

# Comedian is serious: He's going to run against Chávez

**One of Venezuela's best-known entertainers, Benjamín Rausseo, known as Count of Guácharo, formed a party called Piedra and plans to stand against leftist President Hugo Chávez in the Dec. 3 elections.**

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**CARACAS** - Benjamín Rausseo, alias the Count of Guácharo, is best known for his bawdy, stand-up comedy act and his comic theme-park on the holiday island of Margarita, known as the "Kingdom of Musipán."

But now the Count says he's keen to acquire another title: He wants to be president of Venezuela. And the funny thing is, he may just prove more popular than any of the dozen or so opposition candidates whose hats are already in the ring.

"We're going to swap communism for tourism," says Rausseo, who has formed a party called *Piedra*, or rock, and plans to stand against leftist President Hugo Chávez in the Dec. 3 elections.

A self-made businessman of 45, the "Count" was born to a poor family in the eastern state of Monagas. As a kid, he sold newspapers and worked as a shoeshine boy, before studying drama and turning to comedy as a livelihood.

Today, he is one of Venezuela's best-known entertainers, with a comedy routine that is as untranslatable as it is unprintable, and a successful businessman who owns hotels and other companies.

Wearing a straw hat, and playing up his country accent, Rausseo delivers a stream of mainly obscene comments that make fun of his fellow Venezuelans as lazy and promiscuous party animals.

"Happiness guaranteed, or your vote back," promises the Count, whose announcement of his candidacy, late last month, provoked a storm of comment -- both favorable and hostile -- in the Venezuelan press and on the Internet.

Fellow comedian, and political commentator, Laureano Márquez launched a ferocious broadside in the evening paper

TalCual, likening Rausseo to "electoral Vaseline" for allegedly helping Chávez force through an election many in the opposition see as rigged by the government.

Unlike most of the candidates, the comedian has made no pledge to withdraw if certain minimum conditions are not met.

## JOKE IS ON OPPOSITION

But so far the joke is on the opposition: None of its candidates is polling in double figures, while Chávez remains hugely popular, with a 55 percent voting intention. That is despite the abysmal performance of his government team, which is widely perceived as corrupt and incompetent.

Is Rausseo serious? "Of course," he told the foreign press this week. "I've already spent over \$200 on the campaign!"

Joking apart, there is much speculation as to who might be behind a presidential campaign that has confused many in both government and opposition camps.

## **POLITICAL SCENE**

Early this year, a Venezuelan business group that has never been identified hired U.S. political consultant Dick Morris to do an election-year analysis of the political scene. With the help of focus groups and a survey conducted by Oscar Schemel, director of the Venezuelan polling organization Hinterlaces, Morris concluded that the election was wide-open to an "outsider."

When asked who they would vote for, 17 percent of respondents said, "someone new," and a further 10 percent said "none" of the current contenders.

Morris defined the ideal "outsider" as someone from a humble background, between 40 and 50 years old and with a proven track-record as a professional -- but not a technocrat.

The message, he said, should be simple and avoid identification with either of the political extremes.

Step forward Rausseo, who formally launched his candidacy just two weeks after the poll results were announced -- and who has refused to name his backers.

The Caracas rumor-mill has accused him of receiving money from the Chávez government -- supposedly to damage the opposition -- from Washington, or from billionaire businessman Gustavo Cisneros, for whose Venevisión TV channel Rausseo worked for many years.

The president's campaign chief, Francisco Ameliach, said the comedian was, "the most serious candidate the opposition has so far presented," but did not admit to government funding.

U.S. ambassador William Brownfield joked that he had offered to buy Rausseo a coffee on a recent visit to the embassy, but that he had refused even that.

Cisneros has kept mum so far.

## **'VERY VULNERABLE'**

"If they're paying me, I wish they'd deposit the money," says the candidate, who sidestepped a question from The Miami Herald on the subject of what he calls his "hooded" campaign team.

"My campaign team is all 25 million Venezuelans," he said.

"Because even the under-age are going to vote for me."

So far, there are no reliable poll results to back up the anecdotal evidence of his popularity. Polling analyst Alfredo Keller says his perception is that the candidacy is "very vulnerable."

"For one thing," he told The Miami Herald, "he's open to the accusation that he's being backed by Chávez. For another, it's a campaign based on comedy.

"How many more jokes can he come up with between now and the elections?" Keller said.