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Unity Problems Hamper Venezuelan Opposition Ahead of Legislative Elections

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Eight months ago, at the start of the year, the Venezuelan opposition was confident it would win the upcoming Dec. 6 legislative elections and deliver the governing party its first defeat since coming to power 16 years ago. Now, with three months to go, and despite a host of problems facing President Nicolás Maduro and his Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV), many are second-guessing the opposition’s chances.

National and international media outlets that have campaigned on behalf of the Mesa de Unidad Democrática (MUD) opposition alliance, together with leaders of parties that have broken with the 28-group coalition, are suggesting that the opposition, despite its lead in some polls, could end up losing again—not because of anything positive the government has done but because of its own mistakes.

"There are people who haven’t understood that elections are won by coming up with a program and by leaving aside the petty personal ambitions that are destroying this instrument, which we built together for the benefit of the nation, not for any person in particular," Pedro Urrieta, executive secretary of the Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente (COPEI), said Aug. 5 upon announcing that his party, also known as the Partido Socialcristiano, was leaving MUD and would not run candidates in December.

Tenuous lead?

The first to sound the alarm was journalist Ramiro Pellet Lastra, who wrote an article for the Argentine newspaper La Nación lamenting the deep divisions within the Venezuelan opposition. The article also appeared in the rightist dailies O Globo (Brazil), El Mercurio (Chile), El Tiempo (Colombia), La Nación (Costa Rica), El Comercio (Ecuador), El Universal (Mexico), El Comercio (Peru), El Nuevo Día (Puerto Rico), El País (Uruguay) and El Nacional (Venezuela), all members (along with La Nación) of the conservative Grupo de Diarios América.

"The MUD, which is polling at 60% versus 40% for Chavismo, believes it will take control of the Asamblea Nacional Legislativa, shift the balance of power, and begin putting an end to a government that has not only dominated the lives of the Venezuelan people for 16 years but has also been a guiding light for all of Latin America’s populist governments," Pellet Lastra wrote in the July 26 piece.

The journalist went on to say, however, that MUD could have difficulty maintaining that lead. "The question is whether that 20-point advantage will be enough fuel to last the opposition until the elections," he wrote. "Many voters are disenchanted with Chavismo but not altogether convinced by the alternative option. They could end up voting again for the ruling party."

The government owes its poor poll numbers, Pellet Lastra explained, to recession, supply shortages, inflation, crime, corruption, and, ultimately, the return of poverty levels that the Revolución
Bolivariana had previously reversed (NotiSur, Feb. 21, 2014, and May 22, 2015). "Shouldn’t that diagnostic be enough to guarantee a comfortable victory at the end of the year for the opposition? Apparently not," he wrote.

Before taking on the government, the opposition first needs to address its weaknesses, specifically the problem of internal divisions (NotiSur, July 25, 2014), which have alienated some voters, Pellet Lastra explained. "In these troubled times, the coalition seems divided in the eyes of the electorate, which, more than ever, needs a clear guide," he wrote.

Later in the article, Pellet Lastra quoted Venezuelan political scientist John Magdaleno to suggest that the ruling party, despite President Maduro’s falling approval rating, could still turn things around. "On other occasions, Chavismo has been able to weather climates of adverse opinion," the political scientist said, citing the "classic example" of 2004, when the government of the late President Hugo Chávez (1999-2013), despite trailing in the polls by a wide margin (27-37 points), managed in the end to win.

"A meeting of activists"

A few weeks later, amid an intensifying international campaign against Venezuela that has involved trips to Caracas by delegations of rightist senators from Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay (NotiSur, July 10, 2015), as well as open opposition to the Maduro government by US Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Roberta Jacobson and Secretary-General of the Organization of American States (OAS) Luis Almagro, the Associated Press (AP) news agency also raised concerns about the opposition’s current standing.

MUD called on its supporters to take to the streets Aug. 8 and stage simultaneous demonstrations "against hunger and crime, and for freedom" in the country’s 24 state capitals. That same day, AP Caracas correspondent Fabiola Sánchez wrote a less-than-flattering account of the events, describing how, in Caracas, opposition organizers had hoped to hold marches across the city but were able only to gather a small crowd at a single point in the wealthy eastern neighborhood of Chacaíto.

To justify the low turnout, MUD secretary Jesús Torrealba offered an explanation that Sánchez and other journalists buried in their respective articles. "We have a country of fear," the opposition official said. "We’re afraid to go out in the street. We’re afraid to go out and buy food. The lack of security is killing us."

The AP dispatch noted, "Despite being seen as the favorite, the opposition hasn’t been able to attract large crowds to demonstrations in recent months." Sánchez described the Aug. 8 gathering in Chacaíto as little more than "a meeting a activists." The real large-scale citizen gatherings taking place these days, she explained, "are occurring in the lines formed in front of shops by Venezuelans seeking food and other consumer products that are lacking in established stores."

The Guyana factor

Long-present divisions in the MUD that resulted, this past year, in at least four parties and dozens of individual politicians parting ways with the coalition were tested again in early July, when the Maduro government accused neighboring Guyana of "infringing on Venezuela’s sovereignty." The serious accusation came after the former British colony gave US energy giant ExxonMobil permission to conduct petroleum exploration in the disputed region of Essequibo, which is rich in
oil, bauxite, hardwoods, and hydrocarbons and has been claimed historically by Venezuela (NotiSur, Sept. 4, 2015).

The revival of the old border dispute divided opinions, not just among MUD’s 28 member groups but also within some of the opposition parties. Leadership is split between those who see the territorial claim as a national issue and are thus willing to support the Maduro administration in this regard and those who see it as a diversionary tactic by the government.

While MUD’s top leader, former presidential candidate Henrique Capriles (NotiSur, Oct. 19, 2012, and May 3, 2013), said that "there is no way" he would support the state’s claim, Alfonso Marquina, one of the principal figures in Primero Justicia, Capriles’ party, openly challenged the coalition head by saying, "Even if there is a mistake in the position taken by President Maduro, the opposition must respond affirmatively to any call that involves defense of the [national] territory, because this is a matter of the state, not of the government."

Deputy Edgar Zambrano, head of the country’s oldest party, Acción Democrática (AD), and one of the original founders of MUD, is also adamant that the Essequibo claim is a national rather than political issue. "We in the opposition bloc are fully in agreement with the policy outlined by the government," he said.

The debate has contributed to a climate of internal confrontation that, in the words of Marquina, is "giving off serious signs of weakness." MUD’s cohesion problems took an even worse turn on Aug. 5, when COPEI, Venezuela’s second-oldest party and, numerically, MUD’s fourth-largest component, split from the coalition.

MUD claims that COPEI was expelled. Leaders with COPEI, which gave Venezuela three past presidents, say it resigned from the coalition "to gain moral authority against those who are destroying the unity [of the alliance] to put MUD at the service of their petty personal interests." The party’s secretary-general, Pedro Urrieta, announced that COPEI—which was supposed to account for 22% of MUD’s candidates—would not compete in the Dec. 6 legislative elections.

"By saying they expelled us, it’s clear that the leadership of the alliance wants to steal the [legislative] posts that were supposed to belong to COPEI. There is clearly no sense in maintaining membership in an apparatus that doesn’t respond to the interests of the country," the party declared in a statement.

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