



## VENEZUELA: TRANSPARENCY & ACCOUNTABILITY TO THE PEOPLE

Over the course of five sessions spanning **50 hours of debate**, members of President Hugo Chávez's Executive Cabinet spoke to Venezuela's National Assembly in February 2011.



Although the Constitution of 1999 only establishes an annual presentation of the minister's before the National Assembly, during his State of the Nation speech on January 15 **President Chávez**

**proposed that members of the National Assembly have a debate with his cabinet officials.**

During each of the sessions that took place, cabinet officials presented the achievements of their respective ministries, outlined future plans and initiatives, and answered questions and criticisms from members of the National Assembly – both from pro-government and opposition parties.

According to the rules of debate, **each legislator from the different political blocs of the National Assembly was allotted around 5 minutes for its questions and speeches.**

**The sessions were broadcast live on television (including public and private media) for all Venezuelans to watch**, allowing for an unquestionable level of transparency and accountability, a healthy debate on different models of democracy and development, and further consolidation of Venezuela's democracy.<sup>1</sup>

### THE NEW NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

The legislative elections of September 26, 2010 produced a new National Assembly in which **sectors of the political opposition decided to engage in the democratic process.** Of the 165 seats, 98 went to the pro-government United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), while 65 went to a coalition of 10 opposition parties.

The presence of opposition members after a much-criticized decision to boycott legislative elections in 2005 has produced a National Assembly in which different models for democracy and development can be openly discussed and debated.

William Fariñas, a PSUV member from the state of Nueva Esparta, said of the presentations and debates that took place throughout February:

“A fundamental principle of 21<sup>st</sup> century societies is **political pluralism.** The National Assembly has become a center for debate as has happened in the majority of democratic societies throughout the world. The presence and public presentation by different political actors, as much in the personal as in the institutional, with their different focuses, conduct, interests, and ideologies serve as evidence that in bicentennial Venezuela the essence of big-P politics is a reality.”<sup>2</sup>

Fernando Soto Rojas, the newly elected president of the National Assembly, commented that the debates allowed the Venezuelan people to better engage in how the country was moving forward. **“For the first time the Venezuela people are taking parts in serious policy debates** that were the exclusive concern of small intellectual circles,” he said, noting that viewers of the debates had the opportunity to draw their own conclusions on what government ministers would say and the different models of democracy and development being discussed.<sup>3</sup>

### VP, FOREIGN & INTERIOR

**On February 9**, the first round of sessions began with Vice-President Elias Jaua, Minister of People's Power for Interior and Justice. Tareck El Aissami, and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nicolás Maduro.

During his speech, **Jaua highlighted how the Bolivarian government had successfully**



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**overcome several crises in 2010**, including the electricity crisis caused by the severe draught, the banking crises, the diplomatic impasse with Colombia, an emergency caused by heavy rains, and the fallout of a massive real estate fraud scheme.

For his part, Minister El Aissami responded to opposition criticisms about the supposed lack of government effort regarding public safety, referring to “the consultation efforts made with the **Commission for the Police National Reform**.” El Aissami highlighted that over 75 percent of the recommendations made to the commission – integrated by members of civil society, academia and social groups – “have been implemented already.”

Furthermore, the Minister of Interior and Justice said that in the areas **where the recently-created Bolivarian National Police is operating the crime rate has been dropped 57 percent**, with homicides falling 44 percent and robberies 62 percent. “By 2011 the police corps will be deployed in the eight states with the highest crime rates of the country,” he said.

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### SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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The 10 ministers in President Chávez Cabinet charged with the various facets of social development appeared before the National Assembly on **February 10** to discuss their efforts and achievements.

Maryann Hanson, Minister of Education; Yadira Córdova, University Education; Maria Eugenia Sader, Health; and Isis Ochoa, Communes and Social Protection appeared at the session.

The ministers highlighted different achievements that allowed Venezuela to **jump ten spots in the UN Human Development Index** during the government of President Chávez.

Nicia Maldonado, Minister for Indigenous Affairs; Nancy Pérez, Woman’s Affairs and Gender Equality; Héctor Rodríguez, Sports; Francisco Sesto, Culture; and Carlos Osorio, Food also participated in the debate.

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### ENERGY, HOUSING & TRANSPORTATION

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**On February 17**, the Minister of Energy and Oil, Rafael Ramírez; Electric Energy, Alí Rodríguez; Transportation and Communications, Francisco Garcés; Housing and Habitat, Ricardo Molina; and Environment, Alejandro Hitcher presented their reports.

Minister Ramírez, for example, highlighted that the Bolivarian government recovered the country’s oil revenue for the Venezuelan people, allowing the state-run oil company PDVSA to **allocate \$83.3 billion to social programs**. In response to questions from the opposition about the strength of the Venezuelan oil industry, **he presented proof of continuous investments in the oil industry and the increase of its assets** during the government of President Chávez.

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### ECONOMY AND PRODUCTION

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**On February 22**, the Minister of Science, Technology and Intermediate Industries, Ricardo Menéndez; Basic Industries and Mining, José Khan; Tourism, Alejandro Fleming; Agriculture and Lands, Juan Carlos Loyos; and Commerce, Edmeé Betancourt spoke before the National Assembly.

Menéndez said that the **Venezuelan government has democratized access to new technologies and that access to indispensable services**. As an example, he indicated that Internet access in Venezuela has increased to 33 percent of the population, while in previous governments only three percent of Venezuelans had access to the service.

For his part, the Minister of Agriculture and Lands, Juan Carlos Loyo, addressed opposition criticisms, pointing to what remains to be done in the agricultural sector. He explained that in 12 years of Venezuelan revolution **agricultural production** reached 24.6 million tons of food, a **44 percent increase regarding 40 years of governments of the opposition**. Loyo highlighted that the milk production has reported a 68 percent increase throughout the country. Additionally, he explained that Venezuelan government policies have led to an increase in annual caloric consumption.



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### FINANCE AND PLANNING

**On February 24**, the final round of presentations to the National Assembly took place, including the Minister of Public Banks, Humberto Ortega, and capped off by Jorge Giordani, Venezuela's Minister of Planning and Finance.

Giordani highlighted the positive impact that the government's humanist-oriented economic policies have had, notably in social development. **Giordani pointed out that social investment had grown 2.5 percent as a proportion of GDP between 1999 and 2010**, climbing from 9.4 percent to 11.9 percent.

Venezuela's economic policies produced a number of **social benefits**, explained Giordani, including an increase in the number of retirees enjoying benefits, a better distribution of wealth, the reduction of poverty and extreme poverty, and stability in the country's employment levels. Although the global financial crisis is not over and unemployment levels have increased around the world, even in the U.S., unemployment has continued dropping in Venezuela, he added.

Responding to criticisms by the opposition regarding the inflation rate in the country, Giordani explained the complexity of the problem of inflation in Venezuela, where the economy is still oil-dependent, and stressed the social reasons why the government has not followed neoliberal recipes to reduced dramatically inflation. Nevertheless, he pointed out that **the government of President Hugo Chávez has reported a lower inflation average (21.7 percent) than previous governments** (Carlos Andrés Pérez, 1989-1993, 45.3 percent; Rafael Caldera, 1994-1999, 59.6 percent). The minister even highlighted that before the 2002 coup d'état and the 2002-2003 oil sabotage, the government manage to reduced inflation to 12 percent.

Giordani also stressed the efforts of the government to increase the **minimum wage**. Between 1994 and 1998, the minimum wage in Venezuela was about \$151 per month, while during the government of President Chávez it climbed to around \$259.

The opposition also claimed that Venezuela is dangerously increasing its debt. However, Giordani pointed out that by 2010 the **total debt** (internal and external) reached **18.61% of GDP**, most of which is

internal debt. In the 1990s, when the opposition was in the government, the debt reached 70% of GDP.

Giordani also placed the situation of Venezuela in context, pointing out that the country has **one of the lowest debts of the region relative to the national GDP** and **one of the lowest unemployment rates**. He recommended checking the numbers of the Economic Commission for Latin American and the Caribbean (ECLAC) of the United Nations, if someone had doubts about the official statistics.<sup>4</sup>

The minister finally explained that the strengthening of the Venezuelan productive sector, the recovery of oil prices and the economy's positive change during the last trimester of 2010 — it reported a 0.6 percent increase — portend **a new phase of growth**. This growth will be boosted by new development projects, most of which will be financed the National Development Fund (FONDEN) and the Chinese-Venezuelan Joint Fund, he said.

The Bolivarian Revolution encourages financial and economic development under the principles of growth with social equality, Giordani summarized.

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<sup>1</sup> "Venezuela: Parlamento exigió cuentas y transparencia a gobierno de Chávez," AFP, RNW, February 25, 2011.

<http://www.rnw.nl/espanol/bulletin/venezuela-parlamento-exigio-cuentas-y-transparencia-a-gobierno-de-chavez>

<sup>2</sup> "Asamblea Nacional: Debates y principios," El Sol de Margarita, February 11, 2011.

<http://www.elsoldemargarita.com.ve/Noticias.aspx?NoticiaId=74000&SeccionId=5>

<sup>3</sup> "Soto Rojas: Comparecencia de ministros en la AN fue muy pedagógica para el país," *El Nacional*, February 25, 2011. [http://www.elnacional.com/www/site/p\\_contenido.php?q=nodo/187790/Naci%C3%B3n/Soto-Rojas:-Comparecencia-de-ministros-en-la-AN-fue-muy-pedag%C3%B3gica-para-el-pa%C3%ADs](http://www.elnacional.com/www/site/p_contenido.php?q=nodo/187790/Naci%C3%B3n/Soto-Rojas:-Comparecencia-de-ministros-en-la-AN-fue-muy-pedag%C3%B3gica-para-el-pa%C3%ADs)

<sup>4</sup> "Statistical Year Book for Latin America and the Caribbean", ECLAC, 2010. [http://websie.eclac.cl/anuario\\_estadistico/anuario\\_2010/docs/Anuario%20Estadistico\\_2010.pdf](http://websie.eclac.cl/anuario_estadistico/anuario_2010/docs/Anuario%20Estadistico_2010.pdf)