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Venezuelan Voters Head to Polls Again

by *Andrés Gaudín*

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Amid warring polls, which Venezuelans learned to not take seriously given their unreliable performance in the Oct. 7 presidential elections, voters will return to the ballot boxes on Dec. 16.

This will be the fifteenth election (constituent, general, regional, legislative, referendum, recall) since President Hugo Chávez set the Revolución Bolivariana in motion in 1999. Voters will choose governors in the country's 23 states and elect 237 deputies for state legislative councils.

This year, regional elections will be particularly important. First, because, if the governing Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) repeats its October performance—when Chávez won re-election by eleven points to govern until 2019 ([NotiSur, Oct. 19, 2012](#))—it would be a veritable death knell for the opposition Mesa de Unidad Democrática (MUD).

After 13 years of fragmented confrontation with the government, the opposition was able to settle on one leader (Henrique Capriles). However, the MUD's electoral defeat threw supporters into depression and led many member groups and leaders to leave, with strong criticism of Capriles and the political methods of those who, along with him, assumed leadership of the opposition structure. A second defeat could be decisive.

Second, because, if the governing party wins one or more of the 15 states that the opposition controls today, it could revalidate and deepen Chávez's "21st century socialism," so that, if the opposition took power in the future, it would find it very difficult to reverse the changes.

Governing party in good position ahead of elections

The governing party has much in its favor going into these elections. Its Oct. 7 victory was doubly important because, besides affirming Chávez and his model, it dealt a phenomenal blow to the opposition's morale. Immediately after the election, Capriles and MUD officials admitted that supporters felt defeated, even though, until the day before the election, those same leaders and many polls were predicting that the MUD would win. It was clear that, lacking a program, all that united them was opposition to Chávez. An Al Jazeera TV reporter said sarcastically, "What the opposition loves most is hating Chávez."

Since Oct. 7, while the anti-Chávez leadership had to spend much of its time cheering up its base—with little success, judging by the sparse turnout at campaign rallies for gubernatorial and regional legislative candidates—the governing party has spent all its time on the campaign and was able to insert into the center of the debates a theme that will be decisive for the future of Venezuela: the establishment of "socialist communes." In addition, and surely not the last positive input, the government could show certain economic indicators with which they disarmed part of the opposition's criticisms. The country has had eight consecutive quarters of growth and will close out the year with a 5.6% growth rate, better than the 5% anticipated in the yearly budget

The opposition, in contrast, goes into the Dec. 16 elections in disarray and almost without oxygen. And not only because its supporters' discouragement—Capriles and other leaders speak openly of a "depressive political state"—is transmitted to the leaders but also because among the leadership

what the Al Jazeera TV reporter referred to is becoming noticeably evident: they are united because they agree that what they love most is hating Chávez.

Opposition coalition falling apart

On Oct. 31, just one day before the campaign opening for the Dec. 16 elections, an important group of Asamblea Nacional (AN) deputies and influential regional leaders left the MUD. "It was the worst blow since Capriles' defeat," wrote a reporter with the Italian news agency ANSA the same day. "Capriles knew that he had many critics within his ranks, but he did not expect a situation like this," said an analyst with the French news agency Agence France-Presse (AFP).

Ricardo Sánchez, Carlos Vargas, and Andrés Álvarez, three of the AN's most active opposition deputies, called a press conference, and Sánchez spoke for the three as well as for some 20 leaders.

"The truth, clearly, is that, without formally expressing it, the MUD went into the final weeks in a sharp process of fragmentation, and the expression of that was the unfortunate results of Oct. 7 and those envisaged for Dec. 16," Sánchez said. "Without a program, you can't attempt to win anyone over."

Sánchez added, "We are leaving the MUD because we reject its authoritarianism and we don't want to continue being part of something controlled by small power groups that are basically allied to guarantee their own bureaucratic positions, while caring little about the future of Venezuela."

Several times during the press conference, the dissidents used the same phrase, "They care little about the future of Venezuela."

On Sept. 17, three weeks before the presidential elections, four of the 22 MUD groups—Manos por Venezuela, Unidad Democrática, Cambio Pana, and Vote Piedra—withdraw from the structure, giving almost the same reasons.

Socialist communes key to Chávez's 21st century socialism

In his new term, and with the new governors, Chávez will try to put the country on an irreversible path toward socialism. The results of the Dec. 16 balloting could mark the rhythm and the depth of the measures to accomplish that, wrote Mario Naranjo, an analyst with British news agency Reuters.

Quoting the London-based consulting firm LatinNews, Naranjo said that Chávez's objective is to consolidate his present "command ahead of the next, more radical phase of the transition toward socialism, which will focus on expanding the role of carefully selected communal councils and proposed new regional authorities, most probably at the expense of the existing (elected) state and municipal powers."

To get the issue on the street, to force the media to cover it (even if they are critical of those communal councils), to make MUD candidates take a position on it has been an unquestionable victory for the PSUV, which is also a constraint for the opposition. "The aim of Chávez, who was re-elected for the third time with the promise to make the socialist revolution irreversible, is that, by the end of his fourth term in 2019, seven of every 10 Venezuelans will live under the structure of the socialist commune," Carola Solé, a journalist with the Spanish news agency EFE in Caracas, wrote on Nov. 14.

The Ley Orgánica de las Comunas defines the communes as "a local socialist entity...where, and by which, the socialist society is built," and says that its objective is "to promote citizens' participation in managing public policies for the establishment and exercise of self-government by

the people." Among its operating bodies are the Consejo de Planificación, the Banco Comunal, and the Parlamento Comunal, the highest body of self-management in the commune.

"This deepens democracy; it's not a matter of bringing power to the people, like the promise of liberal democrats, but rather of a real deconcentration of power," Deputy Ulises Daal, one of the drafters of the law, told BBC Mundo.

The commune and its nine managing commissions will deal with issues of health, land, and housing; defense of people's right to access goods and services; economy and production; women and gender equality; defense and security; family, recreation, and sports; education and culture; and socialist education.

The opposition did not want to debate the issue because it has no analysis of it. Teodoro Petkoff, a former guerrilla and leader of the Partido Comunista, now editor of the daily Tal Cual and a fervent opponent of the Revolución Bolivariana, alerted the opposition. "Today, it is more important than ever to build a wall of democratic governorships because Chávez's plans will produce real national chaos."

Capriles said that the communes "are nothing more than an initiative to liquidate regional powers [governors and mayors]." The failed presidential candidate, who is running for re-election as governor of the state of Miranda—along with Zulia the most important state in the country—repeats that "it is necessary that people know that the communes are not the people organized but rather mechanisms for a political party to control the life of all our people, which is illegal."

MUD secretary Gerardo Blyde spoke out more forcefully and let his imagination run wild. "The idea of the communes," he said, "has a marked Marxist and communistic tendency, like the Soviets of the former Soviet Union or the communes of China under Mao Zedong."

Luis Vicente León, a graduate in economics from the Universidad Católica, owner of the consulting firm Datanálisis, and advisor to the opposition, said in an interview on Nov. 3 with private TV station TeleVen that "Chávismo is going to win the majority of the governorships." But almost in an effort to console ahead of time, he added, "The opposition's success will not be in winning the majority but rather in winning the fundamental symbols." The symbols León referred to are the states of Miranda and Zulia, now governed by the opposition, which will almost surely remain in their control after Dec. 16.

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