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Venezuelan Voters Approve Unlimited Re-Election

by LADB Staff

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In a Feb. 15 plebiscite, Venezuelan voters approved the constitutional reform proposed by the government of President Hugo Chavez, allowing the president and all national and state elected officials legislators, governors, prefects, and mayors unlimited re-election. The victory for the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV), created by Chavez to give his Bolivarian Revolution a party structure, is the second in just under three months. On Nov. 23, 2008, Chavez supporters won 17 of the 22 state governorships (see NotiSur, 2008-12-05).

In an earlier plebiscite to reform the Constitution to remove presidential term limits in December 2007, the opposition defeated the government the only defeat in 15 elections, taking 50.7% of the vote (see NotiSur, 2007-12-07).

Most Venezuelan and foreign political analysts said Chavez not only won the plebiscite but came out stronger politically, while the opposition, although this time united in opposing the reform, still has not come up with an option and is without clear leadership or a political program beyond merely opposing anything the government backs. "

The strength Chavez gained is indisputable. His increased popularity and positioning from receiving almost 55% of the more than 6.3 million votes allows him to maintain party unity and form a more solid base to aspire to re-election in 2012," said Luis Vicente Leon, director of Datanalisis, a consulting firm close to the opposition. "Something, or a lot, went wrong in the anti-Chavez forces' ability to turn out the voters."

Leon agrees with the strongly anti-Chavez newspaper El Universal's assessment that, although the opposition was able to increase its electoral volume by a half-million votes, reaching 5 million, during the same period (December 2007-February 2009), pro-Chavez forces picked up 1.6 million votes. Chavez helped by economic indicators, charisma For the international media, particularly interested in the Venezuelan political process, Chavez's success was based on three factors: the favorable principal economic indicators (buoyed by the formidable oil revenues received until now), the results of social programs, and the ability to reach the popular sectors and much of the middle class.

During the electoral campaign, Chavez repeated over and over the achievements of his government. He supported his claims by pointing to official data backed by the UN's Economic Commission for Latin American and the Caribbean (ECLAC). In 10 years, the percentage of poor households fell from 51% to 28%; extreme poverty, from 25% to 8.5%, and unemployment, from 12% to 6%. ECLAC data indicates that the country directs more than 14% of its budget to social programs.

Moreover, according to the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), with Cuba's pedagogical assistance, Venezuela has become the first South American country to eradicate

illiteracy. These and other indicators allow Chavez to say, "The poor now have access to health care, food, and education, and they also live in a full democracy. Since 1992, the people have been consulted in 15 elections, so we can say that, while much remains to be done, we are a free country." In addition, the president has considerable charisma.

Tulio Hernandez, a former leftist sociologist who has moved to the right, said, "It is very difficult to compete with Chavez because he is not an ordinary leader, he has extraordinary charisma. It's a phenomenon seldom seen in the world. Although the real results during his presidency do not match either his words or the expectations raised by him, he still maintains an incredible and unique communication with the people, who admire and love him." In comparison, the opposition has little to offer.

The president's ambitions and personalism are such that the opposition has no figure who can compete with the "unique" Chavez, says Hernandez. "The opposition," says Jesuit priest Jose Virtuoso, of the election-observer organization Ojo Electoral, "is little more than a bunch of weakened parties plus some opinion groups, certain personalities, and, not to be ignored, most of the press. Their real and only muscle is the students. They were the ones who carried the No campaign forward, the only ones the people believed, and the only ones who never gave up."

The opposition "are the university students and a group of obscure, ambitious figures," said the French daily Liberation. "The opposition is the youth. For a long time, the traditional parties have only become more discredited, and the new organizations the rightist Tiempo Nuevo and the ultraright Primero Justicia have been unable to formulate an alternative plan that allows them to connect with the popular sectors, Chavez's great electoral base," said correspondents in Caracas for Uruguayan newspaper El Pais.

Observers praise electoral process

Chavez's nearly 10-point win was not the only blow to the opposition. Worse, perhaps, was the positive image observers had of the cleanness of the electoral process, after the opposition had concentrated on decrying a supposed fraud by pro-Chavez forces.

An editorial in the Mexican newspaper La Jornada said the Venezuelan opposition talks endlessly of dictatorship, of Chavez's tyranny, for everything he says or does, and especially for his plan to change the Constitution to allow unlimited terms for elected officials. "But what is at play is not whether a president can be re-elected, because, among other things, Venezuela is almost the only place in the world where the people can remove a president halfway through a term through a revocatory referendum," said the editorial.

La Jornada noted that major political figures in world politics Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, Francois Mitterrand, Hosni Mubarak, and George W. Bush, among others were re-elected without anyone talking about a dictatorship. For Brazilian Deputy Max Altman, "The opposition speaks of fraud, and that is not serious. The Venezuelan electoral system is perfect, inviolable, it is the most safeguarded in the world." Italian news agency ANSA said, "Given the overwhelming support of international observers for the voting system and the vote tallying,

considered impeccable, the opposition should have stuck to repeating their denunciations about the use of the state apparatus in the Yes campaign."

Economic crisis may change Venezuela's reality

Most economists say that, with the abrupt drop in the price of oil from US\$140 a barrel in the first quarter of 2008 to between US\$35 and US\$40 now Venezuela faces a complicated future. Lower oil earnings undermine the government's ability to meet the 2009 state budget of US\$77 billion, drawn up when oil was at US\$60 a barrel. "The government has a cushion of petrodollars to get through a few months, but, at the current price, revenue will not be much more than US\$30 billion. In 2008, imports alone ate up US\$47 billion," said economist Jose Guerra, former president of the Banco Central and professor at the Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV).

The government took note. Economy Minister Ali Rodriguez admitted that "the crisis is bringing ever darker storm clouds, and it is affecting us." While he said he does not think Venezuela will have to face "major worries" this year, he expects cuts in public spending will be necessary to deal with the situation. "It is necessary to adjust, to apply austerity principles much more," he said, in what was perhaps the first time since Chavez came to power that a top government official has used the term "adjust."

Rodriguez said spending cuts would not touch the 14% of the budget designated for carrying out social programs and providing subsidized food to low-income people. Even Chavez, who until now has seemed impervious to the new reality of oil prices, said, "We must cut everything we can cut, but first we are going to strengthen the social programs, especially in health, education, and housing. We know that that the future is difficult."

The opposition, especially the vanguard, the students, is betting that Chavez will fail to face the consequences of the drop in oil prices. "From now on, we have to concentrate on hitting the figure of Chavez and his failure to confront the crisis," said David Smolansky, a leader of the university opposition.

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