

Venezuela's Elections: A Win for US Interference

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Although it is undeniably true that the winner of Venezuela's legislative elections last Sunday was the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), which sealed a solid and absolute majority in the new National Assembly, there was also another winner: US interference.

President Hugo Chavez's party, PSUV, achieved a landslide victory this past Sunday, September 26 in the nation's legislative elections, winning 98 seats out of 165 in the parliament. The coalition of opposition parties, grouped under the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD), won 65 seats, while a third party, PPT, took two.

On a national level, the PSUV won in 56 out of 87 circuits, and 18 states out of 24, including the capital district, Caracas. PSUV also won 7 seats on the Latin American Parliament (Parlatino), while MUD took five. Out of the votes tallied nationally 5,422,040 went to PSUV and 5,320,175 were for MUD parties.

In all scenarios, PSUV won. It's an impressive achievement for a political party formed just three years ago, and demonstrates PSUV is the primary political force in the country. With 98 deputies in the National Assembly, PSUV has an absolute majority, followed in second place by opposition party Accion Democratica (AD), which won 22 seats. The other 43 seats in parliament are divided between 9 different political parties.

But despite the victory of PSUV in the elections, some key areas were lost to opposition forces, such as in the state of Anzoategui, a solid Chavez-supporting region. Opposition sweeps in the states of Tachira and Zulia, while not suprising, merit analysis.

INTERNAL ERRORS

This year was one of the most difficult for the Chavez administration since it came to power in 1999. Electrical energy problems caused by a severe drought during the first semester of the year almost plummeted the nation into collapse. If the government hadn't implemented a nationwide electricity-rationing plan, the situation would have been unbearable. Nonetheless, entire regions in Venezuela were without regular electricity and water service for months, and this had a major impact on the daily lives of Venezuelans. Even though the principal cause of the energy problem was not the government's fault, Chavez still took the blame.

The global financial crisis had its impact on Venezuela, forcing oil prices to drop and the country's budget to decrease. Eleven Venezuelan banks were intervened by the state to save customer savings and prevent a bad situation from becoming even worse. The majority of these private banks were either nationalized or liquidated, some for corruption or financial irregularities. If the Chavez administration hadn't intervened, millions of Venezuelans would have lost all their savings and the social crisis would have been unimaginable.

Inflation and speculation encouraged by private enterprise also had a major effect on the daily lives of Venezuelans. Prices of basic consumer products skyrocketed to unaffordable rates. If the state hadn't expropriated several chains of supermarkets involved in speculation and turned them into a nationwide chain of state-run stores selling products at affordable and accessible prices, millions of Venezuelans would have been without basic food supplies. But the problems of speculation and inflation persist, and instead of recognizing the partial responsibility of private enterprise sabotaging the economy, and consumers willingly paying hiked up prices, the media and others blame Chavez.

Despite the government's efforts to solve these difficult and complex problems, the manipulation perpetuated through mass media, nationally and internationally, ignored the reality and exaggerated the negative, influencing voters' decisions at the polls.

There have also been some very real problems this year, such as the discovery of several tons of decomposed food items in containers owned by the state food program, PDVAL. Despite an investigation into the matter and the detention of those involved, the media exploited the incident to pin corruption and inefficiency on the government. On a regional level, numerous elected officials have failed to follow through on key policies. Others have been consumed by corruption, bureaucracy or incompetence, ignoring the constituents who elected them and causing people to feel abandoned, betrayed and forgotten. A ferocious international media campaign against the Chavez administration has attempted to link the government with terrorism, drug trafficking, authoritarianism and human rights violations, with little, if any, alternative viewpoints. And nationally, the majority-owned private media ran fear campaigns about communism, corruption and dictatorships, in the style of US Cold War propaganda.

This context heavily influenced the elections last Sunday and the decisions of voters. The miracle may be not that the opposition won 65 seats, but rather that the PSUV achieved 98. The sound support for President Chavez and his policies demonstrated through this vote evidences a majority in the country still backs his Bolivarian Revolution, despite imperfections, inefficiencies and failures.

EXTERNAL FACTORS

Another important factor influencing these elections was the multimillion-dollar support the opposition campaign received from US agencies, such as USAID, National Endowment for Democracy (NED), International Republican Institute (IRI) and National Democratic Institute

(NDI). These agencies, backing the opposition to Chavez for years, achieved a major result; their most loyal agents won top seats in parliament.

During the past eight years, US agencies have been working hard to strengthen opposition forces and help them return to power in Venezuela. The result of Sunday's elections is their most important victory to date.

Efforts backed by US agencies to destabilize Venezuela and force Chavez's removal from power have not succeeded since the 2002 coup d'état. Since then, economic sabotages and numerous electoral interventions had failed to produce favorable results for the opposition.

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The key strategic aid and millions in campaign funding from US and other international agencies – in clear violation of Venezuelan law – helped bring opposition forces together under the MUD coalition and select candidates most likely to win.

IRI and NDI set up “campaign schools” and workshops to train candidates and help them develop the right messages to influence voters. US funding helped design campaign propaganda, most of it directed against Chavez. Almost none of the opposition candidates presented alternative policies to attract voters. Their entire campaign was about the threat of “communism” if Chavez stays in power.

The political parties that won the most votes in the elections were Primero Justicia, Un Nuevo Tiempo (UNT), AD and Copei – including winning entire states, such as Zulia (UNT) and Tachira (Copei), both strategic regions bordering Colombia of key interest to US policy.

Two of these parties, Primero Justicia and UNT were created under 10 years ago with US funding and strategic advice. Their work with them over the decade has finally paid off.

The funding and advising invested in one particular candidate, Maria Corina Machado, helped her get the most votes of any candidate on a national level. Machado, founder of the US-funded opposition group Sumate, was the only Venezuelan to be publicly received by President George W. Bush in the White House (with a photo op) throughout his presidency.

The discourse of “communism vs. capitalism” was the pillar of Machado's campaign, and her baby-kissing, plastered-smile style was clearly made in USA.

The brutal international media campaign against the Chavez government, primarily in CNN, FOX News, the New York Times and the Washington Post also had a heavy impact on the elections. For weeks, all the news about Venezuela was related to unsubstantiated claims linking Chavez to “terrorism”, “drug trafficking” and even “nuclear weapons”.

The US government is pleased. They never thought the opposition would win a majority in the National Assembly, but they did believe that PSUV could achieve a solid two-thirds majority. Their objective was to impede Chavez supporters from achieving the comfortable two-thirds majority, which would have neutralized opposition forces in parliament and rendered them powerless. They won.

Although the PSUV has an absolute majority, the presence of US-funded and backed deputies in Venezuela's legislative body will cause unrest. They won't be able to roll back any of Chavez's policies, but they will be able to use this platform to strengthen ties with external allies and prepare their strategy for the 2012 presidential elections.

US interference triumphed this time around in Venezuela. The most loyal agents of the US government are now in key positions in Venezuela, where they can create obstacles and challenges for the Chavez government. Now these individuals, many of whom participated in the 2002 coup and subsequent destabilization attempts, can continue with their anti-Chavez agenda, acting with the legitimacy of being representatives of Venezuela's National Assembly.

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