

Chávez Turns Bitter Over His Defeat in Referendum

Foes of Amending Charter Have 'Nothing to Celebrate'

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BOGOTA, Colombia, Dec. 5 -- Venezuelan President [Hugo Chávez](#) on Wednesday used a four-letter expletive to dismiss the opposition victory in Sunday's referendum and pledged to press forward with plans to approve constitutional changes that would expand his power in one of the world's leading oil producing-countries.

Chávez's remarks, made on television programs broadcast in [Venezuela](#), represent a sharp turn from his magnanimous comments Monday after voters narrowly blocked 69 constitutional changes in a national vote. It was the opposition's first electoral victory since Chávez first won office in a landslide election in 1998.

"I think the opposition has nothing to celebrate," Chávez said. "We didn't lose anything. Prepare yourself because a new offensive will come with a proposed reform -- that one, or transformed, or simplified."

Chávez said Venezuelans have flooded him with letters of support. He said that with enough signatures, he could propose another referendum, "in other conditions, in another moment." Addressing his foes, he added: "I wouldn't sing victory, opposition misters."

The comments came after Venezuelan newspapers reported Wednesday that Chávez ceded to his foes in the pre-dawn hours Monday only after high-ranking military officers pressured him to do so. [Venezuela](#) has been rife with rumors about such a scenario because it had taken the National Electoral Council hours to announce the results, though voting in [Venezuela](#) is tallied electronically.

On Wednesday, Gen. Gustavo Rangel Briceño, the defense minister, denied that Chávez needed to be pressured. "I want to stress the democratic commitments of an exceptional man," he said.

Just two days before, after electoral authorities announced the results, Chávez immediately went on television and said: "I thank you and I congratulate you." He also recognized "the decision a people have made" in the 51 to 49 percent vote against a plan that would have permitted him to seek reelection indefinitely, control the country's revenue and appoint allies to head new provinces he would create, among other proposals.

On Wednesday, Chávez said that if he had won by such a small margin, it would have been a "Pyrrhic victory." He still conceded defeat but called it one made of "courage."

Chávez said the winners rejoiced in the wealthy eastern district of [Caracas](#), "but nowhere else did they celebrate." He also said that if the opposition had risen up against his government during the referendum, he had a plan in place to take anti-government television stations off the air and confiscate their equipment.

The Chávez defeat gives the deeply fragmented opposition the chance to build a movement with the goal of winning local offices next year and possibly mount another recall referendum. But Chávez remains formidable, controlling the National Assembly, the courts and the federal bureaucracy.

Indeed, the president continued to sound triumphant Wednesday, saying, "I haven't been weakened, nor have I been pushed back one millimeter." He also had harsh words for his archenemy, the Bush administration, which he accused of helping orchestrate the opposition's efforts against the charter changes.

"Check because your fist could be wounded," he said, in comments directed at the United States, or what he calls the "empire." "You could have a fractured finger."