

Venezuelan vote boycott: Washington paves road to intervention

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With predictable brazenness, the US State Department on Monday questioned, on grounds of a low turnout, the legitimacy of Sunday's legislative elections in Venezuela. But, as the US government is well aware, the low vote total was caused in large part by a boycott and sabotage campaign mounted by right-wing opposition parties that Washington supports, both politically and financially.

State Department spokesman Adam Ereli, noting that "the abstention rate was very high," declared, "given that rate of abstention, plus expressions of concern by prominent Venezuelans, we would see that this reflects a broad lack of confidence in the impartiality and transparency of the electoral process."

The election resulted in a clean sweep by parties supporting the government of President Hugo Chávez. These parties are expected to control all 167 seats in the National Assembly. Turnout was lower than anticipated, with approximately three quarters of potential voters staying away from the polls.

Facing inevitable defeat, the opposition, led by the two parties that had ruled on behalf of the Venezuelan oligarchy for four decades, opted not to participate. Polls had indicated that Chávez's Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) and allied parties would easily gain a two-thirds majority in the legislature, relegating the opposition to near irrelevancy.

The two-thirds margin would provide the government's supporters with the power to amend the constitution, including the repeal of a statute that would deny Chávez the ability to run for a third term.

The boycott was spearheaded by the group Súmate, which is funded by the US National Endowment for Democracy (NED), and whose leader, María Corina Machado, was welcomed by Bush in the Oval Office six months ago. There can be no doubt that this political maneuver was organized in close collaboration with US officials with the aim of providing Washington and the US-backed opposition a pretext for denouncing the Chávez government as a dictatorship and preparing new provocations against Venezuela.

Over the past year, Súmate and the opposition parties, with strong backing from Venezuela's right-wing privately owned mass media, have waged a non-stop propaganda campaign aimed at discrediting the country's electoral system. First they claimed that the August 2004 referendum on Chávez's presidency, in which the opposition was soundly defeated, had somehow been rigged, a spurious charge rejected by international observers.

Then, they raised baseless objections to technical arrangements for the December 4 vote, first opposing the use of voting machines and then demanding that the country's Electoral Council scrap plans to use fingerprint scanners to guard against voters casting more than a single ballot. The opposition falsely claimed that the technology could

be used by the government to determine for whom each voter cast his ballot.

The machines used in Venezuela were judged by international observers to be far more reliable than most of those used in the US 2004 elections.

Despite repeated concessions by the Electoral Council, including the scrapping of the use of the fingerprint scanners and an agreement to do a manual count of 45 percent of the paper ballots generated by the machines, the opposition at the last minute bolted the process. This came after the opposition's repeated assurances to the Organization of American States (OAS) that it would participate on the basis of the changes agreed to by the Electoral Council. Some 400 independent observers from the OAS and the European Union were allowed to monitor the voting.

There is no doubt that this propaganda campaign, combined with the boycott, contributed to the low turnout in Sunday's voting.

Another factor, however, was the threat of violence. On the eve of the election, there was a major bombing of a key oil pipeline as well as a series of smaller explosions in the capital of Caracas. The sabotage attack destroyed part of the Ulé-Amuay pipeline, which brings oil from the Lake Maracaibo area to Paraguana, site of the world's largest oil refinery.

The president of the Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA, Rafael Ramirez, said that authorities had foiled four other attempted attacks. Groups "trying to create a climate of violence in our country were involved in this," he said, adding, "The same people behind the oil sabotage three years ago...are trying to create fear in our country."

Military officials reported uncovering a cache of 24 pounds of C4 explosives Friday in the northeastern state of Zulia along with weapons and grenades. C4 was reportedly used in the pipeline attack.

Súmate director María Corina Machado set forth the line of the opposition on the elections, declaring, "From a multiple-party parliament we pass to a mono-party parliament that does not represent the broad sections of the population. Today a National Parliament is born that is wounded in its legitimacy."

The leader of the COPEI Christian Democratic party, meanwhile, said that his party would seek to have the election annulled by the Supreme Court. "I know that no court in this country will agree with us, but we'll go through all the national judicial channels before going to the international courts."

Chavista leaders dismissed these charges, pointing out that only 10 percent of the more than 5,000 candidates running in the elections had dropped out, and that a number of different parties and social organizations were represented in the new National Assembly, just not the old discredited parties of the oligarchy, which one official referred

to as “unburied cadavers.”

Interior Minister Jesse Chacón told a press conference that the new assembly was just as legitimate as any that preceded it. In 1998, he pointed out, Acción Democrática won control of the body with the support of just 11.24 percent of registered voters, less than half the percentage (of a considerably larger electorate) that the MVR-led coalition won in the latest vote.

Vice President José Vicente Rangel added, “There are countries like the US in which only 25 percent participate in the elections to Congress,” while no one in Washington questions the elections’ legitimacy.

The decision not to run for a legislature that will be in office for the next five years appears, on the surface, to be an act of political suicide by the opposition—principally the discredited parties of the corrupt system in place in the half-century leading up to 1998, Acción Democrática and COPEI, as well as the newly founded Justice First, which portrayed itself as a party of free market technocrats.

In reality, it is only the latest gambit in a series of desperate political maneuvers aimed at overturning Chávez by extra-constitutional means. These have included the abortive US-backed coup in April 2002, which was defeated by a popular uprising, the 2002-2003 oil bosses’ strike, and the 2004 referendum.

By purposely ceding any representation in the National Assembly, the opposition is taking a self-declared path of “extra-parliamentary” opposition, whose methods and program it has yet to spell out. It is clear, however, that the strategy this layer is pursuing is aimed at provoking a US intervention to restore them to power.

Venezuela’s foreign minister, Ali Rodríguez-Araque, charged at a news conference Monday that the opposition had plotted directly with the Bush administration to sabotage the parliamentary elections. He went on to say, “We have evidence that there are concrete plans by the imperialist US to launch an attack against Venezuela.”

Indeed, there is ample evidence that this is the case. The Pentagon’s 2005 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) and its military plans for the fiscal years 2008-2013 include documents singling out five “threat” countries for “full-spectrum” preparations for military attack, the *Washington Post* reported last month. After North Korea and Iran, included on the grounds of alleged weapons of mass destruction, and China, seen as a potential strategic competitor, Venezuela is listed together with Syria as a “rogue nation.”

American troops are already reportedly carrying out military operations against Syria, and the US has made no secret of its desire to extend “regime change” in Iraq across the border by toppling the government of Bashar Assad. Preparations for similar actions against Venezuela are undoubtedly well advanced.

Washington’s interests in mounting such an intervention are clear. Regime change in Venezuela would have the same essential purpose as in Iraq: establishing direct US control over strategic oil reserves.

Venezuela’s state-owned oil company, PDVSA, accounts for 11.8 percent of US imports—providing the US economy with 1.5 million barrels a day. The country is the world’s fifth largest oil producer.

The escalating tensions between Venezuela and Washington are firmly rooted in the Chávez government’s decision to strengthen state control of this strategic sector, rather than embark on a program of privatization and opening up the country’s oil reserves to foreign investment, as prescribed by the US.

Moreover, Chávez has pursued a nationalist policy in direct conflict with US hegemony in the region. He has established close relations with Cuba, a country that US foreign policy has sought to maintain as

an international pariah, and has pursued economic relations with US rivals in Europe as well as with China.

In October, the Venezuelan government confirmed that it had withdrawn its foreign currency holdings—some \$20 billion worth—from US treasury bonds and invested them in euros with the Swiss-based Bank for International Settlements. Chávez said that the move was taken out of concern that the US could freeze Venezuelan assets as part of Washington’s escalating aggression.

Finally, the Chávez government’s program of populism and reformism—proclaimed by the Venezuelan president as “socialism for the 21st century”—is anathema to a US government that insists that all obstacles to the “free market,” i.e., the pursuit of US profit interests, be obliterated.

The election boycott is a familiar part of Washington’s repertoire of dirty tricks and acts of counterrevolutionary subversion, employed repeatedly in Latin America along with military coups and invasions to overthrow democratically elected governments seen as a threat to US interests.

In 1984, the US Embassy in Nicaragua engineered an election boycott by its chosen presidential candidate Arturo Cruz, then on the CIA payroll to the tune of \$6,000 a month. It sought to bribe and threaten the other opposition parties to join the boycott in a bid to discredit the Sandinista government, which was set to win with overwhelming popular support no matter what other parties participated.

Despite the findings of election observers that the voting had been free and fair, Washington seized upon the boycott that it had organized to brand the Sandinista government an undemocratic dictatorship and justify the CIA’s “contra” war against Nicaragua.

Similarly, in Haiti, the US-backed opposition boycotted a 2000 election under conditions in which it was politically discredited and the Lavalas party of Jean-Bertrand Aristide was headed for a resounding victory at the polls. Again, despite a clean bill of health from election observers, the opposition continued to claim that the vote was rigged, right up until the moment in 2004 that US Marines invaded the country and ousted Aristide, Haiti’s elected president.

There can be little doubt that the latest maneuver in Venezuela has been carried out as part of a similar strategy of counterrevolution and military intervention.



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