

Chávez rival gains momentum, still faces long odds

Venezuela's opposition presidential hopeful, Manuel Rosales, is proving a more effective candidate than expected.

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BARQUISIMETO, Venezuela - At first glance, Manuel Rosales seems like a strange choice for a presidential candidate to take on the powerful and charismatic incumbent, President Hugo Chávez.

The 53-year-old Rosales dresses and talks like a cattle rancher and has traditional political roots. He's not a particularly charming man in person or on stage, and has been caught on more than one occasion fumbling his words.

But Rosales' straight talk and his gumption to face up to Chávez -- who has won the last two elections, survived a coup and a recall referendum -- seems to have won him some fans and rejuvenated a moribund opposition.

On a recent campaign stop in this northwestern city, Rosales lifted his 7-month-old daughter, Alejandra, high above his head, while a surprisingly large crowd of supporters chanted a slogan befitting a man who is putting his political neck on the line: "Risk it! Risk it! Risk it!"

In fact, Rosales, who was the governor of the oil-rich state of Zulia before becoming a presidential candidate, has been somewhat of a surprise in the run-up to a Dec. 3 election that wasn't supposed to hold any drama because of Chávez's standing in the polls and his solid grip on power.

Chávez, a blustery critic of the Bush administration and self-proclaimed architect of "21st Century Socialism," has spread Venezuela's burgeoning oil wealth to the poor through dozens of popular social programs and filled government posts with allies since his first election in 1998.

SPLINTERED OPPOSITION

His consistently high approval ratings and control over the different wings of government frustrated the opposition so much that it boycotted legislative elections last year, leaving Chávez's movement with all 167 seats and the

opposition with a huge credibility gap and split over whether it should boycott the presidential race as well.

Then came Rosales, a lifelong politician from a farming family. With a simple campaign littered with Chávez-like populism -- if not charisma -- Rosales has convinced most of the splintered opposition to participate in full and ordinary people to hit the streets.

Chávez, who early in the campaign focused most of his attacks on Bush and barely mentioned Rosales, has recently been forced to respond to attacks on Venezuela's growing crime and corruption and his massive aid to other countries, including a reported \$2 billion a year subsidy to Cuba.

Large crowds have turned up at Rosales' rallies, and one recent poll put Rosales eight percentage points behind Chávez, although most polls have put him closer to 20 points behind.

"When we started, we were like [Don] Quixote," Rosales told a group of foreign journalists after the rally in Barquisimeto. "[But] what seemed impossible three months ago, doesn't seem impossible now." Perhaps not impossible, but almost so.

Rosales' "Risk It" slogan underlines the myriad difficulties he faces, including concern that many in the opposition will abstain from voting in the face of Chávez's strengths. Indeed, some already are claiming the government is preparing the fraud and intimidating would-be voters.

A video passed to the media earlier this month by Rosales' campaign showed Rafael Ramírez, oil minister and head of the state PDVSA oil company, threatening company employees with expulsion if they didn't support Chávez. Afterwards, Chávez himself repeated Ramírez's boast that PDVSA is "red, very red" -- a reference to Chávez's iconic color.

Still, Rosales remains steadfast and hopeful.

"I don't know any political movement that was made from doing nothing," he said, before acknowledging that the government pressures may keep some from voting for him. "We are fighting against fear."

He is fighting against a huge machine as well.

Chávez's government has used state television and lax election rules regarding incumbent candidates to promote the president. One opposition group estimated that Chávez had a 22-to-1 edge in promotional coverage on television between August and late September.

To counter what Rosales calls a "powerful monster," he has targeted Chávez's weak points: rampant crime and corruption -- the latter partly fueled by oil profits -- and the president's lavish spending on foreign aid. Chávez has been selling oil on easy terms and financing infrastructure and oil-related projects everywhere from Jamaica to Argentina, trying to build support for his leftist policies.

Rosales says he will spend oil revenue as well, but at home through a government-issued debit card he calls *Mi Negra* -- an endearing term that roughly translated means "My Black Dear," but also is a reference to the color of crude -- so the poor can buy basic necessities.

Rosales may have been the only opposition candidate who could have credibly launched such a boldly populist proposal.

INDEPENDENT STREAK

For many, Rosales personifies his home state, Zulia, the capital of the country's oil industry with a fierce independent streak that draws comparisons to Texas.

Rosales' image is more farmer than *político*. He grew up in a small rural village south of Lake Maracaibo and still prefers to dress in simple button downs, jeans and workman's boots. But he's won every local political post that he's sought, from councilman to mayor of Maracaibo and governor of Zulia.

Rosales also has distanced himself from the largely Caracas-based opposition politicians that many associate with the type of failed governments that paved the way for Chávez's first electoral victory in 1998.

In the 1990s he broke with the longtime ruling party, Democratic Action, but his opponents say he is still closely connected to Venezuela's traditional political elite. They point to the fact that the day after a 2002 coup against Chávez, Rosales was one of several dozen who signed a draconian decree issued by the coup government; Chávez and his supporters upended the coup in 48 hours.

On the political front, Rosales insists he is both socially progressive and fiscally conservative, a combination that can be confusing.

He said he admires leftist Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's social programs, and conservative Colombian President Alvaro Uribe's leadership qualities. He says he will defend private property and respect multinationals, while simultaneously launching *Mi Negra* for the poor.

In person, and in public as well, Rosales is a man of few words who doesn't like to talk about his personal life or delve too deeply into philosophical discussions.

After a recent 16-mile march through the capital, Caracas, that drew a massive crowd that some said was in the hundreds of thousands, the candidate offered only a minute-long speech, something of a disappointment to those whose feet were hurting from the walk and throats were swollen from screaming for a change in this country of 26 million.

"We have to recognize that the government has strengths, but strengths that take advantage of the necessities of the poor," Rosales told the foreign journalists.

During his speech in Barquisimeto, Rosales worked this theme. He spoke at length about *Mi Negra* and promised to expand educational opportunities and continue Chávez's social programs in the poor neighborhoods.

The crowd responded: "Risk it! Risk it! Risk it."