

Venezuela politics soiled by sordid claims, gay slurs
By Daniel Wallis
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(Reuters) - From allegations of gay and transvestite prostitution rings to homophobic slurs flying in the National Assembly, Venezuela's polarized politics has taken a distasteful turn.

With tempers fraying as President Nicolas Maduro vows to crack down on corruption, pro-government lawmakers demanded this week that their opposition rivals be investigated for, among other things, money laundering and cocaine trafficking.

The even more lurid charge that grabbed the public's attention was that a senior aide to opposition leader Henrique Capriles runs a gay and transvestite prostitution network.

Lawmakers were shown photos of the aide, hugging other men, fully-dressed in snaps apparently taken at parties.

"We have discovered something terrible ... you've only seen one percent of what we've found," Maduro said late on Wednesday.

"The videos and photos of the orgies are unpublishable."

The aide in question is Oscar Lopez, chief of staff to Capriles in the Miranda state governor's office.

Lopez has dropped out of sight since last week when an arrest warrant was issued for him and security agents seized [computers](#), documents and cellphones from his home in Caracas.

His lawyer has said the agents were serving a judicial order in connection with an investigation into political funding, and has denied Lopez was involved in any wrongdoing. The lawyer could not be reached for comment on the latest allegations.

The opposition denounced the raid as the start of a new wave of state repression and has categorically denied all the subsequent accusations, including that of running a prostitution ring.

"In the name of our (state) government and all of our work mates, we give all our support to Oscar Lopez!" Capriles said on Twitter late on Wednesday.

The presentation of the innocent-looking photos of Lopez as proof of his supposed role in a prostitution network was the latest turn in the new campaign against corruption.

Faced with growing anger over widespread graft, Maduro has vowed to root out corruption wherever it lies, and has said he will ask for decree powers last used by his late mentor Hugo Chavez to "change all the laws" if that's what it takes.

The opposition accuses him of targeting political rivals over relatively small amounts of money on trumped-up charges, while turning a blind eye to massive looting of public funds by his high-ranking "Chavista" allies.

SLURS

The latest allegations against Capriles' aide came during an especially bitter session where ruling Socialist Party (PSUV) members leveled charge after charge against their foes.

During an onslaught of sensational claims, one fired-up PSUV legislator launched a personal tirade against the absent Lopez.

"Reply, homosexual! Accept the challenge, faggot!" Pedro Carreno shouted into the microphone. "What they (opposition leaders) do with their asses is their problem, but they should get serious," he added.

Carreno's comments prompted outrage and dismay from many quarters and an apology of sorts from the lawmaker on Wednesday.

"I apologize if I was excessive in my vocabulary, but I had to put them in their rightful place," Carreno told reporters, referring to opposition leaders.

Maduro has already had to defend himself against criticism from rights groups that he made an anti-gay slur against Capriles at a rally ahead of his narrow victory in April's election.

"I do have a wife, you know? I do like women!" Maduro said at the time, drawing hoots of laughter from some in the crowd.

Responding to Carreno's comments, Maduro said homophobia was unacceptable and ran against every principle of equality in Chavez's self-styled socialist revolution.

He said the lawmaker had felt very offended by the debate and had used strong words, but later apologized.

"In a decorous, honorable, brave and dignified way, he has asked for forgiveness," Maduro said. "That's a real man, someone who recognizes when they've made a mistake and apologizes to the country, to the people. He's an example."

Lopez' sexual orientation was irrelevant, Maduro added.

"It's one thing to be heterosexual, or homosexual, or whatever you want to be. It's another to direct and promote a network of young men, of prostitution, of gay and transvestite perversions ... it's truly sad ... it's a crime."

(Reporting by Daniel Wallis; Editing by Kieran Murray and Claudia Parsons)

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