

The San Juan Star

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AP PHOTO/N.Y. TIMES



Students and other opposition supporters cheer during a rally in Caracas, Venezuela, early Monday morning.

Chávez just getting started

Without a doubt, the results of Sunday's referendum in Venezuela caught everyone by surprise, including President Hugo Chávez and his horde of supporters, the fractured opposition, and all of us outside of that fabulous country I called home during 10 years after my exile from my native Cuba.

Sick and tired of 30-plus years of corrupt politics by the two main political parties, Copei and Acción Democrática, the electorate in 1998 voted overwhelmingly in favor of ex-coup leader Chávez, convinced that a drastic change was in order to save the country from its downhill spiral.

The Venezuelan people never imagined the magnitude of the drastic changes that lay ahead.

Still fully backed by a great majority of Venezuelans anxious for change, Chávez had the constitution rewritten and approved by the electorate in 1999. He then called for new elections and in December 2000 was again elected for a six-year term. His re-election of 2006 still remains shrouded with fraud, no thanks to Jimmy Carter, who blessed the process even though it was widely believed that the newly installed 100 percent computerized voting system was totally manipulated by Chávez. New elections for president are scheduled for December 2012.

Since 1998, Chávez, much like an octopus, has spread his total control over all facets of the nation: he controls the one-chamber congress and the supreme court. The Army has been practically disbanded and replaced by a "revolutionary militia," nothing more than armed thugs. Another mortifier to Chávez, the provincial governments, were to be eliminated in the now-defeated constitutional amend-

ment by bringing all cities under federal control.

The press in Venezuela has been systematically shushed. Earlier this year Chávez ordered Radio Caracas TV's operating license not to be renewed after they produced items contrary to Chávez's ideology. Other news media got the message and have carefully avoided any contrary words. The changes that had been programmed through the defeated amendments would have imposed TOTAL control, as exists in Cuba, over ALL media.

A key factor in the outcome of the referendum was Chávez's recent vitriolic attack against the Catholic Church. I have friends in Caracas who have been denied government business for having voted against Chávez in 2006.

We are now in a new phase of Venezuelan politics. The road ahead is bleak. Chávez, in his constitutional referendum, has outlined in detail his wish list. His record proves he will not give up until he obtains, by any and all means, what he wants. This referendum was his first shot. At this very moment he is hunkered down with his cronies, conniving his next move.

The opposition faces a tough road ahead. It is fractured by its long, sad history of political ineptitude. But there is a bright light at the end of the referendum tunnel. Several young Venezuelans stood out during the recent pre-referendum rallies. Should one emerge as a solid leader, Venezuela may be able to crawl out of the dark hole it has been in for 20 years.

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