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Electoral Authority a Setback to Chavez Opponents

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Venezuela's political crisis reached a hot point in early March as the Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE) announced its decision to forestall a revocatory referendum against President Hugo Chavez. The electoral council decided by a 3-2 majority vote that about 1.1 million of the 3.4 million signatures opposition groups had gathered needed to be "rectified" or confirmed by an appeals process, placing those signatures "in question."

Dissatisfaction with that pronouncement led to large-scale protests and nearly a week of chaos in the streets of several Venezuelan cities, resulting in almost a dozen deaths and many more injuries. Accusations and counteraccusations of fraud The Venezuelan Constitution requires parties seeking to impose a recall vote on the sitting president to get signatures from about 20% of the electorate, meaning they needed to deliver 2.4 million signatures.

The CNE decision held that only 1,832,493 signatures were clearly valid, leaving the opposition about 600,000 short of the necessary amount to confirm a referendum. CNE officials say that 1.1 million of the "doubtful" signatures could be authentic if people would come forward to confirm they signed. The council rejected 140,000 signatures outright because they belonged to minors, dead people, foreigners, or people who weren't registered to vote.

President Chavez, prior to the CNE decision, took to calling the petition process a "megafraud" and in television broadcasts pointed to pages of signatures which he said showed errors. In a speech to foreign ambassadors, he held up a copy of a petition form and said, "I'm sure Emiliano Chavez doesn't exist." He pointed to an identification number accompanying the signature No. 2,550,083 saying it belonged to a dead woman.

Yet days later 61-year-old Emiliano Chavez Rosales stepped forward and told El Universal newspaper, "I'm not dead. I'm alive and kicking." A search of the country's voter database turned up Chavez Rosales' name and the same number. Officials have showed pages of petitions that seemed to have "irregularities."

CNE director Jorge Rodriguez, for example, has displayed several forms in which rows of signatures appear to be in the same handwriting. Petition organizers said this was because signers allowed them to write in their personal information before adding their signatures and fingerprints. They say council-run training in signature gathering told them they could help the elderly and disabled.

Chavez insists the procedure could have allowed petitioners to mask the fact that they were forging thousands of signatures. Petition organizers say they were simply helping people who had trouble writing.
The Organization of American States (OAS) and the US-based Carter Center, which are monitoring the recall drive, said their observers witnessed many people helping others complete forms "in good faith." The opposition is split between those who think it is possible to confirm the signatures through an appeals process and those who believe they must pressure the council to accept the 3.5 million signatures outright. They believe the Chavez government has fraudulently deprived them of their right to petition for a recall and robbed them of their signatures.

Under their plan, election officials say citizens would have two days to come forward. Their ID numbers would be published in national newspapers, and 2,700 centers would be set up around the country where they could sign the petition again.

Some opposition leaders say they can get the necessary 600,000 signatures by the government's plan. Others, however, want the CNE to accept all signatures in dispute and publish the data. They say citizens who didn't sign could then come forward to confirm they were not part of the petition. The OAS and Carter Center agree that the latter process would be more manageable and would place the burden of proof on the CNE.

On March 9, opposition deputies went to the Sala Electoral of the Tribunal Supremo de Justicia (TSJ) to ask that the signature confirmation order be annulled. Allegations of lack of objectivity of members of the TSJ and the CNE have come from both sides of the fight, while CNE officials have complained about intimidation. The recall referendum is the latest in opposition attempts to oust Chavez from power. Previous efforts included a coup that failed after two days and large-scale economic disruptions from the oil, retail, and banking sectors (see NotiSur, 2003-01-31, 2002-04-19).

Chavez was re-elected to a six-year term in 2000 and the midpoint is mid-August. If he loses a referendum held before then, new presidential elections must be held. But if he loses in a vote held after that midpoint, Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel would take over for the rest of his term.

Opponents fear that if that happens, Chavez would be able to rule behind his right-hand man for the rest of his term. Nine dead, 110 wounded, police estimate The anti-Chavistas experienced new martyrdoms as several demonstrators died during several days of rioting from Feb.27-March 4. The protests began as CNE officials spoke publicly about irregularities and the likelihood that many signatures would be invalidated.

The opposition umbrella group Coordinadora Democratica (CD) took advantage of the Group of 15 (G-15) Summit held in Caracas on Feb. 27-28 to draw attention to their cause, squaring off against National Guard troops (militarized police) as several foreign presidents visited the Venezuelan capital (see NotiSur, 2004-03-05). As arrests proliferated and more protestors died, opposition protests became more radicalized. National Guard troops fired tear gas at protestors as various groups set up barricades and burned tires, garbage, and logs.

Several protestors threw rocks and gas bombs at police. Various press reports spoke of masked people bearing rifles in trucks or guarding neighborhood intersections, their affiliations unclear. Some were Federal Police, but others were vigilantes whose allegiances were uncertain. It is also still unclear who killed the victims, with both sides of the fight accusing the other.
Marcos Chavez, chief of the Cuerpo de Investigaciones Científicas, Penales y Criminalísticas (CICPC), said that nine people had died from bullet wounds and 110 had been wounded, with the majority of those occurring in Caracas. He said the incidents were concentrated in middle- and upper-class urban areas in the eastern part of the capital. He said many of the injuries were from gunshots, some suffered contusions, a few had been hit by vehicles. He said six of the deaths took place in Caracas and three more in the interior of the country.

Human rights organizations said the death toll was eleven. The March 4 death of 42-year-old activist Eva Carrizo during confrontations between the protesters and the National Guard mobilized protestor anger, as did the arrest of several prominent opposition leaders.

"It's not enough that they steal our signatures. They also have to rob Venezuelans of our peace and physical safety," said opposition leader Antonio Ledezma. A weekend march drew between 100,000 and 200,000 marchers, who demonstrated peacefully, according to various press outlets. Rioting consumed not only Caracas neighborhoods but also broke out in the western cities of Maracaibo, Barquisimeto, Valencia, and San Cristobal.

On March 3, the violence had mostly died down, but there were reports of clashes in the western town of Machiques the next day, where Carrizo lost her life trying to block a highway with a group of demonstrators. UN envoy of 30 years resigns in protest Complaints of human rights violations by police and government forces grew as the protests continued.

Venezuela's UN ambassador resigned on March 4 to protest threats to human rights and democracy in the South American nation, blaming President Chavez for promoting confrontation instead of reconciliation.

Milos Alcalay, a career diplomat who had represented his country for 30 years, said issues that tipped his decision were the CNE’s rejection of petitions and the "overreaction" by army and police during opposition protests that left several dead. Alcalay said his diplomatic career has been guided by the principles of protecting human rights, a transparent democratic process, and an open dialogue for international diplomacy.

"Sadly, Venezuela now is operating devoid of these fundamental principles, which I still remain intensely committed to," he said. "Therefore, it is with a heavy heart today that I am resigning from my position." Tarek William Saab, a ruling-party lawmaker who heads the National Assembly's foreign-policy commission, called Alcalay a "hypocrite" who failed to speak out against a 2002 coup that toppled Chavez for two days. "Alcalay's attitude completely lacks credibility," Saab said.

The Venezuelan Foreign Ministry had no immediate comment on the resignation. US-Venezuela relations worsen During the political crisis, Chavez ramped up his rhetoric against the administration of US President George W. Bush, calling the former Texas governor a "pendejo," a vulgar term for someone who is a stupid fool. Chavez also challenged Bush to a bet on whose presidency would last longer. "I'll bet you in bolivares or in dollars, you decide," he taunted as
he spoke to a multitude of his supporters gathered on Caracas' main highway in a counterprotest during the G-15 meeting.

Chavez frequently accuses the Bush administration of supporting coup leaders and opposition forces in Venezuela. In more concrete terms, Chavez threatened to stop oil supplies to the US. He said, "If you [Bush], the imperialists who surround you and whisper into your ear, and the lackeys you have here get the crazy notion to try to blockade or invade Venezuela, the people of the US should know that not one drop of oil from Venezuela will reach you."

Venezuela is the world's fifth-largest oil exporter and one of the top suppliers of crude and gasoline to the US. Chavez also promised a "100-year war" if the US chose to invade Venezuela. But at a meeting of business executives and government officials, Chavez tempered his threats and promised stable oil ties. "We don't have even the slightest intention of damaging those relations," he said at a ceremony celebrating the signing of a contract with US multinational ChevronTexaco to develop an offshore gas project. "In the last five years, we have enough proof, not just words, but proof, that we have supplied oil to the United States in a constant and secure manner."

The recent street clashes sent shudders through global energy markets, where participants keep a close watch on Venezuela for signs of a repeat of an opposition strike just over a year ago that disrupted the country's oil industry.

Chavez has also repeatedly insisted that the US was behind the recent downfall of Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, alleging, as does Aristide, that the embattled president did not resign willingly but was kidnapped in a US-backed coup (see NotiCen, 2004-03-04). The US government expresses dislike for Chavez's close political ties with states Washington considers hostile like Cuba, Iran, and Libya and often criticizes his populist policies.

In a March 9 editorial, The New York Times called for both sides of the Venezuelan struggle to respect the principles of constitutional democracy and "resolve their differences through peaceful electoral means," omitting mention of its own editorial endorsement of the military coup in 2002 (see NotiSur, 2002-04-19).

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