

## Venezuela's Forthcoming Revocatory Referendum

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On Thursday 3 June, the National Electoral Council (CNE) announced that opponents of President Hugo Chávez's government had fulfilled the requirements to activate a revocatory referendum on the presidency, in accordance with Article 72 of the Constitution. From this moment, both the government and opposition parties once again initiated intense organizing and mobilizing activities in preparation for the referendum, set by the CNE for Sunday 15 August 2004.

The process that led to the activation of the referendum was rocky and tense, and has changed the face of the Venezuelan political landscape. It signified a political triumph for opposition groups, in particular for those committed to a democratic process, who had carried less weight within the opposition coalition --the *Coordinadora Democrática* (CD). These groups insisted that pursuing a constitutional revocatory referendum, and accepting the process of signature "repair", not only made political sense but had potential for success. Somewhat begrudgingly, other opposition parties including *Primero Justicia*, *Proyecto Venezuela*, *La Causa R*, and more radical ones such as the *Gente de Petróleo*, at the last minute also supported this process, acknowledging that it may ultimately generate more political dividends than a coup against the government, an oil sector strike, violent public protest or other previously-tried anti-democratic strategies. Also, there has been an apparent shift within the CD, towards an increasingly moderate discourse, even from those who had previously opposed the signature "repair" process. This may reflect growing space and support within the CD for those promoting dialogue and negotiation, and with it the potential for de-activating the high level of political polarization. However it is still early to jump to any conclusions.

Internal tensions and contradictions within the government and its supporters, were apparent in the wake of the CNE's announcement, which sparked violent outbreaks in Caracas, including attacks on the Mayor and private media outlets. These were brought to an end as President Chávez officially accepted the CNE decision and called upon his supporters to begin organizing for the referendum. From his palace, the President, sporting his best smile and surrounded by religious and historical symbols, proclaimed the 1999 Constitution, which included legislation for the referendum now unfolding, as his foremost political triumph. He invoked the historic battle of Santa Inés during the 19th century civil war, and the famous poem *Florentino y el Diablo* (identifying himself with Florentino and the CD with the devil) in explaining his strategy and conveying the importance of the forthcoming referendum.

In terms of strength, the government finds itself relatively revitalized, in part due to previous political gains against the opposition and growing national income from oil exports. The latter has enabled the government to implement broad social programs in the areas of health, education, and employment over the past year, which has also rejuvenated political support. Also, the President's charisma continues to draw support, as evidenced by the crowd of supporters that marched on Sunday following his speech. His call for support in the lead up to the referendum has been taken up by social and political organizations, which have begun work to ensure that supporters are recorded in the Electoral Register.

For its part, the opposition also wields significant resources. After collecting 2,541,639 votes—105, 556 more than was necessary, they must now not only obtain more votes than the government in the referendum, but receive at least 3,757,773. This will be a difficult but not an impossible task. The opposition's media-based resources are considerable, not only domestically but also among the international diaspora, and they have succeeded in creating an unfavourable international opinion towards the Chávez government and the processes now unfolding. Their lobby in the U.S. has been extremely effective, and their support from President Bush has been explicit--although this could be a disadvantage among the more nationalist sectors that are opposed to the recent actions of the US. The opposition also

has economic resources not only from private domestic interests, but also public and private sources in other countries, which support their commitment to weaken the Chávez government—this is the case for subsidies provided by the National Endowment for Democracy for organizations such as *Sumate*, *Asamblea de Educación* and *Consortio Justicia*.

The CNE, despite internal divisions and questions about its neutrality, has been able to sustain its credibility as the principle arbiter. Maintaining legitimacy, cohesion and commitment as democratic arbiter is crucial for the outcome of the referendum to be accepted by all parties in Venezuela. International political actors – considered “observers”- such as the Carter Center and the OAS will also play an important role legitimizing, or not, the CNE results. Ultimately, Venezuelans can expect two tough months of increased polarization, which will hopefully result in a clear referendum outcome, ideally leading towards a less polarized, more tolerant political climate and decrease in the resentment and violence that has preceded it.

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