

USAID/OTI Venezuela Field Report

October - December 2008

Program Description

In August 2002, USAID initiated a program in Venezuela to provide assistance to maintain democratic stability and strengthen the country's fragile democratic institutions. The program operates out of the U.S. Embassy and is part of a larger U.S. diplomatic effort to promote democracy in Venezuela.

The Venezuela program has two main objectives: (1) strengthen democratic institutions and promote space for democratic dialogue, and (2) encourage citizen participation in democratic processes. USAID works with several implementing partners drawn from the spectrum of civil society—focusing on dialogue, public debate, citizen participation, and training for democratic leadership; offering technical assistance for political parties; and providing technical support to human rights practitioners and the supporting civil society.

Country Situation

During the last three months of the year, Venezuelan politics focused on the country's municipal and gubernatorial elections, which were held on November 23, 2008. Negotiations between the parties continued throughout October and November—among the opposition parties as well as between the governing PSUV (*Partido Socialista Unido Venezuela*) and its allies—to field unity candidates that would represent one side or the other in the local contests.

The elections took place without any major incidents, and both sides claimed victory. The opposition won in five states: Carabobo, Miranda, Tachira, Zulia, and Nueva Esparta. The opposition also won the mayor's office in Gran Caracas as well as a majority of the races for the other mayoralties (Chacao, El Hatillo, Baruta, and Sucre) within the capital city. (The government candidate won in Libertador.) The Government of Venezuela (GOV) retained control over 17 states, although the states won by the opposition contain nearly 45 percent of the population. At the mayoral level, GOV candidates captured a majority of the open positions, although the opposition did win some key cities. A pronounced rural-urban divide was apparent in the results, with rural areas continuing to support GOV candidates by wide margins.

Late in the campaign it appeared the GOV would bring criminal charges against two leading opposition candidates: Henrique Capriles Radonski, the eventual winner of the governorship of Miranda, and Manuel Rosales, the candidate for mayor of Maracaibo. It appears that threats to revive charges against Capriles Radonski, which stem from the 2002 coup, have been abandoned. However, a corruption case against the triumphant Rosales is going forward in the post-election environment. In addition, corruption charges have been brought against a former mayor and member of the PSUV who broke with the party and supported his daughter's candidacy for governor.

The Venezuelan Constitution limits the president to two consecutive terms, and immediately following the elections, second-term President Hugo Chavez announced his latest push to repeal presidential term limits. The initial plan called for collecting signatures to implement the change, but it was later decided that the process would take too long. In an earlier attempt, Chavez had sought to repeal the term limit through a presidential proposal, but the reform was narrowly defeated in a referendum on December 2, 2007, so this second avenue was closed to him. The only other method for amending the constitution is to have the change proposed by the National Assembly. An amendment has been submitted, and Chavez has called for a referendum in February 2009. Thus far, the president has resisted efforts to expand the proposal to include all elected officials. [This element was added to the proposal in early 2009.] Opposition leaders, student groups, and other activists have begun to mobilize in an effort to defeat the proposed amendment. Recent polling indicates that about 65 percent of the population is against removing term limits from the constitution.

On the international front, President Chavez continued his outreach to Iran, Russia, and the rest of his partners in the ALBA process, particularly Ecuador and Bolivia, signing a number of agreements in order to strengthen ties between them. [The ALBA process is a model of economic integration established as an alternative to the free trade model.] President Chavez spoke extensively about the world financial crisis, stating that the capitalist system has reached its final stages and trumpeting Venezuela's "Socialism of the 21st Century" as the solution to the current economic problems. However, with oil selling at about \$40 a barrel throughout the quarter, Venezuela has not been immune to the effects of the crisis. And if oil remains at this price, Venezuela will suffer a serious budget shortfall in

2009, as the current budget was set with oil prices forecast at \$60 a barrel.

President Chavez congratulated President-elect Barack Obama on his victory and spoke of the opportunity that it presented to improve relations with the United States. Chavez declared his willingness to meet with Obama and recommended a policy of respect toward Latin America as starting point for a possible new relationship. However, subsequent statements have been more critical, and it remains to be seen whether any changes in the relationship will occur.

Franklin Duran, a Venezuelan accused of being an undeclared agent of a foreign government (Venezuela), was convicted in Miami. Duran's lawyers have appealed the conviction, but the verdict has already had repercussions in Venezuela and Argentina, as opposition parties have called for investigations into others implicated during the trial.

OTI Highlights

A. Narrative Summary

USAID continued to work with local counterparts during the quarter, providing support for nonpartisan education campaigns. Activities have focused on generating civic participation from all sectors and political parties, as well as supporting forums on principles of good governance. The program supported various efforts during the quarter, including—

- Forums addressing the tenets of democratic governance and the value of responding to citizens' wants and needs,
- Local groups creating nonpartisan materials focused on local governance based on democratic values, (Materials were provided to community leaders and other members of civil society.)
- Voter registration campaigns working to register people in time for the elections,
- Neighborhood activities and radio call-in shows sponsored by local nongovernmental organizations to stimulate debate on issues that most affect ordinary Venezuelan citizens,
- Open and informative debates for candidates at the local level,
- Training and other support for human rights groups, some of which have recently focused on monitoring the upswing in threats to human rights defenders, and
- Training for political parties on internal democratization.

B. Grants Activity Summary

USAID/OTI, through implementing partners, approved 33 grants during the quarter.

C. Indicators of Success

The program has strived this quarter to take recent lessons learned and implement them going forward. Efforts have been made to focus debate on issues that are relevant to average Venezuelans and to work with willing partners in making government more responsive and accountable.

Reports and public activities by grantees were successful in diffusing information about areas critical to a functioning democracy, including human rights and other important social issues. These activities show the successful work of building up the capacity of civil society organizations to play a meaningful role in Venezuelan society.

Program Appraisal

The Venezuela program is like USAID programs in other countries in this hemisphere and around the world in that it seeks to strengthen democracy and its supporting institutions. The program in Venezuela is designed to strengthen civil society and political parties, the key components to a healthy democracy and the channels through which citizens often express their desires, needs, and concerns as well as find ways to collectively address them.

Threats against program counterparts continue, and the level of harassment increased as the elections drew closer.

USAID will continue to monitor these threats. Physical threats against human rights defenders have continued unabated throughout the quarter.

Next Steps/Immediate Priorities

USAID will continue its work in civic education and citizen participation, while continuing to support human rights defenders as they improve their ability to research, report on, and present cases of human rights abuses.