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Venezuelan Opposition Chooses Presidential Candidate

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After fourteen years of discord, the Venezuelan opposition seems to have discovered the formula for challenging President Hugo Chávez and his Revolución Bolivariana. On Feb. 12, the approximately 20 parties that make up the Mesa de Unidad Democrática (MUD) held open internal elections to select, from among five hopefuls, a candidate to represent them in this year's presidential elections. Barring new rifts and assuming that personal ambitions remain definitively sidelined, on Oct. 7, the opposition will be able to vote for Henrique Capriles Radonski, a 39-year-old lawyer with a rich and successful background in legislative and executive politics and the heir to a large business empire.

If those unlikely events do not occur, the next elections will be the first in which the right will oppose Chávez united around one candidate elected by its bases. In 2006, Manuel Rosales was the single opposition candidate but was chosen by the leadership, without popular participation.

The MUD’s primary elections were preceded by a long but unusual campaign, without large public events or other activities allowing candidates to have direct contact with the electorate. The candidates participated in debates only at private universities and other small venues during which they answered questions from the audience, with responses restricted to one minute each. The rest of the campaign was limited to political ads and interviews with the major media, all belonging to opposition businesses that were backing Capriles.

 Unexpectedly large turnout

The participation of 2.9 million people (16% of the 18.2 million eligible voters) in the primaries filled the opposition alliance with enthusiasm. And with good reason. Both the MUD leadership and the Chávez administration had estimated a turnout of between 10% and 12%. The right reacted with euphoria, while the government registered concern.

Capriles obtained about 1.8 million votes, 62.2% of the total, which ensures him at least 10% of the electorate who were eligible to vote in the primaries and will be eligible in the presidential election in October.

For those who examine the situation dispassionately—a reduced number in a country perhaps more politically polarized than any other country in South America, which makes it useful to consult analysts abroad—that is a good start but insufficient to overcome the 55.5% who supported Chávez in the latest polls that have been released. An Instituto Venezolano de Análisis de Datos (IVAD) poll in January indicated that, if the elections had been held then, the president would have defeated Capriles by 55.5% to 31.8%. The Hinterlaces polling firm put the results at 50% to 37%.

Since Chávez first took office in 1998, 13 elections have been held, including presidential and legislative elections and constitutional referendums. In all of them, the opposition has alleged fraud and blamed the Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE)—the agency responsible for carrying out elections—and the armed forces—charged with ensuring that elections occur normally and without violence. Proof of the allegation was never produced.
With voter rolls recently updated and an electronic vote-counting system in place, it is difficult to imagine the possibility of fraud, said a European Parliament (EP) observer mission following the 2010 legislative elections. Despite the history of opposition complaints, MUD called on the CNE and the security forces for assistance in organizing and supervising the primaries and conducting the tally.

**Capriles softens anti-government rhetoric**

During the night of Feb. 12, with the count almost finished and the nomination of Capriles an indisputable fact, MUD executive secretary Ramón Guillermo Avelado thanked the CNE for its "invaluable and impartial participation throughout this internal process, thanks that we must extend to the armed forces, which guaranteed that this day was a celebration that occurred in absolute normalcy."

Avelado's statement—and that of other leaders, including Capriles, in the following days—was significant. It was the first time that the right had shown such an attitude.

Speaking for the government, Vice President Elías Jaua said that it seemed "good" that the opposition "finally admitted that [the CNE and security forces] have been and will be during the presidential elections as impartial as all institutions in the democracy should be." He added that "it would be even better" if on Oct. 7 they recognized President Chávez's victory. "If that should occur, as we expect, the opposition would do Venezuelan democracy a big favor by recognizing the results, the impartiality, and the institutional role of the CNE and the armed forces during the electoral process."

Jaua also said, "The government is satisfied that it has provided a space for the opposition to have a democratic expression and leave behind those days of 2002, of attempted coups and sabotage, and of 2005, when they sabotaged the legislative elections and chose not to participate in them (NotiSur, Dec. 16, 2005)." When he spoke of attempted coups, Jaua was referring to April 2, 2002, when the right held Chávez for 48 hours and installed Pedro Carmona—leader of the powerful business association FEDECÁMARAS—as the short-lived de facto president (NotiSur, April 19, 2002).

**MUD releases plan for government**

Three weeks before the primaries, on Jan. 23, MUD presented a document to the primary candidates titled "Guidelines for the government national unity program 2013-2019." In it, the MUD lays out for the public the opposition's proposals, and it uncovered the first fracture within the opposition front.

Former diplomat Diego Arria refused to sign the 175-page text—written during a year and a half by more than 400 experts in the most diverse disciplines—because it did not include the need for a constitutional reform "to dismantle the institutional framework of this regime [the Revolución Bolivariana] that represents an abusive, corrupt, and totalitarian system."

The text that Capriles and the other primary participants signed speaks of "reconciling the country, strengthening democracy, invigorating and restructuring public power, constructing a productive and progressive society, improving the quality of life of Venezuelans, and projecting the image of Venezuela as a country of trust, respect, and prosperity to the world."

Specifically, MUD committed to increase private-enterprise participation in the oil sector—the driving force of the Venezuelan economy—increase the productive capacity of the state-owned
Petróleos de Venezuela SA (PDVSA), promote the petrochemical industry, and remove from PDVSA the responsibility for financing the country's social programs [the "social missions"].

Remarkably, that same unified MUD program also "highlights the advances in social protection [the work of the 'missions'] that have been developed during Chávez's 13 years in government," said the news agency Agence France-Presse (AFP) in a story filed Jan. 23 from Caracas. "We will work to ensure the rights to private property and economic freedom and to develop free private initiative and citizen access to quality goods and services," reads the document's lengthy prologue.

**Candidate part of Venezuelan business elite**

Capriles, although of Jewish ancestry, is a devout Catholic. His father is a Sephardic Jew who came to Venezuela from the former Dutch territory of Curaçao, a beautiful island where large contingents of Jews from Spain settled in the 17th and 18th centuries. His mother is an Ashkenazi Jew from Poland who fled Nazi persecution before World War II.

Now leader of the Primero Justicia (PJ) party, Capriles' political history goes back to the mid-1990s, when he was active in the Partido Social Cristiano (COPEI) and was elected a deputy for that party in 1999. At age 25, he was the last president of the lower house in Congress before a Chávez-backed constitutional reform established a unicameral Asamblea Nacional (AN). He was later elected mayor of the municipality of Baruta, in Caracas, and is now governor of Miranda, the second-most-important state in the country.

From his father's side of the family, Capriles inherits a business empire that includes construction, insurance, transportation, real estate, and, most important, media companies. The media holdings include dozens of magazines—focusing on women, sports, children, tourism, etc.—radio stations, and Internet sites, and the company's flagship holdings, newspapers Últimas Noticias (the most popular in Venezuela) and El Mundo, and Globovisión TV channel.

From his mother's side, Capriles inherits real estate companies and various assets linked to the entertainment industry, especially Cinex, the largest chain of movie theaters in the country.

The candidate's background has its negative side as well. In 2002, he was one of the backers of the aborted coup and led a commando group that attacked the Cuban Embassy, where seven cars were burned. The diplomatic mission was in Baruta, the municipality where Capriles was mayor. Following a complaint lodged by then Cuban ambassador Germán Sánchez, Capriles was detained for four months.

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