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Venezuela opposition candidate says he'd accept defeat if others play by rules

The Associated Press

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CARACAS, Venezuela

Venezuela's leading opposition candidate said Tuesday he will respect the results of the Dec. 3 presidential election if President Hugo Chavez wins without tampering with votes.

But Manuel Rosales said any last-minute attempt by the National Elections Council to change balloting or vote-tallying regulations would be unacceptable to government opponents.

"If the game is clean (and) the rules of the game are clear, of course we all would be willing to respect the results," Rosales said. "What we aren't going to accept is that they change the established norms on the day of the election."

Rosales' comments came a day after Chavez urged his political adversaries to publicly state whether or not they would accept the outcome of the vote.

Chavez has also repeatedly accused opponents in recent weeks of planning to destabilize his government by staging violent street protests during or immediately after the vote.

Rosales rejected the allegations, saying Chavez has been raising concerns regarding alleged coup-plotting "to terrorize the people so they don't vote."

Most recent polls have shown Chavez with a double-digit lead over Rosales, who temporarily stepped down as governor of the western state of Zulia to run for president.

Earlier Tuesday, election observers from European Union began fanning out over 17 of Venezuela's 23 states to observe the election.

Monica Frassoni, the EU mission's leader, said the elections council had granted the 130-member delegation permission to oversee balloting as well as to conduct audits of results immediately following the vote.

"They have access to all the stages of the electoral process," Frassoni said.

The EU delegation will be joined by observers from the Organization of American States and the Atlanta-based Carter Center. Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, who founded the Carter Center, is not expected to travel to Venezuela for the election.

Opposition parties had demanded the presence of international observers, arguing that independent monitors from outside Venezuela must be involved in the observation initiative because four out of the election council's five directors are pro-Chavez.

Chavez and top government officials had slammed reports by election monitors from the OAS and the European Union on Venezuela's congressional elections last December, accusing the observers of bias.



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The EU and OAS missions called the vote fair and transparent but both organizations noted deep public distrust of the elections council, particularly among government opponents.

Hector Vanelli, a representative of the Carter Center, told reporters Monday the organization will send electronic voting specialists to evaluate Venezuela's touch-screen voting machines for the presidential election.



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