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President Chavez Wins Recall Vote
by LADB Staff
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An August 15 referendum on the presidency of Hugo Rafael Chavez Frias resulted in a double-digit margin of victory with a large majority of eligible voters going to the polls. The Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE) reported that, with 94.4% of the vote counted, about 58% of voters had said "No" to the effort to recall Chavez and hold new presidential elections. This marks the eighth time in Chavez's six years as president that he has defeated his opponents at the ballot box.

News reports now describe his opposition as weak, divided and in disarray. International observers certify win for "No" to recall With 4,991,483 voters calling for Chavez to remain in power and 3,576,517 calling for Chavez to step down, the CNE ratified Chavez's status as president on August 16.

CNE president Francisco Carrasquero announced that Chavez had received support from 58.25% of voters and disapproval from 41.74%. Former US president Jimmy Carter, whose Atlanta-based Carter Center acted as an independent observer in the vote, said, "After our own analysis, we are in a condition to say that our results coincide with the electoral council's."

The Organization of American States (OAS) was also on hand to monitor the election, as were dozens of other organizations (see NotiSur, 2004-07-30). OAS mission chief Valter Pecly Moreira praised Venezuelan voters, saying, "The civil character of the people is very important, (they were) very civil and cooperative; it impressed me." He said the installation of voting tables was generally conducted "in an appropriate manner."

Observers called the large turnout a significant and positive development for Latin American democracies. Massive voter turnout clogged polling stations, with observers noting a possibility that abstention rates could fall to as low as 20%. The final abstention rate seemed to be higher than that early estimate, at about 25%, but Carter still called it one of the largest turnouts he had ever seen. Voters waited for hours in long, near-motionless lines on voting day.

Bottlenecks formed as some stations did not open until 10:00 AM, when they had been scheduled to open at six in the morning. The computerized voting system, which was a source of great controversy prior to the vote (see NotiSur, 2004-06-18), appeared to have functioned well, but the fingerprinting system to verify voters' identities slowed the process considerably. The first thumbprint machine that Chavez used when casting his own ballot failed to identify him properly and he had to use a different one.

Opposition charges "fraud," monitors see little proof
"They have perpetuated a gigantic fraud," alleged Henry Ramos, a spokesman for the Coordinadora Democratica (CD), the country's largest opposition organization. The CD and Venezuelan cardinal
Rosalio Jose Castillo described Chavez's victory as a "fraud." "The votes in favor of Chavez were purchased by taking advantage of the hunger of the poor, with a result that contradicts all polls," said Castillo on Vatican Radio, claiming that official party members had controlled the voting and paid 50 to 60 dollars for each pro-Chavez vote. International monitors ratified the vote as legitimate and called on opposition groups alleging fraud to provide proof of their accusations.

OAS Secretary-General Cesar Gaviria said that observers would consider the vote as valid until there was "tangible proof" demonstrating otherwise. "The results of the CNE are compatible with our count," said Gaviria. "We are open to listen to precise points and look at concrete issues, but we are obligated to say to the country that the results which came out are compatible with our inspections."

Venezuelan election officials agreed on August 17 to conduct a partial audit of the results, but opposition leaders refused to participate in the audit, setting back international efforts to mend the polarized political climate.

Opposition leaders claimed they had unearthed new evidence of fraud, which they insisted the audit - proposed by former President Carter and the OAS - would fail to detect. "Under these conditions, we won't accept this audit," said anti-Chavez lawmaker Nelson Rampersad after a meeting between opposition leaders, Carter and Gaviria. "We have no reason to doubt the integrity of the electoral process nor the accuracy of the referendum results," Carter said.

Carter said that the opposition would look foolish if it keeps crying foul after the audit, which he said should be completed by August 19. "It should be sufficient to address the remaining concerns that have been expressed by the opposition," Carter said.

World oil prices drop on news of Chavez triumph

Like international monitors, the international oil markets stamped their imprimatur on the pro-Chavez vote the day that the CNE ratified the "No" vote. Prices for oil, hovering at record-highs of US$46.30 a barrel, dropped on news on the Chavez victory, easing traders' fears that social unrest would disrupt Venezuelan oil exports.

Energy markets had been worried about disruptions to the country's 2.6 million barrels per day (bpd) oil production if a disputed result sparked social unrest. Shipping sources had said shipments from Venezuela, the world's fifth-largest crude exporter, were running smoothly. The possibility that the Russian government would freeze Russian oil company Yukos' assets, the inability of OPEC to increase its production and a continually escalating war in the Middle East have also led oil traders to buy at higher prices.

The day after the "No" vote ratification was announced, these factors had led oil prices to again hit new records, meaning that Chavez's victory party on the New York Mercantile Exchange lasted only one day. Record-high oil prices appeared to strengthen Chavez's position in the weeks running up to the vote. They provided more revenue to fund Chavez's social works programs, a practice his critics attacked as bribing the populace for votes.
Chavez gets his home run "Look out!

On August 15 I am going to hit [a home run] so hard that it will land in the gardens of the White House!" crowed Chavez on the August 1 edition of his program "Alo Presidente." Throughout the campaign he portrayed his opposition as a tool of George W. Bush's administration. Chavez supporters often noted the US$50,000 that the National Endowment for Democracy, an organization funded by the US government, had donated to the CD.

The State Department took a wait-and-see posture on the vote while other nations were congratulating Chavez on his win, but it ultimately recognized his triumph the day after the CNE did. This is the eighth time Chavez has triumphed over his opponents at the polls since he came to power in 1998. Chavez called the vote a "clean, transparent and overwhelming victory" for Venezuela. It is a triumph that will likely provide the president with a mandate to expand his "Bolivarian revolution," as he calls his program to lift the majority of Venezuelans out of poverty.

Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel announced after the vote ratification that the government is "going to deepen the social and democratic revolution in Venezuela" and "will be more audacious, more effective, destined to benefit the country's majority poor."

Opposition forces seeking electoral advantage against the Chavez government will now have to wait until next year's congressional elections and for the presidential vote of 2006. The polarization that has riven the country during Chavez's term will likely persist, even with the weakened credibility that the opposition suffers from after yet another failed attempt to remove Chavez from office.

Venezuelan political analyst Alberto Garrido told CNN that his country's political "polarization cannot be resolved in the short term because two modes of life and two different political systems are in dispute...It must be recalled that Chavez said that the era of representative democracy had ended and now the era of participatory democracy had definitively begun, [and these] are two world philosophies, two different political systems."

Observers have generally characterized the two poles of Venezuelan society as the business and racial elite who previously enjoyed dominance and the poor majority that feels Chavez represents a new political force in their favor. Opinion polls progressively showed Chavez in strong standing as the vote approached, and doubts persisted as to whether the opposition would be able to present a leader as popular as Chavez had they won the referendum.

An Aug. 13 survey by Ecuadoran poll service Informe Confidencial showed Chavez with an eight to 12% advantage. During the lead-up to the vote, some pollsters alluded to a "hidden vote" that could potentially swing the referendum away from Chavez's favor, surmising that anti-Chavez voters could be fibbing about their preference to surveyors. But the "occult factor" in favor of recall failed to emerge as voters cast their ballots. Fast-track naturalization of immigrants living in Venezuela also expanded the pool of potential pro-Chavez voters. The president naturalized more than 200,000 foreign citizens living in Venezuela prior to Aug. 15 and said he planned to naturalize one million before the end of the year.
Opposition leaders denounced the move as an effort the gain votes in the referendum. "Mega-marches" by both pro-government and opposition demonstrators filled the streets of Caracas with tens of thousands of people in the days preceding the vote, although commentators remarked on the comparative absence of street demonstrators until the days immediately prior to the vote. Chavez supporters at home in Venezuela and abroad prepared celebrations before the vote had even begun.

In Buenos Aires, the Circulo Bolivariano de Argentina organized different social organizations to march to the Obelisk at the center of the city. Chavez himself was so confident of victory that he left the rigors of campaigning behind on Saturday the 14th and spent his time re-reading Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novel, "One Hundred Years of Solitude." In the weeks preceding the referendum, Chavez announced plans to meet with other regional leaders in the days and weeks following the vote, evidently assuming that his victory was assured.

The expatriate vote, representing a small fraction of the total number of voters, tended to vote strongly in favor of a recall. 95% of Venezuelan voters in Spain voted "Yes" for the referendum, according to the Venezuelan consul to Spain, Yolanda Rojas. She said about 5,000 of the 9,000 Venezuelans residing in Spain voted.

In Miami, where a large community of 16,865 registered Venezuelan voters live, 11,973 of the 12,404 who came to the polls marked "Si" to the recall question. 51% of Venezuelans living in Colombia voted in favor of a recall.

**Woman fatally shot at opposition rally**

Unidentified gunmen fired into an anti-Chavez demonstration after the ratification of the vote, leaving one woman dead and several injured.

In the Plaza Altamira in Caracas gunmen riding a motorcycle shot into an opposition demonstration, wounding seven, including opposition Deputy Ernesto Alvarenga. 61 year-old Maritza Ron died of her wounds while being treated in a clinic. In later declarations to the press, opposition leader Pompeyo Marquez said the government had sent the shooters. Marquez distributed a photo of the shooters, one of whom wore a red beret and t-shirt, the trademark dress of Chavez supporters.

Director of the Policia Metropolitana, Lazaro Forero, said the motorcyclists "shot like crazies at the protestors." International observers and officials called on the Venezuelan people to avoid violence and to maintain the civility that reigned during the vote. [ 

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