

Venezuelan Opposition Wins December 2015 Legislative Elections

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Venezuela's opposition coalition, known as the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD), triumphed in the country's December 6, 2015, legislative elections over the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) of current President Nicolás Maduro. The MUD [won at least 99 seats](#) out of the 167-member unicameral National Assembly compared to 46 seats for the PSUV. This gives the opposition at least a simple majority (84 seats). However, 22 seats are still to be determined, so that the opposition is likely to achieve a three-fifths majority (101 seats), which would give it additional powers, including the ability to remove ministers from office and overturn enabling laws that give the president decree powers. Achieving a two-thirds majority (112 seats) would give the opposition even more powers, including the ability to convene a Constituent Assembly to rewrite the constitution. The election included 113 seats chosen by simple majority in specific districts, 51 seats by proportional representation by party list in Venezuela's states and capital district, and 3 indigenous representatives. The election results were a major defeat for [Chavismo](#), the populist leftist movement originally led by former President Hugo Chávez, who succumbed to cancer in 2013.

The elections were held in a difficult political and economic environment. Under the ruling PSUV of former President Chávez (1999-2013) and current President Maduro (who was narrowly elected in 2013), [democratic practices have deteriorated and human rights violations have increased](#). The government has actively sought to limit the political rights of the opposition through imprisonment of opposition leaders and activists, the use of the judiciary for political purposes, and the suppression of freedom of speech and expression. In 2014, Venezuelan security forces and militant pro-government civilian groups violently suppressed protests, with at least 43 people killed on both sides of the conflict, and more than 800 injured. The rapid decline in the price of oil since mid-2014 has hit Venezuela hard, contributing to economic contraction, high inflation, a decline in international reserves, and increased poverty. The International Monetary Fund is projecting that the economy will [contract 10% in 2015](#) and inflation will be well above 100%. Economic mismanagement and corruption have contributed to the country's dismal economic situation.

Ahead of the legislative elections, the MUD was running far ahead in the polls, ranging from almost 19 to 30 percentage points, and it campaigned on an agenda to release political prisoners and efforts to stimulate the ailing economy. The MUD includes some two dozen parties across the political spectrum. The largest of these include Justice First (PJ), the

party of the MUD's 2012 and 2013 presidential candidate, Henrique Capriles; Popular Will (VP), whose party founder, Leopoldo López, was imprisoned in February 2014 and sentenced in September 2015 to almost 14 years in prison for allegedly inciting violence and other charges (a conviction that was criticized worldwide); A New Era (UNT); and Democratic Action (AD).

The opposition faced significant disadvantages in the legislative elections as chronicled in the press and by the [International Crisis Group](#) and the [Washington Office on Latin America](#). On November 10, the Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS), Luis Almagro, published [a letter](#) to the head of Venezuela's National Electoral Council, expressing strong criticism about the level of transparency and electoral justice ahead of the elections. He asserted that the opposition operated on an uneven playing field that included the government's use of state resources for campaign purposes; the disqualification of seven opposition candidates; the judiciary's investigation of opposition political parties; and government actions that diminished freedom of the press and expression.

In a disturbing development before the elections, Luis Manuel Díaz, an AD opposition leader, was assassinated at a public meeting in the state of Guarico on November 25. The State Department [condemned the killing](#) and noted that it was the deadliest of several recent attacks and acts of intimidation aimed at opposition candidates. The OAS Secretary General called [for an end to violence in Venezuela](#) and for the "disarmament of any armed civilian group, in particular those that depend on the government or the party of the government."

Venezuela had rejected any international election observation missions, including from the OAS and the European Union. Instead, it agreed to a delegation from the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) led by former Dominican Republic President Leonel Fernández to "accompany" the vote. The [opposition had little faith in the group](#). Brazil had pulled out of the delegation because Venezuela rejected a former Brazilian Supreme Court Justice from heading the team. In the absence of international observers, electoral observation by [Venezuelan domestic groups](#) such as the [Observatorio Electoral Venezolano](#) were all the more important.

U.S. Policy and Congressional Concerns

U.S. policymakers and Members of Congress have had concerns for over a decade about the deterioration of human rights and democratic conditions in Venezuela. In 2014, Congress responded to the Venezuelan government's harsh crackdown on protests by enacting the Venezuela Defense of Human Rights and Civil Society Act of 2014 ([P.L. 113-278](#)) requiring the President to impose sanctions against those responsible for certain human rights abuses, although the measure included presidential waiver authority.

After a UNASUR-sponsored dialogue between the government and the opposition failed, the Obama Administration imposed visa restrictions in July 2014 and February 2015 on more than 50 current or former Venezuelan officials involved in human rights abuses. In March 2015, President Obama issued an executive order setting forth the authority for additional sanctions and imposed financial sanctions on seven Venezuelan officials for human rights abuses. The Administration has continued to speak out against human rights abuses in Venezuela, including the [conviction of Leopoldo López](#).

On November 11, 2015, a bipartisan group of 18 U.S. Senators joined 139 legislators from several Latin American countries to send a [letter](#) to President Maduro expressing concerns about Venezuela's upcoming elections and calling for the government to permit international observers. Other Members have spoken out in support of the efforts of the OAS Secretary General, and on November 6, the House Foreign Affairs Committee's Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere held a [hearing](#) that focused on the human rights situation in Venezuela.

For background, see CRS In Focus IF10230, [Venezuela: U.S. Policy Overview](#), and CRS Report R43239, [Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations](#).