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Venezuela: Agreement Reached On Referendum For New Elections

by Patricia Hynds

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Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez Frias marked the first anniversary of his return to power after a coup ousted him for two days in April 2002. He not only survived the coup, but he has also survived intense opposition efforts during the past year to topple him anew. The Organization of American States (OAS)-backed negotiations between the Chavez government and the opposition, which have taken place sporadically since November 2002, have also begun to bear fruit with a recent agreement regarding a revocatory referendum for sometime after August. At this point, however, the opposition is so divided it will have an uphill battle to pull off the referendum, much less win an election. On April 11, the government and the opposition agreed to an electoral solution to the political crisis, which could bring a revocatory referendum. Fernando Jaramillo of the OAS told reporters that the document would be signed sometime after Easter by the 12 delegates who have been participating in the talks (Mesa de Negociacion y Acuerdos). Jaramillo said that, in the document, both parties expressed their "total adherence to and respect for the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and adherence to the principles of the Carta Democratica of the OAS." He said both sides made a commitment to promote the disarming of the civilian population. The document will also ask the Asamblea Nacional to finalize legislation to create a truth commission (Comision de la Verdad) to examine the events of April 11, 2002, and to determine who was responsible for the violence in which 19 people died (see NotiSur, 2002-04-19). On April 15, Timoteo Zambrano, a delegate for the opposition in the Mesa de Negociacion y Acuerdos, said the agreement would set Nov. 19 as the outside limit for holding the referendum, since it must take place within 90 days of turning over the required signatures. The opposition leaders are basing their timeline on the premise that on Aug. 19 they will present the nearly 2.5 million signatures (20% of the electorate) required to petition for a referendum. If the opposition wins, if at least 3.8 million people the total must be more than the number who voted for Chavez in 2000 vote in favor of removing the president from office, new elections will be called. The government is still studying the draft agreement, said Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel. Path to referendum still has obstacles Serious disagreements regarding the referendum persist. Chavez says that the signatures gathered earlier by the opposition are invalid. He argues the Constitution does not allow citizens to begin collecting signatures until August. A new election authority (Consejo Nacional Electoral, CNE) being set up by the Asamblea Nacional must clean up the voter-registration lists, decide the issue of the signatures, and verify the signatures before the referendum can be held. Chavez is also insisting on the right to run in new elections if he loses the referendum. Opposition leaders are against the idea. Polls indicate 60% of Venezuelans would vote against the president in a referendum. But they also indicate that Chavez could win elections against a divided opposition lacking in visible leadership. Meanwhile, Chavez says that if the opposition is able to fulfill the requirements to call a revocatory referendum, they will be soundly defeated. "They have the right to try, but we are going to trounce them just like we did in all earlier popular consultations," he said. Chavez supporters commemorate coup anniversary Thousands of Chavez loyalists gathered to mark the one-year anniversary of April 13, called the Day of the Heroic People, when Chavez supporters

demanded the return of the president, who had been deposed two days earlier. Chavez addressed the crowd of supporters, saying, "Nobody is leaving! We will stay forever, fighting battles." He denounced global imperialism and "savage neoliberalism," and said the coup against him had been promoted by foreign interests and carried out by "the fascist oligarchy" within Venezuela. "The time has come for a new continental wave of independence," Chavez said. "We have no alternative but to unite in struggle. This is the globalization of the revolution." The festivities came a day after a bomb damaged the building where government and opposition representatives have been negotiating. No one was injured in the pre-dawn blast but it renewed tensions as each side accused the other of being behind the attack. Opposition weakened after strategy fails The opposition's major obstacle is its lack of unity. The failure of the two-month "strike" to oust Chavez, the decision by several opposition leaders to go into exile, and the lack of a clear strategy have left the opposition fragmented and demoralized. The Coordinadora Democratica (CD) coalition's tactics have been widely discredited. The strike cost the economy an estimated US\$7 billion and led to a rash of bankruptcies that further increased unemployment. After it ended in failure, some prominent Chavez opponents began distancing themselves from the group. On April 13, one opposition faction, the Bloque Democratico (BD), broke with the larger group. BD leader Alfredo Garcia attacked the agreement between the CD and the government. "This thing with the referendum is a trick....They are playing a macabre game with the country, and the BD will not join that and will never negotiate," said Garcia. "Here there will be no referendum nor an electoral way out with this government. The society, formed by military and civilians, has to restore the constitutional thread" with weapons such as the civil disobedience that is provided for in the Constitution." Several other prominent opposition leaders have gone into exile. Pedro Carmona, the former president of the business group Fedecamaras who headed the government for a day following the coup, sought political asylum in Colombia. In a single weekend last year, Carmona was appointed president, ousted from the presidential palace, and then arrested. He slipped away while under house arrest and entered the Colombian Embassy. He asked for and was given asylum (see NotiSur, 2002-06-14). Many opposition leaders have distanced themselves from Carmona and his actions during his brief presidency. Within hours, Carmona did away with the Asamblea Nacional, the Corte Suprema, and parts of the Constitution. Carlos Ortega, president of the Confederacion de Trabajadores de Venezuela (CTV) and Carmona's principal ally in the coup, is in exile in Costa Rica. "Carmona surprised us when he did away with democracy," said Ortega in Costa Rica. Ortega and Carlos Fernandez, who assumed the leadership of Fedecamaras after Carmona left the country, were the coordinators of the work stoppage that began Dec. 2, 2002, and ended Feb. 3, 2003, without achieving its goal of forcing Chavez from office (see NotiSur, 2003-01-31). Ortega went into exile rather than face charges stemming from that action (see NotiSur, 2003-03-21). Fernandez, who was under house arrest for organizing the strike, was released and is now in Florida. A third leader, Juan Fernandez, president of the Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) union of fired executives Gente del Petroleo, has also lowered his profile and spends much time in the US, where opposition leaders say he is raising money for a possible presidential campaign. On April 15, opposition leaders met in Miami to reorganize and to replan their strategy against Chavez. Among the participants were Carlos Fernandez, Juan Fernandez, and some military officers. Juan Fernandez proposed a three-phase plan to resurrect and unify the opposition. He said the new strategy must attract the poor who have "felt the brunt of the economic crisis caused by the government's inefficiency." Carlos Fernandez returned to the opposition main theme their depiction of a Chavez strategy of "totalitarian Cubanization" of the country. He warned that the government could carry out a "self-coup" to justify suspending the referendum. [Sources: Vheadline.com, 04/07/03; The Houston

Chronicle, 04/10/03; The New York Times, 04/12/03; Inter Press Service, 04/14/03, 04/15/03; The Miami Herald, 04/15/03, 04/16/03; La Opinion (Los Angeles), 04/12/03, 04/17/03; Spanish news service EFE, 04/04/03, 04/08/03, 04/13-16/03, 04/18/03; Notimex, 04/10/03, 04/11/03, 04/15/03, 04/22/03; Associated Press, 04/13/03, 04/15/03, 04/23/03]

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