

Venezuela has allocated over one billion dollars to Cuba-led ID plans

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Cuba has had a leading role in the reform of Venezuela's identity card issuing system. Cuban officials designed everything from the workflow of the new Identity and Migration Service (SAIME), to the salaries that analysts earn. They were awarded contracts related to the project and, in turn, they outsourced these services to multinational companies on behalf of Venezuela.

One of the flagship plans was the electronic identity card, a card with a chip containing the holder's personal data, including medical history and tax records. Despite the sensitive information on the files of Venezuelan citizens, which is also used as voter registration, the plan was not discussed, for example, by the National Assembly.

The contract for the new identity cards with the Cuban company Albet Ingeniería y Sistemas, the commercial face of the University of Information Sciences of Havana (UCI), was made public in 2011 after a journalistic investigation. The commercial contract includes confidentiality provisions and the sources who revealed its content said that they had been threatened by Venezuelan and Cuban officials for criticizing the agreement. One of them, Anthony Daquin, former adviser at the Ministry of Domestic Affairs on identity issues, sought political asylum in the United States after—he said—he was pursued by the national intelligence service.

The contract, however, was for only one of the plans: The government of the late President Hugo Chávez, especially since 2005, put the entire design and management of the new Venezuelan civil identification system in Cuban hands.

A Flurry of Contracts. For the different stages of the project, contracts were signed, for different amounts, making it difficult to determine how much the State has paid for the Cuban assistance. Funding has come not only from contracts provisions, but from the national budget, additional appropriations and the National Development Fund (Fonden). Figures available in public

documents from Albet, national budget laws in recent years, and disclosed contracts, however, allow us to estimate the amount at around \$1.4 billion.

The agreement with Cuba for the issuance of documents began in 2003, when Cubans participated in the deployment of “Mission Identity,” which massified the issuing of identity cards in the months before the 2004 recall referendum. The social program is still in place, as a foundation under the Ministry of Domestic Affairs.

During the administration of Minister Jesse Chacon, the first phase of the project was developed at SAIME (back then it was called the National Office of Identification and Immigration, Onidex), with the launch of the electronic passport, whose procurement and commissioning was made by Albet.

The start of the renovation of Saime was agreed in a contract in 2005, signed by the Venezuelan office and the Cuban corporation Copextel, attached to the Cuban Ministry of Informatics and Communications, under Cuban General Ramiro Valdés, who is considered the architect of intelligence services in his country.

The design of the new identification entity was approved by José Lavandero, a Cuban official with the UCI, who was practically the father of the new Venezuelan institution. The document creating the Identity Project notes that the plan had an estimated cost of \$91.5 million and included the "complete technology solution" for modernizing the entity. By this stage—said the authorities—an additional appropriation of \$135.9 million was approved. Yet year after year, funds from the national budget continue to be allocated for this purpose.

The second phase, the electronic identity card, was also awarded to the Cuban company. In March 2008, with Pedro Carreño as Minister of Domestic Affairs, Albet—with its director, Antonio Romillo Tarke—and the ministry signed the contract for the identity cards for \$172.2 million. The Cubans were entrusted with every task, from providing the cards to the software to manage them, ensuring Cuban control on the system.

The government, however, said that only national technicians handle the system. Albet outsourced the implementation—which has a six-year delay—to multinational Gemalto for an amount of \$40 million.

In 2008, the then president of Onidex, José Javier Morales (now deputy to the National Assembly), said the identity card project would be financed by Fonden and would include the purchase of equipment and the update of the technology platform. Morales, Hugo Cabezas (former Minister of the Secretariat) and later Dante Rivas (current director of the Administrative Service of Registries and Notaries), Venezuelan officials who have been directors of Onidex and Saime, were in charge of deploying identity plans outlined by the Cubans in their early stages.

The Dollar Machine. The modernization plan for the identity system has received at least \$630 million between 2009 and 2014 (3.94 billion bolivars at the official exchange rate for each year). The government has allocated resources for this purpose through the budgets for the Identity Mission and Saime. The social program has absorbed most of the funds for the new identity cards.

We must also add a figure revealed by the Cuban company Albet, in a presentation to the Latin American Economic System: Between 2004 and 2010, they had projects with Venezuela for some \$783.5 million. If we take into account the figures in the national budget, the additional appropriations, the numbers in contracts and those revealed by the company, the total reaches an estimated \$1.4 billion allocated for the Cuban counseling services on the field of identity documents.

Albet, created in 2005, has signed contracts with at least eight Venezuelan ministries. Also under Cuban management are the large part of the systems used by the State in commercial and public registries, the center for information management and analysis, the programs of the National Center for Food Balance of Venezuela, the education software, the *Guardian del Alba* Project for the control of PDVSA oil fields, the communications from the Office of the President, the prison control system, emergency management, police management, hospital management, shelter and refuge information, and the national census registration system.

After the contract to design the new SAIME and electronic identity cards was revealed—and the subsequent outsourcing to the multinational Gemalto—opposition deputies to the National Assembly, such as Rodolfo Rodríguez, Carlos Ramos and Abelardo Díaz, tried to bring the issue to a debate in the

plenary session, but the request was denied. They also tried to launch an investigation at the Comptroller Committee, to no avail.

The Comptroller General's Office has not mentioned the case in its reports in recent years. The authorities simply deny that the document-issuing system is in the hands of Cubans, but have provided no details about the hundreds of millions of dollars allocated to these plans.