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Andrés Gaudàn

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by Andrés Gaudín
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A little more than two weeks before the most significant elections Venezuela has experienced since 1999 when the late President Hugo Chávez (1999-2013) installed the Revolución Bolivariana in this South American country, Venezuela is on the last leg of an electoral process steeped in a climate of tension in which mutual mudslinging by warring sides has replaced the debate of ideas (NotiSur, July 23, 2010, and May 22, 2015).

Presidential recall threatened
On Dec. 6, 167 members of the unicameral Asamblea Nacional (AN) will be elected, and, if the opposition wins a majority (which is possible), they will be in a position to push for a recall referendum against President Nicolás Maduro. This recall referendum is a resource constitutionally available once a governing official completes half the term to which he/she was elected (NotiSur, Aug. 20, 2004).

At this moment, the government, represented by the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV), is in the middle of a serious economic crisis—with high inflation, shortages, and an acute currency devaluation. In addition, it faces pressures from a persistent international campaign against it.

The opposition, which could be in a position to gain a majority for the first time in the 16 years of Chavista prominence, comes to the elections united under a common roof—that of the Mesa de Unidad Democrática (MUD). However, it is mired in an internal crisis caused by the imprisonment of Leopoldo López, leader of the small, right-wing Voluntad Popular (VP) and promoter of a proposal called "La Salida," (the way out), which calls for overthrowing the current administration by any means possible. The overwhelming majority of MUD members, however, do not agree with La Salida (NotiSur, July 25, 2014).

As has happened since the beginning of the Bolivariana era, bilateral relations between the oil-producing country and the US—the main destination of this vital resource—overshadow everything. Periodically, tense relations are followed by a period of rapprochement, which, a few weeks later, reverts to the tension stage where both sides fill the air with apocalyptical declarations that get front-page coverage.

In the last weeks of campaigning, both sides are focusing on the "López case." Beyond the many ways this is used to denounce the government for the alleged hampering of justice, it is President Maduro who gets the greatest political benefit because strong anti-US sentiment in Venezuela—that also exists in the great majority of countries in the Americas—turns these expressions of sovereignty into new displays of government support.

López was sentenced to nearly 14 years of prison Sept. 9, along with four students who are "remarkably never named in the demands made of the Venezuelan government," the Cuban news agency Prensa Latina reported on Sept. 13. The VP leader was convicted of three crimes: damage and arson, inciting violence, and conspiracy. The Caracas court's ruling found that these crimes
were committed in the framework of the guarimbas, a Venezuelan term to denote blocking public streets and thoroughfares, which López encouraged between February and June 2014. Those events resulted in 43 deaths and more than 800 people injured plus untold economic losses to infrastructure and government property.

The guarimbas were organized as part of La Salida, an extreme strategy that led four parties and dozens of leaders who had made up the original nucleus of the MUD to distance themselves from the alliance. Moreover, it led to the replacement of Ramón Guillermo Aveledo, of the Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente (COPEI), as the MUD’s executive secretary and that party’s decision to not nominate candidates for the elections (NotiSur, Sept. 4, 2015).

The Caracas government has reaped unexpected benefits during this time that the Venezuelan judiciary is accused of being controlled by a political power that violates human rights. On Sept. 29, a report by the German news agency Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA) cited statements by Maduro thanking President Barack Obama for praising Venezuela for its role in the Colombian peace process (NotiSur, Sept. 18, 2015). On Oct. 28, another feather in Maduro’s cap was that the country was elected to occupy a three-year seat on the UN Human Rights Council.

"This is an extraordinary achievement," said Venezuelan Foreign Minister Delcy Rodríguez. "The United States has unleashed a major campaign of falsehoods and infamy against the homeland of Simón Bolívar, and we have won. We have overcome its manipulations against our country and its efforts to break regional unity."

Previously, on Oct. 2, and just weeks after the region was concerned with the tense situation on the Colombian-Venezuelan border, the government in Bogota stressed, in the words of Colombian Defense Minister Luis Carlos Villegas, "our neighbors' spirit of peace that has allowed bonds to be fully re-established in defense and security."

While the government reaped these laurels, it also received harsh criticism. The US State Department, US legislators from both Democratic and Republican parties, the governments of Chile and Peru, and major international media have spoken out against the Venezuelan process. The criticism increased following the sentencing of Leopoldo López.

On Sept. 11, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon dealt with the López issue when he met with Rodríguez to discuss problems on the Colombia border. Rodríguez told the Spanish news agency EFE, "I had to explain to Ban that López is a terrorist and that it's very dangerous for outside voices, such as his, to try to legitimize acts of terrorist violence. I had to tell him that one must be very cautious to keep from having a double standard when one talks about terrorism and terrorists like López."

**OAS secretary-general criticizes judiciary**

One of the most active outside critics of the Venezuelan process is Organization of American States (OAS) Secretary-General Luis Almagro, Uruguay’s former foreign minister. Immediately following López’s sentencing, the diplomat questioned the independence of the Venezuelan judiciary. Just a few hours later, also on Sept. 9, former foreign minister and former vice president Elías Jaua responded harshly. In a statement issued through official channels, Jaua called Almagro the "proconsul" of the US and accused him of "judging our revolution," something he said Almagro has no political or moral standing to do.
Jaua added, "You have dedicated all of your term [at the OAS] to attacking the free and dignified homeland of Bolívar." He then closed, saying, "Mr. Almagro, you’ve been on the job as ‘proconsul’ for less than six months, and, instead of dedicating your efforts to threatening Venezuela, out of self-respect you should have received or visited the families of the thousands of missing Mexicans."

Almagro responded, elaborating on his doubts about the independence of the Venezuelan judiciary. On Sept. 18, EFE reproduced sections of a letter to Jaua written in a tone somewhere between ironic and didactic to "continue that unproductive epistolary dialogue," in the opinion of a deputy from Uruguay’s ruling party. In the letter Almagro said, "No revolution, Elías, can leave the people with fewer rights than they had before, poorer than they were in values and principles, more unequal in justice and representation, more discriminated against depending on their thinking or political direction. All revolutions mean more rights for more people."

The OAS secretary-general also called into question the respect for minorities in Venezuela. "Democracy is the government of the majority but it must ensure the rights of minorities. There is no democracy without guarantees for minorities," he said.

On Nov. 3 and 10, the media repeatedly cited other statements by Almagro saying, "At this time neither transparency nor electoral justice [in Venezuela] are guaranteed."

The Argentine newspaper Tiempo reported that Almagro’s recent criticisms respond to statements by Maduro that international news agencies reproduced on Oct. 23. In those statements, the president warned that the country "would fall into chaos" if the PSUV lost control of the legislature on Dec. 6. In a threatening tone, he added that the opposition "should light candles to all the saints and pray that we win because only the revolutionaries can govern Venezuela." The story in Tiempo said that Maduro concluded in the same tone. "The worst that could happen to these rich, lazy bigwigs would be to win the elections because a new stage of the Revolución Bolivariana would begin," Maduro said. "The empire [the US] should know that the Revolución Bolivariana will never give up. Let’s prepare to defend this revolution when and where we must."

Until then, no PSUV leader had spoken, even hypothetically, about a possible electoral defeat.

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