

Turnout of anti-Chávez voters is questionable

Opposition to constitutional changes put forth by President Hugo Chávez has grown, but many of his foes may not vote, and that could help him win

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CARACAS --

The fate of President Hugo Chávez's drive to institutionalize his "socialist revolution" in Venezuela appears to depend on whether voters like Mohamad Merhi turn out next Sunday for a referendum on amending the constitution.

Merhi, a 55-year-old urban planner, believes that Chávez uses the state's power to punish enemies and will become even more dangerous if the changes are approved. But he and many other opponents plan to stay home because they believe that Chávez will resort to fraud to win, if necessary, and that voting would only legitimize his victory.

"I'm not criticizing those who will vote no, but they are only helping Chávez," Merhi said.

The most recent polls show a surprising rise in the number of Venezuelans who reject the amendments -- now a majority. But if enough opponents stay home, pollsters say, Chávez will win yet another electoral victory.

This one would allow him to run for reelection indefinitely, further tighten his grip on power, seize private property more easily, establish socialism as the nation's ideology, sharpen his conflict with the United States and buttress his alliance with Cuba.

In all, the 16 million registered voters are being asked to vote yes or no on amending 69 of the constitution's 350 articles -- a constitution that Chávez already had rewritten to his liking in 1999.

A poll made public on Saturday by Datanálisis showed that 49 percent of likely voters oppose Chávez's proposed changes, while only 39 percent favored them.

Reflecting that many opponents plan not to vote, the margin against the proposed changes was even greater when the poll included all respondents, not just likely voters. Among those polled, nearly 45 percent were opposed while 31 percent gave their support.

"The key question is whether those opposed to the referendum will vote," said Luis Vicente León of Datanálisis.

Significantly, León said he had never conducted a poll close to an election showing that Chávez might lose. But he wasn't ready to declare him defeated.

"When Chávez is winning in a poll, you can certify the result," León said Saturday. "But Chávez has capacity to mobilize voters to a much greater extent than his opponents. In a normal country, the no vote would win. But here, it's a very unpredictable situation."

Adding to the uncertainty is speculation that if Chávez concludes he will lose, the Chávez-controlled Supreme Court could delay the vote by agreeing to consider one of the opposition's challenges.

The outcome of the voting next Sunday will have enormous repercussions.

A loss would embolden the opposition and weaken Chávez at home. In turn, that would undercut his efforts to extend his influence throughout Latin America, where he has spent billions of dollars to counter the United States and export what he calls "21st century socialism."

The election also has important implications for South Florida.

Tens of thousands of Venezuelans have headed to Miami-Dade and Broward counties over the past decade to escape Chávez's rule, and thousands more seem poised to go if he wins the referendum.

SHIFT IN ELECTORATE

The growing opposition to the proposed changes has caught political observers by surprise. As recently as two months ago, they were forecasting an easy victory for Chávez.

But student groups organized big marches against Chávez, giving voice and energy to the leaderless and fractured opposition movement. Then retired Army Gen. Raúl Isaías Baduel, formerly one of the president's most trusted lieutenants, went public with his opposition, saying the proposed changes amounted to a "coup."

The small Podemos political party -- which has six seats in Congress and has almost always supported Chávez -- refused to back the proposed changes. Even Chávez's ex-wife, Marisabel Rodríguez, joined the chorus of critics.

But Chávez remains personally popular, with the approval of more than 50 percent of the population. And he is a formidable campaigner who has trumped the opposition at every turn.

He has won three presidential elections and a 2004 recall referendum. He staved off a 2002 coup that briefly ousted him from power, and he controls all 167 seats in Congress -- after the opposition boycotted an election -- and 20 of the 22 state governorships.

Chávez has a way of making the poor and others feel as though he's on their side, whether it's by peppering his public appearances with slang and exuberantly bursting into song or by spending billions of dollars of oil revenue on programs aimed at improving education, healthcare and incomes of slum residents.

The advertising campaign for a yes vote is banking on Chávez's personal popularity. The ads make scant mention of the proposal to end presidential term limits. Instead, they feature a smiling Chávez telling Venezuelans that they would have a greater voice in the nation's affairs if they approve the changes.

"It will give much more power to the people so we can move forward," said Miguel Parra, who was clad in the red T-shirt favored by Chávez supporters, as he left a pro-yes rally last week.

Helping Chávez's cause is a highly favorable economic wind at his back.

Oil prices now approaching \$100 a barrel have given Venezuela's oil-dependent economy the fastest growth in Latin America since 2004, according to the Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean.

HEAVY SPENDING

Chávez is spending the resulting windfall as quickly as the treasury collects it, government budget figures show. Venezuelans are engaged in a consumption binge that seems to have little in common with Chávez's socialist preaching.

It can take a 20-minute wait in line to order a sandwich at a Subway shop in Caracas, and retailers report that imported computers, whiskey and clothing are flying off the shelves. Imports are up an astonishing 36 percent compared to a year ago, the Central Bank of Venezuela reports.

But amid the economic plenty, consumers complain that they cannot find eggs, sugar, milk and other basics at supermarkets. Price controls imposed by Chávez have eliminated farmers' profits and caused them to reduce production.

That's one of the signs that even though Chávez controls nearly all the levers of political power, he has yet to gain total control over this free-wheeling country.

That would change if he wins the referendum, critics say.

Conceding a defeat, opponents like Mohamad Merhi are looking ahead to the political battles after Dec. 2 when Chávez would be expected to nationalize more private holdings and try to grab even more power.

Merhi has long been a vociferous Chávez opponent but has turned that into a full-time avocation since his 18-year-old son, Jesús, was shot and killed in a massive April 2002 march against the president. He now heads an anti-Chávez group, Asociación Vive.

Merhi believes that Chávez has stacked the deck to win the referendum. So, he said, voting only legitimizes a pre-ordained election result.

"Chávez will make sure he wins one way or another," Merhi said.

"What we need to do is unite after the referendum to prevent the coup from actually occurring."