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President Hugo Chávez Faces Legislative Elections

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On Sept. 26, nearly 17 million Venezuelans will go to the polls (NotiSur, May 28, 2010) to elect the 165 members of the Asamblea Nacional (AN), the unicameral legislature that has acted in full support of the government since 2005, when the opposition decided to boycott the electoral process and was thus left with no representatives. Since 1999, when President Hugo Chávez was first elected, the country has been divided into two apparently irreconcilable camps. Today, in Venezuela, one is either pro-government or opposition, meaning, in basic political language, being for or against Chávez.

The opposition does not exist as a united bloc. There is a small, self-defined group of "progressive intellectuals" who attack both sides, but who are, in the end, closer to the opposition than to the government.

In any case, with eyes on the Sept. 26 election, two openly antagonistic sides do exist, and the importance of the election is the only thing they agree on after 11 years of the Revolución Bolivariana and endless battles.

The pro-government forces, assembled and united around the charismatic figure of Chávez, believe that they are facing a "critical moment" because, if they do not maintain their absolute majority in the AN, it will be impossible to enact laws enabling them to strengthen "21st century socialism," as pro-government forces are now calling their political project.

The fragmented opposition, without leaders or a common platform, also understands that this is a "critical moment," although for it the problem is one of survival. If it does not obtain a significant representation in the AN, it runs the serious risk of fading away, even getting lost in its internecine struggles.

In the middle, while the government continues governing and carrying out significant actions, the poverty of the opposition’s campaign rhetoric and actions is finding invaluable help abroad. Well-known figures, print media, and organizations tied to the continent’s extreme right and the most absolute corporate interests have come to its aid, spreading and above all clarifying the confusing rhetoric against the Revolución Bolivariana and 21st century socialism.

Foreign companies find government a good business partner
But other surprising voices have also come from abroad—multinationals and powerful business groups that praise the Venezuelan government's rules of the game in the economic sphere—and they have made excellent business deals with it.

Amid the electoral campaign, the government has done some things that show that the fight for a legislative majority has not paralyzed it. On Aug. 18, when the rightist press was emphasizing that the large local and international economic groups were complaining that it was not possible to do business in Venezuela because "there is no judicial certainty," the Spanish news agency EFE reported that the government had announced an agreement with Agroflora, a livestock business.
and subsidiary of the British Vestey Group, which has operated in Venezuela since 1909. Agroflora produces and sells beef and buffalo meat. The state bought 11 ranches comprising 290,000 hectares on which it is raising 120,000 head of various breeds of cattle.

The British said they were "satisfied because we have agreed to sales conditions favorable to both sides."

On Sept. 2, EFE reported on an agreement with the French multinational Casino, from whom the state bought 76 large supermarkets, eight distribution centers, and a fleet of 100 trucks for more than US$600 million. A high-ranking company executive said that Casino will be a partner with the state, retaining a 20% stake in the business, "because with these good terms it’s in our interest to continue working in Venezuela."

Also on Sept. 2, the German news agency Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA) quoted some statements by Chávez that seemed to show his confidence in winning a clear victory in the legislative elections and the government's looking beyond Sept. 26. That day, the president announced that the country was breaking its strong dependence on the US as a market for its oil. Chávez said that, from having been the third-largest provider of crude to US refineries, Venezuela dropped to fifth, thanks to the opening of two large markets (China and India) and others that were less significant but which, taken together, buy an important volume of oil (Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, some Caribbean countries, and two "European powers," which he did not name).

For voters, the good deals with the French and the English and the acquisition of new markets for oil are not minor and could even become powerful campaign arguments.

Reality discredits opposition’s allegations

Within this context, the government stepped up its disparaging language, saying that the opposition "is the servant of North American imperialism." The opposition fell into the trap and, using language reminiscent of the Cold War, said, "In Venezuela, the choice is between freedom and communism."

The government says that behind the opposition campaign is a plan to overthrow it through a coup, and the opposition replies—again taking the bait and making erroneous claims—that Chávez is a dictator and that in Venezuela freedom of the press and speech do not exist.

It is clear that Chávez has no proof for what he says, but the lack of proof becomes secondary when the reality contradicts the opposition at the same time it is making its denunciations.

When the opposition says that Chávez is a dictator, it levels the charge in the major daily newspapers and TV networks, all in the hands of powerful rightist economic groups allied with the opposition. When the press says that there is no press freedom, it does so on the pages of its own newspapers and on its own TV screens. When the opposition and the media say that there is no press freedom, they say so by consulting political leaders or everyday citizens who make the allegations without seeing that, just by having their comments broadcast or printed for public consumption without censorship, they are giving the lie to their own charges.

Such ineptness is not exclusive to the Venezuelan press and the opposition. The large international media corporations—the Sociedad Interamericana de Prensa (SIP) and the Asociación
Interamericana de Radiodifusoras (AIR)—have made allegations in Venezuelan newspapers, on TV, and on radio that freedoms of the press and speech are not respected in the country.

The opposition has other outside help because the international right does not hide its fear of the Revolución Bolivariana and, in countries throughout the region, it tries to discredit any grassroots measure or demand saying that it is promoted by what it generically calls "Chavismo." As the specter of "Castrismo" was raised in the last century, today it is "Chavismo," and that extreme polarization does not lend itself to a healthy debate on ideas. The opposition's foreign friends are not doing any favors, either for Venezuela or for the opposition, when they interfere in domestic affairs to enflame differences.

**Foreign lawmakers to observe elections**

At the end of July, a group of Chilean deputies from the Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI), one of the heirs to the legacy of the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), announced that it would travel to Venezuela to observe "whether the electoral race has the minimal democratic guarantees." This seemed at the least contradictory given the origins of the group, and even more so when Honduran President Porfirio Lobo, elected in a disputed process that began with the overthrow of President Manuel Zelaya in 2009 (NotiCen, July 2, 2009, Dec. 3, 2009), also decided to act as an electoral observer. Almost daily, news agencies cite US spokespersons, officials, or legislators speaking of their "concern" about Venezuela.

On Sept. 6, Agence France-Presse (AFP) reported that Cuban exile and author Alberto Montaner had surprised his audience at the University of Miami when he said, "I can attest that there will be fraud in the Venezuelan elections and that that fraud will be perpetrated from the Universidad de Ciencias de la Información in Havana, where they will electronically manipulate the vote."

On Sept. 7, the rightist Madrid newspaper El Mundo became the spokesperson for the romantic Spanish singer Alejandro Sanz, printing a surprising message that the singer sent Chávez, asking him for "permission" to perform in Venezuela. "President Chávez, I want to sing in your country. Will you allow me to do so? Will you give me your word that nothing will happen to my fans, to my people, to my business, or to me?"

The national newspapers and TV channels reprinted his message, the article from El Mundo was reproduced in dozens of Latin American newspapers, and the opposition applauded the singer's "gesture of solidarity." Their hope is that on Sept. 26, the "solidarity" will translate into votes from the middle class, among whom Sanz's music is very popular. Chávez did not answer.

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