

INTERNATIONAL
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European observers sign off on Venezuela vote, but cite complaints by state workers

The Associated Press

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CARACAS, Venezuela

International observers backed vote results showing a landslide win for Hugo Chavez, but a European Union delegation also said it received complaints that some government employees faced pressure to support the incumbent president.

The EU observers said in a preliminary report Tuesday that overall the vote was carried out smoothly and securely.

The delegation noted a few areas of concern, including a high participation of public employees at Chavez's campaign events, unbalanced coverage in both state and private media, and a heavy use of government advertising by Chavez, and to a lesser degree opponent Manuel Rosales.

Monica Frassoni, the Italian lawmaker who heads the EU mission, said her delegation had received "numerous complaints of pressures on public employees for them to vote for President Chavez or participate in events of his election campaign."

She did not say how many complaints there had been, or the sorts of pressure allegedly applied. Frassoni said the observers were not in a position to analyze the complaints because it was not part of their mission.

The EU observer team joined other vote monitors from the Carter Center and Organization of American States during Sunday's election, in which Chavez won with nearly 63 percent of the vote to secure another six-year term. The EU delegation was the largest, with more than 150 observers, and it plans to present a final detailed report in mid-February.

Frassoni said the observers had evaluated a video released by the opposition last month in which Oil Minister Rafael Ramirez was shown telling employees of the state oil company that they should back Chavez or give up their seats.

"Whoever forgets that we're in the middle of a revolution, we're going to give them a beating to remind them," Ramirez said in the wobbly video, which was discreetly taped during a closed-door meeting and was released by Rosales' campaign.

Chavez defended Ramirez after the video's release, saying any oil company employees who are not with his government should pack up and go to Miami. He cited a 2002-2003 anti-Chavez strike by managers and workers in the oil company, which devastated the economy.

Chavez gained the upper hand by firing thousands of protesting employees and replacing them.

During the campaign, debate heated up about whether the government puts pressure on bureaucrats to support Chavez.

The opposition accused the government of coercing workers to boost its support, while the government denied any pressure was placed on bureaucrats who attended campaign rallies in large



numbers wearing the red T-shirts of their ministries and offices — also the color of Chavez's party.

Several current and former government employees, speaking to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because they feared retribution, said they were pressured by their bosses to show support for Chavez, including attending political rallies.

One ex-employee of the Science and Technology Ministry said employees were expected to obtain and display at their work stations "patriotic certificates" to prove they had not signed a petition seeking a 2004 recall referendum against Chavez.

Other state employees denied noticing any pressure or coercion. Yurmiris Torres, an employee in the pro-Chavez Caracas mayor's office, said she works with many opposition supporters. "They have not been fired. There is freedom for everyone," she said.

Some government critics note that lists of those who signed petitions seeking the 2004 recall vote have circulated on the Internet and on CDs sold on the street — and that some cases of alleged job discrimination followed in public offices. But Chavez has urged his followers to "bury" such lists.

Government critic Ana Julia Jatar has researched the subject and says she has compiled some 780 documented cases of alleged political discrimination in recent years.

Prosecutors have said they would seriously investigate any such complaints.

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