

VENEZUELA

Opposition's window of opportunity

Opinión
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“A photo finish,” Chávez said after Venezuelans rejected his constitutional reforms. He’s right, of course, only the No –which few really thought would win– is resounding a lot louder than 51-49. The president, after all, thought he’d get indefinite reelection and even more personal power. Instead, he’s facing a Venezuela of opportunities that the Sí would have preempted.

After conceding defeat, Chávez has reverted to his old self. Last Wednesday, he railed against the opposition using a profanity to disqualify the No, while promising to put a simpler version of the reforms back on the agenda. Whether or not the Constitution allows him that option, the fact that he’s raising it is telling. If only he’d explained the reforms better and given the people more time, the Sí would have won. What else could account for his first reversal in nine years?

Chávez never fathomed that some within his ranks –like his former defense minister, General Raúl Isaías Baudel or Podemos, his erstwhile allies in the National Assembly– would campaign so effectively against the power grab, or that many rank-and-file supporters would desert him by abstaining or voting No. Dialogue could bring them back, but then he’d have to compromise some on his twenty-first socialism, his only road map.

Chávez is, nonetheless, charging full steam ahead, even as a photograph showing the Supreme Court chief putting her ballot in a No box briefly surfaced on the court’s web page. State security certified it hadn’t been doctored. Could there be other photographs of high-ranking Chavistas who kept their No quiet until December 2? When RCTV lost its license in May, university students took to the streets after more than a decade of absence from national politics. Running Chávez out of office was not their cause, then or now. Rather, as Ricardo Sánchez –a leader at the Central University of Venezuela– said on Monday: “Our struggle is for democracy, freedom and human rights, a social agenda and reconciliation among Venezuelans.” Chávez dismisses them as “rich kids” – most are middle class– but, without them, the Sí might have crossed the finish line.

Venezuela’s traditional parties have long been spent. After thrice failing to unseat Chávez between 2002 and 2004, they turned to a strategy of electoral abstention. In 2005, three-quarters of the voters abstained in the parliamentary elections which returned a fully Chavista National Assembly. In 2000, the abstention rate had been 44 percent.

In 2006, the tide turned a bit with Manuel Rosales’s respectable presidential run. Though he lost big (63-37), Rosales campaigned on a progressive platform. Initially, a sector of the opposition called on voters to stay home on December 2. Fortunately, enough would-be abstentionists reconsidered and made a difference.

Chávez's customary bravado may now be doing his own ranks more harm than good. Until his resignation last Thursday, Vladimir Villegas was a vice minister in the Foreign Ministry. Interviewed by El Nacional, Villegas said: "A hypocritical silence is more harmful to our cause than criticism. Chávez needs to understand that we all need to reflect on what happened. He needs to listen to all of us and surround himself with people who won't hesitate to speak their minds." Are there more Chavista resignations in the offing? Chávez's confrontational style –such as accusing his supporters who abstained of being weak and irresponsible– could also fan the fledgling majority that said No on December 2. All the same, the opposition –new and old– cannot rely on Chávez's anger to grow their ranks. A new majority depends on the No leadership meeting the opportunities created by the referendum.

Hugo Chávez will remain Venezuela's president until 2013. Chavismo still controls all the levers of power. Neither are oil prices likely to fall from the stratosphere any time soon.

At the same time, he is already facing choppy economic waters. Soaring inflation and mounting shortages probably cost him votes among his supporters. Might Chávez make a self-interested correction on the economy's course? If he did, he'd have made a concession, and the opposition better be ready to capitalize on it.

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