

Pentecostal Megachurch Pastor Refuses to Cave to Pressure

Evangelical pastor Javier Bertucci on Thursday ignored calls to withdraw from Venezuela's presidential election in order to back a more prominent candidate, splitting Venezuela's already fractured opposition.

Venezuela's larger formal opposition coalition is boycotting the May 20 presidential vote because many of its leading politicians are in jail, exiled or barred from standing. The coalition says the vote is a sham designed to legitimize President Nicolas Maduro.

That decision has left space for alternatives such as Bertucci and Maduro's main challenger, former state Governor Henri Falcon. Many opposition supporters distrust the two candidates and plan to abstain from voting, but having two rival opposition candidates will split the votes of those who do go to the polls.

Falcon started off more popular, but Bertucci appears to be gaining ground in a handful of recent polls.

"If I were certain that should I pull out, Falcon would win, I would pull out. But that's not the scenario," the pastor, whose campaign has centered on distributing soup to hungry Venezuelans and preaching evangelical values, told reporters.

Falcon has also rejected the possibility of joining Bertucci, arguing that he is the one leading the polls.

Maduro's campaign will also benefit from state handouts, coercion of government employees and the pro-Maduro makeup of the election board.

Venezuela is in the throes of a major economic crisis with

millions suffering food and medicine shortages, hyperinflation and disease. Critics blame inept governance, while Maduro says an “economic war” is behind the problems. {eoa}

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