacion, which, it said, is under Chavez's orders, to rearm the guerrilla Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC).

The local press reprinted the information. On Dec. 22, El Nacional published a long story summarizing the stories in the three foreign papers. The daily El Universal published the same stories and said that "Venezuela is helping Iran transport nuclear material."

The Foreign Relations Ministry denied the three stories and said that it would demand the right to respond to all the papers that published them. The reports did not reappear in The Washington Post, La Stampa, El Mundo, or the local papers. On Jan. 5, and without checking the story with local official sources, the same national dailies ran a wire story from the Associated Press reporting that, in the middle of a severe winter, Venezuela had suspended its provision of heating oil to poor US families.

AP quoted Joseph P. Kennedy II, son of the late Robert F. Kennedy and head of Citizens Energy, to say that, because of the drop in the price of oil, the Venezuelan government had cut off the free provision of heating oil, which it had been giving since 2005, to some 235,000 indigent families in 23 US states. The program, which has been controversial in the US, has been a powerful propaganda tool for Chavez in his confrontations with the administration of former President George W. Bush.

On Jan. 7, the Venezuelan government denied the story and said on the record that the donation of heating oil, which costs about US\$100 million a year, "would continue as it has since 2005." In this atmosphere, a little more than 16 million Venezuelans will go to the polls on Feb. 15 to vote "Yes" or "No" on the modification of five articles of the Constitution that prevent indefinite re-election of all elected officials, especially the president.

If the government proposal prevails, Chavez will be in a position to run again in 2013 and, if he wins, to continue in office until 2019. But "if the results of the referendum are negative, I will be the first to recognize the results and I will leave office in 2013," wrote the president in a column published Jan. 22 in the Venezuelan daily Ultimas Noticias. This would not, however, be the first time that Chavez has said one thing and done another, as French newspaper Le Monde noted.

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