

## VIOLENCE AGAINST THE ELECTORAL BRANCH OF POWER: CRIMES AGAINST DEMOCRACY

Since 2007, The National Electoral Council in Venezuela has been the target of attacks and violent acts that, although have not impeded the success of the election events, have affected the country's democratic normal life. These attacks, sometimes organized and executed by political leaders and parties, are expressed through direct aggressions against the facilities, authorities and personnel of CNE, including their relatives.

Direct attacks against the electoral entity is an unprecedented fact in the country's political life and lacks any international reference. Through these actions, minority groups of political activists have put a regrettable and shameful pressure on the electoral entity, sometimes reaching high levels of violence that would constitute real crimes. Like in many countries in the world, in Venezuela any violent act that disturbs or attempts to disturb the normal development of elections is considered a crime.

Violence against CNE has different purposes and modalities, which significantly affect the civic nature of an election event. Their final goal is to undermine the credibility of the electoral institution in order to discredit their acts and stimulate political confrontation.

In particular, the reiterated harassment and physical aggression acts against officials of the Electoral Branch of Power are worrying. Let's see some of these facts:

- **2013:**

- Upon completion of the presidential election in 2013, the then opposition candidate, Henrique Capriles, did not recognize the results and called for violence in the street and against CNE, which resulted in the deaths of 11 people.
- Seven CNE offices throughout the country were attacked and their workers were harassed in the states of Anzoátegui, Mérida, Monagas, Sucre, Trujillo, Zulia, and Yaracuy.
- Directors of the electoral entity were harassed at their homes, including the President of CNE, Tibusay Lucena, whose home was harassed, including its residents who were practically kidnapped by violent groups the night of April 15.
- During a demonstration in support of CNE, near its headquarters in Zulia state on April 16, a young man was killed by sharpshooters.

- **2014:**

- During the violent protests between February and June, in the context of the so-called “Operación La Salida” (The Way-out Operation), staged by the opposition, three CNE offices in the states of Lara, Táchira and Anzoátegui were attacked.
- The CNE seat in Zulia state was set on fire and completely destroyed.
- The homes of top officials of the National Electoral Council were also submitted to harassment and aggression.

- Streets were closed and access to some neighborhoods in some municipalities throughout the country was blocked, affecting also access to seats of CNE and preventing personnel from traveling from their homes to their worksites.
- **2015:**
  - In 2015, the main opposition leaders staged a campaign discrediting CNE and its authorities. Since the beginning of the year, four negative matrices against the electoral authority were created in the media: The National Electoral Council allows for fraud; it is neither independent nor impartial, and discourages opposition voters. After the congressional elections in 2015, in which the opposition won the majority of posts, no opposition representative or leader rectified for the attacks.
- **2016:**
  - In the context of the activities regarding the request by the opposition to hold a recall referendum against the President, the National Electoral Council and its workers were again harassed by opposition political groups.
  - During the event to validate signatures in June, more than 20 officials were object of verbal and physical aggressions while they were fulfilling their duties.
  - Several CNE workers, including the top authorities, were the target of hatred campaigns in social media by opposition political leaders.
  - Five CNE seats in the states of Táchira, Trujillo, Carabobo, Yaracuy, Mérida, and Lara were victims of different degrees of aggression, including firearm shooting and throwing of incendiary devices.

- The CNE authorities were forced to suspend labor activities on three occasions as a consequence of violent demonstrations against their facilities, as a measure to avoid aggressions against its officials.
- Workers of the National Electoral Council were forced to file constitutional complaints with the Supreme Tribunal of Justice, as a consequence of threats against their physical integrity and obstacles to access their worksites.

**Discrediting the electoral arbiter.** Over recent years, the electoral entity has been object of a discredit campaign, especially targeted against its directors. This campaign that uses the media and particularly social media and incites hatred against the electoral authorities and workers has to main objects:

1. Blurring the CNE functions in the eyes of the national and international community. This campaign is intended to separate the election system, which has been recognized for its good performance, from the decisions and policies taken by its authorities, portraying the authorities as “criminals”.
2. Fracture and weaken the moral of the institution, threatening and trying to demoralize, by means of criminal accusations in the media, the officials and workers of the electoral entity.

Special mention should be made to the campaign led in 2016 against the president of the CNE, Dr. Tibisay Lucena, which constitutes a despicable example of gender-based violence and incitation to hatred. These aggressions, intended to damage her honor and reputation, including her family, is a constant element which the CNE authorities have been submitted to.

## 2017. Violence during the election of the National Constituent Assembly

The National Electoral Council directly suffered the political violence from the very moment at which the elections of the National Constituent Assembly (ANC) were legitimately and constitutionally convened.

The political opposition, which refused to participate on July 30 election, made public calls to sabotage and hinder the elections clearly violating the Constitution and electoral laws. In Venezuela, calling for abstention in an election is an electoral offense. Calls to forcefully preventing citizens from exercising their right to vote by political parties that have reached publicly elected posts using the same election system undoubtedly constitutes a regrettable political step backwards by a sector of the country.

The days prior to the election, CNE officials were victims of the campaign inciting to hatred by being object of aggression and insults at their worksites and homes to force them to hand over the voting machines and the election material to be destructed.

Due to the high levels of violence against the constituent election process of July 30, which were expressed through the direct attacks against the headquarters, infrastructure and personnel of the CNE, the electoral authority had to take extraordinary measures in more than 150 municipalities so as to guarantee the right to vote of the Venezuelan voters.

These measures included:

- Relocating polling centers in those areas affected by violence.
- Establishing conditions for voters in the areas affected by violence to be able to vote in another polling center in their municipality.
- Opening emergency polling centers in cities like Caracas.

- Adopting additional security protocols to guarantee transparency of the vote.

The automated polling platform (voting machines, transmission equipment and electoral material) was distributed in some municipalities in the Venezuela amidst strong street violence and barricades that blocked access to polling centers. Workers of the electoral entity carried out this task running serious risks against their physical integrity. The successful completion of the work should be attributed to the mystic and dedication of the CNE personnel.

The day before the elections, several polling centers were assaulted by violent groups and in some places, voting machines and electoral material were set on fire. Notwithstanding, the most part of the electoral infrastructure was protected by the personnel, eve risking their own lives. Several CNE workers were attacked in the street only for wearing the CNE uniform and the distinctive signs of the institution.

On the Election Day, a polling center in the western state of Táchira was shot. Polling centers in the central state of Guárico were attacked with incendiary bombs. Notwithstanding, the responsible official at the polling centers safeguarded the votes that had already been cast.

In addition to physical violence, these CNE workers also face an intimidation campaign on social media by Provea, which is an organization for the defense of human rights. The contents and reach of the campaign were reported at that time.

- At the end of this election process, the CNE tallied:
  - ✓ Direct aggressions against more than 200 CNE officials.
  - ✓ More than 200 voting machines destroyed.
  - ✓ Attacks against a number of seats, with one of them being partially burnt.
  - ✓ Attacks against vehicles and homes of electoral officials.
- The most affected states in terms of infrastructure and officials were Táchira, Mérida, Barinas, Zulia, Aragua, and Barinas. The National Electoral Council also received aggressions in different municipalities in the states of Anzoátegui and Miranda.

A total of 49,947 officials, technical personnel and citizens, fulfilling their duties as members of polling stations and boards, were directly attacked as the result of the violence against the elections. Below some examples:

### **ANONYMOUS CAMPAIGNS ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

Over the last three years, anonymous campaigns inciting hatred against electoral authorities have increased in terms of frequency and intensity.