



## Chavez Accused by Opponents of Abusing State Power in Campaign

By Guillermo Parra-Bernal

Nov. 30 (Bloomberg) -- Venezuelan opposition parties have filed more than 20 complaints with international election observers, alleging President Hugo Chavez is abusing his control of government to build support ahead of the Dec. 3 vote.

Misuses of public resources include sending on-duty soldiers and state workers to campaign rallies and running pro-Chavez programming on state television, according to a report opposition presidential candidate Manuel Rosales gave observers from the European Union and the Organization of American States.

“It's our last chance to show the world that the government is not playing fair,” Timoteo Zambrano, the liaison between the Rosales campaign and observers, said in an interview. “We really hope that they will say the abuses brought about a lot of imbalances in this election.”

Chavez's popularity and control over Venezuela's government -- from the courts to the election council to congress -- have all but assured he will win the presidential contest. Chavez, 52, who in March said he may stay in office through 2031, held a 29 percentage point lead over Rosales in a Nov. 24 poll released by Zogby International and the University of Miami.

‘Almost Impossible’

“It's almost impossible to measure the extent of the abuses,” said Mercedes de Freitas, executive director of Caracas-based chapter of the anti-corruption group Transparency International. “No one in this country is in a position to impose limits on this situation.”

Venezuela has the region's weakest rules on campaign-finance and election oversight, she said.

The report, running more than 100 pages, catalogues complaints about the electoral council from 41 parties that support Rosales, 54. They say the panel ignored requests for information on the software in voting machines, on the fingerprint devices being used to establish voters' identity and the disposition of voting booths. Fingerprinting, which the council says will help prevent fraud, destroys voters' confidence in the confidentiality of their ballots, Zambrano said.

Other complaints range from the display of multi-floor billboards of Chavez hung on government buildings in Caracas to the use of state vehicles in campaign rallies.

State companies have also been misused, the report says. Oil and Energy Minister President Rafael Ramirez, who heads state oil company Petroleos de Venezuela SA, was recorded by an employee with a mobile phone last month threatening to replace workers who don't support Chavez, according to the report.

The company “is red from head to toe,” Ramirez says in the video, referring to the color used by Chavez's supporters.

‘Go to Miami’

After the opposition released the video -- also posted on YouTube -- Chavez backed Ramirez, saying that the company's workers must support his revolution or “pack up and go to Miami.”

The electoral council said it's investigating whether Ramirez's speech constituted improper political meddling.

A spokesman for Ramirez declined to comment on the investigation, as did a presidential spokeswoman. The managers of Chavez's campaign, Francisco Ameliach and Pedro Carreno, didn't return calls to their mobile phones seeking comment on the report.

Electoral Councilor Vicente Diaz said on Nov. 28 that about half the allegations of campaign violations brought to the council implicated government workers, with 53 percent involving violations of rules on advertising. As many as 70 probes have been opened since August, the council said in a statement.

Alejandro Plaz, president of Sumate, a Caracas-based civic action group that led the 2004 effort to recall Chavez, said his research showed Chavez had 22 times as much free television air time as Rosales, citing the broadcast Chavez rallies and speeches by the state TV channel.

By the end of October, 45 voter complaints against the Chavez campaign had been filed to the electoral council, compared with two against Rosales.

#### Intimidation

Plaz said the government used intimidation to weaken rival candidacies. In September, the tax and customs secretariat shut down a theme park for two days owned by independent candidate Benjamin Rausseo, according to newspaper El Universal. Rausseo withdrew from the race on Nov. 14.

``It's hard to get observers' attention about all this," Plaz said in his Caracas office.

Steve Johnson, a policy analyst at the Washington-based Heritage Foundation, said observers are more interested in ensuring a peaceful ballot than a fair one.

For observers, abuses ``are a tricky issue to deal with," said Michael Shifter, vice president for policy at Inter-American Dialogue, a foreign policy research center.

``It's not because observers are being soft on Chavez," he said. ``It's just that this hasn't been as settled as some of the other issues in terms of election monitoring."

Monica Frassoni, an Italian lawmaker who heads the EU mission, said in a Nov. 26 interview in Caracas that the observers' task is to produce a thorough chronicle of the electoral process for Venezuelans to use for themselves without changing the course of the election.

If politicians seek to use the report for their own benefit, ``that is, frankly speaking, more a problem for the people here than for us," she said.

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