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Venezuelan Opposition Leader in Exile; Expropriations Continue

by LADB Staff

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The exile in Peru of former Venezuelan presidential candidate Manuel Rosales, mayor of the city of Maracaibo and a leader of the Venezuelan right, put Presidents Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and Alan Garcia of Peru at odds for the second time and threatened to rekindle a diplomatic conflict that, in late 2006, ended with a rupture in diplomatic relations between the two countries. But this time nothing happened. Nor did the internal repercussions expected by the opposition materialize, although, alongside Rosales' going into hiding and secretly traveling to Lima, it launched a propaganda offensive to claim alleged persecution of its principal leaders.

Those events, which in other circumstances might have damaged the government, were eclipsed by other news. First, by former vice president Jose Vicente Rangel's allegation of a destabilization plot against the government by a group of national businesspeople with support from well-known Colombian political figures. Second, by a new wave of expropriations that left nearly 2.5 million hectares of agriculture and ranching land under state domain along with some 60 national and foreign businesses operating in the hydrocarbon sector.

Rosales accused of fraud

Rosales, who received 4 million votes in the 2006 presidential election, thus becoming the leader of the fragmented opposition, went into hiding in March 2009 when an informant gave him a heads up that he was about to be detained as part of an investigation into possible fraud in his financial statement. The document showed US\$68,000 in income that the former mayor was evidently unable to explain. If any irregularity in wealth accumulation were proven, Rosales could be sentenced to between three and ten years in prison and lose the political capital he accumulated during his years of opposition to Chavez.

Venezuelan government sources said Rosales did not choose Peru to go into exile by chance. He was looking to set off another conflict. Personal relations between the presidents of the two countries are at their worst, and the Garcia administration has granted asylum to other Venezuelan opposition figures, including former union leader Carlos Ortega, one of the movers behind the 2002 short-lived coup, which overturned the constitutional government for two days (see NotiSur, 2002-04-19).

Although Chavez said that the Peruvian decision to grant Rosales exile for "humanitarian reasons" made a "mockery of international law, dealt a blow to the struggle against corruption, and was an insult to the Venezuelan people," and, as a sign of protest, temporarily recalled Venezuela's ambassador in Lima, diplomatic ties were strained but not broken off. British news agency Reuters, which systematically criticizes President Chavez, said the accusation against Rosales "joins various government political and legal battle flanks against opposition governors and mayors." It continued, "The target is the 20% of the total regional offices that the opposition won in the November 2008 elections."

Although it does not list the supposed targets, Reuters mentions some "emblematic personalities," who, in its judgment, are victims of political and legal persecution. It specifically refers to former defense minister Gen. Raul Isaias Baduel, detained since early April for allegedly stealing money from armed forces coffers; nine police who were sentenced to up to 30 years in jail for having participated in violent acts during the 2002 coup; and two state governors under investigation for alleged mismanagement of US\$20 million.

In a separate paragraph, Reuters mentions Miranda Gov. Henrique Capriles, under investigation by a special congressional committee for illicit enrichment and fraud. The judiciary is also investigating Capriles for an assault in 2002 against the Cuban Embassy during the aborted coup. At that time, Capriles and a group of supporters occupied the embassy, causing serious material damage, and held various people hostage, among them Cuba's ambassador and its consul in Caracas.

Colombian Grupo Santos accused of funding destabilization efforts

In the midst of the spat with Peru, Rangel made charges that some initially thought might lead to a new diplomatic scandal. The former vice president said on TV that a group of Venezuelan businesspeople had established a base of operations in Panama to destabilize the Chavez government and that, in addition to their own resources, "they receive help from Colombians of the Grupo Santos."

Rangel specifically mentioned Colombian Vice President Francisco Santos Calderon and his brothers Juan Manuel (defense minister and a close confidant of President Alvaro Uribe) and Enrique (owner and director of the daily El Tiempo and president of the Sociedad Interamericana de Prensa, SIP). The accusation also included retired military, among them former defense ministers Rafael Montero Revette and Raul Salazar, both now active in the opposition, who are circulating a manifesto accusing Chavez of negotiating to "hand over" the Golfo de Venezuela to Colombia.

Although the two items seem contradictory and come as relations between the two countries are strained, Rangel is not backing down. Recently, Chavez took the propaganda offensive when Venezuela rejected any alleged complicity with the guerrilla Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and declared itself removed from the conflict in the neighboring country. "The irregular Colombian forces of various stripes who participate in the conflict know they cannot enter Venezuelan territory, and, if they try, they will be met with all available forces," said Foreign Relations Minister Nicolas Maduro from Havana.

At the same time, Chavez, speaking in Caracas, said, "We will not allow any armed incursion to violate our national sovereignty. That is not our war, and we are not going to meddle in that war. As I told President Uribe, I am not an ally of the FARC nor do I support the FARC, but as you know, I am also not an enemy of the FARC." New land, business expropriations Amid the various opposition moves, the government continued its program to expropriate lands for the purpose of "guaranteeing food self-sufficiency and sovereignty," said Minister of Agriculture and Land Elias Jaua. Chavez also took the opportunity to reiterate his support for establishing what he calls "21st century socialism."

Official reports show that, in the last half-year, the government has "recovered 2.4 million ha of land from huge estates, or land that was unused or had distribution problems," said Jaua. The minister added that it will now be possible to produce more corn, rice, and vegetables. Of the total newly expropriated land, 900,000 ha is to be used for agriculture production, a chronic weakness of the Venezuelan economy.

An additional 1 million ha will be used for dairy farming and cattle ranching, for which specimens and breeding stock have been imported from Argentina and Uruguay, which have excellent breeding cattle. Chavez is present at every expropriation ceremony, whether of land or industries, and always touts the aims of the *Revolucion Bolivariana*.

On May 10, during the signing of expropriation orders for 10,000 ha in the southeastern state of Apure, on the Colombian border, the president said he was aware that the measures were criticized by the dominant groups. "What do the latifundistas say? That this is robbery. A thief says the same thing when he is captured 'I'm innocent.' But, don't worry, we will continue moving ahead with all our energy," said Chavez. "We will continue because almost all these land extensions are the result of plunder and the powerful's violence against campesinos, Indians, the poor. That's why the revolution is here, to put things right. There are no private lands. They can have occupants and producers producing on the land, but if they don't produce, well, they will lose the right to use the land and the revolution will have the right to expropriate it."

More important than this 10,000 ha passing into the hands of the state was the expropriation of some 60 oil-sector businesses that became assets of state-owned *Petroleos de Venezuela Sociedad Anonima (PDVSA)*. On May 7, the *Asamblea Nacional (AN)* passed a law stating, "The works, goods, and services related to carrying out primary hydrocarbon activities are of public and social interest," and "operations of injecting water, steam, or gas into deposits" are reserved for the state.

By May 8, the state had taken possession of the businesses, among them US-based *Williams Companies Inc.* and the consortium *SIMCO*, in which Texas-based *Wood Group* has a 49.5% stake. Thus 300 launches, 30 tugs, 30 flat barges, 39 terminals and docks, 61 diving launches, 5 ship-repair docks, and 13 workshops, all in the *Golfo de Maracaibo*, are now under *PDVSA* control. The 8,000 workers were absorbed by the state. None of the affected businesses initiated or announced the intention to initiate reparation actions. They only want to know how much compensation they will be paid and when and how they will receive it.

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