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Chavez Candidates Sweep Constituent Assembly Election in Venezuela

by LADB Staff

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Elections for 128 of 131 delegates to Venezuela's Constituent Assembly (Asamblea Nacional Constituyente, ANC), held July 25, gave President Hugo Chavez an overwhelming victory. Voter turnout was around 47%. With the Polo Patriotico's sweep of the election, Chavez won what he called the "final battle" to carry out a peaceful and democratic revolution to refound Venezuela.

The absolute control that Chavez now has of the ANC has raised concerns about the possibility of dissention within the Assembly, which will have only a handful of opposition delegates. "Today, a new Venezuela is born with greater social security, where human rights are respected, and all Venezuelans have the right to housing, education, and health," Chavez said before casting his vote.

The pledge to hold a Constituent Assembly was a cornerstone of Chavez's presidential campaign. He said it would rescue the country from its ingrained corruption and growing poverty (see NotiSur, 1998-12-11, 1999-04-30). "Nobody questions that the system needs fundamental and profound changes, that it just doesn't work anymore," said Michael Shifter of the Washington-based Inter-American Dialogue (IAD). "The question is how it's going to be changed and what is the alternative."

"Chavistas" steamroll opposition

Chavez's Polo Patriotico was the only party that had a candidate for each assembly seat. The coalition took 120 of the 128 seats at stake in the election, according to official results from the Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE). Indigenous communities chose their three delegates a week earlier. The Chavistas had 128 candidates running, of whom 120 won, while the opposition had 1,039 candidates, of whom only 8 won.

The CNE set Aug. 3 as the opening of the ANC. Most analysts credited the efficiency of Chavez's supporters and the weakness and disorganization of the opposition for the landslide. Former chief of staff Alfredo Pena and Chavez's wife, Marisabel Rodriguez, were the top vote-getters in Sunday's election. Also elected were his brother, 20 former military officers, five former government ministers, a sports broadcaster and a folk musician. Only 15 women, all "Chavistas," were elected to the ANC, giving women just 11.5% of the seats in the body that will decide the future model of government for the country.

Among the losers was former president Carlos Andres Perez. It was his first electoral loss and, some analysts say, the end of his political career. Perez was the first Venezuela president elected to a second term and the country's most charismatic politician before Chavez. The political destinies of Chavez and Perez have been closely linked. Chavez staged his unsuccessful coup attempt in February 1992 during Perez's second term.

Although the attempt failed to topple Perez, a year later he was forced from office when the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) found him guilty of embezzlement and misappropriation of funds (see NotiSur, 1993-09-10, 1996-06-07). Perez was not only forced out of office, but also thrown out of the Accion Democratica (AD) party that he had helped to form, and sentenced to 28 months in prison.

First task of ANC is determining limits of power

Chavez's overwhelming victory consolidated his grip on power, which had been countered since he took office in February by the opposition-dominated Congress. It also ensures that the new constitution, which the assembly will have six months to write, will reflect his proposals. Chavez's critics warn that the new constitution could give the former coup leader such sweeping powers that it would essentially create a dictatorship in South America's oldest democracy.

Chavez has said he wants the Assembly to dissolve both Congress and the CSJ, but he would not object if the Assembly retained the legislative body. "We're building a true democracy here, and a true democracy is built through consensus and respect for others," said Chavez. He said the overwhelming victory gives the Assembly "an absolute legitimacy and an impressive legality" so that "now it can begin to make the decisions that need to be made."

The CSJ ruled in April that the Assembly would not have the power to dissolve branches of government, but Chavez has said the ANC can ignore that ruling. "We are going to begin by ratifying the absolute powers of the Assembly, although this does not mean that we are immediately going to close Congress," said Artistobulo Isturiz, one of the highest vote-getters of the newly elected delegates.

The first and most controversial task is resolving whether the ANC will be designated "originaria" with unlimited powers or respect the CSJ ruling limiting its power to writing a new constitution. The victory of the Chavistas makes it likely that the ANC will declare itself "originaria." Chavez, meanwhile, says his priorities for the new constitution are respect for democracy, an ethical political system, decentralization through a truly federal system, an independent judiciary, defence of human rights, and a new economic and social order. More specifically, the ANC will decide on issues such as presidential re-election, creating a unicameral Congress, taxation changes, and incorporating rules fostering more liberal economic competition.

Crisis in opposition parties

Neither the strong economic recession nor the growing unemployment nor the deterioration of the quality of life in Venezuela has cost Chavez significantly in the polls. Five months after taking office, he still receives 76% approval ratings. Luis Vicente Leon, director of the polling firm Datanalisis said that is the highest level of popularity that any Venezuelan president has ever received after more than 100 days in office.

The latest election has made it clear that the old Venezuela where two traditional parties controlled everything no longer exists. The main stronghold of the opposition parties has been the Congress, where they hold a majority. The major opposition parties AD, Comite de Organizacion Politica Electoral Independiente (COPEI), and Proyecto Venezuela control 45% of the seats in Congress,

while the pro-government parties Movimiento V Republica, Patria para Todos, and the Movimiento al Socialismo have 33.6%.

On July 29, Congress declared itself on vacation until October. While Chavez continues to see high poll numbers, the support for the opposition parties has dwindled. Leon said their support has dropped 20% this year. Chavez's victory caused a crisis in the opposition parties. The leadership of both AD and COPEI resigned. COPEI secretary general Donald Ramirez and party leader and former president Luis Herrera Campins said it was time for the party to choose new leadership after their third major defeat in nine months.

"We are worn out and we want to give an opportunity to a new generation who will assume the process of refounding the party and converting COPEI into a strong option in the face of the present serious reality of the country," said Ramirez. [Sources: United Press International, 07/24/99; Associated Press, 07/23-25/99; Notimex, 07/25/99; The New York Times, 07/25/99, 07/26/99; Agence France-Presse, Clarin (Argentina), El Nuevo Diario (Miami), Inter Press Service, 07/26/99; Spanish news service EFE, 07/26/99, 07/27/99; El Universal (Venezuela), Reuters, 07/27/99; CNN, 07/25/99, 07/26/99, 07/29/99]

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