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WHO CAN BEAT HUGO CHAVEZ?

NEW, SAVVIER OPPOSITION LEADERS ARE EMERGING BUT CHAVEZ IS STILL RIDING A POPULAR WAVE

SPECIAL REPORT

IT'S A ROUGH ROAD FOR VENEZUELA'S OPPOSITION

As Venezuela prepares to go to the polls this Sunday, a new, savvy generation of opposition candidates are making a go at it. But President Hugo Chavez remains popular with voters -- as well as ruthless with his political foes. Just ask the governor of Miranda.

FRANK JACK DANIEL
LOS TEQUES, Venezuela

THE VICTORINO SANTAELLA HOSPITAL, with its grimy floors, shuttered wards and too few doctors, tells a story of Venezuela's democracy. It is a cautionary tale for those who might vote against President Hugo Chavez's party in Sunday's parliamentary elections.

Henrique Capriles Radonski, a wiry 38-year-old who drives a scooter, defeated a powerful ally of the president two years ago to become governor of the state of Miranda, which includes half of Caracas. But like the handful of other opposition candidates who benefited from anger over high crime and poor services, Capriles has learned the hard way that Chavez plays rough.

Infuriated at losing Miranda, Chavez ordered the central government to take over the state's hospitals days after the Capriles took office, diminishing his authority.

Since then, resources have dried up and doctors facing pay cuts have fled. At the Victorino Santaella, basic medical materials like gauze are nearly always in short supply, said a nurse who asked not to be named. The hospital could not pay its bills on time. A private cleaning firm left after not being paid for months. Its maintenance and security companies bolted for the same reason.

Once, the hospital had almost all the doctors it needed, said Yilver Gimenez, who heads the union representing health workers at the hospital. But now they are short around 150 physicians. "Some weekends you can't find a doctor, not one, not even a resident."

The presidential decree noted the change was made "to guarantee access to health establishments, adopting policies, plans and strategies aimed at improving the collective quality of life."



POPULIST POLITICS: Venezuelan opposition figure Henrique Capriles Radonski, Governor of the state of Miranda, campaigns in the rural area of Cua some 60 miles from Caracas, September 1, 2010. REUTERS/JORGE SILVA

But Miranda was the only state where Chavez seized control of all hospitals after the elections.

To Capriles and others, it looked like revenge, a bid to weaken him and limit what he can do to improve services in an area where governors generally have an opportunity to shine. "They practically dismantled the state in a week," Capriles said. "They took the hospitals and the budget -- it was done with every intention to stop me making the hospitals work."

The government says it has recently approved funds for medical materials at Victorino Santaella. There are plans to raise doctors' pay nationwide. A health ministry official who asked not to be identified because he was not authorized to comment said the problems with hospitals were not limited to Miranda.

Whatever the motive, in this instance, at least, it seems likely to backfire as voters may blame the central government for the reduced quality of service. More than 3 in 4 support Capriles, according to an August survey by respected pollster IVAD.

But the message has not been lost on a new generation of opposition candidates, who for all the obstacles they face appear to be slowly getting their political act together, according to most experts.

THE POLITICS OF ANGER

Chavez came to power in 1999, riding a wave of anger at traditional politicians. At first, he was not taken all that seriously. For years, Venezuela's opposition politicians badly underestimated his political shrewdness.



BUILDING SUPPORT: Henrique Capriles Radonski, governor of Miranda state, embraces a woman after giving to her help to rebuild her home during a tour of work in rural area of Cua some 60 miles from Caracas September 1, 2010. **REUTERS/JORGE SILVA**

His triumph was their undoing. Seen as out of touch with the people, they failed again and again to beat him at the ballot box and made a series of wrong turns that enabled him to consolidate a socialist project opposed to U.S. power. They were left in the political wilderness, in large part because of their own missteps, as he strengthened his grip on the state.

But the forces aligned against Chavez are stirring. In recent times, new, savvy opposition leaders like Capriles have emerged who believe they can overcome what they and others consider distortions in Venezuela's democracy. In so doing, they hope to defeat Chavez.

Their aspirations will be put to the test on Sunday when Venezuelans go to the polls for the 12th time since Chavez won office. This time they will choose a parliament. Both sides view the election as a stepping stone to the critical 2012 presidential race that could determine the direction of the country, one of Latin America's top five economies.

Chavez isn't going away. Unlike his longtime nemesis, President Alvaro Uribe, who recently left office in Colombia, or Brazilian friend President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva who retires in January, Chavez is planning to seek a new term in 2012, after 14 years in office.

To help make sure that doesn't happen, Capriles has been out and about wooing the voters.

The governor veers his scooter back and forth to skirt deep potholes along the main eastern highway out of Caracas on the way to visit a squatter settlement of wood and tin shacks. Upon arriving in the rural slum of Ciudad Tablita, built under the highway, he jumps off the bike, crosses a wobbly cable bridge over a trash-strewn brook and gets to work.

"WHAT IS MORE IMPORTANT, BUILD A HOUSE OR BUILD A ROAD?"

He exudes energy as he darts from shack to shack, promising \$3,500 of building materials to dozens of families to rebuild their rickety homes with brick. Capriles, who does not rule out running for president in the future, sees improving shoddy housing as a priority and something he can do better than Chavez.

In the midst of a recession and with local authorities starved of funds by Chavez's increasingly centralized and partisan administration, that means the roads in Venezuela's second most populous state, Miranda, are destined to suffer.

"What is more important, build a house or a build a road?" said Capriles, who has decided not to repair potholes because of a funding shortage. He says the government owes Miranda about 40 percent of its entitled financing for the last two years.

This is pretty basic populist politics, conducted with a candidate for parliament from his First Justice party in tow, but it is aimed at beating Chavez at his own game by winning over the poor with education and housing projects.

"It's a lie that Chavez is the only one who works for the poor," Capriles said, as residents jostled round him.

ROUGH ROAD

Cutting its way through Caracas's hillside shanty-towns, the pock-marked highway is not a bad metaphor for the challenges and pitfalls the opposition will face as it tries to stop Chavez winning the presidential election in two years time.

The odds are stacked against them. Despite a deep recession and one of the world's worst murder rates, Chavez remains the country's most popular politician and is backed by a powerful and politicized state apparatus that works in his favor.

More than 30 opposition organizations and parties are currently working in the Democratic Unity umbrella group that has fielded one candidate for each seat in play on Sunday. The alliance could collapse after the elections, especially if it has a poor showing. Bitter infighting can be expected over who will become the candidate to face Chavez in 2012.

For years the opposition tried to oust Chavez through protests, strikes and a coup -- a strategy that merely strengthened support for the former tank soldier.

Opposition leaders campaigned mainly through the media and largely failed to address concerns of the working class. As in previous years, most of Sunday's candidates have been selected behind closed doors and mostly without primaries.



CHAVEZ'S PEOPLE: A supporter of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez cheers for him during a campaign rally in Guarenas outside Caracas September 18, 2010. **REUTERS/JORGE SILVA**

The new wave of young leaders want to change that. They are campaigning and doing social work in the shanty towns that cover Caracas's hills, putting the fight against poverty at the center of the debate and even co-opting some of Chavez's policies and tactics.

And although many are drawn from the center-right -- Chavez brands them "fascists" and lapdogs of the U.S. "empire" -- they often speak admiringly of the combination of poverty reduction and market economics that made leftist Lula such a success in neighboring Brazil.

"This could become a real opposition in the country -- but it's not there yet," said Nicmer Evans, a political scientist and activist in Chavez's PSUV Socialist Party.

Unfortunately for the likes of Capriles and Leopoldo Lopez, a former mayor turned activist, both Chavez and some older opposition politicians seem determined to see them fail.

CHAVEZ'S WRATH

Capriles is living proof that it is possible to dent Chavez's power -- but not without a price.

Besides the hospital takeover, money for housing and roads was moved out of Miranda's bank accounts; thousands of firearms were taken from the state police force and garbage trucks were shifted to other regions.

Other opposition politicians have fared even worse. Chavez turned the post of Caracas mayor into little more than a title after Antonio Ledezma won, stripping him of budget, powers and offices and creating a new Chief of Caracas above him.



"THIS COULD BECOME A REAL OPPOSITION IN THE COUNTRY -- BUT IT'S NOT THERE YET!"

PEOPLE'S MAN: A supporter of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez holds a portrait during a campaign rally in Guarenas outside Caracas September 18, 2010 **REUTERS/JORGE SILVA**

"IN VENEZUELA, YOU HAVE TO WIN ELECTIONS LIKE DAVID BEAT GOLIATH."



SIDELINED: Leopoldo Lopez, seen here campaigning in February, 2008, was banned for running for Mayor of Caracas. **REUTERS/CARLOS GARCIA RAWLINS**

Such actions, along with legal harassment of opponents -- Capriles himself spent 4 months in jail while he was mayor of a wealthy Caracas district -- renewed concerns among the opposition and international rights bodies that despite frequent competitive and free elections, Chavez is riding roughshod over many democratic principles.

Some fear Chavez will take steps to limit the power of parliament if the opposition has a strong showing on Sunday, perhaps ruling by decree or pushing through a raft of radical legislation before the new lawmakers start in January.

"The government is weakening democracy enormously," said Simon Calzadilla, a lawmaker running for reelection with the leftist PPT party, which split with Chavez this year and aspires to offer a third way. "Instead of (governing) to construct, he's doing it just to stay in power and destroy other people."

Leopoldo Lopez was a very popular two-term mayor of Caracas's well-heeled eastern district Chacao. Two years ago he was excluded from running for office as mayor of Caracas under a 2003 law that gives the controller general power to sanction public officials for corruption without trial.

The measure, known as an "inhabilitation", has been applied to dozens of public officials, many of them low-ranking members of government, but the most prominent victims were Lopez and another opposition leader.

Lopez's exclusion from public office stems from a donation state oil firm PDVSA made in 1998 to a political organization of which he was a member, which later became the First Justice party. The donation is controversial because his mother, a PDVSA employee at the time, signed the check.

Lopez dismisses the accusations as politically motivated. He has contested the ruling in the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, whose decisions are binding for member states.

For the moment, however, he is still excluded from running for office. He is not on the ticket for Sunday's elections and, unless he can overturn the ruling, he won't be a contender for president in 2012.

Barred from an election he was likely to have won, the 39-year-old son of a well-to-do family unsurprisingly feels democracy has been severely damaged under Chavez.

"In Venezuela, you have to win elections like David beat Goliath," Lopez said in his Popular Will movement's headquarters in eastern Caracas. "It is not an election against a candidate, it's an election against the power of the state."

LIVELY CAMPAIGN

In many other ways Venezuela's democracy is vibrant. Political debate is noisily conducted on TV screens, in newspapers and on street corners. Parties splash campaign publicity on billboards and hand out flyers on street corners.

Participation in community councils founded by Chavez gives millions of Venezuelans a say in how local development is carried out, and a dozen elections since Chavez took office in 1999 have taken place without significant election day fraud.

But the playing field in election campaigns in Venezuela is clearly uneven, with the government ramping up spending and launching new social programs in the weeks before a vote.



SPEAKING OUT: Opposition supporters at a campaign rally in the low income neighborhood of Petare in Caracas expressed their anger at high crime and violence with signs that read "20,000 dead, no more." September 18, 2010. **REUTERS/CARLOS GARCIA RAWLINS**



FIRST JUSTICE: Opposition mayor from the Sucre district Carlos Ocariz stands outside a campaign office of Primero Justicia (First Justice) party in Caracas's largest slum, Petare, September 1, 2010. **REUTERS/CARLOS GARCIA RAWLINS**

The state has several television stations broadcasting its message and Chavez frequently uses special powers to force all stations to run his speeches. Although the most-watched networks are in private hands, the opposition is still suffering from the absence of RCTV, an anti-Chavez channel mixing news with soap operas that was Venezuela's favorite.

RCTV became cable-only in 2007 after Chavez refused to renew its license because of its role in a coup against him. It is currently barred from broadcasting on cable for contesting a law obliging networks to broadcast some Chavez speeches.

Several opposition leaders have legal cases open against them, often on corruption charges. Some like former presidential candidate Manuel Rosales, fled the country rather than face trial. Others have spent short, or not so short, periods in jail.

Pro-Chavez officials dominate top ranks of all Venezuela's public institutions and they are expected to walk in step with the revolution, even if they do not necessarily follow Chavez's every order.

In December, Supreme Court President Luisa Morales, a Chavez ally, argued against division of powers, saying it weakened the state. In one apparent example of this, Judge Maria Afiuni was arrested in December after she freed a banker held without trial for over two years. Chavez said she should be jailed for 30 years, and Afiuni has been in prison since awaiting trial.

Still, the government insists local autonomy thrives. "We have a very strong leadership, there is no doubt about it. All politics revolves around Chavez in Venezuela. But to say all the powers are in the hands of Chavez is not true," said Andres Izarra, a former minister who now runs government funded cable news network Telesur.

Venezuela's human rights record is good compared with Latin America's violent military regimes of the 1970s and 1980s, or Colombia today, but rights groups are nonetheless worried by the Chavez government's open political discrimination.

If they were meant to hamper the opposition, the "inhabitations" have failed. Capriles only became a candidate after former governor Enrique Mendoza was barred, and Lopez's replacement also won. Chavez is still smarting from those defeats and ahead of Sunday's vote he has made not-so-veiled threats about the perils of electing his opponents.

"It's really difficult, impossible to work with them," Chavez said recently on a visit to the Petare slum in a municipality run by opposition Mayor Carlos Ocariz. "If that mayor, or that governor thinks I am going to give them even a cent -- what for? They're from the bourgeoisie."

Despite the rhetoric, the central government does provide the legally apportioned budget and an additional share of tax and excess oil income to states and municipalities, although, as Capriles attests, it is often slow in handing the cash over.

Chavez's invective seemed designed to scare voters and referred to extra funds for infrastructure and other projects he approves for states and cities governed by his allies.

"IF THAT MAYOR, OR THAT GOVERNOR THINKS I AM GOING TO GIVE THEM EVEN A CENT -- WHAT FOR? THEY'RE FROM THE BOURGEOISIE."

"This is what Chavez does -- vote for me or there'll be no resources, but he will suffer for this sooner or later, because people aren't stupid, they see what's going on," Capriles said.

Things may soon get worse for opposition states -- from next year more of their funding will be assigned by a new body overseen by the president. They fear the new arrangement will make the financing more discretionary.

According to the Latin Barometer poll, a yearly study of attitudes in the region, 47 percent of Venezuelans are happy with their democracy, down from 59 percent in 2007.

"THEY NEED TO BECOME ANTI-CHAVISTA REVOLUTIONARIES"

TIRED OF POLARIZATION

The nation's vast slums are a key political battleground, and one where the opposition -- recently linked to the wealthier classes -- is only now making inroads.

Ciudad Tablitas is on the outskirts of Guarenas, a stronghold of Chavez support that calls itself the "cradle of the Latin American revolution" because of its role in riots at price rises preceding Chavez's first, armed, bid for power.

"In the past we couldn't enter a barrio like this, we'd be met with a hail of stones and tomatoes," said Tugomir Ypes, a mining engineer working to organize ballot box witnesses for polling day in Guarenas.

In the winding alleys of La Dolorita, an extension of the Petare slum, locals barely raise an eyebrow when police and soldiers storm a house looking for a gunman believed to have been involved in a shootout.

As in Ciudad Tablita and most poor neighborhoods, a few years ago opposition politicians and activists in this part of town often preferred not to reveal their identity.

"That's changed," said Mayor Ocariz on a recent visit to La Dolorita ahead of Sunday's election. "Although political leaders want polarization, the people are tired of it."

In 2008, Ocariz took the municipality of Sucre from the son of Chavez's former vice-president. His predecessor was considered corrupt and lazy by locals and took to handing out free washing machines in the last few days of his campaign.



TAKING ON CHAVEZ: Opposition mayor of Sucre district Carlos Ocariz listens to people in Caracas's largest slum of Petare September 1, 2010. **REUTERS/CARLOS GARCIA RAWLINS**

Like many peers, Ocariz, 39, is a foreign-trained technocrat. He studied in Canada and worked at the Inter-American Development Bank in Washington before returning to Venezuela. As with Capriles and Lopez, it is clear upon meeting Ocariz that he does not share the humble roots that cement Chavez's ties to the people.

He managed to win Petare, once a stronghold of Chavez support, largely because he did the legwork. After losing in two successive elections, years of knocking on doors and making himself known in the municipality paid off.

Now the yellow and black logo of First Justice, to which Ocariz also belongs, is more prevalent on walls and lamp-posts in this part of town than Socialist red.

Since becoming mayor he's raised wages of the police, doctors and teachers, increased the tax take and given 30 percent of the municipality's budget for investment to grassroots groups, including community councils -- the foundation of Chavez's notion of participatory democracy. He says his approval ratings are over 80 percent.

He has also emulated Mexican and Brazilian social programs that offer financial reward to poor families if their children have a high school attendance rate.

Prominent Venezuelan political blogger Francisco Toro says the opposition is beginning to get its act together, but that the young generation needs to split decisively from the past.

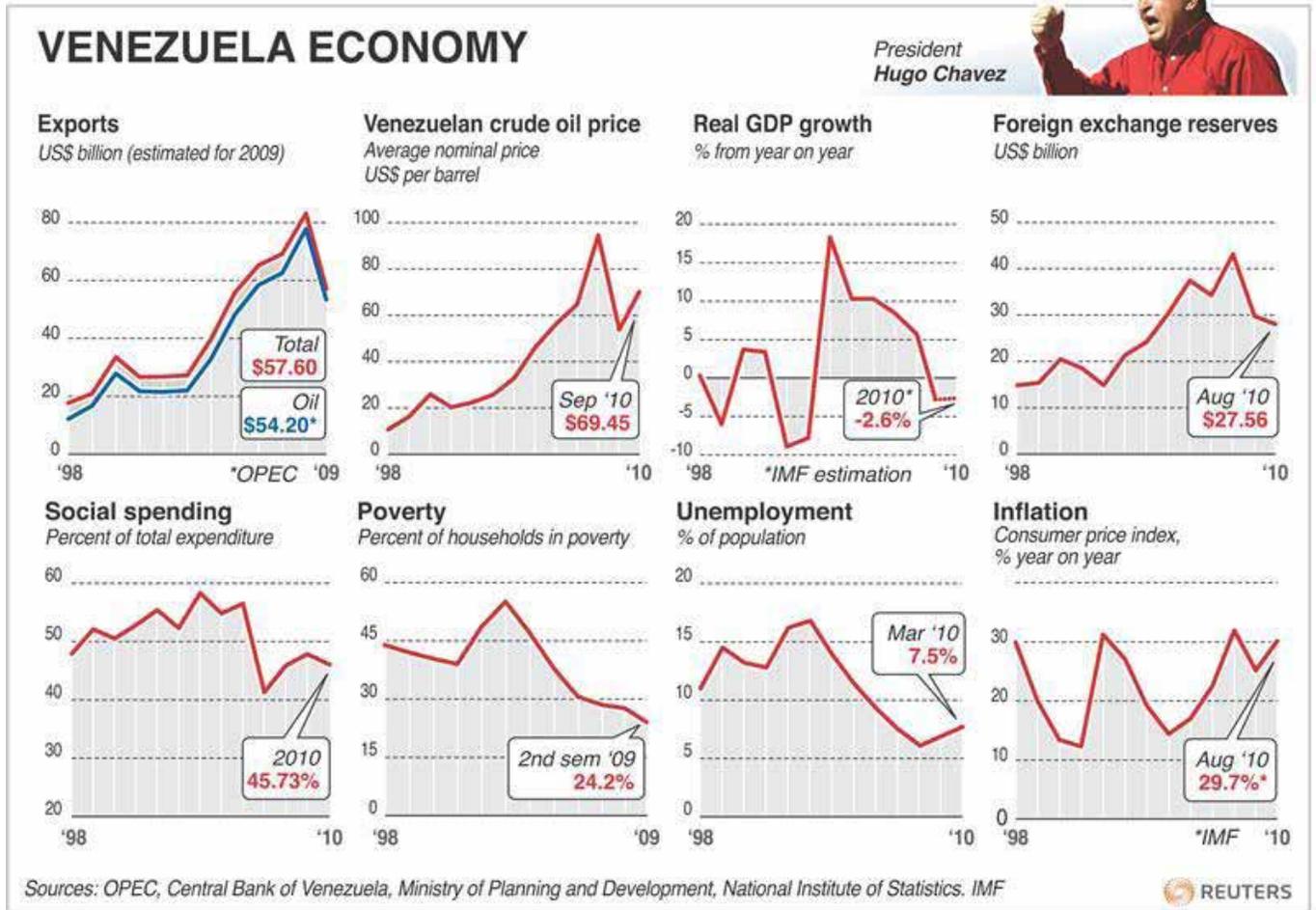
"They need to pick some high profile, symbolically loaded fights with the dinosaurs," he said in an email to Reuters. "They need to become anti-Chavista revolutionaries."

The opposition is dominated by older men involved in politics for years before Chavez reached office, with wildly conflicting visions of Venezuela's future. Several tendencies have appeared with fresh ideas, including ex-allies of the president who now call him an autocrat while staying true to ideas of social change.

A student movement that organized nationwide protests in 2007 and is credited with contributing to Chavez's most clear-cut election defeat is now focused on getting the opposition vote out, along with organizing enough witnesses at polling stations to ensure no ballot boxes are stuffed.

"There's a nascent understanding that you can't just cede the ground game to the PSUV. The utter disarray in opposition get out the vote and witness operations of the 2006-2009 era seems to be a thing of the past," Toro said.

"They need to organize at the grassroots ahead of 2012 in the kind of methodical, Obama-esque way no Venezuelan has really tried since the clandestine opposition to (dictator) Perez Jimenez in the 1950s."



CHAVEZ SEIZES ON OPPOSITION ERRORS

Chavez rose to power during the decline of Venezuela’s two-party political system, once seen as an example for Latin America but that by the 1990s was collapsing, beset by corruption and irresponsible borrowing that led to economic chaos.

He first tried to take power in 1992 in a failed coup, convinced the two party system was rigged to prevent outsiders taking office. As opportunities opened up to new parties in the following years, he embraced the democratic route to power.

Venezuela’s traditional political class did not know what hit them when the plain-speaking mid-ranking soldier from the poor countryside swept into office in 1999, ending generations of privileges for the old school.

The opposition’s strategy for the first five years of Chavez’s rule was to try to end his term quickly. It started with street protests. Then a coup, a manager-led shutdown of the oil industry, a bungled recall referendum in which the opposition lost and cried fraud, and finally a boycott of the last legislative elections in 2005. All failed.

“The truth is we didn’t have a majority back then, and we failed to accept that,” said Lopez.

The consequences of that course of action will be felt for a long time to come, not least in Sunday’s election.

“We are to blame for a lot of what happened, all of us,” said Capriles, who believes voters would have grown tired of Chavez without opposition errors making them unelectable.

The opposition’s boycott, and subsequent absence from parliament for the last five years, is perhaps the single most significant political event in the Chavez era. It allowed him to pass dozens of laws that rapidly advanced his drive to turn Venezuela into a socialist state.

The virtual monopoly of parliament enabled Chavez to concentrate his power, naming new, compliant magistrates to the supreme court for example, while clearing the way for a new electoral law that increases his Socialist Party’s chance of winning this and future elections. By 2005, Chavez’s popularity was soaring in line with oil prices that gave him the bucks to fuel health and education programs for the country’s poor.

In recent years, the political winds have often seemed to favor critics of Chavez. This year Venezuela is barely showing the first signs of recovering from a deep recession, and the president’s record has been besmirched by electricity shortages, high crime and a scandal over rotting food.



FAMILY MAN: A family sit outside their house decorated with a poster of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez during a campaign rally in Guarenas outside Caracas September 18, 2010. **REUTERS/ JORGE SILVA**

Chavez lost an election for the first time in 2007 in a referendum on allowing him to run for reelection and overhauling the constitution to deepen his revolution. But with next to no opposition lawmakers, the national assembly passed many of the reforms rejected in the referendum, and allowed Chavez a new vote on lifting term limits, which he won.

Despite his travails, Chavez is still popular. Recent polls show a tight race nationwide for parliament, with the opposition trailing the Socialist Party by a couple of points.

But even with almost half of the electorate behind it, the new voting rules mean the Democratic Unity alliance may only win a third of seats. The new electoral law passed last year redrew a number of electoral districts and strengthened a first-past-the-post system that is likely to favor Chavez's Socialist Party, the country's largest political organization.

That may be enough to win Chavez the 110 of 165 seats he needs to keep a two-thirds absolute majority that allows him to pass major legislation without consulting the opposition.

Rivalry between the opposition political parties, often described by Chavez supporters as "like a group of drunkards fighting over an empty bottle," has also damaged their cause.

When Lopez was blocked from running for Caracas mayor only a few hundred protesters joined him on a march against the ruling. Other political parties by and large seemed quietly pleased, since his exclusion meant their inclusion.

If the opposition has learned anything over the last few years, it is the importance of unity during elections. But it continues to make

surprising mistakes. This year, the Democratic Unity alliance missed an opportunity to conduct widespread primaries, which are popular with voters and which polls show produce more popular candidates whose faces are known to voters. Democratic Unity held 15 primaries while the Socialist Party held 87, one for every district.

Capriles identifies three types of politicians in Venezuela -- those in power now, those who want a return to a pre-Chavez era and those who are seeking a political "renovation." He is clear about where he stands.

"This country has changed. It will not go back. We can get rid of Chavez but the past won't return," he said, in a striking echo of one of the president's slogans against the opposition.

(Additional reporting by Patricia Rondon)



CHAVEZ'S HISTORY AT THE BALLOT BOX

VENEZUELANs vote on Sept. 26 in a parliamentary election, with President Hugo Chavez confident of a good showing but opponents sensing they might be able to slash his majority.

Dubbed a dictator by his foes, the socialist Chavez's supporters say his democratic credentials are proven by the fact he has won all but one of about a dozen national votes.

Following are facts on Chavez's history at the ballot box:

- December, 1998 - After a failed coup attempt six years before, ex-soldier Chavez galvanizes anger with the traditional elite to win the presidency with 56 percent of the vote.
- April, 1999 - The president wins more than 80 percent support in a referendum to create a new popular assembly charged with rewriting the constitution.
- July, 1999 - Chavez's candidates win at least 119 seats in the new 131-member, constitution-making assembly.



MANY TIMES A WINNER: A man sits near campaign posters of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez in Caracas September 15, 2010. **REUTERS/JORGE SILVA**

- December, 1999 - More than 70 percent of Venezuelans approve new constitution which, crucially, extends presidential terms to six from five years and allows immediate re-election for a further six-year period.
- July, 2000 - Chavez wins another presidential election under new constitution, gaining 60 percent of the vote in a clear popular mandate to continue his leftist "revolution."
- December, 2000 - Government candidates win majority of posts in local municipal and parish elections.
- August, 2004 - In a "recall referendum" sought by the opposition to try and oust Chavez, he wins 59 percent of the vote and remains in power.
- October, 2004 - In regional elections, government wins all but two out of 23 governorships.
- December, 2005 - Opposition boycotts parliamentary elections, giving Chavez candidates total control.
- December, 2006 - Chavez wins a third term in presidential elections with almost 63 percent of the vote.
- December, 2007 - In a first electoral defeat for Chavez in nearly a decade, Venezuelans vote down his bid to run for re-election indefinitely at a referendum. Chavez calls the opposition triumph a "pyrrhic" and "shit" victory.
- November, 2008 - At regional elections, Chavez candidates keep control of 17 states, but opposition erodes his dominance by taking six posts including the powerful Caracas mayorship.
- February, 2009 - Chavez reverses his 2007 defeat by winning new referendum, with 56 percent of vote, removing limits on re-election.

(Writing and reporting by David Cutler, London Editorial Reference Unit, Patricia Rondon and Andrew Cawthorne)

COVER PHOTO: Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez at a campaign rally in Guarenas outside Caracas, September 18, 2010. **REUTERS/JORGE SILVA**

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