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Not free, not fair

By Editorial Board

Facing increasingly bleak political prospects, the Venezuelan government sprung another unfair, last-minute trick on the democratic opposition last week: a declaration that a minimum of 40 percent of parliamentary candidates in the next election must be women.

Normally, this would be a worthy goal, but the outraged opposition held its long-scheduled primaries last month in advance of the December elections, as the government well knows. The change forces challengers to scramble to find enough female candidates to meet the new requirement.

Opponents condemned the sudden move by the electoral board, an agency under the thumb of President Nicolás Maduro and his cronies, as illegal and unprecedented. Not that it's likely to make a difference. This is par for the course for a government willing to stop at nothing to stave off defeat.

Food shortages, a deteriorating economy, an eroding currency, rampant crime and soaring inflation are all working against the government — not to mention rampant corruption and government fraud. Foreign currency reserves are at their lowest level in more than a decade. And Maduro forces won't be rescued by a sudden increase in oil revenues, because no such increase is in sight.

The popularity of the regime that Mr. Maduro inherited from the late Bolivarian socialist founder Hugo Chávez has badly deteriorated in the hands of the incompetent leader.

The president's own popularity stands at 25.8 percent, according to a recent survey by the pollster Datanalisis. His party's candidates would win only 21.3 percent of votes for the National Assembly versus the opposition's 40.1 percent, according to the same poll — *if* a free and fair vote were held.

Not that there's much chance of that, to judge from the record of previous

elections under the control of the government machine. Gerrymandering, changes in the rules, iron-fisted control of the news media and the organs of state propaganda, phony vote counts — expect the full panoply of the regime's dirty tricks to be on display as it fights desperately to remain in control of the Andean nation and its oil riches and natural wealth.

Including, of course, jailing its critics. Among the most prominent political prisoners in jail is former mayor and presidential candidate Leopoldo López, who called off a 30-day hunger strike last week after the government finally caved in to demands that it schedule elections. “We lift the strike, but the fight continues,” Mr. Lopez declared in a defiant message from the Ramo Verde jail where he has been detained since Feb. 18, 2014, on trumped-up charges of “instigating arson, damage and criminal gatherings.”

The challenge for the 29-party political opposition is to stick together while Mr. Maduro and his cohorts try to widen the fault lines within the coalition. Given the government's increasing unpopularity, this will likely be its best chance to reverse the course of Venezuela's decline since the Chávez takeover.

The challenge for Venezuela's friends is to guarantee a free and fair election, a role that the Organization of American States could once have been expected to fulfill in pursuit of its goal of upholding democratic values across the hemisphere.

Is it up to the task? “We must be, and I promise to be, inflexible in demanding respect for human rights and democracy,” its new secretary-general, Luis Almagro, wrote in an essay for the Herald recently.

Well, here's a chance to prove it.