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Legislative Primaries Held in Venezuela as Talks with U.S. Continue
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More so than ever before in the past few tumultuous years, the political life of Venezuela and its people is developing simultaneously along two separate but intimately related lines. One involves efforts to restore bilateral relations with the US. The other has to do with year-end legislative elections, set to take place Dec. 6, when voters will choose all 165 members of the unicameral Asamblea Nacional (AN). The success of the former depends in part on the outcome of the latter since the elections could impact the political unity Venezuela needs in its dealings with the northern superpower.

At this point it is impossible to predict how the elections will turn out. Internal divisions exacerbated by the personal ambitions of its leaders are complicating matters for the opposition Mesa de Unidad Democrática (MUD) coalition (NotiSur, July 25, 2014), which has a real shot, according to analysts, of winning in December. But pundits say it is also within reason to imagine another victory by the governing Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV).

"A Chavista triumph in the parliamentary elections would strengthen [the government] in the short term and leave the opposition crushed, frustrated, and divided. It would be very, very bad for the opposition," analyst Luis Vicente León wrote in a June 5 column for the opposition daily El Universal.

The two large blocs that divide Venezuela’s "partiocracy" have already held internal elections to select candidates for the Dec. 6 contests. The MUD primaries, held May 17, were, however, only partial. The coalition’s 28 member parties voted in just 12 of the country’s 23 states and chose only 42 candidates. The other 123 candidates the opposition plans to run will be designated "by consensus." MUD leaders said financial constraints kept them from holding a more thorough vote, even though the Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE) covered most of the associated costs (NotiSur, May 22, 2015). A more likely explanation, according to analysts, is that MUD limited the primaries to guarantee that each of its 28 member parties is represented on the ballot come December.

The PSUV held its primaries on June 28, selecting all 165 legislative candidates. The elections were open to all registered voters but were not obligatory. More than 3 million people participated. Fewer than 640,000 people cast votes in the opposition primaries.

The governing party, by all accounts, remains cohesive. Its primary elections, consequently, did not produce any internal upheaval. The MUD, in contrast, continues to be divided by two extremes that have made their differences known since February 2014, when a succession of violent incidents left more than 40 people dead and caused serious public infrastructure damage (NotiSur, Feb. 21, 2014, and April 4, 2014).

The conservative coalition’s majority sector, headed by former presidential candidate Henrique Capriles, believes in using the existing democratic system to challenge the government. The other sector, led by former Chacao mayor Leopoldo López, who was jailed last year on charges
that he promoted the violence, believes in "toppling the government," a nondemocratic option popularly known as la salida (the way out). Capriles represents Primero Justicia. López represents Voluntad Popular. In the MUD primary elections, the two sectors secured 13 and eight candidates, respectively. The traditional Acción Democrática (AD) secured seven candidates. The right-wing coalition’s other 25 member parties finished with 14 candidates among them.

**Mending fences**

With the election process playing out in the background, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and US President Barack Obama are trying to turn the page on a relationship that, since 2010, has been bogged down by back-and-forth insults and mutual reproaches. Ties between the two countries hit a new low this past March, when Obama signed an executive order declaring Venezuela to be an "extraordinary threat" to US national security, a move that produced an unusual show of international solidarity with the government in Caracas (NotiSur, March 27, 2015, and April 10, 2015).

In April, just ahead of a Summit of the Americas gathering in Panama, where Obama was expected to face a hostile reception, the US sent one of its most experienced diplomats, Thomas Shannon, to Caracas in a bid to mend fences (NotiSur, May 1, 2015). To a certain degree, the move worked. During the Summit in Panama, Obama faced criticism, but only moderate. It didn't go unnoticed, furthermore, that while there he met with Maduro and, more importantly, shook hands and spoke privately with Cuban President Raúl Castro. The overtures were of the utmost importance for US diplomacy as signals of Obama’s desire to improve relations with Latin America.

Since then, the US and Venezuelan governments have made even more diplomatic strides. On May 20, another high-level diplomat, Bernard Aronson, the US government’s special envoy for the Colombia peace process, traveled to Venezuela and met with Maduro. News agencies reported that the goal of Aronson’s trip was to discuss ways that Washington and Caracas could assist and support peace talks underway in Havana, Cuba, between the Colombian government and guerrillas. Venezuela and Chile are officially "accompanying" the negotiations, which Cuba and Norway, as "guarantor countries," are overseeing (NotiSur, April 3, 2015).

Five days later, Venezuelan Foreign Affairs Minister Delcy Rodríguez said her government was "very satisfied" by the Obama administration’s decision to designate Shannon as a permanent envoy to continue talks that will hopefully put the two countries back in each other’s good graces. Rodríguez called the decision "sound and correct" and praised Shannon, based on his previous visits to Venezuela, as having a good understanding of the country’s political situation.

**"Local terrorists"**

That same week, Maduro made his own statements on the subject of improving US-Venezuela relations. "Today, Tuesday, the 26th [of May], I can say that the process is going well. I hope it doesn’t end up being sabotaged by either local terrorists or the extreme right in the US," he said. The president was referring to Leopoldo López—who has reportedly had telephone conversations from jail with another of the instigators of last year’s violence and discussed the possibility of carrying out more violent acts—and to conservative US lawmakers Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL).

Maduro said the two governments should pursue the things he discussed with Obama in Panama and with Aronson and Shannon in Caracas. "Dialogue is the way to improve our relations," he
said. "But [the process] has many enemies. The main enemy standing in the way of us having a relationship of equal standing with the US is the terrorist extreme right that looks to unleash a spiral of violence so that the imperial extreme right blocks us from having these normal relations." Maduro accused the terrorists of "wanting to generate a major conflict with the US to provoke a thousand kinds of intervention and so that that US does us harm."

On June 11, in the Haitian capital Port-au-Prince, the two sides had a new meeting that both described as "highly" auspicious. The Venezuelan Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores was even more precise and noted on its Web page that the two countries are "pursuing a process of rapprochement meant to normalize relations within a context of respect for international law, sovereignty, and the self-determination of nations." Venezuela was represented by Delcy Rodríguez and by AN president Diosdado Cabello, widely considered to be the government's number two.

**Right-wing conspiracy?**

A number of developments have occurred in the meantime that lend credence to Maduro’s claims regarding a supposed alliance between "local terrorists" and "the imperial extreme right." For one thing, the Spanish daily ABC and the US newspapers The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, and The Washington Post launched a campaign recently in which they accuse Cabello of leading a cocaine-trafficking and money-laundering operation. Also, former Spanish Prime Minister Felipe González (1982-1996) made a theatrical and well-publicized trip to Venezuela to help with the legal defense of López and other jailed opposition figures, a mission that is bound to fail given that the Spaniard doesn’t have the necessary credentials to work in the country.

A group of Brazilian senators, headed by former presidential candidate Aécio Neves, also traveled to Caracas recently. They hoped to meet with López but were harassed by a "mob of Chavistas," they said, and were thus unable to complete their goal. On June 22, another group of Brazilian senators made the trip to Caracas, meeting with MUD leaders and with family members of López and other prisoners. The head of that group, Lindbergh Farías, challenged Neves’ claims and said the latter "went to Venezuela for the sole purpose of wreaking diplomatic havoc."

Finally, on June 25, the US State Department, in its most recent Country Reports on Human Rights, said that in 2014 the Maduro government "frequently investigated and selectively prosecuted its political opponents on corruption charges to harass, intimidate, and imprison them." The document also said that, in Venezuela, "corruption reduced the effectiveness of the security forces and undermined the independence of its judiciary." This time, Caracas chose not to react.

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