



Popular Will Prisoner Freed as Venezuelan Opposition's Election Dispute Grows

Rachael Boothroyd-Rojas

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The high profile member of the ultra right-wing Popular Will party, Yon Goicoechea, was freed by Venezuelan authorities Saturday after more than a year behind bars.

Goicoechea was arrested last August by national security forces for the alleged possession of explosive devices, just two days before an opposition march called for September 1.

Since being granted conditional release, Goicoechea has confirmed his candidacy for the mayorship of the wealthy municipality of El Hatillo, despite his party calling for a boycott of upcoming elections.

Venezuela's National Electoral Council (CNE) announced last month that municipal elections to choose 335 mayors will take place on December 10. However, the three largest opposition parties – Democratic Action, First Justice, and Popular Will – have refused to stand candidates and threatened to expel party-members that participate.

Nonetheless, several opposition figures have defied their parties' leadership to stand in the upcoming municipal elections on tickets belonging to other opposition organizations. Meanwhile, the fourth largest party of the coalition, A New Era, has also decided to field candidates.

On Tuesday, Goicoechea confirmed he will on Progressive Advance's ticket and stated he believed it was a mistake for the opposition not to participate in the elections. He told press he had "tactical differences" with the VP leadership.

"I think it is a huge error for us not to go to municipal elections now, and then in February participate in the presidential elections,' he told Globovision.

The politician, who was awarded the U.S.-based Cato Institute's \$500,000 "Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty" in 2008 for his role in anti-government protests the year before, said he would not allow the opposition "to lose spaces where it had been the vanguard of the struggle".

It is unknown whether Goicoechea will be expelled from Popular Will or whether he has already left the party. But VP politician and congressman Juan Andres Mejia said the party "rejected" Goicoechea's candidacy, describing it as a government ploy to "divide and discredit" the opposition.

The main opposition coalition, the MUD, suffered a heavy defeat in regional elections on October 15, managing to scrape just five governorships against the government's eighteen. The alliance was subsequently thrown into chaos when four out of its five elected governors for the Democratic Action party decided to flout the MUD leadership to swear in before the pro-government National Constituent Assembly (ANC).

Last week, the founder of a New Era party and former presidential candidate, Manuel Rosales, also decided to rebel against the MUD's decision by registering as a candidate for the state governorship of Zulia.

Regional elections in the border state will be repeated on December 10, after the Justice First party's victorious gubernatorial candidate, Juan Pablo Guanipa, refused to swear in before the ANC.

Rosales' campaign for the Zulia governorship comes on the back of several tumultuous years for the politician, who was arrested in 2015 when he returned from self-imposed exile in Peru. The former mayor of Maracaibo fled the Venezuelan justice system in 2009 after being charged with corruption and the misuse of public funds by the attorney general. He was released in December 2016 while a ban on him holding political office was lifted by the Supreme Court last week.

Zulia-born Rosales told press earlier this week that he would not "abandon" the state, but his candidacy has since been attacked as "vile" by First Justice and Popular Will.

"On behalf of First Justice and Popular Will we want to express solidarity with the brave people of Zulia, who are not just victims of the constant violations of the dictatorship [sic] of Nicolas Maduro, but also from leaders who today take advantage of the cause for personal political projects," reads a joint statement from the two parties.

PJ and VP also accused Rosales of attempting to "trick" the people of Zulia and "play the government's game".

The opposition coalition is facing its biggest crisis in years over the best way to oust Venezuelan President for the United Socialist Party Nicolas Maduro. While some opposition leaders prefer the ballot box, others want to force Maduro to abandon the presidency through violent street protest.

Between April and July this year, opposition leaders backed deadly anti-government demonstrations which claimed the lives of over 125 people, but were unsuccessful in unseating Maduro.

Though calm returned to Venezuela's streets following the election of delegates to the ANC at the end of July, government spokespeople have warned that the opposition could reignite its regime change campaign against the elected president.

On Tuesday, the Venezuelan Electric Energy Minister Luis Motta Domínguez told press that assailants suspected to be allied to the opposition had set fire to the state electricity company CORPOLEC's regional headquarters in Tachira. A government health clinic inside the compound had to be evacuated in response.

Tweet reads: "Venezuelans! I denounce the attack on the administrative office of CORPOLEC...It was set on fire intentionally. In that office a CDI [medical clinic] was active. Despicable [people who did this]!"

The minister described the arson attack as a "paramilitary and terrorist" act. He said he believed it was related to the MUD's decision to boycott municipal elections.