

VENEZUELA'S OPPOSITION IS PREPARED TO REJECT THE ARBITER AND TO PRODUCE CHAOS

MARTA HARNECKER
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- ▶ 1. In the face of the increasing possibility that the valid signatures will not be sufficient to continue the referendum process, the leaders of the anti-Chavez opposition, advised by their external allies, have openly announced their disposition not to recognize the verdict of the National Electoral Council (CNE). They have gone so far as to threaten to boycott the institutional life of the country if the referendum is not carried out. What they are looking for is to create a chaotic situation that justifies foreign interference. They are willing to give up their mother country in order to recover their lost power.
2. In this context the simultaneous declarations of the opposition, along with high officials of the U.S. government, beginning with Bush himself,¹ are symptomatic and very worrisome.² One should not forget that the fourth document of Santa Fe, which guides Bush's foreign policy, indicates that the main enemies of the United States in Latin America are the "axis Cuba, Venezuela and the Colombian guerrilla."³
3. Since opposition leaders know that they cannot count on a sufficient internal correlation of forces to democratically remove Chavez from government, their future depends on the international support they can obtain. Their great allies, the transnational corporations of information, make an effort to spread doubt about the neutrality of the electoral arbiter and try to convince the world that the authors of fraud are not the anti-Chavez forces, but the government, in conspiracy with the National Electoral Council.
4. As is known, after having failed in their coup d'etat attempt against Chavez and in their attempt to paralyze the country economically, so as to force him to leave government, most of the opposition chooses to proceed with the recall referendum process against the president of the Republic.
5. The new rules of the political game, established in the Constitution of 1999, permit a recall referendum. The National Electoral Council, made up of five members elected by two thirds of the National Assembly, is the organization in charge of the referendum process.⁴
6. Since Chavista deputies have a slim majority in the National Assembly, the opposition delayed the appointment of the members of the CNE for many months. In order to break this impasse, the government had to resort to the Supreme Court of Justice, the same one that acquitted the military coup participants of April 2002. No one can accuse the Supreme Court of being biased in favor of the government.

¹ On this subject, see: *Declaraciones de los Estados Unidos sobre el proceso revocatorio*, Mónica Saiz, 23 February 2004.

² Hugo Chavez Frias, *Extracts of the 17 February 2004 speech in the Presentation of the Strategic Plan of Purchases of the State*, III Round of businesses, Caracas.

³ *Investigation conducted by Izquierda Unida, about the participation of Spain and the United States in the coup d'etat in Venezuela*, <http://www.izquierda-unida.es/Actualidad/docu/2002/informegolpevenezuela.htm>.

⁴ On this process see: Francisco Palaces, *Breve sinopsis informativa del proceso de referendo revocatorio en Venezuela*, unpublished document, 23 february 2004.

7. The National Electoral Council was finally made up of two members who are close to the opposition, two members who are close to the government and a fifth member who also is president of the CNE, Francisco Carrasquero, who was not only considered by all political actors to be a neutral person, but who received the public support of recognized members of the opposition. At last it seemed that a resolution was found.

8. The governing organization for recall referenda had to elaborate the norms that would govern this unprecedented process. Even while knowing the fraud-filled tradition of the traditional parties and so as not to ruin the process, Chavistas had to accept outrageous things, such as the possibility that traveling lists would be allowed at signature collection tables; that is to say, the possibility of collecting signatures outside the designated location of the table. The regulation, in addition, did not force the locations to submit the actual lists at the end of the day, but only legal documents that certified the number of lists and signatures collected in them.

9. The signature collection proceeded without any major incidents. Hundreds of thousands of people appeared to place their signatures in front of observers from both sides during the four days that the process lasted, reflecting before the world the civic spirit of the Venezuelan people.

10. Even though a group of international observers, among which were several parliamentarians from Europe and Latin America and personalities from diverse areas (journalists, judges, university professors,⁵ leaders of social movements⁶), publicly denounced that they noticed irregularities, it was not possible to detect the hidden manipulations of opposition people who were educated in decades of fraudulent conduct.

11. The incompetence and lack of monitoring of many witnesses who are sympathizers of the government, along with the skill of the opposition, which knew how to take advantage of the weaknesses the electoral regulations with impunity, created the conditions for the accomplishment of significant fraud.

12. Fearing not having obtained the required signatures, everything seems to prove that the opposition's political cadres took advantage of the opportunity to keep the lists in their hands and were sent out to reproduce and to fill over a hundred thousand of these with fraudulent signatures, betting that the National Electoral Council would not be rigorous in its analysis of the lists and that the technological delay of the Venezuelan identification system would make it practically impossible to check the signatures one by one. They were so sure of this that they did not even take care to change the handwriting for each new signer that they added.

13. Secure of having convinced the National Electoral Council of the legitimacy of the submitted signatures, the opposition began to conduct a national and international media campaign to make the world believe that Chavez would not accept the results of the democratic consultation. The categorical declarations of the president and of the political actors that support him to respect the verdict of the arbiter ruined this campaign.

14. Exhausting these resources and statements that the CNE would not accept intimidations or pressure, the opposition has now directed its attacks against the arbiter itself.

⁵ See: *Informe del Grupo de Observadores Internacionales sobre proceso de recolección de firmas, 30 de noviembre 2003* (Signed by a group of 52 intellectuals, deputies, social leaders, journalists, and other people, of 35 countries of the world).

⁶ See: *Pronunciamiento sobre el proceso de recolección de firmas en la República bolivariana de Venezuela*. Politics of the Bolivarian Congress of the People, Caracas, 30 november 2003.

15. The same people, who for months prevented the appointment of the CNE and then for 30 days delayed the delivery of their signatures, now accuse the CNE of slowing down the process due to its supposed technical excesses. They argue that if the referendum process is prolonged for several more weeks, even if they manage to realize the referendum and to win it, there would be no presidential elections and Chavistas will continue in government. According to the new Constitution, if the president is revoked after four years of his mandate, which will be in August, the vice president must assume the presidency for the rest of the presidential period.

16. They say they are worried about the established periods, when in fact what they are worried that with time the magnitude of the fraud will be discovered. From this comes their effort to try to prevent a meticulous revision of the signatures at all costs.

17. Meanwhile, the CNE has not let itself to be intimidated and has continued to act consequently in its functions. In the face of the overwhelming accusations of fraud raised by Chavez and his followers, the CNE has been forced to meticulously check all of the submitted lists, which has delayed the process beyond the predicted date.

18. Every day more signatures appear that correspond to dead people, to foreigners, to minors or to identification numbers that belong to people who have not signed.

19. According to an announcement of the president of the CNE, in an interview with the TV Channel 8 (the state TV), the CNE has until now detected around 150 thousand lists where the signatures appear suspicious. Data that accompanied the signatures (name, address, identification number) were filled out by the same hand, contrary to the instructions that said each person should write his or her own data by hand (except in the case of serious impediment) and that unclear fingerprints will force the revision of around one million 400 thousand signatures.

20. In less than one week, on Sunday, February 29, the National Electoral Council will officially announce what everyone knows: that the valid signatures are not sufficient to proceed with the recall referendum and that from there a process of revision of the doubtful signatures must begin by the signers themselves to see if it is possible to accumulate the necessary signatures.

21. Conscious that opposition leaders will not recognize their defeat and will not scrimp in the use of any tool to prevent the progress of the revolutionary Bolivarian process, the people of Venezuela are preparing themselves to defend the process. They are fortifying their organizations and are preparing for a great mobilization of the entire country in Caracas for the 29th of February.

22. In moments such as this, in which the opposition is not alone, in which it can count on the support of the more reactionary international political and media forces, international solidarity is more necessary than never. In this sense, the recent declaration by the World Parliamentary Forum, in Mumbai, India, this past January, in which deputies from all continents expressed "their most firm support for the social transformation process in Venezuela" and rejected "any type of foreign interference," has been very important.

23. It is time to activate the Bolivarian Circles around the world and to create new ones wherever they are not present. It is necessary to include Venezuela in the great world-wide mobilization against war and intervention, planned for March 20. Let us march towards the US embassies in different countries this first day of March. ◀