Referendum Set for August 15

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The long struggle about whether there would be a revocatory referendum against Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has ended, and the Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE), the national electoral authority, has set a date of Aug. 15 for the ballot. As Chavez's opposition and his base of support commence parallel campaigns, Chavez's legal status as a potential future candidate if he loses the vote remains unclear.

If Chavez loses the recall, elections will be held within 30 days. The winner of those elections would serve out the remainder of Chavez's current six-year term, which began in 2000. The votes against Chavez will have to exceed the more than 3.7 million votes that brought him to office in 2000.

On June 8, the CNE announced the Aug. 15 ballot date, days after announcing that the referendum would take place. The opposition to Chavez, gathered primarily under the aegis of the Coordinadora Democratica (CD), has put up a long fight to get this referendum through (see NotiSur, 2003-12-12). The CD delivered almost 3.5 million petition signatures to the CNE, but the signatures had to undergo a "repair" process when the electoral body found fault with over 1 million of the signatures and required opposition groups to verify them.

The decision led to deadly protests at first and later to a massive effort to "rectify" the questionable signatures (see NotiSur, 2004-03-12). The total number of signatures had to represent 20% of registered Venezuelan voters, or approximately 2.4 million signatures. Chavez accepts recall, says Bush is his opponent "I accept it, I accept it," said Chavez in a nationwide broadcast hours after the CNE projected that he would be facing a recall vote. He has previously said that he would comply with the results of the referendum.

The former colonel called the news a triumph for Venezuelan democracy and said his acceptance disproved opposition claims that he was steering the country into dictatorship. In various speeches, Chavez said he aimed to win a new, overwhelming mandate.

At a June 8 rally, Chavez told supporters that he anticipated a 2-to-1 victory, saying, "We will obtain twice the votes of the oligarchy, we will get at least five million votes" in the referendum. "The real enemy is Mr. Bush, the president of the United States, the empire, from whence the intervention in Venezuela is supported and coups against democracy are financed," said Chavez at a June 12 appearance.

Both US President George W. Bush and his main opponent in the 2004 US presidential election, John Kerry, have spoken against Chavez's presidency, while publications like The Washington Post and The Economist have also condemned him.
Some polls suggest that the opposition has sufficient support to oust Chavez through the upcoming vote, particularly if voter dissatisfaction at high crime rates and a foundering economy plays a large role. Others say Chavez, boosted by high oil revenues and traditional abstention at the polls, will win. Some surveys put his support at 40%, which is high by regional standards.

**Both sides launch electoral campaigns**

On June 16, the CD announced the beginning of its campaign to get a "yes" vote on the recall referendum. The opposition group had conducted large-scale marches through Caracas as the CNE considered its petitions, while Chavez support groups held their own competing demonstrations.

On June 5, The Associated Press reported that tens of thousands of opposition supporters had marched through the capital to celebrate the CNE's pro-referendum decision. Waving flags and chanting "referendum now!" demonstrators danced to anti-Chavez jingles booming from loudspeakers mounted on trucks. Others blew whistles and set off powerful fireworks. One man carried a banner reading, "Chavez, your time is nearly up!"

The next day, the pro-Chavez forces made a show of their street strength, with tens of thousands marching in Caracas dressed in the official party's characteristic red vests. "The president is not alone, his people are here," said Noemi Vargas, a 35-year-old lawyer, carrying a puppet representing Chavez and a copy of the Constitution in her hands. "This symbolizes the revolution. It is a symbol of what we want out of this process."

**Controversy over electronic voting machines**

The vote will be automated, with about 19,000 voting machines distributed to voting centers throughout the country. The yet-untried electronic voting machines are supplied by the SBC consortium, in which the government has a financial stake, according to The Miami Herald. The two pro-opposition members of the CNE's five-person board expressed strong reservations about the decision to support automation. Both voted against the machines on June 8.

One of the two, Ezequiel Zamora, described as "extremely serious" the council's 3-2 decision not to carry out any manual count of the voting slips produced by the touch-screen machines. The lack of such a procedure, Zamora said, would cast "serious doubt" on the results, and he called on the three pro-government members of the board to reconsider their decision.

Deputy Nelson Rampersad, speaking on behalf of the CD alliance, pointed out that, "Smartmatic itself says the process is auditable." "What are they trying to hide?" Rampersad asked, referring to the three board members who voted for the resolution. Smartmatic is the Florida-based company, part of the SBC consortium, supplying the Italian-made electronic voting machines. Another important question for the opposition is whether the vote tally will be completed by Aug. 19, four days after the referendum.

If Chavez loses after that date, his vice president, Jose Vicente Rangel, would take power and no new presidential election would be triggered 30 days later. Opposition members fear that Chavez
would "rule from behind the throne" if Rangel held power. Ballot question will not include word "revocatory." The CNE also approved the wording of the plebiscite question to appear on the ballot, leaving out the term "revocatory" and the verb "revoke."

Opposition groups expressed concern about the wording of the question, but said they were still optimistic. The question will read: "Are you in agreement with rendering ineffective the popular mandate given by legitimate and democratic elections to the citizen Hugo Rafael Chavez Frias as president of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela for the current presidential period?"

CD leaders had sought to have the verb "revocar" (revoke) in place of "dejar sin efecto" (render ineffective) in the plebiscite's phrasing. Opposition spokespersons called the wording of the question unclear and overly complex, blaming the three pro-Chavez members of the CNE. They still predicted, however, that they would defeat Chavez in the upcoming vote.

Chavez's status after potential loss unclear Venezuela's highest court ruled on June 15 that Chavez can run in 2006 elections if he loses a recall referendum but left unclear whether he could stand for election immediately after a recall. Chavez's eligibility to seek election immediately if he loses the Aug. 15 recall is crucial to Venezuela's divided opposition.

Recent opinion polls suggest that Chavez with approval ratings of up to 40% could win against several opposition candidates. Two magistrates of the Tribunal Supremo de Justicia (TSJ) objected to the court's failure to address the issue. The CNE ruling "does not resolve the doubt" about whether a president "whose mandate has been revoked can participate in immediate elections," wrote one of the magistrates, Pedro Rafael Rondon. "This omission" could increase "uncertainty for the country."

Opponents say it would be absurd for Chavez to run after losing a recall, but the Constitution is not clear on the point. The TSJ said that Chavez if he were to lose the recall could seek the presidency in Dec. 2006 elections for a new six-year term that would start in January 2007.

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