

## **Chávez's list**

Francisco Rodríguez

Last Friday, during a nationally televised cabinet meeting, President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela made a striking assertion. He called on officials in government to “bury [pro-Chávez deputy Luis] Tascón’s famous list.” This was a reference to the list of Venezuelans who had signed the petition to hold a recall referendum last year against Chávez, and which was widely used by government officials and backers to pressure opposition supporters into changing their political position. Across the nation, Tascón’s list was drawn on by government officials not only to screen applicants for government jobs, but also to determine access to a wide range of public services including food and unemployment subsidies, government-subsidized credit, and issuance of passports and identity cards.

Chávez’s reference to Tascón’s list is startling because it is the first public assertion by a government official that the list was indeed used to intimidate Venezuelans who opposed his government. Indeed, Chávez described at length how the list was used in the past in affirming that the situation that gave rise to it “is now behind us.” In a blatant display of duplicity, government officials had up to now claimed that the publication of the list of petition co-signers on deputy Tascón’s web page was meant to protect those whose signature had been falsely incorporated into it. At last, the Venezuelan government has admitted the role that was really played by what was only one in the many components of its strategy to rig last August’s referendum in its favor.

Wait a minute, you may say. Weren’t the results of this referendum publicly availed by the Carter Center and the OAS? Indeed, they were. But just like the OAS and Carter Center made no mention of Tascón’s list nor of the widespread campaign of intimidation carried out by the government on the eve of the referendum in its final reports, they also failed to mention much else that went on in Venezuela and which made last year’s referendum a far cry from meeting the standard of fair and free elections which these bodies were meant to ensure.

The OAS and Carter Center, for example, failed to mention that the President of Venezuela’s electoral council publicly interviewed with Congress for a position as Supreme Court Justice during the referendum campaign (a position to which he was subsequently appointed with the votes of government deputies as a reward for his exemplary behavior). They also failed to mention the blatant use of government resources in Chávez’s campaign, perhaps best exemplified by the colossal Chávez campaign banner covering the whole south side of a landmark building belonging to the Armed Forces in Caracas (to get an idea, think of a Bush-Cheney banner marking the entrance to West Point).

What is worse, these institutions restricted themselves to a reading of the consistency of total electoral tallies with those produced by electoral machines in their evaluation of the referendum results. The software of those machines was produced by Smartmatic, a company of dubious reputation whose contract was approved with the votes of only the government representatives to the electoral council. Relying, as the Carter Center and the OAS did, on the statistical patterns present in the vote data to tell if there was fraud or not is unlikely to be very helpful: as Edward Felten of Princeton and

Aviel Rubin and Adam Stubblefield of Johns Hopkins have pointed out, the forms of electronic election fraud that are most likely to succeed will not produce detectable statistical anomalies. A timely and publicly transparent audit of the paper records of citizens' votes would have been much more convincing. Yet inexplicably, the Carter Center and OAS shied away from demanding such an audit, and conformed themselves with auditing a 1% sample that was picked through a computer program written by the staff of the same pro-government official whose conduct throughout the process was openly questioned by the opposition (that official has now been rewarded with the presidency of the electoral council). The one careful statistical study of the audit, by Ricardo Hausmann of Harvard and Roberto Rigobón of MIT, showed significant differences between the characteristics of audited and non-audited centers – a fact that in itself is impossible to reconcile with the supposed randomness of the sample.

The Venezuelan conflict is not about a struggle of rich against poor. Despite the highest windfall in oil revenues since the nineteen-seventies, Venezuelan poverty and unemployment rates now stand at historical highs, substantially above the levels they held when Chávez came to office. It is about a government that is systematically taking away the basic political and civil liberties that Venezuelans had enjoyed since the downfall of their last dictatorship in 1958. The current candidates to the OAS General Secretariat should be very careful regarding the lengths they are willing to go to ensure Venezuela's vote. That vote is likely to come at a high cost – especially to ordinary Venezuelans.

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