



Petkoff pulls out of problematic primary

THINK TANK

EVENT: On July 8, influential opposition candidate Teodoro Petkoff announced that he would not take part in a primary election to select a unity presidential candidate.

SIGNIFICANCE: New opposition divisions have opened after initial progress made in selecting a unity candidate ahead of the December 3 presidential contest. Petkoff's refusal to take part in a primary contest adds to the opposition's woes, while raising serious questions as to the role of the non-governmental organisation (NGO), Sumate.

ANALYSIS: On current form, the various opposition organisations in Venezuela stand no chance of presenting a candidate capable of defeating incumbent President Hugo Chavez in the December election. In the eight years since Chavez was elected, both old and new opposition parties have made limited to negligible progress in developing alternative programmes of government, or re-connecting with voters. This, together with counter-productive strategies such as the 2001 street protests, 2002 coup attempt and boycotts of successive elections have boosted Chavez and handed the 'Chavistas' control of local, municipal, regional and national legislatures. The strong rise in the oil price since 2002 and the government's strategy of distributing windfall revenues to the poor have made Chavez unassailable -- despite the lack of transparency and accountability in government policy and finances.

A matter of weeks ago, it seemed that opposition groups had overcome a debilitating hurdle. Having finally committed to participation in the presidential contest, the leading candidates -- Julio Borges, Teodoro Petkoff and Manuel Rosales -- agreed an informal pact. In order not to fragment the opposition vote, they would work toward establishing a unity candidate. The agreement always was problematic. However, serious issues such as a unity programme of government and distribution of campaign influence were swept aside, as was the issue of how the unity candidate would be selected.



Into this fray stepped non-governmental organisation (NGO) Sumate, which at the end of June offered to organise a primary.

Sumate controversies. Sumate, which first emerged in 2003, is a controversial organisation in Venezuela. Composed overwhelmingly of the wealthy, educated elite that Chavez denounces as the 'oligarchy', it pitched itself as a civil society group that was working to achieve electoral transparency and 'real' democracy in the country. The organisation's activities subsequently focused on organising the recall referendum against Chavez in August 2004 and denouncing perceived irregularities in the electoral register and automated vote counting procedures. International election observation groups dismissed these claims, together with the statistical evidence Sumate provided to support them.

Three key factors make Sumate's activities problematic for the Venezuelan government -- and now, it would seem, the opposition:

By focusing on election transparency issues, Sumate has been fronting what the government perceives to be a covert US campaign of destabilising Chavez through undermining his democratic credentials and legitimacy.

Funding for Sumate's activities has come from USAID and the US quasi-governmental organisation, the National Endowment for Democracy. This has fuelled the government's suspicions of the group and its intentions. Moreover, receiving foreign funding for political activities in Venezuela is illegal, and prosecutions against figures on the Sumate executive are scheduled to proceed at the end of the year. The National Assembly also is to investigate Sumate's finances, including funding for the proposed primary.

The government has linked Maria Corina Machado, one of the key Sumate figures, to individuals implicated in the 2002 coup attempt. Suspicions of her intentions and political loyalties were deepened in 2005 when President George Bush very publicly received her in Washington

Petkoff issue. On July 8, Petkoff, along with the conservative economist, Roberto Smith, announced that he would not take part in the Sumate primary, scheduled to be held August 13. In an uncharacteristically sharp



attack, Petkoff criticised the organisation for being arrogant and authoritarian. More damagingly, he compared its methods to those of Pedro Carmona, the so-called 'dictator for a day' who issued a series of undemocratic decrees when he assumed power during the temporary removal of Chavez in the 2002 coup attempt.

Petkoff was not alone in criticising Sumate. The nine candidates that have agreed to participate cautioned Sumate against assuming a political role. Both the Rosales and Borges camps issued strongly worded statements in which they emphasised that Sumate's engagement was purely technical and limited to the organisation of the primary. It was Sumate's attempt to develop a political consensus between the candidates that appears to underpin the politicians' rebuke. The group also had sought to determine which of the candidates registered for the primary would be forced to step down ahead of the contest. For the candidates, this represented an attempt by Sumate to usurp the role of political parties. According to Petkoff, Sumate was "claiming for itself the right to dictate to political sectors and the presidential candidates how they should behave."

Problematic primary. Petkoff since has been subject to vitriolic attack in the opposition media for his stance; critics claim that his rejection of the primary is based on his calculation that he will not win. While this may be true, it also shows why a primary may not be a good idea for the opposition: Petkoff would prefer that the candidate be chosen through some form of opinion poll survey. This would be a far better indicator of potential support for the opposition candidate.

By contrast, those most likely to participate in a primary will be opponents of the government. Consequently, the process may lead to the selection of the most conservative candidate, whose potential reach into pro-Chavez hearts and minds during the presidential campaign will be limited. There is also the concern that turnout in the primary will be low, damaging the opposition's attempts to dispel the impression that a vote for the opposition candidate in December would be a wasted vote.

Petkoff's position, which has been elaborated in his Tal Cual newspaper, represents a clear attempt to distance himself from groups such as Sumate



that the government characterises as the 'violent opposition', implicated in previous (and failed) anti-government campaigns. It is also an indication of the extent to which Sumate's activities have moved into the realms of the party political. However, this principled stand may have come too late for Petkoff to reap the dividends. There is little time for Petkoff to develop a cohesive campaign and position himself in the middle ground between the 'US-backed' opposition and the Chavez government. Moreover, if he reneges on the earlier pact with Borges and Rosales, Chavez and the victor in the Sumate primary may squeeze him out of the race.

CONCLUSION: Sumate's role in organising the primary may prove deeply damaging for the opposition in the longer term. By relying on the NGO, the opposition runs the risk of being linked to the United States and by default, disconnected from the economic and political interests of ordinary Venezuelans.