

Venezuela and the Citizens Right to Referendum

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Does this sound Like Plano?

CARACAS, Venezuela—Thousands of demonstrators marched throughout the country Wednesday to demand that government authorities verify that a referendum should be held on whether to recall President Nicolás Maduro from office.

Supporters of the opposition alliance, Democratic Unity Roundtable, claim electoral authorities have dragged their feet on verifying the approximately 200,000 signatures needed for the first stage of calling for a recall vote. The opponents said they supplied 1.8 million signatures last month.

Mr. Maduro responded to the protests Wednesday by holding his own rally here, blocking the opposition march with riot police cordons and releasing a few canisters of tear gas. The aborted march underlines the steep uphill battle facing the opposition in pressuring the national electoral council, known as CNE, to comply with its own rules and activate the referendum process.

Two-thirds of voters surveyed wanted Mr. Maduro out after a harsh recession, chronic food shortages, and cuts in power and water supply, according to the latest Venebarometro poll. “We knew this would happen, but we came anyway to show that we’re strong, we’re many,” said a 53-year-old opposition supporter, Nestor Uribe, pointing to the National Guard barricades, armored vehicles and rows of riot shields that blocked the procession of mostly middle-aged and elderly citizens from entering downtown.

After winning a landslide victory in the December legislative elections, the opposition coalition has launched an array of proposals and bills to wrestle away public institutions from the government. Mr. Maduro then used the Supreme Court, which he’d filled with ruling party loyalists days before the new congress took seats, to shoot down the measures.

The leaders of the opposition alliance now say the recall referendum is their last chance of changing the government before the recession becomes a humanitarian crisis. But nine days after they handed CNE the signatures required to initiate the process, the electoral officials are yet to finish their work, despite the law that obliges the count be completed in five days.

“All we want is for CNE to comply with their own rules and with the constitution,” said the opposition leader, Henrique Capriles, who said he had to leave Wednesday’s march after being dosed with pepper spray by the National Guard. “They are not interested in the electoral process.”

The CNE’s complicated process would require collection of the signatures of 20% of all voters, nearly 4 million, within three days to actually authorize a recall vote.

Finally, to remove Mr. Maduro from office and force new elections, about 7.5 million voters, a number that would exceed the amount of votes he received in the 2013 election, would need to vote for the recall. Each of the steps is controlled by the CNE, which has sided with the government for years.

The timing is crucial, as a successful referendum carried out after January would leave Mr. Maduro’s vice president, Socialist Party loyalist Aristobulo Isturiz, in power until 2019.

“The government will do everything possible to impede the referendum this year,” said Carlos Raul Hernandez, political science professor at the Central University of Venezuela.
Sound like the City of Plano?