

Ritual Gloating Postmortems - The Corporate Media v. Hugo Chavez

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Dateline December 3, 2007 – the corporate media is euphoric after Venezuelans narrowly defeated Hugo Chavez’s constitutional reform referendum the previous day. The outcome defied pre-election independent poll predictions and was a cliffhanger to the end. Near-final results weren’t announced until 1:15AM December 3 with about 100,000 votes separating the two sides and a surprising 44% of eligible voters abstaining. On December 7, Venezuela’s National Electoral Council (CNE) released the final outcome based on 94% of ballots counted. A total of 69 amendment reforms were voted on in two blocks:

For Block A: No – 50.65%; Si (Yes) – 49.34%;

For Block B: No – 51.01%; Si (yes) – 48.99%.

Below is a sampling of corporate media gloating. They deserve a bit of slack as they’ve waited nine years for this moment, and they may not get another for some time. Venezuelans lost, they won, but Chavez may be right saying reform lost “por ahora (for now).” In a post-election comment on Venezuelan state TV channel VTV he added: Reform is slowed but alive, and “the Venezuelan people have the power and the right to present a request for constitutional reform before (my) term (in office) finishes, of which there is still five years.”

Under Venezuelan law, the National Assembly (NA) can pass new socially beneficial or other legislation any time provided it doesn’t conflict with constitutional law. The Constitution can only be changed by national referenda in one of three ways – if the President, NA or 15% of registered voters (by petition) request it. The Constitution, however, prevents the President from seeking the same amendments twice in the same term, but they can become law through popular initiatives or a constituent assembly.

In addition, Chavez can use his constitutionally allowed Enabling Law authority until next summer when it expires. Under it, he can pass laws by decree in 11 key areas that include the structure of state organs, election of local officials, the economy, finance and taxes, banking, transportation, the military and national defense, public safety, and policies related to energy.

Chavez had this authority two previous times and used it in 2001 to pass 49 legal changes to make them conform to the Constitution in areas of land and banking reform and for more equitable revenue-sharing arrangements with foreign oil companies in joint-state ventures. He wanted it this time to accelerate democratic change at the grassroots and be able to transfer power to the people through communal councils. He may also use it to advance his social and economic model based on equitably distributing more of the national wealth

through investments in health care, education and social security. If these type reform measures are proposed, he'll get strong public support for them provided he keeps them simple and explains them properly and often.

In his post-election comments, Chavez stressed another reform proposal is coming "next year or in three years. It doesn't have to be exactly the same. It can be in the same direction, but in a different form, improved and simplified, because I have to accept that the reform that we presented was very complex."

The pre-election debate and propaganda assault made it more complex, and the opposition out-muscled reform supporters. With proper planning and implementation, that problem is correctable, and in the meantime, the NA can enact some reforms legislatively and Chavez can do it on his own by decree. Expect that to happen and for most Venezuelans to support it enthusiastically.

Already, members of Venezuela's National Indigenous Movement (MNIV) want constitutional reform reinitiated, intend to mobilize, and may begin collecting signatures for a petition drive for it. They met to strategize on December 7 after which MNIV coordinator Facundo Guanipa announced that Venezuela's small indigenous population near-unanimously supports Chavez's reforms according to referendum data results.

For now, however, the gloaters have center stage and aren't quoting OAS Secretary General Jose Miguel Insulza's comment that "Quite a few myths on the Venezuelan democracy are falling down. It works like all democracies....I hope the US government can acknowledge, as all of us, that it was a fair, clean process."

Don't count on it or from the dominant media, and start off with this writer's favorite press adversary - the Wall Street Journal's Mary Anastasia O'Grady, this time on a Journal-produced three minute video available online. She warms up fast with comments like the referendum, if passed, would have given Chavez "dictatorial power to rule for life," and Venezuela has a "rigged electoral system." Outrageous and false on both counts, of course, but this is typical O'Grady ranting.

Further, she claimed near-final tallies were available around 8:15PM, but the National Electoral Council (CNE) waited until 1:15AM to report them. In fact, reporting was delayed because the election was too close to call, and it was agreed in advance not to do it until 90% of the votes were counted. At that point, the result was announced. One other O'Grady gem was Chavez came to power in 1999 by "removing" the "old elite" implying that defeating them decisively and democratically was improper - vintage O'Grady with more from her ahead assured.

The Journal wasn't through. An online op-ed read: "Venezuelans Rain on Hugo (and it's) more than a setback for Venezuela's messianic strongman. It is a victory for the ideal of liberty across Latin America....kudos....to the people of Venezuela (by preventing Chavez from) impos(ing) what amounted to a personal coup against that nation's democracy. He tried to bully Venezuelans into voting for one-man rule and a hard model of socialism. They said no (and CNE waited until 1:15AM) when it became clear that there was no way to fudge the results."

According to the Journal, Chavez's package "would have eviscerated Venezuela's civil liberties (and) end guarantees of private property." A final jab was in the form of a warning

that Chavez still controls the country's political institutions and "remains a threat to (the) region. He's in a race against time (to advance his) expansionist agenda (that) has the potential to undermine Colombia's democracy, and has already destabilized Bolivia and Ecuador." Phew, and Rupert Murdoch hasn't yet taken over the paper he bought last summer when he finalized a deal for Dow Jones & Company.

Enter the New York Times and its man in Caracas, Simon Romero, whose style outclasses Journal writers but not his substance. His byline on December 3 read "Venezuela Hands Narrow Defeat to Chavez Plan" that would have granted him "sweeping new powers. Opposition leaders were ecstatic," and Zulia State governor and Chavez 2006 presidential opponent, Manuel Rosales, said "Tonight, Venezuela has won." His next day report trumpeted the setback saying the "vote sets roadblocks (and) has given new energy to (the) long-suffering opposition." It's "an expression of....government mismanagement (and) a warning to Mr. Chavez that he had finally overreached (in wanting to end presidential) term limits and greatly (centralize) his power." It's a "sharp rebuke (from voters to) let Mr. Chavez know (they're reluctant) to follow him much farther up the path to a socialist future."

Still more from Romero, along with Times op-ed writers, that "Reflection and Anger (came) After Defeat," and Chavistas are "being consumed by recrimination and soul-searching" following voter rejection. "Chavez lash(ed) out at his opponents (and) dismissed (their victory) with an (unmentioned) obscenity," and "Chavismo" needs "to embrace a more pluralistic path."

That was a warm-up for op-ed writer Roger Cohen. He chimed in with a backhanded salute for "the humiliation of a 51 to 49 percent rejection to end term limits and undermine private property rights." He stopped short of mentioning most West European and other parliamentary systems allow unlimited reelections, and the latter accusation is false. Then Cohen attacks calling Chavez a "strongman....a caudillo....a menace (and) his 'socialismo' equals 'Hugoismo.'" He aimed to "accumulate power through threats, slandering opponents as 'traitors,' (and) buying support with \$150 million a day in oil money."

It gets worse: "his crony bankers (are) pocketing millions by arbitraging the disparity between the official and black-market (bolivar) rates. Crime and drug-trafficking are thriving." His socialism is "the Russian (equivalent of) 'Soviets,' (and) I salute the Venezuelan people" for imposing "The Limits of (a) 21st-Century Revolution." On December 3, Cohen listed them in eight Venezuelan marketplace and political rules to show by his logic Chavez "can('t) turn back the clock far enough to change" them.

The Times wasn't done, and on December 4 it lashed out editorially with "A Tale of Two Strongmen." The other was Vladimir Putin after his December 2 parliamentary election victory. According to The Times, it was a "referendum on himself (in which he) cynically manipulated a huge victory...." Chavez wasn't as lucky in his "latest and most outrageous power grab (so there's) hope (Venezuelan) political competition....will now flourish." The Times concedes he's "still very powerful," so "The international community will....have to keep up the pressure on (him because he) hasn't suddenly become a democrat."

The Washington Post had its post-election say with a similar slanderous agitprop editorial torrent – that "Mr. Chavez had proposed to make himself a de facto president for life....Polls before the vote showed only about a third of Venezuelans favored the amendments (and)

Urban slum dwellers who have supported Mr. Chavez in the past had good reason for second thoughts: Thanks to his crackpot economic policies....the outcome will not restore full democracy (because Chavez) still controls the legislature, courts, national television and the state oil company, and he retains the authority to rule by decree." False on all counts except that most democratically elected legislators and Chavez-appointed judges support Bolivarianism as embedded in the country's Constitution they're sworn to uphold.

The AP was also hostile calling Chavez "conflict-prone (with a) larger-than-life personality leav(ing) little room for compromise (that) ensur(es) more friction (in a) deeply polarized (country)." But "Sunday's victory has energized the opposition (that can petition) for a recall referendum once Chavez reaches the midpoint of his six-year term in December, 2009."

In the West as well, the Los Angeles Times was celebratory in calling Sunday's defeat "a remarkable indictment of (Chavez's) agenda." But it headlined: "Chavez isn't finished." Even in defeat, he'll be "able to pass many of his desired reforms legislatively" since he controls the NA and Supreme Court. The Times cited "images of huge (opposition) student marches," but the "biggest factor (on) Sunday (was) Chavez's own nonsensical economic policies, which have caused many of his impoverished supporters to wonder if he really knows what he's doing." They're "like Soviet Russia or modern Cuba (and) Chavez's socialist ideals are leading Venezuela to a precipice, and it's the poor who will suffer most if it goes over the edge."

Time magazine wondered "How Will Chavez Handle Defeat? (and) Why Venezuelans Turned on Chavez." It reported "panic set in around 7PM Sunday evening," but it wasn't until 1:00AM that "el comandante" conceded defeat. In the view of Time writer, Jens Erik Gould, they worried more about a Chavez power grab and ability to seize private property than the proposed social benefits for the poor and popular grassroots power they'd get. But while "defeat may....slow the President down....he and his allies still have wide-reaching powers (so the) battle is far from over" with no doubt left which side Time backs.

Business Week magazine was vocal about what was "Behind Chavez's Defeat in Venezuela" in an article full of the usual kinds of errors, misstatements and pro-business slant. It said "rejection....may mean more stability for business and the economy" without ever mentioning business is booming, and the economy is one of the fastest growing ones in the world under Chavez's "socialist vision."

The article quoted the opposition saying if the referendum passed "We would have woken up in a dictatorship....a possible victory....undermined business confidence....defeat calls into question whether Chavez will be able to deepen his socialist revolution....the majority in Venezuela doesn't share Chavez's socialist vision....There is growing discontent with Chavez's leadership." Victory would have let Chavez "seize private property....curb private ownership....undermine Venezuela's democratic and capitalist foundations, and allow Chavez to create a state styled on communist Cuba if passed."

Anti-Chavez post-election rants could fill volumes. A few more follow below:

— the San Francisco Chronicle lamented that "Chavez (still) holds all the cards (and) The opposition has yet to find a leader that can match Chavez's magnetic personality and charisma."

— Bloomberg.com was also dismayed that one defeat won't "likely....stop (Chavez's) drive

to socialize Venezuela's economy....he may nationalize industries, seize property and weaken central bank independence."

— the state-run Voice of America (VOA) trumpeted George Bush's post-election comment that Chavez's defeat is a "vote for democracy;" it never mentioned his pre-election rant about Venezuela being undemocratic;

— CBS News headlined "Chavez's Democratic Authoritarianism (so) Despite (electoral defeat), Venezuela's President will continue toward absolute rule;"

— the Christian Science Monitor said "Venezuela's Chavez Defiant, Despite Defeat....few believe the results will cause (him) to alter his course,"

— the Financial Times in a "Chronicle of a defeat foretold" sees Chavez's support among the poor eroding as "Venezuelans are seeing things with greater realism;"

— the Economist sees his "aura of invincibility....forever damaged, the battle for succession seems bound to begin soon (and) Survival strategies no longer....involve unquestioning loyalty to the 'commandante.' The fighting back is just beginning;"

— CNN was also at the forefront of what Chavez at a post-election press conference called its manipulation campaign. He said Defense Minister Rangel Briceno was "very angry by (CNN's) manipulating campaign....all over the world," he's preparing to sue the cable network, and "behind (it) is the evil face of the United States;"

— the BBC is notorious as a "guardian of power;" it headlined "White House....welcomes the defeat of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's controversial reform....referendum....(and said) the people spoke their minds....that bodes well for the country's future and freedom and liberty....(Venezuelans didn't) want any further erosion in their democracy and their democratic institutions;" pro-Chavez voices or a clear explanation of the issues were nowhere in sight pre or post-election;

— the Chicago Tribune headlined "Chavez chastened, hardly capitulating (as) political leaders and analysts said it is too early to say whether the slim defeat....represents just a bump in the road....or the awakening of a durable and vibrant opposition;" and

— the London Guardian's Seumas Milne headlined Chavez was "Down but not out in Caracas" in writing for a paper with a long history of pro-state support and too little of it for its people. Milne, on the other hand, struck another note saying Bolivarianism suffered a setback (but) "it's far from finished (and) Sunday wasn't a crushing defeat." It also "discredit(ed) the canard that the country is somehow slipping into authoritarian or even dictatorial rule....The referendum was a convincing display of democracy in action....The revolutionary process underway in Venezuela has delivered remarkable social achievements." Halting or reversing them "would be a loss whose significance would go far beyond Venezuela's borders (but) Chavez's comments and commitments (show) there is no mood for turning back."

Chavez is resilient and will rebound from one electoral setback. Don't ever count him out or underestimate his influence over what co-director of the Center for Economic and Policy Research, Mark Weisbrot, says is "A historic transformation....underway in Latin America (following) more than a quarter century of neoliberal" rule. Long-time Latin American expert, James Petras, puts it this way: "The referendum and its outcome (while important today) is

merely an episode in the struggle between authoritarian imperial centered capitalism (Chavez opposes) and democratic workers centered socialism (it's hoped Bolivarianism will deliver)." The spirit of democracy thrives in Venezuela, and one electoral setback won't derail it.

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