

No to Chavez

by *The San Diego Union-Tribune*

Venezuela dodged a bullet, or more precisely a howitzer shell, in narrowly defeating Sunday's referendum on granting its bullying president, Hugo Chavez, near-dictatorial powers. The obligatory word of caution, however, is that Chavez promptly vowed to keep trying to rewrite his country's democratic constitution. Chavez's openly proclaimed goal is to remake Venezuela into a socialist state with himself as president, indefinitely. The referendum entailed 69 proposals dressed up as "reforms." In fact, their intent was to effectively dismantle Venezuela's system of legal and constitutional checks and balances. In its place would have been a vast centralization of powers that would have permitted Chavez to rule as a virtual dictator.

Among these powers was an emergency-rule provision that would have empowered the state, read Chavez, to confiscate private property, censor the press, neuter a Venezuelan Congress already reduced to a rubber stamp, seize Venezuela's central bank and thus control the country's currency and appoint communal councils to rule local governments. In addition, presidential term limits would have been abolished, allowing Chavez to run for re-election indefinitely.

All this amounted to such a breathtaking seizure of power that an ex-Chavez ally, former defense minister and retired general Raul Baduel, called it a "coup against democracy" and urged a "no" vote.

Opposition to the referendum came from Venezuela's traditional political parties, human rights groups, university students, leaders of the Roman Catholic Church, business organizations and, significantly, former Chavez allies who think their blustering president has gone too far.

Despite heavy government intimidation, lack of access to Venezuela's television networks (now a Chavez monopoly) and undisguised vote-buying in referendum provisions for a shorter work week and increased social welfare benefits, Venezuelan voters said no, albeit narrowly. The announced results were 51 percent no, 49 percent yes. With Venezuela's electoral machinery firmly in Chavez's hands, one might wonder if the actual tally was that close. The results sent opposition supporters to dancing in the streets of Caracas. It marked Chavez's first electoral defeat in nine years as president.

It would be nice to imagine that this marks the beginning of the end for Chavez. Despite the oil wealth that sustains him, he's already moving down an economic and political path that threatens to wreck Venezuela. Moreover, he's a populist demagogue who relentlessly vilifies the United States, makes common cause with an anti-American cabal that includes Iran and Castro's Cuba and crudely insults foreign leaders with whom he disagrees. Alas, Chavez will almost certainly persevere in his quest for unchecked personal power and his crackpot version of "21st century socialism" for Venezuela. He controls every seat in Venezuela's national legislature, a once-independent judiciary, most of Venezuela's state governments, much of his nation's radio and television and, of course, the petroleum industry that provides most of Venezuela's wealth.

If the brave opposition that staved off disaster Sunday is ultimately to succeed in saving democracy, it must gird for many more battles yet to come.

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