

Venezuela: Bolivarianism Triumphs in Referendum Vote

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On February 15, Venezuelans voted on whether to let presidents, National Assembly representatives, governors, mayors, and state legislators run indefinitely for re-election after Chavez last December proposed a national referendum for constitutional change – so voters, not politicians could decide.

Sunday they spoke decisively in favor by a 54.4% to 45.6% margin with over 94% of votes counted. Chavez didn't win. Venezuelans did for Bolivarian continuity and against oligarch dominance, no democracy, and back to an impoverished state.

Since 1999, Chavez transformed Venezuela to what it is today:

- a Bolivarian republic based on “solidarity, fraternity, love, justice, liberty and equality” beyond the “free-market” model of worker exploitation for capital;

- politically, economically, and socially changed; affirming quality health care for all as a “fundamental social right and....responsibility....of the state;” also education; affordable housing, food and other essentials; pensions; the highest minimum wage in Latin America; land reform; job training, micro-credit; free speech, ending discrimination, indigenous rights, and much more;

- a participatory democracy empowering people at the grassroots;

- a Constitution serving people, not elite interests;

- using the nation's oil wealth for all Venezuelans, especially those most in need;

- overall, a government of, by, and for the people; one that cares; an unimaginable one in America where freedoms are eroding, wealth is sucked from the public to the powerful, and elections are reduced to theater.

On February 16 at 2.41AM, Reuters reported that “Chavez wins re-election chance in economy's shadow.” Around the same time, AP said “Chavez calls Venezuela vote mandate for socialism,” and The New York Times headlined: “Chavez Decisively Wins Bid to End Term Limits.”

From Caracas, reporter Simon Romero wrote:

“President Hugo Chavez (won a mandate that) inject(s) fresh vibrancy into his socialist-inspired revolution. The results (showed) his resilience after a decade in power as well as (a)

fragmentation of his opposition....The vote (lets Chavez run again) in 2013, (and) could bolster his ambitious agenda as an icon of the left and a counterweight to American policies in Latin America."

"It also (poses) a challenge for the Obama administration," and a US president who claims that "Chavez has been a force that has impeded the progress in the region....We must be very firm when we see (that) Venezuela is exporting terrorist activities or backing malicious groups like the FARC. That creates problems that are unacceptable."

For his part, before and after America's election, Chavez offered friendship and conciliation, a change from George Bush's hostility and confrontation, and a new page between two hemispheric neighbors to advantage them both.

In Caracas, supporters were jubilant when Chavez appeared on the Miraflores balcony in triumph. Thousands turned out. Fireworks exploded, bugles blared, and people waved red flags, honked horns, sang the national anthem, and shouted "Chavez no se va" (Chavez isn't going anywhere), and "Viva Chavez."

Chavez answered: "Today we opened wide the gates of the future....Truth against lies (and) the dignity of the homeland have triumphed....Venezuela will not return to its past of indignity....Any attempt to take us down the path of violence, by failing to recognize the results of the people's will, will be neutralized....In 2012 there will be presidential elections, and unless God decides otherwise, unless the people decide otherwise, this soldier is already a candidate."

He read a congratulatory note from Fidel Castro quoting Bertolt Brecht to Jorge Luis Borges, then declared Bolivarianism is re-invigorated. "God grants victory to perseverance," he said. Even Brazil's Lula told Germany's Der Spiegel that "Chavez is without a doubt Venezuela's best president in the last 100 years," and an opposition Venezuelan journalist admitted privately that he didn't trust the old regime to take over again so he backed the referendum. One Chavista agreed saying: "They're not coming back. This is another victory for the revolution."

Romero also admitted that Chavez is "by far Venezuela's dominant political personality" and immensely popular. Opposition forces were subdued but not silent with Sumate leader Maria Corina Machado saying: "This was a victory imposed by the abuse of state power. This should not be seen as a defeat but as a national challenge" ahead of next year's National Assembly elections. For now, she accepts the results but not happily.

So did Michael Shifter of the Inter-American Dialogue, yet his comments were hostile in saying: "Chavez's intention is clear. He aspires to be president for life. He is convinced he embodies the popular will and is indispensable to the country's progress. But his capacity to pull this off is far from assured" given his ability to maintain social spending with much lower oil revenues after prices fell around 75% and may drop further.

Pomona College professor Miguel Tinker Salas had another view saying: "The greatest challenge the government now faces is governing in the face of crisis and not falling into triumphalism."

Opposition leader Omar Barboza unapologetically denounced the outcome: "Effectively this will become a dictatorship. Its control of all the powers, lack of separation of powers,

unscrupulous use of state resources, (and) persecution of adversaries.” Comments like these are typical and a clear case of sour grapes.

In contrast, Louis Riel of Toronto’s Bolivarian Circle was joyful in “congratulat(ing) the people of Venezuela for a clean, transparent, orderly, efficient, and DEMOCRATIC voting process that allows ALL major elected officials to stand for election so that the people” can decide up or down whether to keep them.”

“This is an enormous victory for the people of Venezuela who have once again shown their satisfaction and their confidence in President Chavez, in his long term vision for the country (for) a truly democratic, participatory, humanist, socialism of the XXI century....VIVA VENEZUELA AND VIVA CHAVEZ!”

At 9:35PM Sunday, however, Venezuelans rejoiced when National Electoral Council (CNE) President, Tibisay Lucena, announced the results with 94.2% of votes counted – an impressive Bolivarian triumph. Another defeat for generations favoring power over people. A hopeful sign that continuity under Chavez will inspire others to take over when he’s gone.

Venezuela has 16,767,511 registered voters, 11,422 voting centers, and 126 others in overseas embassies and consulates. Turnout was nearly 70%. Voting proceeded smoothly with very few problems reported. Polls opened at 5:30AM and remained open as long as people were in lines. For the most part, they were short and moved quickly. Venezuela’s electoral system is a model democratic process, a far cry from America’s sham one.

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