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Venezuelan Opposition Returns to Legislature, Seeks Support Abroad

by Andrés Gaudín

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After five years of voluntary absence from the Asamblea Nacional (AN), the Venezuelan opposition returned to the 165-member unicameral legislature three months ago, having won 40% of the seats in the Sept. 26, 2010, elections (NotiSur, Oct. 15, 2010). Their representation denied President Hugo Chávez the two-thirds majority needed to push forward his Revolución Bolivariana, the touted "21st century socialism." The opposition in the AN has not, however, presented any bill and has limited itself to obstructing legislative work—not showing up for AN sessions, avoiding debate on ideas, focusing only on formally questioning certain ministers, denouncing the government internationally for alleged violations of democratic ideals, and asking outsiders to intervene in the country’s internal affairs.

Meanwhile, domestically, the Mesa de Unidad Democrática (MUD)—a heterogeneous opposition umbrella organization of approximately 20 groups ranging from the political center to the far right—took the first steps toward coming up with a unified candidate for the Dec. 2, 2012, presidential elections. For now, at least six potential candidates are on record as being in the race.

With his grandiloquence, Chávez offers endless arguments that the opposition uses, incorporating them into its complaints and carrying its dramatic requests for solidarity abroad.

"They are insignificant, their contradictions cancel their claims, they have no beginning or end, they're absurd, they have no regulatory codes, no ethical, political, or moral principles," said the president in commenting on a legislative session in which opposition deputies had questioned Vice President Elías Jaua and Interior Minister Tarek El Aissami. Both had been accused of responsibility for the prevailing violence in the country, which, with a homicide rate of 48 per 100,000 inhabitants, surpasses the average for the rest of Latin America.

Chávez said, "It's very positive that the MUD gets involved in politics, but we know that at those Asamblea Nacional sessions there is a lot of theater, desperation, and even hatred against us, and no debating of ideas."

On that occasion, the president apologized "for my faults, for my errors, because I want to govern obeying the people," and, after his diatribe, launched a call for dialogue that lacked credibility. "I do not want to treat the opposition disrespectfully because I maintain a sincere call for dialogue, and that must be based on respect," he said.

The opposition responded to the invitation using data from El Aissami. "If 78% of homicides occur in eight of the 23 states in the country, we want to question those eight governors, [we want them] to come here and tell the Asamblea what solutions they propose to stop this wave of violence," said Deputy Juan Carlos Caldera, one of the MUD legislative spokespersons.
Students lead opposition protests

University students continue representing the opposition in the streets, and they requested the intervention of Chilean José Miguel Insulza, secretary-general of the Organization of American States (OAS). In mid-February, they began a hunger strike, calling for passage of an amnesty law favoring an elected deputy, a judge, and a group of police and military jailed since the April 2002 attempted coup against Chávez. The students set up their protests in front of the OAS offices in Caracas, the Chilean and Costa Rican Embassies, and the offices of the UN Development Program (UNDP).

Beneficiaries of the pardon would be José Sánchez, sentenced in 2007 to 19 years in prison for killing a military-intelligence agent, and María Lourdes Afiuni, a judge indicted on charges of corruption, abuse of power, and criminal conspiracy.

Despite being in prison, Sánchez was elected deputy in the September elections and should have been seated along with other elected deputies on Jan. 5, 2011. Finally, based on his immunity as an elected official, he was released and took his seat in the AN. Afiuni underwent surgery and was granted house arrest for humanitarian reasons.

In an unpublicized backing of the strikers, the rector of the Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV) had suspended academic activities, but when the situations of Sánchez and Afiuni changed, the university quickly reopened its doors.

In its campaign to discredit Chávez internationally, the opposition has not fared badly and has received various forms of solidarity, occasionally with ethically questionable information. One such case is the cancelation of a Colombian soap opera broadcast by the private television channel Televén. The soap opera was titled Chepe Fortuna and its leading characters were a grotesque woman named Venezuela and a beautiful woman named Colombia. The first character, disheveled and with her hair in disarray, was a hysterical woman who had a dog named Huguito and frequently was involved in criminal activities and even drug trafficking.

Given the program's inherent disrespect, Televén decided to cancel it. On Jan. 15, Chávez publically thanked and congratulated the channel's management. Nevertheless, six days later, on Jan. 21, the Uruguayan daily and the Web site of both carried the exact same headline: "Chávez takes Colombian soap opera off the air." Both published the same text. The Uruguayan paper attributed the information to Spanish news agency EFE and France's Agence France-Presse (AFP), but the story was not among the international agencies' official distributions.

Help from friends abroad

From Miami, on Jan. 23 an entity called Un Mundo sin Mordaza called for a worldwide series of acts of repudiation against the Venezuelan government. Francisco Portillo of American Democracy Watch, an affiliated organization, explained that the protest's aim was to "declare Chávez a dictator." Portillo said that "Venezuelan brothers are suffering the great tragedy caused by the dictator, who has also caused problems to both the Southern Cone and Central America, so we want to send the world a clear message about the great danger to democracy in Venezuela, where Chávez is staying in power like a dictator in the style of Fidel Castro."

The outcome of the call for protests is unclear, but an EFE feed was published beginning Jan. 19 in newspapers throughout South America. On March 21, the news reached Panama, where six groups
affiliated with MUD met to outline a campaign with their sights on the 2012 presidential elections. The unusual site was chosen because of the presence there of Manuel Rosales, former governor of the state of Zulia. When a legal investigation was opened into alleged acts of corruption and misuse of public funds, Rosales fled Venezuela and was granted political asylum in Peru (NotiSur, May 22, 2009). Rosales is a leader of the Un Nuevo Tiempo party and one of the hopefuls to be the unified-opposition candidate.

On March 18, the group received solidarity from Chile, where Demócrata Cristiana (DC) Sen. Ignacio Walker offered his party's support to the Venezuelan opposition, and he pledged to a delegation of AN legislators to monitor the 2012 elections. "We want to call Latin America's attention in order to support the Venezuelan electoral process so that there will be no surprises and the popular will will be freely expressed," said Walker.

The most disturbing news, because it would be a serious intervention by the US government in the internal affairs of another country, came to light on Feb. 15 when Venezuelan-US lawyer Eva Golinger denounced that the proposed budget presented to Congress by President Barack Obama included US$5 million for the Venezuelan opposition.

Golinger, an outspoken supporter of the Revolución Bolivariana, wrote, "For the first time in recent history, the Foreign Operations Budget (State Department) openly details direct funding of at least US$5 million to anti-Chavez groups in Venezuela. Specifically, the budget justification document states, 'funds will help strengthen and support a Venezuelan civil society that will protect democratic space and seek to serve the interests and needs of the Venezuelan people. Funding will enhance citizens' access to objective information, facilitate peaceful debate on key issues, provide support to democratic institutions and processes, promote citizen participation and encourage democratic leadership.'"

The funding for Venezuelan opposition groups comes from the State Department's Economic Support Fund (ESF). The denunciation by Golinger, published by the Uruguayan daily La República, Brazil's Catholic agency Adital, and various Web sites, points out that this year the funding for opposition groups will be public, because Venezuela has passed the Ley de Defensa de la Soberanía Política y la Autodeterminación Nacional, which "clearly renders all foreign funding for political campaigns, parties and organizations, including NGOs, that engage in political activities, illegal. How exactly does Washington propose to channel those US$5 million to Venezuelan groups, when such financing clearly constitutes a violation of Venezuelan law?"

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