

Venezuelans on edge as they vote for new parliament

Country is sharply divided, and its economy is in a tailspin

BY JOSHUA PARTLOW

CARACAS, VENEZUELA — The Venezuelan government faced the possibility of losing a majority in its National Assembly on Sunday night, as the opposition campaign headquarters here made confident pronouncements about its lead, relying on exit polling and other limited samples.

More than three hours after polls had closed, President Nicolás Maduro's government had not released any official results in the election, a key political moment for Venezuela as it suffers through a painful economic crisis and a crime wave. The assembly vote has turned into a plebiscite on Maduro's rule two years after he took over from Hugo Chávez and tried to follow his socialist model.

But the country has experienced a wrenching economic crisis in recent years. Opponents blame government mismanagement; Maduro — who is a tireless critic of the United States, as Chávez was — blames enemies in the business community for sabotaging the economy to turn people against his government.

As oil prices have plummeted, sapping revenue from the country's main industry, the crisis has worsened, causing widespread shortages of basic goods and soaring inflation. Venezuela also has faced rising crime and one of the highest murder rates in the world.

The mounting problems have energized opposition candidates in the election for the 167-seat National Assembly. Their supporters hope they can seize a majority and begin to roll back the power of Maduro's government. Polls showed the opposition coalition, known as the Democratic Unity Roundtable, leading by around 20 percentage points, but pollsters said the gap narrowed in the days before the election.

Tension has been building as opposition protests have grown. Depending on the reported out-



People shout slogans while the governor of Venezuela's Tachira state votes in San Cristobal. The opposition has mustered a strong challenge in the National Assembly races, but it is unclear how much the parliament can affect the country's governance.

GEORGE CASTELLANOS/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE VIA GETTY IMAGES

come of the Sunday's election Sunday, fears are growing that those protests could sharpen considerably. More than 40 people died during street protests last year.

Maduro threatened last week to take to the streets with his supporters if his side lost its majority in the assembly, although he backed away from those warnings Sunday. The two sides remain determined enemies; opposition leaders say they haven't talked to government officials in more than a year.

In a city coursing with nervous energy, residents formed orderly lines Sunday to cast their ballots. Maduro's government has blocked many international observer missions from monitoring the election, but the opposition brought in more than 100 foreign

parliament members as observers. There were reports of some irregularities, including malfunctioning machines and government supporters campaigning near voting places, but no immediate reports of violence or major disturbances during the day. The government outraged the opposition by keeping polling places open for an extra hour, until 7 p.m., a tactic the opposition assumed was used to rush in late voters for the other side.

The opposition relied heavily on social media to spread its message before the vote. Denied access to Venezuelan television stations, it formed a YouTube channel.

"We showed we could overcome democratically a system that isn't democratic," opposition leader Julio Borges said in an

interview at his coalition's campaign headquarters Sunday night. "We confronted all the obstacles of repression, the media, the abuses of power. The good thing about this story is that when people are determined, they're capable of overcoming any obstacles."

The economic unraveling has sapped the morale of many Venezuelans. Nine words into her answer about what it's like to live in this country, Omaira Laja was in tears.

It wasn't only the economy that troubled the 51-year-old manager of a women's clothing store, or how her chain, which had 40 employees, is now down to 19, or that the prices of dresses have risen 60 percent just in the past few months, or that three-fourths of her income is gone.

Standing outside a public school on Avenida Libertador in Venezuela's capital, Laja worried that the country had grown so divided that a dangerous confrontation was coming regardless of the outcome of Sunday's election.

"I want freedom, I want peace," she had begun. And now, "There isn't any."

It is unclear how much pressure an opposition victory would apply to Maduro's government, which might be able to largely ignore what has been a rather inactive legislature. But some argue that an opposition win could accelerate calls for Maduro's impeachment before the end of his term in 2019 and the freeing of political prisoners.

Even among supporters, Maduro has nowhere near the popularity of Chávez, and he has lost

some former allies, who accuse him of bungling the economy by holding fast to outdated subsidies that make gasoline close to free and encourage the smuggling of Venezuelan goods out of the country. Maduro is also criticized for refusing to devalue the currency and instead holding on to four different exchange rates, including an official rate that helps government allies enrich themselves.

"What can't be forgiven is that a government that tries a radical transformation of the Venezuelan economy and society is committing errors that help the attacks of those who want to retake power," said Victor Alvarez, a leftist economist and government minister under Chávez. "They didn't correct a series of decisions that remained from the Chávez years and committed additional errors that have aggravated all of these problems."

The government still has a formidable political machine at its disposal. In the working-class neighborhood known as January 23, a bastion of support for Chavismo and the site of Chávez's grave, the vote-whipping was in full swing. As in previous elections, government supporters set up shop outside polling stations to write down the names of residents who voted.

In La Vega, another Chavista stronghold, Armando Pereira found himself in a familiar place while waiting his turn: "One more line," he said.

The 62-year-old electric technician had voted for the left throughout his life, and Sunday was no exception. For many Venezuelans, the goodwill, even adoration, that Chávez generated through his charisma, omnipresence on television and attention to the poor has left a residual pool of support for Maduro even as he has stumbled through the punishing economic crisis.

"Yes, there are difficulties, but since Chávez arrived they've never let them govern," Pereira said.

"My desire is that whoever has to win wins, but in peace," said Isolina Gonzalez, a 47-year-old retired professor. "I pray to God that there is no war in Venezuela."

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Joseph Poliszuk contributed to this report.

In opening round of French elections, far-right party is poised to take lead

BY ANGELA CHARLTON AND MILOS KRIVOKAPIC

PARIS — France's far-right National Front won more support than any other party in the first round of regional elections Sunday, according to polling agency projections, in a boost for Marine Le Pen's anti-immigration strategy and a blow to President François Hollande's Socialists.

The projections put National Front candidates on top so far in six of France's 13 newly drawn regions. But Sunday's voting was only a first round, and some

mainstream voters may steer away from far-right candidates in the decisive Dec. 13 runoff.

The elections took place in an unusually tense security climate about three weeks after deadly attacks on Paris — a climate expected to favor conservative and far-right candidates. It is the last election before France votes for president in 2017 and a gauge of the country's political direction.

Polling agencies Ifop, OpinionWay and Ipsos projected that the National Front won between 27 and 30 percent support nationwide.

Former president Nicolas Sarkozy's party, the Republicans, and its allies were projected to come in second place, at about 27 percent. The Socialists, who currently run nearly all of the country's regions, are projected to come in a weak third place, with 22 percent to 24 percent.

The polling projections estimated the percentage of votes for different parties, not the number of seats they are expected to win on France's regional councils. The number of seats will be determined in next Sunday's runoff, which pits the leading parties in

each region against each other.

The big question for the runoff is whether supporters of Republican, Socialist and smaller-party candidates will rally together to keep the National Front from winning control of any of the regions.

The Paris attacks on Nov. 13 that killed at least 130 people and a Europe-wide migrant crisis this year have shaken up France's political landscape. The Islamic State militant group has asserted responsibility for the attacks.

The National Front is hoping that the election will consolidate political gains Le Pen has made in

recent years — and strengthen the party's legitimacy as she prepares to seek the presidency in 2017. The party has long been viewed as anti-Semitic and considered a pariah.

The unpopular Hollande has seen his approval ratings jump since the Paris attacks as he intensified French airstrikes on Islamic State targets in Syria and Iraq and ordered a state of emergency at home. But his party has seen its electoral support shrivel as the government has failed to shrink its 10 percent joblessness rate or invigorate the economy.

The arrival of hundreds of thousands of migrants in Europe and the exploits of the Islamic State have bolstered the discourse of the National Front. It denounces Europe's open borders, what it calls the "migratory submersion" and what it claims is the corrupting influence of Islam on French civilization.

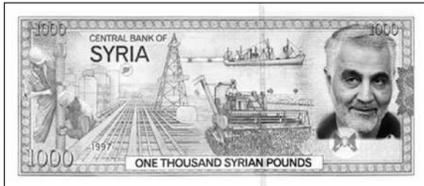
Le Pen is campaigning to lead the northern Nord-Pas-de-Calais-Picardie region, which includes the port city of Calais, a flash point in Europe's migrant drama. Polls suggest she could win.

—Associated Press

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Iran will continue financing terror, Mr. President



As a result of the nuclear deal signed with Iran last July, the Iranian regime will have access to US\$ 100-150 billion in 2016, in addition to new revenue from oil export. Some of this cash will be pumped into the country's ailing economy. But a lot of the fresh dollars will certainly be used to finance the Iranian

regime's terrorist activities and destabilising policies in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East.

In a new report under the title "Financing Terror", we calculated that, since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in March 2011, Iran has been propping up the killing machine of the Assad regime with US\$ 3 billion to US\$ 5 billion annually. This 'aid' has contributed to the death of over 300,000 people, the displacement of more than seven million inside Syria and about four million to other countries.

Additionally, Iran has been providing Hezbollah Lebanon with US\$ 100 million to US\$ 200 million per year since the 1980s, not accounting for special payments or arms deliveries.

Shia militias in Iraq received US\$ 10 million to US\$ 35 million annually from the mid to the late 2000s. This increased to an estimated US\$ 100 million to US\$ 200 million yearly as of 2009.

Iran also provided the Palestinian Hamas with US\$ 100 million to US\$ 250 million between 2007 and 2011. The Palestinian Islamic Jihad received US\$ 100 million to US\$ 150 million annually since 2007. The Houthi militias in Yemen received US\$ 10 million to US\$ 25 million since 2010.

Our findings suggest that Iran's lavish expenditure on financing terror in the Middle East within the considered periods of time totalled between US\$ 20 and US\$ 80 billion. We believe this policy will continue in 2016. This cannot be in the interest of the US and its allies.

That is why we ask you, Mr. President, to:

- Treat the war in Syria as an international armed conflict that involves a foreign occupation by Iran and Russia on the one hand, and a liberation struggle by the Syrian people against this occupation on the other.
- Support referring the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court to investigate all war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria.
- Pressure Russia with more economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation so that it disengages from Iran and becomes part of the solution in Syria.
- Fulfill your promises by arming and training enough moderate Syrian rebels, not only to fight Daesh and al-Qaeda-linked groups, but also Syrian and Iranian regime forces and militias.
- Impose no-fly zones to protect civilians and allow humanitarian access throughout Syria, in line with the international 'responsibility to protect' norm.
- Help Syrians set up a democratic state where the rule of law prevails, and where there is no place for al-Assad and his supporters.

Mr. President, only the US can prevent Syria and the Middle East from further disintegration and chaos.

To visualize the Iranian occupation of Syria, the Naame Shaam campaign has produced a new Syrian bank note with the counterfeit of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, the de facto ruler of Syria. See www.naameshaam.org **Naame Shaam** means "Letter from Syria" in Persian. We are a group of secular and progressive Iranian, Syrian and Lebanese activists and citizen-journalists who focus on uncovering the role of the Iranian regime in Syria. We are supported by the Netherlands-based Rule of Law Foundation, www.lawrules.org

This is the first out of two ads. The second one will be printed in this paper next week.

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