

Chávez aiming for a landslide

Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez had visions of 10 million votes as his opponent urged defiance ahead of today's election.

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CARACAS - Billboards, banners and graffiti lined the streets of Caracas on Saturday as Venezuelans readied for a tough-fought presidential election between incumbent Hugo Chávez and opposition candidate Manuel Rosales.

While Chávez supporters clad in his signature red and others in Rosales's blue called for people to vote, soldiers and police began to deploy near some of the more than 33,000 voting centers that will be used in today's election.

The balloting will be a fitting end to an unusually active period of elections in Latin America and the Caribbean -- 12 in the past year -- largely split between left and right-of-center candidates. Today's election looks to be a tiebreaker of sorts.

Chávez, a self-proclaimed socialist and enemy of the Bush administration, does not seem satisfied with simply winning: He is aiming for 10 million votes, out of nearly 16 million registered voters, and his campaign has stamped two open hands -- 10 fingers -- on baseball hats and T-shirts across the country to promote this goal.

Rosales, a career politician from the western oil-producing state of Zulia who is more pro-capitalist and friendly toward the United States, is pushing his followers to "Risk It" by defying the Chávez government, which has a huge electoral machine.

Like Chávez, who has gained popularity with his widespread health, education and food subsidy programs, Rosales has many populist proposals, including issuing a special debit card to help the poor pay for groceries.

Both candidates wound up their campaigns with huge rallies in different parts of the nation last week. Each side seems confident, although most polls show Chávez with a clear lead.

Questions linger as to how the losing side will respond. The opposition cried fraud after a recall referendum failed to oust Chávez in 2004. Chávez, first elected in 1998, is seeking another six-year presidential term.

In a short time, Rosales has successfully united the opposition's forces and created a viable opposition party to challenge Chávez's rule, which includes total control over the country's legislature following the opposition's boycott of the elections last December.

But the opposition candidate risks alienating some if he concedes too quickly or angering Chávez supporters if he challenges the vote too long.

The European Union, the Organization of American States, the Atlanta-based Carter Center and a host of other national organizations will be monitoring the vote.

Venezuela has electronic voting that many worry can be technically manipulated in numerous manners. What's more, some provinces will be using a fingerprint ID service, designed to avoid repeat voting but allegedly able to record a person's secret vote.

Despite the concerns, both campaigns are waging a massive get-out-the-vote drive. Some pro-Chávez factions will be playing music from vehicles in the early hours of the morning and providing free motorcycle taxi service for those who live far away.

Media organizations have committed to not revealing exit poll results until the official results begin trickling in three hours after the polls close. In the past, questionable exit polls have provoked widespread discontent with the final results.