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Chavez Seeks More Re-elections

by LADB Staff

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Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez is preparing a campaign to run for re-election later this year, and he has informally asked the people of Venezuela to decide if he can pursue the office again after that term. In May, Chavez said that voters should have a chance to decide if he could run again after the 2012 term expires, potentially extending his mandate contingent on continuous re-elections until 2031.

If opposition boycotts, Chavez wants referendum

Chavez said on May 6, while speaking at a stadium packed with supporters in central Lara state, that Venezuelan voters should have the chance to decide whether he should govern the country for the next 25 years.

Chavez said he would hold a referendum to put the question of his remaining in office to Venezuelans if the opposition pulls out of upcoming presidential elections. "I am going to ask you, all the people, if you agree with Chavez being president until 2031," he said. It was not clear whether Chavez was talking about holding a legally binding vote to eliminate term limits or proposing a plebiscite. Chavez said the day before that he might seek "indefinite" re-election through a referendum if the opposition boycotts the presidential vote.

The Venezuelan Constitution allows a president to be re-elected only once in immediate succession. Chavez is eligible to run for re-election to another six-year term in December, but if he wins he would not be able to run again in 2012. "I would call a national referendum to have the people decide if I can continue here indefinitely or if I have to go after six years," he said.

Opposition leaders accuse Chavez, a former paratroop commander first elected in 1998, of becoming increasingly authoritarian and opening dangerous divisions along class lines in Venezuela the world's fifth-largest oil exporter. Polls indicate Chavez is likely to win the Dec. 3 election, and international observers have signed off on recent votes as fair. Chavez will likely be able to pass a rewrite of laws governing presidential succession, given that a 2005 boycott by opposition parties gave parties allied to the president unanimous control of the Asamblea Nacional (AN, see NotiSur, 2005-12-16). He has also had repeated success at the ballot box in elections and during a recall referendum and maintains strong support among the country's poor majority.

Skyrocketing oil prices have led to huge economic growth rates in recent years, following years of economic decline after a shutdown of the oil industry (see NotiSur, 2003-02-28 and 2003-09-05). Opposition figures have criticized the electoral authority, but international monitoring organizations have repeatedly approved prior elections. However, in the congressional vote at the end of 2005, they expressed concerns about high abstention rates.

Opposition leaders are demanding an independent audit of the voter registry and a manual vote count to guarantee a transparent election. They say there are many inconsistencies like dead voters on the rolls or thousands of voters with the exact same birth dates and surnames. They have threatened to boycott the vote if their objections are not addressed by the Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE), which many government foes view as pro-Chavez. Chavez has responded to the possibility of another opposition boycott like last year's with the pledge to run a referendum on his continued tenure.

Candidates Petkoff, Borges begin campaigns

In April, 74-year-old ex-minister and newspaper editor Teodoro Petkoff announced that he would run against Chavez. The liberal opposition leader was a Cuba-inspired guerrilla in the 1950s and 1960s, but later split with the Partido Comunista de Venezuela (PCV) to lead the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) party. He was planning minister under President Rafael Caldera (1993-1998) and now edits the newspaper Tal Cual. Today, he is one of Chavez's top critics. A number of analysts see Petkoff's electoral prospects as slim, given that his age and Chavez's overwhelming popularity are likely to limit any prospects of unseating the incumbent president.

Another prominent opposition candidate is Julio Borges of Primero Justicia (PJ), a young party not closely associated with other opposition groups that have failed to mount successful drives against the Chavez administration. Borges is a pre-candidate who needs to win a primary election, as does Zulia state Gov. Manuel Rosales of Un Nuevo Tiempo. Rosales, Borges, and several other pre-candidates will need to win their parties' August primary elections to stand against Chavez. Roberto Smith Perera will run under the Venezuela de Primera ticket and does not face a primary.

No one appears to have a good chance against the popular leftist incumbent, although a number of issues have been dragging at his administration's heels. Mass protests against violent crime have taken place after prominent kidnappings and murders. The oil-rich state of Zulia has been the site of a pro-autonomy movement, and there have been student riots in western Venezuela.

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