

Lessons for the Bolivarians: Venezuela After the Referendum

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Hugo Chavez' narrow defeat in the referendum was the result of large-scale abstentions by his supporters. 44 percent of the electorate stayed at home. Why? First, because they did not either understand or accept that this was a necessary referendum. The measures related to the working week and some other proposed social reforms could be easily legislated by the existing parliament. The key issues were the removal of restrictions on the election of the head of government (as is the case in most of Europe) and moves towards 'a socialist state.' On the latter there was simply not enough debate and discussion on a grassroots level.

As Edgardo Lander, a friendly critic pointed out:

"Before voting in favour of a constitutional reform which will define the State, the economy, and the democracy as socialist, we citizens have the right to take participate in these definitions. What is understood by the term socialist state? What is understood by the term socialist economy? What is understood by the term socialist democracy? In what way are these different to the states, economies, and democracies that accompanied socialism of the 20th century? Here, we are not talking about entering into a debate on semantics, rather on basic decisions about the future of the country."

And this was further amplified by Greg Wilpert, a sympathetic journalist whose website, [venezuelaanalysis.com](#), is the best source of information on the country:

"By rushing the reform process Chavez presented the opposition with a nearly unprecedented opportunity to deal him a serious blow. Also, the rush in which the process was pushed forward opened him to criticism that the process was fundamentally flawed, which has become one of the main criticisms of the more moderate critics of the reform."

Another error was the insistence on voting for all the proposals en bloc on a take it or leave it basis. It's perfectly possible that a number of the proposals might have got through if a vote on each had been allowed. This would have compelled the Bolivarians to campaign more effectively at grassroots level through organised discussions and debates (as the French Left did to win the argument and defeat the EU Constitution). It is always a mistake to underestimate the electorate and Chavez knows this better than most.

What is to be done now? The President is in office till 2013 and whatever else Chavez may be the description of 'lame-duck' will never fit him. He is a fighter and he will be thinking of how to strengthen the process. If properly handled the defeat could be a blessing in disguise. It has, after all, punctured the arguments of the Western pundits who were claiming for the last eight years that democracy in Venezuela was dead and authoritarianism had won.

Anyone who saw Chavez' speech accepting defeat last night (as I did here in Guadalajara with Mexican friends) will not be in any doubt regarding his commitment to a democratically embedded social process. That much is clear. One of the weaknesses of the movement in Venezuela has been

the over-dependence on one person. It is dangerous for the person (one bullet can be enough) and it is unhealthy for the Bolivarian process. There will be a great deal of soul-searching taking place in Caracas, but the key now is an open debate analysing the causes of the setback and a move towards a collective leadership to decide on the next candidate. It's a long time ahead but the discussions should start now. Deepening popular participation and encouraging social inclusion (as envisaged in the defeated constitutional changes) should be done anyway.

The referendum defeat will undoubtedly boost the Venezuelan opposition and the Right in Latin America, but they would be foolish to imagine that this victory will automatically win them the Presidency. If the lessons of the defeat are understood it is the Bolivarians who will win.

P.S.

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