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Venezuelan Voters Reject Constitutional Referendum
by LADB Staff
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Venezuelan voters narrowly defeated a national referendum on a package of constitutional reforms that President Hugo Chavez had promoted heavily (see NotiSur, 2007-11-30). The "no" vote on the constitutional referendum was the first major electoral defeat the Chavez administration has suffered since coming to office in 1999.

The referendum asked voters to approve or disapprove a reform package that included 69 amendments to the Constitution, including removing presidential term limits, setting up economic social support programs, and rearranging the form of Venezuela's socioeconomic order, which included plans to set up local councils to make decisions and spend government funds.

Relatively high abstention
In prior national balloting, Chavez has won, either as a candidate or when promoting previous constitutional reforms (see NotiSur, 1999-12-24, 2000-08-04, 2000-12-08, 2004-08-20 and 2005-12-16). Some of those votes had low voter turnout and others, like a recall referendum against Chavez in 2004, saw huge numbers of voters come to the polls. In every case, the result favored the Venezuelan president, his initiatives, or his political allies.

The Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE) announced that the "yes" vote could not win the morning after polls closed on Dec. 2, with about a 2% lead separating the "no" vote total from the "yes" vote. The amendments were divided into two separate blocs, with Bloc A covering 46 amendments and Bloc B the other 23.

TheBloc B amendments generally included issues of public administration, the makeup of the various branches of government, and the laws surrounding national universities, along with provisions for the president to declare periods of national emergency.

Bloc A included other issues like removing presidential term limits and extending presidential terms from six to seven years, lowering the voting age from 18 to 16, implementing populist economic and social programs, forming community councils and other "socialist" designs, prison reform, land reform including prohibiting latifundios, or large land estates, and modifying the composition of the armed forces, among others.

In all, 4,379,392 voters voted yes and 4,504,354 voted no on Bloc A, a 49.29%-50.70% split, with a difference of almost 126,000 voters opposing the changes. On Bloc B, a margin of a little more than 187,000 voters opposed the changes, with 4,522,332 (51.05%) voting no and 4,335,136 (48.94%) voting yes. The total number of valid votes was 8,883,746; 118,693 votes, or 1.31% of the total cast, were nullified, and 9,002,439 of Venezuela's 16,109,664 registered voters turned out to vote. That signified an abstention rate of 44%, a relatively high number, especially compared to an abstention rate of about 25% in the 2004 recall referendum against the president.
Analysts tended to agree that a low mobilization of Chavez's supporters aided the opposition's victory. Polls prior to the vote had said the race was extremely tight, with the difference in many instances coming within the surveys' margins of error.

Opposition-movement leaders portrayed the reforms as Chavez's effort to arrogate dictatorial powers by extending the length of presidential terms from six to seven years and allowing him to run for president for the rest of his life. They also portrayed the changes as a power grab, with the president taking power and stripping the central bank (Banco Central de Venezuela, BCV) and the national universities of their autonomy, along with naming the provincial and municipal leaders.

A number of former Chavez allies, like legislators from the Por la Democracia Social (Podemos) party and former defense minister Gen. Raul Baduel, joined the opposition to call for the no vote. Students and faculty groups opposed to reducing university autonomy led large-scale marches against the reforms, which ended in a number of violent clashes between demonstrators, police, and Chavez supporters.

The student movement, according to media coverage of the demonstrations, lent new legitimacy to the opposition, which traditionally has failed to pull in majority support. International press coverage tended to follow traditional, professional political opponents of the Chavez administration. "Por ahora, no pudimos"

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