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Venezuela: Results of the November 2008 local elections and the February 2009 referendum; reports of violence during or after these events

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The Venezuela Information Office's website states that in the 23 November 2008 state and municipal elections in Venezuela, voters elected 603 officials, including 22 state governors, 328 mayors, 233 state legislative council members, 13 council members for the Caracas Metropolitan area and 7 members for the Alto Apure District Council (Venezuela Information Office n.d.). The United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela, PSUV) of President Hugo Chávez captured 17 out of 22 state governorships in the elections (France 24 Nov. 2008; BBC 24 Nov. 2008); the opposition won 5 state governorships (ibid.; Reuters 24 Nov. 2008) and the mayor's seat in Caracas (ibid.). The National Election Council's (Consejo Nacional Electoral, CNE) website contains the official results, in Spanish, of the elections for governors in the 22 states and for mayors in the districts of Caracas and Alto Apure (Venezuela 27 Nov. 2008).

In a 15 February 2009 referendum on whether to permit a constitutional amendment to abolish presidential term limits, 54 percent of voters supported the proposed change (*The Guardian* 17 Feb. 2009; *National Post* 17 Feb. 2009). The United States (US) government describes the referendum as "democratic" although a State Department spokesperson notes that there were "'troubling reports of intimidation'" (The Canadian Press 17 Feb. 2009). The Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS) is quoted as saying that "'nobody has complained about the transparency of the process' [of the referendum]," and "'everybody has accepted the results'" (BBC 18 Feb. 2009). The opposition leaders acknowledged the results and conceded defeat (Venezuelanalysis 17 Feb. 2009). The constitutional amendment was signed by President Hugo Chávez on 19 February 2009 (AP 19 Feb. 2009).

Violence before and after the elections

A student leader who had organized opposition protests against the constitutional amendments proposed by Hugo Chávez was shot and killed on 1 October 2008 (AP 13 Oct. 2008; AP 3 Oct. 2008). It is unclear if the attack was "politically motivated" (ibid.). The attorney general's office stated that at least 106 people were detained during the voting process, many for the destruction of voting materials including voter receipts (FOX News 24 Nov. 2008). Six people were arrested in Guarico state for reportedly attacking voters, and one person was stabbed in a conflict between government opponents and supporters in Boli state (ibid.). Three leaders of the National Workers Union (Unión Nacional de Trabajadores, UNT) were shot and killed in Aragua state shortly after the municipal and state elections (The Internationalist Dec. 2008; *Latin American Herald Tribune* 3 Dec. 2008); they had met to challenge the results of a mayoral contest won by the PSUV candidate (ibid.). Venezuelanalysis, a website which provides news, analysis and background information about Venezuela (Venezuelanalysis n.d.), indicates that there have been "numerous reports" that following the November 2008 elections, the anti-Chavez opposition launched a "campaign of violence and intimidation" against trade unionists, community organizations and pro-Chávez social movements, especially in the regions where the opposition was successful in the state and municipal elections (Venezuelanalysis 29 Nov. 2008). The *Links - International Journal of Socialist Renewal* website published a 28 November 2008 statement from the Australian-Venezuela Solidarity Network (AVSN), an Australian group that supports significant social change and opposes foreign intervention in Venezuela; the statement lists threats or attacks on pro-Chávez individuals and organizations in the aftermath of the November elections (AVSN 28 Nov. 2008). Information on whether there have been convictions for the killings of the UNT workers or the student leader, or on whether political motives for the killings have been officially established, could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

Violence before the referendum

A 20 January 2009 *Los Angeles Times* article and a 29 January 2009 *Latin American Herald Tribune* article mention several instances of pre-referendum violence. A 21 January 2009 Reuters article states that "protests"

occurred throughout Venezuela between groups of university students opposed to the amendment and the police. Police employed tear gas in Caracas against protesting students, and in Merida, a police officer was wounded by gunfire that came from a compound in the university (Reuters 21 Jan. 2009). The government contends that the students provoked violence, and the students allege that the government employed unnecessary police force (ibid.). There were "violent student protests" in at least six cities before the referendum (Venezuelanalysis 28 Jan. 2009). According to a 9 February 2009 Venezuelanalysis article, the leader of La Piedrita, a Caracas-based pro-Chávez group, stated in an interview with the opposition newspaper *Quinto Día* that his group was responsible for tear gas attacks against the premises of political parties, news media, the Catholic Church and other entities linked to the anti-Chávez opposition (Venezuelanalysis 9 Feb. 2009); La Piedrita had been linked to earlier tear gas attacks (*Latin American Herald Tribune* 29 Jan. 2009). A journalist for the Valencia-based political weekly ABC was fatally shot on 16 January 2009 (RSF 20 Feb. 2009). An article on Venezuelanalysis indicates that there were "relatively few acts of politically motivated violence" on voting day compared to what has occurred during previous elections (Venezuelanalysis 15 Feb. 2009).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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