

S. Fla. groups unite in drive to oust Chávez

Local Venezuelan opposition groups have put aside their differences to work for the defeat of controversial leftist President Hugo Chávez in the country's Dec. 3 election.

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Argenis Ecarri is ready for the Venezuelan presidential elections.

Three months ago, he and 53 of his friends went to their homeland's consulate and changed their voter registration so they could cast ballots in South Florida on Dec. 3. The friends have also organized carpools to the polls on election day and a tailgating party once they get there, all in an effort to help opposition candidate Manuel Rosales defeat firebrand President Hugo Chávez.

"What's at stake is our country's democracy and the possibility of one day returning there," said Ecarri, 37, a Doral resident. "If Chávez wins, our hopes of that are pretty slim."

That sense of urgency has gripped the broader anti-Chávez Venezuelan community in recent months, driving previously feuding organizations to unite to work for his defeat.

The new umbrella group, called the Venezuelan Unity Command, has gathered 700 volunteers to work at the local polls, which will be located at the Orange Bowl. The group created a dozen work committees covering different aspects of the election. Among them: a get-out-the-vote team, a group charged with communications with the consulate and a legal task force that will help with voter complaints on election day.

"We have to work together to get Chávez out, because that is the most important thing," said Ernesto Ackerman, president of the Miami-based Independent Venezuelan-American Citizens. "None of us can do it alone."

Other groups that are part of the coalition include All for Venezuela, We Are All Venezuela, and the Venezuelan-American Brotherhood.

PREVIOUS DIVISION

During the last Venezuelan election in 2004, a failed referendum intended to oust Chávez, many of the same groups united only to split over a dispute about the direction of the local anti-Chávez movement. Although the newly unified activists now decline to talk openly about the acrimonious power struggle, they concede that until recently, several of them were not speaking to each other.

"If Chávez stays, Venezuela will become another Cuba," said Patricia Andrade, of the Venezuela Awareness Foundation. "We must sit down together and cooperate."

Despite polls showing Chávez has a strong lead, it's a time of optimism for the anti-Chávez activists, who had been disheartened in recent years by the divided opposition in Venezuela and the failure of the referendum.

"The happy reception that Rosales has received in Venezuela has brought us hope and a great optimism," Ecarri said. "A few months ago, there was no hope."

The Venezuelan opposition called off a primary election in early August, with several other candidates pulling out of the race and agreeing to back Rosales, the former governor of the oil-rich state of Zulia.

Rosales has given special attention to South Florida's expatriate community, sending one of his campaign committee leaders to Miami Nov. 13 to address the local coalition.

"Miami is a very important piece of Rosales' campaign," said William Ojeda, the head of Rosales' volunteer committee, at a meeting with the coalition in Doral. "Each vote is essential now."

LURING EXPATRIATES

More than 18,000 Venezuelans are registered to vote with the Miami consulate, which helps Venezuelans living in Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina. According to 2000 Census figures, more than 40,000 Venezuelans live in Broward and Miami-Dade counties, though the actual number is thought to be much higher.

If elected, Rosales will attempt to lure expatriates back to Venezuela through tax incentives, Ojeda said.

Although Rosales has drawn large and enthusiastic crowds as he campaigns across Venezuela, most opinion polls show him substantially trailing Chávez.

Opposition members say those polls are inaccurate, though Chávez supporters dismiss those theories.

"When there's not an election, everyone agrees that Chávez is very popular, but every time an election comes, they say he's down in the polls," said local Venezuelan journalist Carlos Matamoros, who plans on voting for Chávez.

``He's the only president that I've seen who has done an important social work, with important efforts to help the poor."

Chávez does not have an organized campaign in Miami, according to supporters and consular staff who were appointed by him.

The local community overwhelmingly supported the 2004 referendum, with 12,600 voting to oust Chávez while only about 400 voted to keep him in office, according to the consulate.

In that election, many local voters complained that their names were not on the rolls despite having registered. Others could not vote because the Venezuelan government imposed a requirement that local voters must prove they were in the United States legally before they could cast ballots.

Venezuela's Miami consul general, Antonio José Hernández Borgo, said that the Venezuelan government has not yet said whether it will demand proof of legal residency again.

Rosales supporters say that election law prohibits it.

"The referendum was unprecedented, so the government took advantage of the lack of a set regulation to impose that residency requirement to suppress the expatriate vote," Andrade said. ``In the presidential election the law clearly says that all you need is a national ID card, but the government could always try to invent something just before the election to make it more difficult for people here to vote."

The consul dismissed such accusations of government meddling, pointing to the last election as proof.

"There is an incongruence in those accusations, because here we always have more votes against us," he said.

``Also, the vote abroad is only .03 percent of the . . . total vote. It's not significant."