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FEATURED Q&A

Will Venezuela's Elections Be Free and Fair?



Polls suggest President Nicolás Maduro's party could lose control of the National Assembly in the Dec. 6 legislative elections. // File Photo: Venezuelan Government.

Q Venezuela's government is failing to ensure that the country's Dec. 6 elections will be free and fair, Organization of American States Secretary General Luis Almagro wrote this month in a letter to the head of the country's electoral board.

The government will not allow OAS election observers into the country and will only permit the Union of South American Nations to observe balloting. President Nicolás Maduro has dismissed the OAS as a puppet of the United States. Is there any hope that the election will be fair if only observers from Unasur are present? What will be the impact of Almagro's letter? What is the likelihood that Maduro will allow other organizations to send election observers? If he does not, will the results of the election be internationally accepted? What might happen to Venezuela's geopolitical standing if the election is seen as undemocratic?

A Benigno Alarcón, director of the Political Studies Center at Andrés Bello Catholic University in Caracas: "The perception of 67 percent of voters is that already elections are neither free nor fair, according to our own polls. However, the presence of qualified election observers in Venezuela, even as late as today, could create trust among more voters, and having observers there will be very important to accepting the final results of this election. The agreement signed by the National Electoral Council and Unasur, from what we have seen, is a limited and regional electoral observation initiative that is very far from what we understand as a formal international electoral observation mission. It catches our attention that some of the South American governments will risk their reputation by been involved

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TODAY'S NEWS

POLITICAL

More Mexicans Leaving U.S. Than Entering: Study

Between 2009 and 2014, one million Mexicans and their families left the United States for Mexico, while during the same period, 870,000 left Mexico for the United States, according to the Pew Research Center.

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BUSINESS

Stonegate Bank Launches Debit Card for U.S. Travelers to Cuba

The bank's debit MasterCard is the first issued by a U.S. bank for use in Cuba.

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POLITICAL

Argentines Head to Polls Sunday

The ruling party's Daniel Scioli faces off in the country's presidential runoff against the opposition's Mauricio Macri. Macri, who has vowed to dismantle current President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's economic model, is projected to win, according to polls.

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Macri // File Photo: Macri Campaign.

POLITICAL NEWS

More Mexicans Leaving U.S. Than Arriving: Study

More Mexicans migrated back to Mexico from the United States between 2009 and 2014 than the other way around, according to a new Pew Research Center analysis of government data from both countries. During that time period, one million Mexicans and their families, which include their U.S.-born children, moved from the United States to Mexico. In the same period, 870,000 Mexicans left Mexico for the United States, creating a net loss of 140,000 in those five years. The figures include both

Mexico is the birth country of 28 percent of immigrants to the United States

legal and illegal immigration. Mexico is the birth country of 28 percent of immigrants to the United States, the largest percentage of any country of origin for immigrants. However, the numbers are not exact, Pew said, because there are no official counts on how many Mexican immigrants leave and enter the United States during any given year, but the organization said the report uses the best available government data. The report used survey data from the 2014 Mexican National Survey of Demographic Dynamics, or ENADID, and the 2010 and 2000 Mexican decennial censuses to calculate how many people left the United States for Mexico. To calculate how many Mexicans were leaving Mexico for the United States, Pew used data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (2005-2013) and the Current Population Survey (2000-2014), both adjusted for an undercount. In its analysis, Pew attributed the net loss in Mexican immigrants to the United States to the slow recovery of

the U.S. economy after the Great Recession, stricter enforcement of immigration laws, and increased deportation of Mexican immigrants. The Pew report added, however, that the majority of the 1 million immigrants who left the U.S. during the five year time period left of their own accord, according to ENADID survey data.

DR Violated Int'l Law by Stripping Citizenship: Amnesty

Moves by the Dominican Republic to strip citizenship from people of Haitian descent violated international law, Amnesty International said in a report Thursday, Agence France-Presse reported. In 2013, a Dominican court ruling said people born in the country to parents without legal residency did not have citizenship in the Dominican Republic. "The decision of the Dominican Constitutional Court... resulted in a large number of people being arbitrarily deprived of nationality and subsequently exposed to a situation of statelessness," the report said. Most of those affected by the ruling are of Haitian descent. Haitians widely saw the move as racist, and the decision damaged ties between the neighboring countries. In its report, Amnesty International said the Dominican Republic through policies started in the 1990s and continued in the 2013 ruling rendered tens of thousands of people "ghost citizens." The ruling two years ago immediately made 250,000 people stateless, the report said. The human rights group called on the country to address the issue. "Authorities in the Dominican Republic must urgently find a long-term solution to this crisis," said Erika Guevara-Rosas, Amnesty International's director for the Americas. The 2013 ruling led to international criticism of the Dominican Republic, which led the government to establish a process through which some 50,000 people would be allowed to remain in the country. However, most of those eligible were unable to complete the process before the government-set deadline. [Editor's note: See [Q&A](#) published in the Oct. 18, 2013 issue of the Advisor, shortly after the constitutional court's decision.]

NEWS BRIEFS

Argentines Head to Polls Sunday to Select President

Argentines head to the polls Sunday in the country's presidential runoff to select the country's next leader. Ruling party candidate Daniel Scioli, the governor of Buenos Aires province, faces off against the opposition's Mauricio Macri, the mayor of the capital city. Polls are showing Macri, who delivered an unexpectedly strong showing in the first round, in the lead.

Colombia's Senate Approves Plebiscite for Peace Accords

Colombia's Senate on Wednesday approved a measure that will allow voters to decide whether to accept any eventual peace accord between the government and the FARC rebels, according to Colombia Reports. In September, the two sides set a tentative March 23 deadline to reach a peace agreement, but voters would have to approve it in a plebiscite in order for the accord to come into force. Only a 13 percent "yes" vote would be enough to ratify the peace deal, due to historically low voter turnout rates for the South American nation.

Syrian Woman With Stolen Passport Arrested in Costa Rica

Costa Rican authorities have detained a Syrian woman with a stolen Greek passport, just days after five Syrian men were arrested in Honduras with fake passports, trying to travel to the United States, BBC News reported Thursday. The authorities say the woman had flown to Costa Rica from Peru. A sixth Syrian man was turned away from entering Honduras on Nov. 13, and a seventh was detained in Paraguay on Sunday. News of recent arrests of Syrian migrants in Latin America has stoked fears in the United States that militants may try to enter the country via the same routes as have the arrested refugees.

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in a self-censored initiative like the one mentioned. We consider that implementing initiatives like this could become a very bad practice that represents risk for the prestige of the international institution of the election observation, by permitting any government to use this kind of limited electoral overlooking initiative in order to legitimize low-integrity and unfair election processes. Almagro has the duty of defending the organization's principles and the democratic institutions as he is doing, but he needs the active support of all the American democracies. Unfortunately, there is no chance that Maduro nor the Venezuelan National Electoral Council will accept qualified election observers in this election because there are abundant weaknesses and problems. However, and just because of this reason, it is extremely important that the international community keep their eyes on Venezuela before, during and after this difficult but important election. The country's peace and governability will depend on the final result of this election."

A **Kevin Casas-Zamora, director of the Peter D. Bell Rule of Law Program at the Inter-American Dialogue and former vice president of Costa Rica:** "Given the level of abuse of state resources by the ruling party and the restrictions under which the Venezuelan opposition operates (including the imprisonment of some of its leaders), I don't think anybody entertains any hope of this election being fair. The real question is whether it will be clean. And Unasur's observers will not be in a position to tell us that. The election 'accompaniment' agreement signed by Unasur and Venezuela's electoral authorities incorporates all sorts of restrictions to the work of observers and, crucially, does not explicitly allow checks on the software inside the voting machines. Moreover, Unasur's mission will be partially funded by Venezuelan authorities, in what is a clear breach of internationally accepted practice, as stated in the International Declaration of

Principles for Election Observation, ratified by all major organizations in the electoral monitoring field but not by Unasur. All this is suggestive of a complacent mission, one that will be unable to bestow any trust on an electoral system that, according to recent polls, is deemed untrustworthy by more than 70 percent of the Venezuelan population. Serious international observation, by the likes of the OAS and the European Union, would have been crucial to reassure not just the opposition but the Venezuelan citizenry as a whole that votes would be properly counted and that any fraud would not go undetected. This will not happen now. As a result of this, the Venezuelan authorities have allowed the international perception of the electoral process to be defined by OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro's devastating indictment. In the light of this perception and of polling numbers that appear heavily favorable to the opposition, any electoral victory by the ruling party—fair or not—will be met by widespread international skepticism, loud accusations of fraud from the opposition and, almost surely, severe street violence. Any claim to democratic legitimacy that the Venezuelan government enjoys would be shattered, and the country would find itself utterly ungovernable and increasingly isolated in the region."

A **Jorge Lara-Urbaneja, partner at Arciniegas, Lara, Briceño & Plana in Bogotá:** "President Maduro has not and will not allow observers from OAS or any other trustworthy organization for the Dec. 6 elections. There is no reason for Maduro to change that initial statement now. Observers from Unasur will be allowed, but its secretary general, former Colombian President Ernesto Samper, has already committed unconditional support to the Maduro regime. Whether the results are internationally accepted has never been an issue concerning elections in Venezuela. The Venezuelan government has been an electoral minority even since Chávez

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BUSINESS NEWS

Stonegate Launches Debit Card for U.S. Travelers to Cuba

Florida-based Stonegate Bank on Thursday became the first U.S. bank to allow its customers to use their debit cards in Cuba. The bank, headquartered in Pompano Beach, said its debit MasterCard can now be used in 10,000 hotels, restaurants and other businesses in Cuba. "This is the first step in relieving the burden of U.S. travelers carrying cash when traveling to Cuba and another step in normalizing commercial relations between the two countries,"



Seleski // File Photo: Stonegate Bank.

Dave Seleski, the bank's president and chief executive officer, said in a statement. "Hopefully more issuing banks will help this process by approving credit and debit cards as well." Cardholders will need to sign for all purchases with their debit cards, the bank said, adding that the cards will likely be able to be used in ATMs next year. In March, MasterCard allowed its U.S.-issued cards to be used in Cuba, but federal rules left banks to decide whether their cards could be used on the island. Jeff Wilson, president of MasterCard's GeoCentral Division, called the move a "milestone" that is part of an effort "to deliver our cardholders a convenient and safe way to pay when traveling to Cuba." Stonegate Bank has 21 offices in Florida, along with \$2.31 billion in assets and \$1.95 billion in deposits. [Editor's note: See Q&A on whether Cuba represents risk or opportunity for U.S. banks in the July 30-Aug. 12 issue of the Financial Services Advisor.]

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was running. But the official apparatus has in every instance taken a variety of actions directed at fixing the final numbers. The government has already changed the electoral

“Now the entire Venezuelan population is suffering from the government’s failure.”

— Jorge Lara-Urbaneja

circumscriptions map, so as to increase the number of elected incumbent from areas where supposedly there is an official majority. This time, however, all those strategies may end up being much less effective, because now the entire Venezuelan population is suffering from the government’s failure. The impact of the steep devaluation, high inflation and shortages, exacerbated by the government’s measures, are severely affecting those who should have benefited from the revolution in the first place. So, the question is to what extent the Maduro government will control the election results and whether the opposition will end up with a substantial majority in the Assembly that will make a difference going forward. But, besides controlling election results, the Venezuelan regime has imposed political and administrative measures eliminating the practical effects of any electoral defeats.”

A **Harold Trinkunas, director of the Latin America Initiative at the Brookings Institution:** “President Maduro may yet regret his decision to refuse to invite an OAS electoral observation mission, although it is too late for him to change his mind. The massive difference in the poll numbers, with the generic ballot running 2-1 in favor of the opposition, suggests the government is

headed for defeat in the Dec. 6 legislative elections. This has created high expectations among many Venezuelans that these elections will bring change. However, the system for apportioning legislative seats in Venezuela tends to over represent pro-government parties, and as OAS Secretary General Almagro noted in this letter, the electoral playing field in Venezuela is stacked against the opposition in important ways. As a result, there is a significant possibility that the opposition will underperform its polling numbers. In a country that is highly polarized and where only a third of the population has confidence in the electoral authorities, such an outcome, especially if the gap between polls and announced results is large, is likely to be interpreted as fraud. This makes

“There is a significant possibility that the opposition will underperform its polling numbers.”

— Harold Trinkunas

it particularly important that the Unasur electoral accompaniment mission (now welcomed by the opposition) exert itself to establish its credibility. In the absence of a credible international mission, there would only be domestic electoral observers, who are particularly vulnerable to pressure from the government, to provide a second opinion on the integrity of the ballot. In Venezuela, doubts over election results would heighten already high levels of political tension and make it even more difficult to address the very serious economic and security problems facing the country.”

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at gkuleta@thedialogue.org.

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