

Venezuelan Referendum Fails to Unify or Even Calm the Body Politic

Introduction

Venezuela's August 15 referendum on whether to recall President Hugo Chávez was the culmination of two years of opposition efforts to oust the leftist president and equally fervent defense of him by his government and supporters. About 10 million people braved long lines to vote, forcing the extension of voting hours at more than 8,000 polling stations.

The referendum was meant to settle once and for all the question of Chavez's popular mandate, end the incessant political bickering that spawned a coup and a general strike, and lead to reconciliation and economic recovery. Instead, Chávez's 59% victory only deepened the opposition's suspicion and hatred of the president and brought calls of fraud and manipulation.

The Voting

The National Electoral Council (CNE) is supposed to be an independent body, but the opposition charges that it, like the legislature and the judicial system, is stacked with appointees favoring President Chávez. The CNE warned public and private groups not to make predictions about the outcome of the election before the day following the vote, but the private group associated with the opposition, Sumate, announced a victory for the opposition four hours before the polls closed. Soon thereafter, the CNE announced that early returns, based on a sample of "quick counts," showed that Chávez was winning with more than 58%.

The opposition umbrella group, the Democratic Coordinator (CD in Spanish), immediately called the election a fraud and demanded a recount. But exit polls by the OAS and the Carter Center, which sent observer missions, generally agreed with those of the CNE. President Carter called on "all Venezuelans to accept the results and work together in the future," and OAS Secretary General César Gaviria stated that the observers had not found "any element of fraud." The Episcopal Conference of Venezuela also called for dialogue and national reconciliation.

An Audit of the Voting Machines

CNE President Jorge Rodríguez expressed willingness to accept a petition from the CD but refused a manual recount. The Carter Center and the OAS supported the CNE's offer to audit votes from 150 randomly selected polling stations, but the CD refused to participate, arguing that the sample was too small and would not uncover likely sources of fraud. Smartmatic, the Florida company that sold the automatic voting machines to the CNE, stated that 98.8% of the machines functioned perfectly and denied any software bias or rigging of the electronic voting machines. The CNE audit, watched over by the Carter Center and the OAS, showed that the recall election had not suffered from fraud and the results could be considered trustworthy. The final outcome--59% voting for Chávez (no to the recall) and 41% against (yes to the recall)--was confirmed.

The opposition continued to reject the conclusions of the audit, claiming that: a) some polling places had exactly the same number of yes voters, suggesting that the voting machines had been programmed with a ceiling for such votes; b) the machines

disappeared from Smartmatic control for a long time and then reappeared; c) foreign observers did not take a hard look at the dependence of the CNE on the government; and d) that fraud originated with the software/programming of the machines.

Neither the government nor the CNE was willing to conduct any more audits or recounts, although the CNE expressed willingness to receive specific, documented cases of alleged fraud. In his report to the OAS General Assembly, Gaviria declared the election to be without fraud and transparent, but he too offered to accept proofs of fraud from the opposition for evaluation.

Foreign Reactions

Foreign nations praised the Venezuelan people for exercising their civic duty in a civil manner. Fidel Castro quickly congratulated Chávez. Brazilian President Lula praised the electoral process and later expressed consternation at the opposition's insistence that there was fraud. The US withheld comment, except to praise the civility of the electoral process and call for reconciliation. The Andean Community lauded the "civic maturity demonstrated."

The Group of Friends of Venezuela (US, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Spain, Portugal) congratulated the Venezuelan political forces for "the transparent and peaceful manner" in which they carried out the referendum. The group received a sharp rebuke from Venezuelan Foreign Minister Jesus Arnoldo Pérez, who said that since it had been constituted to deal with the country's political crisis it could now be disbanded. Within the Group of Friends, he charged, the Chávez government has two enemies--the governments of the United States and Spain.

Post-Referendum Outlook

Chávez wasted no time in going on the attack. On national TV a week after the election, he said the door was open to the opposition but that he would not talk to the CD, adding that it should be "eliminated from the democratic map of the continent." He called for a massive demonstration in front of the CNE on August 25 to receive the confirmation of the referendum results and promised to deepen his Bolivarian Revolution. The leader of the AD (a member group of the CD), Jesús Méndez Q., pledged to "continue in the political fight." Other opposition leaders accused Chávez of decreasing his "governability" by rejecting the nearly one-half of the electorate who did not support him.

Chávez called on voters to give his party another victory in municipal and legislative elections on September 26. The opposition indicated it might boycott the elections despite a plea from the Archbishop of Caracas to reconsider. After the AD and COPEI (opposition political parties) said they would ask the CNE to hold a manual count of the paper ballots in the regional elections, the CNE indicated it might postpone the elections by a few weeks. Presumably, far fewer international observers will be present for the local elections than for the referendum.

Observations

Instead of uniting the country, the referendum only confirmed divisions and deepened distrust between those who favor the Bolivarian Revolution and those who oppose Chávez and his government. Accusations of fraud will most likely persist, as even the most astute observers are divided on the issue. (Carlos Montaner, in a Miami Herald

article, asserts that fraud took place, while an Alvaro Vargas Llosa article in the San Francisco Chronicle argues that the vote was fair.)

Whatever one's view of Chávez's political and economic policies, there can be no doubt that he has benefited from mistakes of the opposition--especially the general strike and coup attempt--and from high oil prices. The added revenue from oil allowed him to step up his government's social programs before the referendum. The increase in spending temporarily masked the fact that five million people have lost their jobs under his rule. The Central Bank reports GDP growth of 23% in the first half of 2004 and now predicts 3-5% growth in 2005, after a drop of 9.2% in 2003. Although subsidizing the poor may be laudable, it is not sustainable when oil prices return to more normal levels. (In fact, PDVSA oil output has declined since 1998 and is now 400,000 barrels per day below the OPEC-allotted quota.) Critics predict that in the end, the Chávez government will be like former corrupt regimes that left the great majority of Venezuelans with few permanent improvements. Instead of funding subsidies, the oil revenues should be used to improve the productivity of all Venezuelans through better infrastructure, education and health systems.

Chávez has failed on the political front. Instead of trying to persuade the public of the need for social and economic change, he has opted to attack the church, the private sector and organized labor. He frightens many Venezuelans with his rhetoric and gratuitous attacks, including praise for Fidel Castro and his repressive regime and condemnation of the US as the source of Venezuela's and Latin America's problems. His actions have been no less controversial than his words. He has moved gradually to dominate the legislature, the CNE and the judiciary. He has transferred or retired military leaders considered disloyal to him and bought off the rest with high-paying jobs and/or positions ripe for enrichment through corruption. His critics fear that he now wants to extend control over the police and may use the September elections to drive the opposition from the state and municipal governments.

To his opponents, Chávez appears to have a totalitarian strain and is implementing actions to match his rhetoric. He might say that energetic measures are needed to bring about economic and social change, but perhaps it is just that he likes power and must find ways to control the more than 40% of the population who do not support him. Chávez has two and a half years before he has to face the electorate again. It is a good bet that he will continue to extend his control over Venezuelan society so that when oil prices drop and he can no longer buy support, he will be in a position to impose it.