

Venezuela Vote Sets Roadblocks on Chávez Path

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CARACAS, [Venezuela](#), Dec. 3 — The surprising defeat of a referendum over the weekend to accelerate President [Hugo Chávez](#)'s socialist-inspired revolution has given new energy to his long-suffering opposition.

But just how long that momentum lasts will depend on whether his opponents can keep within their ranks the Venezuelans who defected from Mr. Chávez to vote no on the proposals.

For nine years, a combination of populist politics and rising oil prices have propelled Mr. Chávez's socialist program for Venezuela with an almost inexorable momentum. On Sunday, his country put on the brakes.

Those results have at once given the opposition a sudden boost and demonstrated the resilience of Venezuela's institutions. They also showed that many of Mr. Chávez's once-stalwart backers have grown frustrated with the rising prices and food shortages that have become symptomatic of his revolution, despite his promises to the poor.

Interviews in the barrios where Mr. Chávez's support has run strong indicated that many of those no votes were as much an expression of frustration with government mismanagement as a warning to Mr. Chávez that he had finally overreached in proposing constitutional changes that would have ended term limits for the president and greatly centralized his power.

The rejection of his proposals amounted to a sharp rebuke from Venezuelans who let Mr. Chávez know that they were hesitant to follow him much farther up the path to a socialist future if their present needs were not being met.

At play now is a large portion of the electorate. Mr. Chávez won re-election last year with about 63 percent of the vote, compared with the 49 percent that supported his proposed constitutional amendments. The opposition, which never won more than 41 percent in four national elections during Mr. Chávez's presidency, got 51 percent over the weekend, illustrating its ability to win over voters who were loyal to Mr. Chávez in previous races.

The real test now for the opposition will be to fashion viable alternatives to keep those defectors. That will not be easy. Mr. Chávez and his supporters still control the National Assembly, the [Supreme Court](#), almost every state government and the entire federal bureaucracy. The opposition, meanwhile, is recovering from years of tactical errors and marginalization from the country's political life.

But in an unforeseen challenge to Mr. Chávez, the new leaders of this opposition have emerged from the disaffected within his own movement. They are hewing to leftist

ideals while expressing increasing unhappiness with state control of the economy and the intensifying cult of celebrity around Mr. Chávez.

“The president wanted to obligate Venezuelans to accept this project,” said Gen. Raúl Isaías Baduel, the retired top commander of Venezuela’s army who broke with Mr. Chávez last month.

General Baduel, speaking at a news conference here on Monday, said “the people did not propose one comma or period to the text” of the defeated proposals, which would have formally created a socialist state. As a next step, General Baduel proposed that the country convene a new constitutional assembly to rewrite Venezuela’s laws.

Aside from General Baduel, other leaders whose stars are rising are Ismael García, a deputy in the National Assembly, and Ramón Martínez, governor of Sucre State in eastern Venezuela. Both men were supporters of Mr. Chávez but have vociferously distanced themselves from him in recent months.

They were joined by a student movement that led street protests here and in other large Venezuelan cities before the vote. In contrast with some traditional opposition parties, few of the student leaders describe themselves as conservative critics of the president, preferring to tout their own progressive ideals.

Some of the students were as surprised as many other people here by the outcome of the referendum. “I didn’t think we were going to win,” said Diana Cocho, 24, one of hundreds of people who flocked to Plaza Altamira in eastern Caracas at 2 a.m. Monday after the results were announced.

People played drums, jumped up and down, exchanged hugs and chanted antigovernment slogans. Most were students. Many were sipping from bottles of rum.

“I thought Chávez looked scared, like he expected something different,” said Ms. Cocho, referring to the president’s television comments accepting the outcome of the vote.

Though Mr. Chávez indeed looked unusually humbled, he and his supporters tried to make the most of their setback, quickly portraying it as evidence that democracy survives in Venezuela. “Now Venezuelans should have trust in our institutions,” he said.

After weeks of less conciliatory statements from Mr. Chávez, during which he labeled opponents of the proposals “traitors” and lashed out at critics in other countries, a cellphone text message circulating throughout the country early Monday put it this way: “Good morning, Venezuela! We have a new president!”

Indeed, the results showed that Venezuela’s institutions remained durable, for now, even in the gale-force winds of an overwrought political environment. In recent days, Mr. Chávez and senior officials denounced what they warned were destabilization plots by the opposition, and fear of political retaliation has grown common as the president’s followers strengthened their grip.

Opponents, meanwhile, warned that the proposed changes would have made Mr. Chávez even more authoritarian than they say he already is. One of the 69 amendments, for instance, would have allowed Mr. Chávez to create new administrative regions, governed by vice presidents chosen by him. Others would have given him the power to declare states of emergency for unlimited periods and increase the state's hand in the economy. Federal electoral officials, the arbiters of the referendum, were largely supporters of the president, they warned.

Yet the results were honored by all sides.

“Chávez's detractors have claimed he is a dictator, but he proved his democratic credentials by accepting an electoral defeat,” said Bart Jones, author of a new biography of Mr. Chávez. “Dictators don't accept defeats.”

In terms of strategy, political analysts said Mr. Chávez may have erred by trying to rush the proposals before voters without enough discussion, reflecting an overconfidence that he had accumulated as he prepares for his 10th year in power.

“Chávez's defeat will encourage introspection in the Chávez movement and a critical debate which is long overdue for them,” said Steve Ellner, a political scientist at Oriente University in eastern Venezuela.

“What hurt Chávez the most was the lack of sufficient attention to concrete, tangible problems and an overemphasis on lofty ideals,” Mr. Ellner said, referring to pressing issues like shortages of basic foods and general government corruption.

For Mr. Chávez's followers, meanwhile, the outcome of the referendum has forced some to take stock, uncomfortably, of their own loyalties.

Pedro Luis Urbina, a 33-year-old bus driver from the gritty district of El Valle who described himself as a loyal “Chavista,” said he had voted in favor of the proposals, despite disagreeing with them. The reason, Mr. Urbina said, was that he feared losing a government loan he had received to start his own small public transportation business.

Such conflicted reasoning could commonly be heard outside polling stations throughout this city. But that does not necessarily mean Mr. Chávez's support among the poor is withering. Perhaps Mr. Urbina put it best. “I'm celebrating because ‘no’ won,” he said, “but I still have President Chávez.”