



## VENEZUELA IN THE INTERNATIONAL PRESS

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### **Election impact threatens governability**

#### **THINK TANK**

**SUBJECT:** Implications of the results of the December 4 legislative elections.

**SIGNIFICANCE:** The pro-government alliance won a sweeping but hollow victory in the parliamentary elections, which were marred by high abstention rates.

**ANALYSIS:** Given the decision by the main opposition parties to abstain from the December 4 elections for the country's 167 National Assembly seats, it was not surprising that the pro-government alliance captured all the seats. President Hugo Chavez's own political party, Movimiento Quinta Republica (MVR) won 114, or 68% of the seats, with allies such as Patria Para Todos (PPT), Podemos and the Venezuelan Communist Party absorbing the remaining share. The 'Chavistas' also won all the seats for the Latin American and Andean parliaments, with elections for those posts held concurrently with the legislative contest.

**Abstention impact.** The abstention rate in the election reached 76%, the highest in the country's parliamentary history. The government and the National Electoral Council (CNE) attribute this to a number of factors, including:

- calls for voters to boycott the process by the opposition parties;
- heavy rain;
- voter fatigue (there have been ten election and referendum processes since 1998);

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- 'wasted vote syndrome' -- that is, supporters of the opposition opted not to back renegade opposition candidates as they knew the Chavistas would win; and
- the fact that many supporters of the Chavistas did not vote as they expected pro-government candidates to triumph.

An alternative interpretation put forward by the opposition, and which has been endorsed by the international election observer groups from the EU and Organization of American States (OAS), is that popular confidence in the five-person executive of the CNE is low and this reduced interest and confidence in the process. As a part of this lack of confidence, people were concerned that their voting preference would be recorded by Chavista officials and used against them when applying for public sector jobs. These claims were originally forwarded by the opposition to justify their decision to withdraw from the election. However, although the EU and OAS did pinpoint negative popular perceptions of the CNE, both organisations passed the elections as fair and legitimate and they condemned the opposition for abstaining.

**Implications of the results.** A number of key concerns arise from the election results:

1. **Opposition strategy.** It is not clear whether the opposition has a defined strategy for challenging the government now that it no longer has a presence in the legislature. In the 2000 contest, the opposition won nearly half of the seats and formed an influential block within the National Assembly, which was recognised as one of the last remaining pluralised institutions. With the opposition now on the outside of all formal institutions, there are serious concerns that anti-government mobilisation will be reignited on the streets. The opposition have emphasised that they do not recognise the legislature as legitimate, and this has potentially dire ramifications for observance of future laws, respect for political institutions and political stability going forward.
2. **Chavista domination.** The dominance of the Chavistas in all state institutions will reduce any checks and balances on the government and will undermine accountability and transparency. Although the new president of the legislature, Nicolas Maduro, has claimed that the



body will represent different positions and listen to citizens' views, this must include the views of the opposition if stability and democracy are to be guaranteed. The key question is how far the Chavistas in the legislature will debate policy, challenge the executive and address issues of corruption and institutional politicisation.

3. **Governability risks.** The hegemony of the Chavistas in the National Assembly does not in itself guarantee enhanced governability. The alliance is fractious and prone to intra-alliance disputes that could be as paralysing in the legislature as the previous opposition block. There are serious issues of democracy and accountability within the MVR party itself, and the organisation has previously assumed a domineering and autocratic position in relation to alliance partners.
4. **Abstention implications.** Although the high level of abstention has been dismissed by the government, it is very serious for an administration that claims to be committed to building new forms of participatory democracy. The Chavistas have clearly failed to develop a political culture wherein voting and participation form part of democratic routine and are perceived positively by the electorate.

**Legitimacy questions.** While the events of December 4 raise serious questions about the legitimacy and representative nature of the National Assembly, the electoral legitimacy of the Chavez presidency itself cannot be questioned -- despite claims to the contrary by the opposition. However, the election results do raise two key issues:

- Firstly, the high abstention rate raises serious questions as to popular support for Chavez's new model of '21st Century Socialism'. The government does not have a clear mandate for this new ideological positioning, which was unveiled in January.
- Secondly, in the run-up to the election, Chavez emphasised that he perceived this contest as a referendum on the government. In this context, the low turnout is damning.

A clear message that the opposition has taken from the elections is that Chavez is able to be defeated, and that the president may be seeing the erosion of his capacity to mobilise popular support.



**The year ahead.** The actions of the government and the opposition in the aftermath of December 4 will be informed by the presidential election scheduled for December 2006. The government will undoubtedly seek to consolidate its support base among the poor in the months ahead and a populist spending spree should be expected. It would be wise for the administration to follow up proposals for dialogue with the opposition that were voiced by the foreign minister after the election. However, in recent statements, Chavez has reacted strongly against the assessment of the election by international observers and stepped up criticism of the opposition. The adoption of a highly combative position is unhelpful and, unless revised, will set the stage for further conflict.

**CONCLUSION:** Venezuela faces a difficult and challenging year. A strong turn-out in the election would have enhanced the legitimacy and mandate of the administration. The opposition has achieved a strategic victory, while the administration does not appear to have grasped the full implications of the December result for international and domestic perceptions of the Chavez government.