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Andrés Gaudán

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**U.S. Nomination for Venezuelan Ambassador Rejected**

by Andrés Gaudín

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After a brief period of precarious normalization of diplomatic relations between Venezuela and the US, hope that the new status would be consolidated was dashed last December. The administration of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez rejected the nomination by the administration of US President Barack Obama of Larry Palmer to represent Washington's interests in Caracas, and, in response, the White House revoked Venezuelan Ambassador to the US Bernardo Álvarez's diplomatic visa. As a result, since Dec. 29, relations between the two countries have been reduced to trade.

Palmer's nomination expired when the US Congress adjourned in December. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee is now waiting for the State Department to submit a new nominee—or resubmit Palmer's name. Reciprocal accusations have reached a fever pitch and, while there is no danger that Venezuela will cut off the nearly 1 million barrels per day of crude it provides the US, the future is uncertain, say most analysts and media outlets in the region.

**Opposition returns to legislature**

The context in which the situation is unfolding is complicated for the Venezuelan government. On Jan. 5, the opposition returned to the unicameral Asamblea Nacional (AN), with 67 of the 165 deputies (NotiSur, Oct. 15, 2010), ending the governing party's absolute control, which it had enjoyed since 2005, when opponents of President Chávez's Revolución Bolivariana boycotted the elections. While 65 of the opposition lawmakers belong to the Mesa de Unidad Democrática (MUD), which includes some 30 parties, the group is not homogeneous and has no common leader.

The two remaining opposition deputies represent a spin-off from the governing party and will be far less confrontational than the MUD bloc. The 98 deputies who comprise the rest of the AN all adhere to Chávez's Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV). They will clearly dominate the AN but do not have the two-thirds majority necessary to decide on issues requiring a "special majority."

Simultaneously, the government is facing criticism from the Catholic Church hierarchy, powerful agricultural groups, industrial chambers, and, especially, the large media groups. From abroad, the Revolución Bolivariana must endure a persistent campaign from the Miami-based Sociedad Interamericana de Prensa (SIP), which includes owners of more than 100 of the largest media outlets in the region (NotiSur, Jan. 7, 2011).

**Palmer's congressional testimony proves his undoing**

On Aug. 4, 2010, the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved the nominations of some 30 ambassadors to Latin America, Africa, and Asia, but Palmer was not among them. No one said so, but apparently his answers to a series of 12 questions from the senators were not satisfactory.

Those responses also angered the government in Caracas. The independent Venezuelan Web site http://www.entornointeligente.com published Palmer's responses. Commenting on the situation in his potential diplomatic destination, Palmer said that: 1) morale in the Venezuelan armed forces
was "considerably low"; 2) "both the Army and the Air Force have suffered equipment maintenance
problems, with potentially serious consequences for capability and readiness"; 3) Colombia's
allegations that Venezuela harbors Colombian guerrilla groups "are very serious" and "Venezuela
is obliged, as a member of the United Nations and the Organization of American States [OAS], to
deny terrorist groups the ability to operate within its territory"; 4) Venezuela is strongly influenced
by Cuba and, "while the Venezuelan government states that the Cuban presence in Venezuela is
limited to the medical, educational, and technical spheres, there are credible reports of growing
Cuban-Venezuelan cooperation in the fields of intelligence services and the military. Venezuelan
military officers train in Cuba. Venezuelan 'social promoters' receive paramilitary training from
Cuban officers in Venezuela."

It is unclear why Venezuela waited until Dec. 20 to meet with acting Chargé d’Affaires Darnall
Steuart—who has headed the diplomatic mission at the US Embassy in Caracas since July 2010
when former ambassador Patrick Duddy left the country—and formally withdraw the agreement of
Palmer to be ambassador.

The Venezuelan government expressed its rejection harshly. "It is well-known that Palmer broke
the basic rules of respect for the country that would receive him, rudely insulting the fundamental
institutions of Bolivarian Venezuela and doing so in a manner unworthy of the functions that he
would carry out," read the text. "The government considers that the insistence on pushing the
ratification process for Palmer and the refusal to look for a real solution to this problem generated
in Washington constitutes a new provocation and a manifestation of the hypocrisy of the elite that
govern that country, in particular in its relations with Latin American and Caribbean peoples."

Hours before Steuart received the note, Chávez had spoken about the issue at a public event
in which he instructed Foreign Minister Nicolás Maduro that, if Palmer arrived in Venezuelan
territory, Maduro should "detain him, offer him a coffee from me, and then send him back to his
country the same way he entered. Bye-bye, this is over."

Faced with such a strong rejection, Steuart presented the Foreign Ministry with a letter signed by
President Obama and addressed to the Venezuela government. In the letter, which the US diplomat
read to the Venezuelan press, the White House insisted on nominating Palmer "because he has a
unique combination of experience, skill, and wisdom to successfully represent our nation in Caracas,
and we have never waivered in that view."

The letter only made matters more tense. The Venezuelans went to the files and discovered
that Palmer's experience was reduced to three third-level diplomatic posts and not always as
ambassador: Liberia, the Dominican Republic, and Honduras. Chávez and Maduro, along with other
Venezuelan officials, commented sarcastically on Palmer's ability and knowledge.

Despite the tone of the exchange, the US insisted that it had a "national interest" in having an
ambassador in Caracas, and State Department spokespersons Mark Toner and PJ Crowley both
understood this. In any event, Toner warned that continued opposition to Palmer "could have
consequences." And it did. On Dec. 29, Washington withdrew Ambassador Álvarez's visa, and he
returned the same day to Caracas.

Afro-Venezuelans support Chávez
On the domestic front, the dispute took an unexpected turn. The Red de Afrodescendientes de
Venezuela (RAV), a social agency that had always been careful not to appear tied to Chávez,
resoundingly supported the government. Palmer is African American and part of a sector of US black society that RAV has criticized as "wanting to appear white to satisfy power."

In a written communiqué, RAV said that, on this occasion, "the Afro-Venezuelan social movements support the official position of not receiving [Palmer] as an official representative of the White House," adding, "We publically warn that we will be attentive to a possible publicity maneuver to try to portray Palmer as a victim of racist attacks."

Then, the Afro-Venezuelan agency characterized the would-be ambassador to the country. "The nominee represents the current of Afro-right groups and individuals who consider that, regarding the topic of Afro-descendants, there is no room for historical, political, or social analysis, and they say that the problems of poverty and injustice that we suffer have to do with opportunities for education and individual growth."

What now?

Given the situation, the State Department's attitude at first seemed an effort to lower tension. On Jan. 3, Crowley repeated that the US regretted Caracas' decision, and said, most diplomatically, that "Palmer's nomination expired" when the last Congress ended and that, as a consequence, "We will have to re-nominate an ambassador candidate."

When asked if the White house was considering another candidate, Crowley said, "I mean, that—these are issues that we will be evaluating with the new year. I believe that Larry Palmer’s nomination formally expired with the end of the last Congress, so among the issues that we'll be evaluating is what to do in light of that and the step that Venezuela unfortunately took."

When a reporter asked what precisely his statement meant, the spokesperson said, "We will have to re-nominate an ambassador candidate," which opened the door to speculation.

In Caracas, Chávez celebrated, but he said that the incident "cannot in any way be considered a victory, because it would be as irrational as saying that we have defeated the empire."

Nevertheless, he allowed himself a joke, proposing to Obama that he nominate as ambassador "one of these four friends of Venezuela: Oliver Stone, Sean Penn, Noam Chomsky, or even former President Bill Clinton."

Any such hopes were dashed two days later, when Crowley said, "We appreciate President Chávez’s suggestions, but the fact is we are not looking for another candidate....We’ve made clear that we felt very strongly that Larry Palmer was the appropriate candidate, fully qualified, and would have been and would be an effective interlocutor to improve relations between the United States and Venezuela. We have not changed our view, even though his nomination is technically expired. We supported him prior to the end of the last Congress and we continue to support him. And we regret very much that Venezuela has rescinded agrément, but the fact is we’re not looking for another candidate."

-- End --