



Elections in Venezuela – A Follow Up

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On 6th December 2015, Venezuela held elections for its National Assembly and the results displayed a clear win for the opposition coalition Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD). This is the first time since 1999 that the opposition has won a clear majority in the Unicameral National Assembly of Venezuela and the Chavista party Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) has lost an election.

The Venezuelan political sphere has been abuzz with activity since the election results. The political stance of President Nicolas Maduro has moved from one of acceptance to one of defiance of the election result.

The MUD won a 'supermajority' in the elections. A supermajority in the Venezuelan National Assembly is defined as two-thirds majority. The MUD won 109 out of a total 167 seats and the three elected representatives of the indigenous people allied with the MUD, taking their total to 112, which landed the MUD with a supermajority.

The supermajority in the National Assembly would provide MUD with several sought after advantages. With the supermajority, the MUD can bring in a referendum to undo political arrests or suspensions, appoint members to the Judiciary; they can also file a no-confidence motion against the Vice-President or the President and even usher in a new constitution.¹

Maduro's Presidential term is under imminent threat from the MUD super-majority as the MUD leader Romas Allup stated that they aimed at ending Maduro presidency within six months using their super-majority. The MUD also introduced a bill in the assembly to grant amnesty to 75 people, who the MUD claims are political prisoners.²

Recent political developments in Venezuela are indicative of a possible clash between the Maduro regime and the MUD-led National Assembly. These developments are a mix of the Maduro regime trying to prolong its tenure and the MUD's attempts of getting rid of Nicolas Maduro as the President. The 'supermajority' is one of the most prominent hurdles that the Maduro regime has zeroed upon and Nicolas Maduro has been trying to challenge the status that MUD has attained in the National Assembly by breaking the super-majority. A lot is being orchestrated by the Maduro regime to break the MUD super-majority.

In the power struggle that has ensued between the PSUV and the MUD, the Supreme Court of Venezuela has become a powerful tool. The judges of the Supreme Court are appointed by the National Assembly; therefore, they can be used to further political motives as the judges appointed are often the ones, who come with the desired political affiliations. In December, before the swearing in of the new National Assembly, the PSUV-led legislature called for an extra-ordinary session. In this session, it made 13 new appointments to the 32 member bench of the Supreme Court. The MUD has condemned this move and called it "undemocratic".³

Soon after this appointment, the PSUV filed charges against nine representatives of the MUD alleging that they indulged in electoral malpractices and bought votes from the Venezuelan people. President Maduro said on TV that "these criminals are buying votes ... there was a plan." He further added that government agencies are still investigating.⁴

The Supreme Court is yet to pass a judgment on these nine leaders; however, their appointment to the National Assembly for now has been suspended and will remain as such till a verdict is reached in the case. The nine suspended politicians have condemned this move by the Supreme Court and have called on the recently appointed judges to recuse themselves from the case because of their close political affiliations with the PSUV. The

three indigenous representatives, who had pledged fealty to the MUD, have also been accused of vote-buying and they have also been suspended. The MUD leader Ramos Allup went against the ruling of the Supreme Court and swore-in the three indigenous candidates from the Amazonas state. Due to this defiance of the Supreme Court ruling, the Court has suspended the entire legislature.⁵ If the allegations against the suspended leaders are proven and the suspensions turn permanent, the MUD stands to lose its super-majority in the National Assembly.

The current situation in Venezuela is one of confusion and uncertainty, and a clear political vacuum. The legislature stands suspended by the Supreme Court. Both MUD and PSUV are not willing to show their cards on the table. Diosdado Cabello, the second-in-command at PSUV has said, "We are going to the Supreme Court... the President doesn't want to do anything unconstitutional." Cabello says that they are requesting for a clarification on further action on the legislature.⁶

The MUD is also in consultation with a team of lawyers in order to decide their next step. Ramos Allup also met with Vice President Aristobulo Isturiz. He was quoted saying, "I think the vice president will be a facilitator in communications between the government and the opposition, between the branches of government and, above all, between the executive and the legislature. We're hoping that line of communication will remain open."⁷

The MUD has called the attention of the International community to the attempts to derail the functioning of the National Assembly. The allegations against MUD members and the last-minute appointment of judges have been termed as measures by Maduro to begin a "Judicial- Coup".

The MUD leaders have also written an open letter to the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon condemning the practices adopted by President Maduro to legally threaten their super-majority. The letter has also been addressed to the European Union Foreign Affairs Chief, Federica Mogherini and senior officials of the Organization of American States, the Union of South American Nations and the regional bloc, MERCOSUR.

MUD Executive Secretary Jesus Torrealba wrote, "The country, the region and the world are facing a judicial coup attempt against the Venezuelan people's decision," and "the ruling party's

irresponsible behaviour is pushing the entire country to the brink of disaster, which would have grave consequences for the entire region."⁸

Since the elections, Venezuela has also witnessed some changes in the Venezuelan cabinet. As Maduro tries to show the Venezuelan people his devotion to improving the state of the nation, there have been new appointments to the cabinet.

On 6th January, 2016, Maduro made new appointments to the cabinet. Maduro has appointed Luis Salas, a professor at Bolivarian University of Venezuela, established by the late Hugo Chavez, at the top economic position, that is, the Vice President of Economy. Salas has also been named new head for the Ministry of Productive Economy. The 39 year old professor is considered by most people as a 'socialist hardliner' and has been known to endorse the views reiterated by Maduro and the rest of the Chavistas and has used the phrase "economic war waged by the West and the right-wing" liberally. In his writings, he indicates that inflation is used as a "political tool" by people to pressurise the government. Salas also believes that the economic deterioration that the country currently faces would be worsened by foreign investment; he also blames fascism for "economic sabotage".⁹

Maduro has split the former Economy, Finance and Bank Ministry into two and has now appointed Rodolfo Medina as the Minister for Bank and Finances. Medina is also a university academician and is believed to have socialist leanings. Eulogio Del Pino has been ratified by President Maduro as the head of the State run Oil Company – PDVSA and as the new Oil Minister. Maduro has also appointed Delcy Rodriguez as the Foreign Minister and the new Defence Minister is Vladimir Padrino. Aristobulo Isturiz was appointed as the new Vice President in place of Jorge Arreaza, who is the son-in-law of Chavez. Arreaza is the new Minister for Universities, Science and Technology and also the Vice President of Social Matters.¹⁰

These changes in the cabinet have been mocked by the MUD because their appointments are based on their ideological affiliations and because of their inexperience as politicians. One of the MUD leaders, Americo de Grazia tweeted, "Maduro's new cabinet reminds me of the tragic orchestra's final goodbye on the Titanic."¹¹

The political instability and turmoil in Venezuela does not show any sign of improving anytime soon. The situation will only further deteriorate on account of sinking oil prices.

As the Venezuelan political sphere stands at an impasse, the international community is waiting to see what the future entails for the country.

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End Notes

¹ Aparajita Pandey, "Elections in Venezuela," ICWA Viewpoint, <http://www.icwa.in/pdfs/VP/2014/ElectionsinVenezuelavp13012015.pdf>, (Accessed on 15 January 2016).

² "Venezuela Opposition Warns of 'Judicial Coup' by Maduro," *Agence France-Presse*, 30 December 2015, <http://news.yahoo.com/venezuela-opposition-warns-judicial-coup-maduro-185351061.html>, (Accessed 6 January 2016).

³ "Venezuela's 'Super Majority' Power Struggle Paralyzes Government," *MercoPress*, 13 January 2016, <http://en.mercopress.com/2016/01/13/venezuela-s-super-majority-power-struggle-paralyzes-government>, (Accessed 13 January 2016).

⁴ "Venezuela's Chavistas and Newly Elected Opposition Head for Deadlock," *The Guardian*, 8 January 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/08/venezuelas-chavistas-and-newly-elected-opposition-head-for-deadlock>, (Accessed 13 January 2016).

⁵ "Venezuela Congress Swears in Politicians Barred from the Supreme Court," *The Guardian*, 5 January 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/06/venezuela-congress-swears-in-three-politicians-barred-by-supreme-court> (Accessed 17 January 2016).

⁶ "Political Showdown in Venezuela as Opposition Takes Control of the Parliament," *The Guardian*, 5 January 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/05/political-showdown-in-venezuela-as-opposition-takes-control-of-parliament> (Accessed 17 January 2016).

⁷ Venezuela's 'Super Majority' Power Struggle Paralyzes Government," 13 January 2016, MercoPress, <http://en.mercopress.com/2016/01/13/venezuela-s-super-majority-power-struggle-paralyzes-government> (Accessed 13 January 2016).

⁸ OAS Secretary General Open Letter Regarding Venezuela's Pre-Electoral Climate, *MercoPress*, 30 November 2015, <http://en.mercopress.com/2015/11/30/oas-secretary-general-open-letter-regarding-venezuela-s-pre-electoral-climate> (Accessed 16 January 2016).

⁹ "Venezuela Shuffles Economic Team, Keeps Forex Rate, Reuters, 15 January 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-economy-idUSBREA0F01I20140116>. (Accessed 18 January 2016).

¹⁰ "Venezuela Congress Plans to Investigate PDVSA, China Loans, Reuters, 19 January 2016, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-venezuela-oil-idUKKCN0UX2N9> (Accessed 21 January 2016).

¹¹ "Venezuela Shuffles Economic Team, Keeps Forex Rate," Reuters, 15 January 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-economy-idUSBREA0F01I20140116>. (Accessed 18 January 2016).