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Venezuelans United Against U.S. Sanctions

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After experiencing in 2014 the most difficult months of its short, 15-year history at the helm of the Venezuelan government, the Revolución Bolivariana sailed through a year’s end that many analysts and the opposition had foreshadowed as a period of turmoil and street demonstrations. Nevertheless, and even amid a critical economic situation exacerbated by the sharp fall in oil prices and annual inflation that hovered around 60%, President Nicolás Maduro managed to maintain cohesion in his Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV), continue counting on the support of the armed forces and, above all, weather a crisis in the supply of staple goods that had angered the population (NotiSur, Feb. 21, 2014).

At the end of 2015, the government will face a legislative election that at one time was thought might be the beginning of the end of the process that the late President Hugo Chávez (1999-2013) began in 1999. Today, Maduro says, "We must prepare ourselves to obtain a new, overwhelming triumph," adding, "US support of the opposition and unacceptable interference by President Barack Obama have been decisive factors ensuring the union of the Venezuelan people with their government."

Last May, the US Congress—headed by Republican leaders in both houses and many Democratic legislators—began an escalated campaign against the Venezuelan government. In July and September, Congress voted on sanctions that Obama finally adopted on Dec. 4. Although the names of those punished were not publically disclosed for reasons of "confidentiality of the visa register," according to an explanation from State Department spokesperson Marie Harf, it is known that they included high-ranking public officials and military leaders. The sanctions include suspension of visas and freezing assets and bank accounts in the US.

"Our message is clear," Harf said, "Those who commit such abuses will not be welcome in the United States."

The White House’s concern is in defense of Leopoldo López, a former mayor of Caracas’s Chacao district who is in jail, and Corina Machado, a former deputy who was removed from office. Both, who no longer have the support of the opposition coalition Mesa de Unidad Democrática (MUD) and its leader, Henrique Capriles, are accused of having incited episodes of violence between February and May 2014 with the goal of destabilizing the government and forcing Maduro to resign (NotiSur April 4, 2014, and June 6, 2014).

In Venezuela, as in the rest of Latin America, everything that comes from the US is viewed suspiciously by government supporters and independents not aligned with the MUD. Publicized by the ruling party that doesn’t miss an opportunity to attack the US, which it calls "the empire," the sanctions gave rise to a strong reaction by the government, which, on Dec. 19, one day after Obama signed them, issued a statement that received no internal criticism, not even from the opposition media.

"It is unacceptable that the government of the United States seeks to disqualify us," the text read, "when it is precisely in the United States where human rights are systematically violated." The document went on to enumerate "permanent violence against immigrants; discrimination
against the African-American minority such as in the recent case of Michael Brown [referring to
the black youth killed by a white policeman in Ferguson, Missouri]; crimes by those in power that
go unpunished; the open practice of kidnapping and torture such as occurs outrageously at the
Guantanamo Bay Naval Base and other US military installations around the world; and support of
terrorism, bombings, and military aggression in other countries."

**Comparison with Cuban sanctions**

Three days later, the person who spoke up was the former foreign minister and now Ambassador to
the UN Rafael Ramírez, who explained, "Measures such as sanctions bring the people together." He
added, "They reinforce our will and the will of our people to reject and confront them."

Ramírez said, "That is a policy that is bound to fail, but we hope it won’t take 53 years like it took
for Obama to recognize that the policy that the White House had toward Cuba was a failure of the
United States," a country he called "the "great destabilizer of the planet."

Ramírez then asked if the sanctions "respond to the lobby of the far right and transnational firms
that have strong ties to Venezuela’s extreme right, to coup supporters López and Machado, since
signing this new chapter of aggressions against Venezuela is equivalent to giving a blank check to
groups outside the Constitution."

Finally, Ramírez rejoiced in recalling the three main reasons that Obama cited in his statement
"Charting a New Course on Cuba," when on Dec. 17 the White House announced the beginning
of a thawing in relations with the small Caribbean island. He then enumerated, reading from the
official communiqué: "1) It is clear that decades of US isolation of Cuba have failed to accomplish
our enduring objective of promoting the emergence of a democratic, prosperous, and stable Cuba. 2)
Though this policy has been rooted in the best of intentions, it has had little effect. Today, as in 1961,
Cuba is governed by the Castros and the Communist party. 3) We cannot keep doing the same thing
and expect a different result."

The former minister then reminded the great power, "Just as Latin America was united in defense
of Cuba, it will now be united behind Venezuela." And he added, "To try to isolate a country and
weaken the revolution with these sanctions and interference is to fail to recognize what Venezuela
and the Bolivarian ideal represent for Americans, and the meaning of the banners raised by Hugo
Chávez, who changed the interrelations of forces in the region."

The government took advantage of President Obama’s two decisions—the "thawing" relations
with Cuba and imposing sanctions against Venezuela—to standardize an official discourse filled
with optimism. Everything was in his favor since the opposition remained weakened following
the resignation of the then secretary general of MUD Ramón Aveledo last July, and since the
government had waged a successful campaign against smuggling that made it possible to end the
year with a full supply of basic products.

For this, Venezuela had the cooperation of the Colombian government in controlling a long,
common border where subsidized food destined for the domestic market had left the country
and was held by speculators and a black market that pushed prices up to unthinkable levels. In
this favorable context, on Dec. 29, Maduro received support from high military officials—a sector
that remains key in the politics of Latin American countries—at an event in which he praised the
nationalist spirit of the Venezuelan armed forces.
Opposition not ready for 2015 elections

Next December’s legislative elections approach, and the opposition has not managed to regroup following the split in its leadership provoked by López and Machado and Aveledo’s resignation that followed.

As recently as Jan 2, it was learned through leaked information that the majority of the 25 small parties in the MUD coalition would have arrived at a minimum agreement with an eye to the parliamentary elections, in which they would speak about "a cessation of parallel projects inside the coalition."

This same day, a report filed by the Spanish news agency EFE explained what this "cessation of parallel projects" referred to. The opposition’s most recent defeats in presidential elections in March 2013 and municipal elections in December of the same year, the Spanish news agency said, "opened a can of worms for the opposition and uncovered two opposing views about how to proceed: to either get the government to change or change the government." (A not so subtle way of promoting a coup, the only way possible to make such a change since Maduro was elected for a term that ends in 2019.)

This second approach, led by López and Machado, led to the violent protests between February and May of last year (NotiSur, April 4, 2014, and June 6, 2014).

The opposition seemed willing to accept that this is the reality and that the government can only be changed by constitutional means. On Jan. 4, Venezuelans received a strong signal to that effect. That day, for the first time, all the country’s governors and mayors agreed to sit down at the same table with Maduro to begin a dialogue about the country’s serious problems. It seemed that MUD was beginning a new phase, apparently convinced it would again lose in legislative elections in December. But, at the last minute, Capriles did not attend.

On Jan. 7, Archbishop Diego Padrón read a communiqué from the Conferencia Episcopal Venezolana (CEV) in which the Catholic Church said that "faced with the magnitude of the crisis, the political parties have failed to propose an alternative project for an efficient democracy and various agendas and individualistic projects impede the pursuit of the common good and of a project in which all sectors participate (NotiSur, July 25, 2014)."

Most of the clergy is aligned with the opposition.

"We will vote, and of this there is no doubt, but it is difficult to be convinced we will win. I am totally skeptical regarding expectations one wants to generate," wrote Jaime Merrick in the opposition daily El Nacional. Merrick is a recognized analyst and financial expert in Caracas.

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