

Chavez foe leads massive march in Venezuela

By Associated Press

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Surrounded by supporters, opposition presidential candidate Henrique Capriles, center, gestures during a march before registering his candidacy for the presidency in Caracas, Venezuela, Sunday, June 10, 2012. (AP Photo/Fernando Llano) (Fernando Llano)

CARACAS, Venezuela — Opposition leader Henrique Capriles marched through Venezuela's capital on Sunday accompanied by tens of thousands of supporters as he formally launched his candidacy to run against President Hugo Chavez.

Surrounded by supporters waving red, yellow and blue Venezuelans flags, Capriles marched and jogged from a park in eastern Caracas toward the headquarters of the National Elections Council, 6 miles (10 kilometers) away, where he formally registered.

"I want to be everybody's president, not the president of a single group," Capriles told the crowd. His campaign has tried to reach across the country's deep political divisions, in contrast to Chavez's often-inflammatory attacks on rivals.

"I am not anybody's enemy," Capriles added. "I'm the enemy of problems."

Capriles has vowed to create employment, fight crime and root out corruption, though most polls show him trailing Chavez ahead of the Oct. 7 election.

"We have our hopes pinned on Capriles and we're sure he can lead us toward progress," said Sergio Mijares, a 58-year-old shopkeeper who opposes Chavez's plans to transform Venezuela into a socialist state. "I'm optimistic he can defeat Chavez."

Chavez, a former paratroop commander who is seeking a new six-year term in office, has sought to dismiss his rival by accusing him of representing the interests of the wealthy.

Capriles, meanwhile, has said his political approach is similar to that of former Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, a leftist labor leader who promoted pro-business policies while funding expansive social programs as president that made him popular among the poor.

Capriles stepped down as governor of Miranda state this week to focus on the campaign.

Andrea Reyes, a 48-year-old housewife, said she would vote for Capriles because of his reputation as an efficient administrator and out of fear that Chavez will ruin the economy and drive millions of Venezuelans to emigrate if he is re-elected.

"If Chavez emerges as the winner in October, he's going to destroy this country," she said.

Chavez is scheduled to formalize his candidacy on Monday.

Associated Press writer Christopher Toothaker contributed to this report.

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