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Opposition Reeling after Chavistas Win Majority of Venezuela's Governorships

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Back-to-back electoral victories by Venezuela's governing party have pummeled the once ascendant Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (Democratic Unity Roundtable, MUD) opposition coalition, which won a large majority in the 2015 legislative elections but has since squandered its formidable popular support.

Immersed in an internal struggle—based less on ideas than on old grudges and personal ambitions—the political right has played into the hand of President Nicolás Maduro and his Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (United Socialist Party of Venezuela, PSUV), which now looks poised to continue governing indefinitely.

Altogether, the situation is a poignant demonstration of the opposition's inability to defeat the government by democratic means. With its loss in the 2015 parliamentary elections, the PSUV's days seemed numbered ([NotiSur, Jan. 8, 2016](#)). And for the nearly two years following, the opposition's external allies—governments, Western political parties, and major media outlets—did all they could to reinforce that message. Now, though, all of that has been replaced by a single and central question: How did Chavismo—the political movement founded by the late president Hugo Chávez (1999-2013) and continued under Maduro—go back to winning?

The Chavistas' most recent victory came Oct. 15, when gubernatorial elections were held for Venezuela's 23 states. The PSUV earned more than 6 million votes (54%) and won 18 governorships. The opposition won approximately 4.7 million votes (45%) and five governorships. In terms of raw numbers, the PSUV fared slightly better than it did in the 2015 parliamentary elections, winning an additional 400,000 votes, while the MUD stumbled significantly, losing approximately 3 million votes.

The PSUV's other big win came in late July, when elections took place for the new and powerful Asamblea Nacional Constituyente (National Constituent Assembly, ANC). An estimated 8 million of the country's approximately 11 million eligible voters participated in the process. The governing party won all of the ANC's 545 seats ([NotiSur, Aug. 25, 2017](#)).

Broken alliance

The opposition didn't present candidates for the ANC elections but soon afterwards faced a serious conundrum when the new body called for the Oct. 15 gubernatorial elections to take place. The problem for the MUD coalition was that agreeing to compete in the process amounted to a de facto validation of the ANC itself. On top of that, four of MUD's five elected governors agreed afterwards to be sworn in by the ANC, a body the coalition considers fraudulent. The opposition structure essentially imploded as a result.

The collapse is all the more significant given how difficult it was for the coalition to come together in the first place by agreeing, for the 2012 and 2013 presidential elections, to back a single candidate

([NotiSur, Oct. 19, 2012](#)). The honor fell to Henrique Capriles, who was legally disqualified this past April from participating in politics for a period of 15 years, a ruling stemming from corruption allegations regarding Capriles' tenure as governor of the state of Miranda.

It was finally Capriles who brought to the surface the internal differences that had long been gnawing away at the opposition. On Oct. 24, following MUD's most recent defeat, Capriles announced his definitive withdrawal from the coalition in protest to the swearing in of four of the five opposition candidates who, nine days earlier, had been elected as governors.

"I will not be a part of this alliance as long as Henry Ramos Allup is there," he said in reference to the head of Acción Democrática (Democratic Action, AD), the party to which the four governors belong. "When a body is ill, you have to operate to remove the tumor," added Capriles, who lost to Maduro in the 2013 presidential election ([NotiSur, May 3, 2013](#)). "This needs to be done in MUD, and the cancer that needs to be removed is named Henry Ramos Allup."

In another demonstration of just how complicated things within the opposition alliance have become, Carlos Ortega, a former head of the Confederación de Trabajadores de Venezuela (Confederation of Venezuelan Workers, CTV) and a prominent AD figure, also sounded off on Ramos Allup. Ortega demanded that Ramos Allup resign and called him "a monument of human misery, the most shameless, worthless, and disloyal man our party has ever had."

Figures from MUD's radical right aired grievances as well.

"We need to clean house and sweep all this garbage out to sea," said lawmaker Freddy Guevara, the vice president of the Asamblea Nacional (National Assembly, AN) and the leading voice of the Voluntad Popular (Popular Will, VP) party.

"Out with these miserable people," added Lilian Tintori, a homemaker who became a leading VP activist after her husband and party founder, Leopoldo López, was jailed and sentenced to 14 years in prison.

López was convicted for "acts of terrorism" that in 2014 left 43 people dead and caused incalculable material damage ([NotiSur, July 25, 2014](#)). The violence was part of what the far right called "La Salida" (the exit), a series of street actions aimed at toppling Maduro "by any means necessary."

More elections looming

In a move designed to deepen the divisions further still, the Maduro government, on Oct. 26, announced that mayoral elections would take place next month, most likely on Dec. 10. Municipal elections had been a key opposition demand that the government, fearing an adverse result, initially ignored ([NotiSur, July 7, 2017](#)). The Maduro regime later raised the possibility of holding the elections in March 2018. But now, given its resounding successes in the past few months and the obvious schism within MUD, the government is ready to test its luck, and test it now.

There is also talk that the next presidential elections, which are supposed to take place in December 2018, as established in the Constitution, "could be moved up to some date in the first quarter of 2018," according to an unidentified source cited by the Venezuelan news agency Agencia Venezolana de Noticias (AVN).

The most radical factions of the MUD coalition say they'll refuse to present candidates in either of the two elections. Ramos Allup, for his part, said that more "political flexibility is needed to save MUD and keep this moribund alliance from dying completely."

MUD's allies have wavered, too. The government of US President Donald Trump, the opposition's principal outside backer, made an inexplicable about-face on a decision that the Venezuelan government had called a "nasty case of meddling." The original move came July 27, just ahead of the ANC elections, when the US Department of State shocked Venezuela and the world as a whole by ordering the withdrawal of all non-essential personnel and their families from the US Embassy in Caracas, supposedly for security reasons. But on Oct. 24—even though there has been no obvious change to the security situation in Venezuela—it ordered its diplomats and their families back to Caracas.

In the meantime, MUD's media allies, such as the powerful O Globo in Brazil and Argentina's La Nación, a leading member of the conservative, region-wide newspaper association Grupo de Diarios América (American Group of Daily Newspapers), cut their ties with a slew of "independent analysts" whose take on events in Venezuela proved to be erroneous. The Argentine daily went so far as to say, "We ought to review our list of sources, because it shouldn't be that on the eve of the election, they were predicting a one- or two-point victory for the MUD when in reality things resulted in a deafening defeat."

Either way, the inaccuracies may have less to do with polling problems than with a persistent and ill-intentioned attempt by the faux "analysts" to influence outside opinions with false information. The left-leaning Argentine daily Página 12 raised the question of whether these "professional opinion makers," rather than gauge how Venezuelans were likely to vote, were more interested in setting the stage for outside intervention—be it political, economic, or military—something the leading MUD figures have been calling for during the past few months.

Tintori and Guevara, who recently made several trips together out of the country, say they believe that "all is not lost" and insist that Washington is still considering the possibility of suffocating Venezuela economically as a way to oust Maduro, as the opposition has repeatedly called for. On these tours, the two were received by the leaders of Spain (Mariano Rajoy), Germany (Angela Merkel), Great Britain (Theresa May), and France (Emmanuel Macron), and by advisors of Donald Trump.

Their beliefs are supported by information published earlier this year in the Miami-based, Spanish-language daily El Nuevo Herald. In a June 5 article, journalist Antonio María Delgado—citing details provided to the British news agency Reuters—suggested that the White House could eventually suspend imports of Venezuelan oil. Venezuela, whose economy depends on its oil industry, is the third leading supplier of oil to the US after Canada and Saudi Arabia. In 2016, it sent an average of 700,000 barrels a day to the US. To overcome the potential loss of Venezuelan crude, according to the article, the US may choose to use its strategic reserves. The Trump administration is already on record, El Nuevo Herald pointed out, as saying it is willing to sell half of the country's 700 million barrels of strategic reserves.

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