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Opponents Unable to Gain Traction Against Venezuela President Hugo Chávez

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Domestic opponents of Venezuela's Revolución Bolivariana and their foreign allies do not seem to have found the formula to gain ground, either in their immediate plans or in medium-term strategy aimed at defeating President Hugo Chávez in the December 2012 presidential election. Beset by their own contradictions, opponents continue with no sign of unity. Given the impossibility of sustaining a coalition and sharing a platform, they decided to postpone until February 2012 the election of a consensus candidate that would give them better possibilities for entering the final stage of the electoral campaign.

The coordinated offensive by the continent’s rightist press and the Sociedad Interamericana de Prensa (SIP) does not have domestic repercussions and, although it appears successful in creating a negative image of the Venezuelan government, it seems to lose effectiveness within the borders of the home countries of the dailies and TV companies that try to demonize the figure of Chávez with the increasingly ineffective argument that he is “a mere populist leader.”

The US government, the principal foreign ally of the enemies of Venezuela's process of change, decided to apply sanctions to the Caracas government, but everything indicates that the efforts are doomed to failure and have even altered the relation of forces within the US.

Instead, the governing Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) has found openings to win new allies, or simply friends, inside and outside the country.

While the opposition focuses on minor matters—such as promoting legislative questioning of some government officials, or claiming that many of Chávez's actions are nothing more than electoral campaigning paid for with public funds, or even demanding the president's "immediate" return to the country just hours after he underwent emergency surgery for a non-life-threatening problem while visiting Cuba—the PSUV continues to make progress in forming the "Polo Patriótico." This is a type of political organization that will allow the governing party to live under the same roof with social sectors, intellectuals, and even business people who view with skepticism and fear the opposition Mesa de Unidad Democrático (MUD).

Without providing convincing arguments, the government has been allowed to denounce the opposition for alleged acts of destabilization and even coup intentions, but the opposition has been unable to piece together a convincing response to the allegations.

Improved relations with Colombian president prove costly

Chávez travels around the world gathering sympathy, especially from his counterparts on the continent—in Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, Bolivia, Uruguay—and he has even been able to improve the bad climate that clouded bilateral relations with Venezuela's closest neighbor Colombia, relations that were dangerously confrontational during the eight-year administration of former President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010).
This change is costing the president dearly domestically, including among old allies and defenders of the Bolivarian Revolution. Although they attack Chávez with harsh arguments because of the new relations established with Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos, Uribe’s successor, those old allies make it clear that their differences will not threaten the government’s programs of change.

Aware that Colombia has been the thorn in the side of the Venezuelan process, Chávez took advantage of Santos’ pragmatism to fundamentally overhaul relations between the two countries.

After having been close to a military confrontation during Uribe’s time in office, Chávez embraced Santos and put into practice a strategy that has allowed him to exchange major drug traffickers captured on either side of the border, turn over to Bogotá a dozen guerrillas detained in Venezuela, and—the largest problem for his allies—summarily extradite a Colombian journalist who was his personal friend and is a friend of the Bolivarian Revolution.

The deportation of Joaquín Pérez Becerra—a Colombian with Swedish citizenship, director of the Agencia de Noticias Nueva Colombia (ANNCOL), and friend of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC)—caused real defenders of the Bolivarian Revolution to accuse Chávez of calling into question the meaning of diplomacy in relation to the value of principles.

"We are part of the profound changes that the nation has experienced in recent years, but we are not going to betray the principle of internationalism. Today the country is asking who the president of Venezuela is—Chávez or Santos? Let Chávez defend his actions and say in the name of what principles, what laws, and what interests he turned over compañero Pérez Becerra to be tortured in Colombian jails," said Amilcar Figueroa, a prominent PSUV leader.

"This alliance between Santos and our president, who in addition to being president is the leader of a socialist and revolutionary process, must be reviewed," said Jerónimo Escobar, an active member of the Movimiento Gayones.

**US imposes ineffective sanctions**

In this context, and rather than taking advantage of ethnic and political differences to stir up critics and pit them against Chávez, the US opted to impose sanctions on Venezuela.

Experience indicates that, throughout history, "punishments" have only served to bring people together. Nevertheless, on May 24, the US State Department announced a package of measures against the Venezuela state oil company PDVSA for allegedly violating a prohibition passed by Congress and applicable to businesses that export energy-related products to Iran.

The application of a domestic US law, the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability and Divestment Act (CISADA), against Venezuela means that PDVSA will not have access to financing from the Export-Import Bank, to export licenses in the US, and to contracts with Washington.

"Carefully analyzed, it seems that the announcement will have no effect on the rewarding commercial and energy ties between the US and Venezuela, although it will surely help to complicate a little more the already bad bilateral relations," wrote BBC analysts in London.

"The Bolivarian government expresses its strongest condemnation of this decision because it constitutes a hostile action on the fringes of international law and in violation of the principles of the UN Charter," said Venezuelan Foreign Minister Nicolás Maduro. The minister mentioned that
the Venezuelan oil company provides 1.2 million barrels of crude a day to the US market, something close to 5% of domestic consumption, according to a US Commerce Department study.

The BBC analysts clearly are not mistaken. Besides eliciting unexpected domestic sympathy for the Chávez administration, Maduro said that, "now more than ever, we are going to deepen relations with Iran because it is evident that it is impossible to dialogue with this US government."

Maduro added that Venezuela "has made every effort to establish a relationship of fluid communications, of mutual respect, a relationship between equals, but it is impossible to talk with this government of President Barack Obama, which is weak and incoherent and submits easily to pressures from ultraright lobbyists."

Moreover, as the BBC said, the sanctions will have little effect. The US State Department's Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs spokesperson Charles Luoma-Overstreet admitted that the sanctions "do not ban the sale of Venezuelan crude to the United States" because "the penalization will not affect PDVSA subsidiaries," especially CITGO, a major chain of gas stations in the US that belongs to the Venezuelan oil company.

Regarding the block on obtaining financing with the Export-Import Bank, the US institution that promotes sales of local industries in international markets, Venezuela has had no deals with the institution since 2001, when it received a credit for exporting oil equipment worth US$100 million that was concluded in full and on time by Venezuela.

In contrast with "this bumbling US policy," as analyst, former communications minister, and supporter of the Bolivarian Revolution Jesse Chacón described it, Venezuela continued its attempts to have better relations with the US public. Along with renewing for the sixth consecutive year the program of giving heating oil to low-income families, African American communities, 234 shelters for the poor, and 250 Indian communities, "a genuine expression of the Venezuelan people's solidarity with the most vulnerable, wherever they are," Venezuela added a plan to improve relations with the US black community.

"Taking advantage of the African heritage of Presidents Chávez and Obama," governing-party Deputy Modesto Ruiz made a prolonged trip that took him to Washington, Boston, and Baltimore to meet with legislators, academic leaders, and representatives of social movements as part of the UN's celebration of 2011 as the International Year for People of African Descent.

Ruiz's objective is to promote cultural and educational exchange between black communities from both countries. Among those who met with the deputy were professors and students from Harvard University. The Spanish news agency EFE reported on May 5 that "the final agenda will be released when a complete bilateral agreement is established, but the idea is to develop exchanges with Harvard, aimed specifically at students of African descent from both countries."

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