

Venezuela's Chávez defiant, despite defeat

President Hugo Chávez indicated Tuesday that he will not give up on plans to change the Constitution, even though voters rejected the idea this past Sunday.

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Caracas, Venezuela - Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez says the time has come for "profound reflection" following his first electoral defeat in nine years at the helm Sunday night.

"Did I make a mistake in choosing the strategic moment to present [the proposal for sweeping Constitutional changes]?" Mr. Chávez asked on state television Monday. "It could be. We still aren't mature enough to adopt an openly socialist project."

But Chávez's acceptance of the results has strengthened his democratic credentials, and analysts say he'll use that to push his socialist "revolution" just as fervently as he has been.

"It is striking how quickly and shrewdly Chávez turned the defeat to his political advantage, claiming the high road and retaking the initiative," says Michael Shifter, the vice president for policy at the Inter-American Dialogue, a Washington think tank. "He remains determined and resolute in pursuing his revolution, but the vote means he will encounter growing resistance, not only at home but throughout the region. The loss reveals seeds of decay that are likely to intensify over the next year or so."

Chávez's base has weakened ...

After getting nearly 3 million votes fewer than last year's presidential elections, government officials have wonder what happened to their key bases of support. Reports Tuesday showed that in Petare – one of the most densely populated slums in Latin America and normally a stronghold for Chávez – the "No" option won 62 percent while only 38 percent backed the constitutional reform.

"Chávez needs to reflect upon the proposal and his close collaborators. There must be a new sensibility when new changes are proposed, because any decision he attempts to make by force could cause serious consequences," says Carlos Luna, a political analyst and professor at the Central University of Venezuela.

But few believe the results will cause Chávez to alter his course.

Alberto Barrera, a novelist and co-author of the Chávez biography, "Chávez sin Uniforme," says the president seems unwilling to read the truth from the electoral results, showing what he calls a "short circuit" between what Chávez wants and what the

people want. "President Chávez exists because the country's elite ignored and turned their backs on the will of the people, but now it seems he may be willing to do the same," he says.

.. but he won't give up on reforms

Speculation has begun to mount about how and when Chávez will attempt to push some of the reforms into law, whether unilaterally by decree or through the National Assembly, which he dominates. He also controls the country's courts, most of its media, and almost all local and state governments.

His options may be limited by article 345 of the current Constitution, which prohibits a reform project defeated at the polls to be submitted again during the same presidential term.

In theory, this means the president could not push through proposals such as curbing the Central Bank's autonomy, the formalization of Venezuela as a socialist state, creating a confederation of nations with Cuba, abolishing presidential term limits, and presidential appointment of local and state authorities.

But Chávez has the power to pass any law unilaterally, until August 2008, that does not explicitly contradict the current Constitution. During that time, analysts expect him to pass such reforms as a 36-hour workweek, universal social security, and a fund for independent workers.

The National Assembly could also convoke a constitutional assembly to change the rules. Chávez supporters are likely to control the assembly until internal elections in 2010.

"It's true that during this constitutional period I've lost the right to present this reform proposal again of my own initiative, but the Venezuelan people have the authority and right to do so," said Chávez Tuesday. "If the people wish to, a request can be made before this presidential period ends in five years."

Striking a defiant tone

Chávez also warned people against thinking that the vote was a serious blow to his moves to bring "21st century socialism" to the country, and had a few choice words for those who voted "No" in Sunday's referendum.

"Chávez will be here for a long time and the revolution will be here for a long time," he said. "The revolution came here to stay so don't make ridiculous conclusions. If they [his supporters that abstained or voted "No"] were looking to punish me, they flagellated themselves."

Still, Chávez continues to enjoy widespread support here. For example, Marlina Villegas, a 70-year-old housewife, swallowed the defeat with hope and pride. "Of course I want him to implement the reform," says Ms. Villegas.

"That reform has to go through, but our poor president can't do everything by himself. He has traitors within his ranks, [President Bush] trying to remove him, and countless other things. But this revolution will move forward because he has an entire people behind him," she says.