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Venezuela: Legislative Elections Seen As Key For Government, Opposition

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Four months ahead of elections in which Venezuelans will choose the 167 members of the unicameral Asamblea Nacional (AN), society seems disconnected from an event that could definitively decide the future of the country, either by consolidating President Hugo Chávez's Revolución Bolivariana or by marking the resurgence of an opposition that remains disunited, weak, and without leadership or a common platform. Nevertheless, the political parties are mobilized as never before and, for the first time in the democratic history of the country, they held primary elections to choose their candidates. However, the climate is not optimal for the unfolding of such a significant event. The opposition alleges that its leaders suffer political persecution and has managed to get its allies outside the country to echo those allegations. The ongoing drought, but also the lack of foresight, has forced the government to enact two deeply unpopular measures: water and electricity rationing (see NotiSur, 2010-02-12). It also took two other strictly economic steps that again brought confrontation with the opposition. It moved forward with the process of nationalizing industries and expropriating lands. And, it decided to enforce a strict foreign-exchange control policy in an effort to prevent dollar speculation from fueling inflation, which in the first four months of 2010 reached 11.3% (see NotiSur, 2010-03-19). The administration and the opposition come to the elections from very different realities. Lack of dialogue brings defections "The Hugo Chávez administration's power in Venezuela does not have the same energy as it did before; the revolutionary process is going through a terrible moment," said an analysis on Radio Francia Internacional. The resignations of two governing Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) leaders, it said, spotlights the divisiveness among sectors that have led the political and economic changes in the last decade. The French government-run station said that the Venezuelan government has lost strength and, although its influence continues to be powerful, "a certain social discontent is evident as the result of a deteriorating quality of life, which suggests that the government could lose ground in the Sept. 26 legislative elections." The defection of Gov. Henri Falcón of the western state of Lara, and the resignation of PSUV vice president Gen. Alberto Müeller Rojas were two hard blows to the government's image, as even Chávez's closest collaborators acknowledge. Until last year, Müeller Rojas was an advisor to the armed forces general command, and he is (or was) a personal friend of the president. Political analyst Margarita López Maya, a professor at the state Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV) and researcher with the Centro de Estudios del Desarrollo (CENDES), says that a growing discontent exists within the Chávez administration, a result primarily of the lack of an exchange of ideas and space for dialogue. Both situations, says López Maya, "are a direct consequence of the concentration of power in the figure of Chávez, who rejects any opinions different from his." López Maya, who has always sided with opposition sectors, said that "the economic recession and its repercussions in the poor electric and water services undermine the president's popularity, until now still positive. Such discontent extends even to the bases of the governing party, the PSUV, provoking a disparity between the ideals that brought Chávez to power and those that the movement now defends under the banner of '21st century socialism.'" Chávez holds onto popularity despite problems Throughout her analysis,
López Maya recognizes the opposition's weaknesses and admits that the admiration that Chávez's figure elicits means that his popularity remains high, guaranteeing him a majority and a powerful leadership. Despite the signs of splintering with the defections of Falcón and Müeller Rojas, the researcher says that "the day the Revolución Bolivariana abandons power is still a long way off, given the absence of a firm and coherent opposition leadership." She says that, since Chávez took power, the opposition "has made terrible errors," such as the bizarre and failed coup in April 2002, when an alliance of business organizations, traditional political parties, some leaders of the weak Venezuelan union movement, and students came together to overthrow Chávez (see NotiSur, 2002-04-19); the 2003-2004 petroleum-sector work stoppage (see NotiSur, 2003-01-31), led by the highest administrative and technical staff of state-owned Petróleos de Venezuela SA (PDVSA); and its boycott of the 2005 parliamentary elections (see NotiSur, 2005-12-16). "It is difficult for the more traditional opposition to regain the confidence of people who view it with skepticism and when it is up against a government that controls most large businesses and most of the country's resources," said López Maya. In light of the UCV professor's comments, the Radio Francia commentator said that "everything indicates that if the 21st century socialism continues moving away from the 1999 Constitution the result of a reform pushed through by Chávez more dissidents like Falcón and Müeller Rojas could emerge as time goes on. The report added that, in the medium term, reduced oil-export earnings, signs of alleged human rights violations, and reduced social spending could be detrimental to the government. In the opposition camp, the panorama has become even more complicated. One of its most representative leaders, Gov. Henrique Capriles Radonski of Miranda state (where the capital Caracas is) asked in early April, only three weeks before the primaries, for changes to the electoral agreements adopted by the Mesa de Unidad Democrático (MUD). The unity table comprises an incipient political alliance of 11 new, small parties the traditional social democrat Acción Democrático (AD) and social Christian COPEI (Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente) having basically disappeared with the renewal movement that brought Chávez to power and at least 40 groups of various origins and extractions. Capriles, leader of the Primero Justicia (PJ) party, asked that the primaries be held in all districts in the country, which, wrote opposition daily El Universal, would "require a review of an entire map where dozens of parties, electoral movements, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) come into play competing for the 167 seats along with their respective alternates." Although at first the Miranda governor's demand did not seem to have great significance, opposition leaders quoted by the newspaper said that "Capriles' words require that all national agreements adopted by MUD be reviewed." Primaries demonstrate weakness of opposition Beyond the weaknesses exhibited by the governing party and the divisions within the opposition, the primaries on April 25 for the parties and groupings of MUD and on May 2 for those of PSUV demonstrated two very distinct realities. The governing party provided for ample participation of its militants with only two conditions that they not run campaign advertising in the media and that they not denigrate their opponents while the opposition allowed only very limited participation. Within the PSUV, 3,527 candidates competed in the country's 87 electoral districts. The opposition fielded only 78 candidates in just 15 districts. The open participation brought out almost 100% of Chavista supporters but only 17% of the opposition. The PSUV nominated by secret ballot 110 candidates to run for AN seats. Another three representing the Indian peoples will be chosen according to their own rules, and the remaining 54 candidates will be designated directly by the PSUV leadership "on their merits." The opposition nominated only 22 candidates through the primary process, while the other 145 will be named by the MUD leadership. The opposition's restraints on Yon Goicochea and Ricardo Sánchez, two prestigious youth leaders, also captured public attention. Goicochea and Sánchez were leaders of the student protests that
gave the opposition an ongoing presence on the streets of Caracas, but both are independent and have refused multiple offers from the 11 MUD parties to join their structures. In this respect, as well, the governing party is in the lead, since 241 young people participated in its primaries and 11 were chosen to run for AN seats. "These young people appear as a powerful renewal factor. We have opportuneely combined experienced leaders with those of the new generation, exactly what some political analysts define as a perfect formula and a symbol of the new times," said Aritóbulo Istúriz, vice president of the governing party.

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