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## Despite Foreign Support, Opposition Is Weak as Venezuela Readies for Elections

by *Andrés Gaudín*

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Venezuela is gearing up to elect a new government after the most difficult year in its recent, tumultuous history was marred by bloody street demonstrations, galloping inflation, and extreme shortages of basic products ([NotiSur, Aug. 25, 2017](#)).

With the ruling Partido Socialista Unido (PSUV) fortified and the opposition Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD) defeated and dismembered, few doubt that the country's embattled president, Nicolás Maduro, can be reelected for the 2019-2025 period.

MUD suffered three consecutive electoral defeats between August and December ([NotiSur, Nov. 10, 2017](#))—in the first, it didn't present any candidates, and in the next two, its member parties reacted with conflicting attitudes. Still, MUD leaders agreed to participate in a bipartite dialogue with the presence of international observers in Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic. A third round of talks, scheduled for this week, could be decisive. If the government takes advantage of an opening and calls for an election, the opposition has promised its followers it will look for a consensus candidate able to represent the 20 parties in the coalition.

On Dec. 12, two days after losing practically all the municipal governments it had held for the past six years, the largest opposition party, Primero Justicia (PJ), said the opposition should present a single candidate for the presidency, chosen through internal elections ([NotiSur, Nov. 10, 2017](#)). That day, Congressman Luis Florido updated an idea that former presidential candidate Henrique Capriles had put forth on Oct 29. Internal divisions made it impossible to hold a dialogue, however, until MUD released a 2,300-word document on Dec. 31 about its work during the past year. In a markedly self-effacing tone, the leadership said, "We're making a serious promise," and timidly indicated it would seek a common candidate to take on the ruling party.

The right-wing alliance did not explain exactly how it would select Maduro's eventual rival, saying only that it would continue "to explore negotiation paths" with "the dictatorship," which is how it refers to the PSUV government.

### *Sole opposition candidate difficult to find*

Maru Morales, a dissident journalist, said that the search for a single candidate wouldn't be an easy task. "There's an abundance of pre-candidates," she wrote, mentioning Capriles, even though he's been banned from holding political office for 15 years; Henry Ramos Allup, a former president of the National Assembly and secretary of the Acción Democrática party; Henri Falcón from Avanzada Progresista; Leopoldo López, the leader of Voluntad Popular, who has been serving a 14-and-a-half-year prison sentence, convicted of acts of terrorism and inciting violence. Morales quoted Congresswoman Delsa Solórzano—of the Un Nuevo Tiempo party, a member of the MUD coalition—saying that whoever is chosen will have a "titanic task" because, "not only would he have to unify the action" but would also have to put an end to "the context of discouragement that is overwhelming the opposition" following the electoral catastrophes of 2017.

Congressman Juan Carlos Caldera, of the PJ, noted, “In addition to the job of motivating, regrouping, and reorganizing the opposition’s struggle, this leader would have to transmit a seriousness to our friends abroad who have done much to end the Maduro dictatorship.”

Caldera was basically referring to the governments of the US and Canada, the European Union (EU), Argentine President Mauricio Macri, the Southern Common Market (Mercado Común del Sur, MERCOSUR), Organization of American States (OAS) Secretary General Luis Almagro, and the International Air Transport Association (IATA). The actions that the opposition considers gestures of solidarity are, for the government, acts of foreign interference.

## *US leads sanctions against Venezuela*

Last October, the US government issued its second package of sanctions against Venezuela, this time specifically targeting the Venezuelan government. While the first sanctions affected 10 individuals, the most recent ones prohibited certain financial operations with any entity over which the US has jurisdiction. That meant that Venezuelans added pork, an important holiday dish, to the list of shortages affecting them. Normally, Venezuela imports pork loin from Portugal, but Portuguese businessmen followed the provisions of US President Donald Trump’s executive order. Canada, which joined the US government in adopting the measures, leads the so-called Grupo de Lima (12 countries in the Americas that oppose the Venezuelan regime). As such, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his foreign minister, Chrystia Freeland, met with US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in Ottawa on Dec 19. to discuss how to take new joint actions against Venezuela ([NotiSur, Jan. 16, 2015](#), and [Sept. 15, 2017](#)).

On Nov. 13, foreign ministers from EU countries responded to a persistent demand from the Venezuelan opposition and imposed an “embargo of arms and other material that can be used for domestic repression” in Venezuela, a measure previously applied only against Syria and North Korea. According to the BBC, “there is no official data, but impartial numbers reveal that the impact of these sanctions will be limited.” The British news agency cited an investigation carried out by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) between 2014 and 2016 noting that Holland and Austria were the only EU countries supplying Venezuela with arms. The UN Register of Conventional Arms (UNROCA) reported that Spain had sold three vessels to the Venezuelan Navy between 2010 and 2012. An investigation by Control Ciudadano, a Venezuelan non-profit that specializes in security and defense, reinforces SIPRI’s information and shows that the impact of the UE sanctions will be minimal. A comparison between the 2015-2016 period and the previous two years “shows that the country reduced military spending by 90%.”

Without acknowledging, or better yet, ignoring, that the US continued with its escalation of sanctions, Mauricio Macri pleaded on Nov. 8 for “a complete embargo that would include the maximum obstacles for shipments of Venezuelan crude.” Macri touched on the subject during an interview with the Financial Times as part of his visit to New York. A few weeks later, on Dec. 21, at a MERCOSUR summit in Brasilia, Macri again insisted on imposing tougher sanctions and presented himself as “the top defender of human rights in Venezuela.” His counterparts didn’t comment, but in a statement parallel to his claim, the Coordinadora contra la Represión Policial e Institucional de Argentina (Committee against Police and Institutional Repression in Argentina, CORREPI) denounced in Buenos Aires that in the 721 days that Macri had been president, there had been an average of one assassination per day, with 725 deaths resulting from the so called gatillo fácil (“easy trigger”) or from torture in state detention centers.

The greatest support MUD has received from an institutional point of view came from the OAS and mainly from its secretary general, Almagro, who has even allowed himself to advise the Venezuelan opposition. On Oct 28, as he received an award from the Inter American Press Association (IAPA) during its annual meeting in Salt Lake City, the diplomat said that those “who agree to participate in an election convened by Maduro or dialogue with his representatives become accomplices in a fraud and show they have no democratic convictions.” Almagro had used similar terms on Oct. 16 when MUD responded by saying that he had “exceeded the limits by attempting to interfere in our sovereign decisions.” Another of the many other examples of Almagro’s rejection of the Venezuelan government occurred on Oct. 13, when he authorized the OAS Hall of Honor in Washington, D.C., to install a “supreme court of justice” parallel to the official one that functions in Caracas. “With his presence, Almagro validated an initiative unprecedented for the organization,” the Spanish news agency EFE said, citing Latin American diplomatic sources.

### *Airlines stop service*

In another demonstration of external support for the opposition, Venezuela is being cut off by air from the rest of the world. The IATA will close its Caracas office on the last day of January, according to Peter Cerdá, IATA’s vice president for Latin America. “It makes no sense for us to stay,” he said.

Cerdá noted that United Airlines and Delta, two US carriers, as well as Colombia’s Avianca, suspended their flights in 2017; Dynamic, a US carrier, and Germany’s Lufthansa did so in 2016; and Air Canada, Aeromexico, Alitalia, LAN of Chile, Tiara of Aruba, and the Brazilian airlines TAM and GOL stopped service in 2014 or 2015. According to Cerdá, other firms still operating flights to Caracas, such as American Airlines, Aerolíneas Argentinas, Air France, Iberia, and Portugal’s TAP, have reduced flight frequencies in what should be seen as a first step toward canceling service.

“Companies say that operating in Venezuela gives them losses, but is Venezuela the only country where they have losses? What other countries are they isolating at this time?” asked Congressman Diosdado Cabello, one of the PSUV leaders.

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