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Venezuela

The challenge after Chavez

- IV Online magazine - 2013 - IV459 - April 2013 -

Publication date: Thursday 25 April 2013

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Newly elected Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro set as his objective equalling and even exceeding the vote scored by Hugo Chávez by getting 10 million votes, but he succeeded in obtaining only 7,505,338, losing 600,000 votes in relation to Chavez's vote at the last election and winning by only 300,000 votes, with 50.6% against 49.07% for his opponent Capriles. Abstention was only a little higher, rising from 20 to 22%, which shows that the majority of votes lost by Maduro went directly to the opposition which, imitating Chávez and disputing his heritage, succeeded in winning over a sector of the previously Chavista middle class and even some working class sectors.

The official campaign was very poor: a great deployment of nationalist rhetoric, no ideas on the deepening of the social process, and still less on socialism, repeated appeals to loyalty (directed partly to the internal struggle inside the state apparatus), no encouragement to popular initiative and self organization, silence on the organs of popular power and a mix of religiosity and mysticism. The campaign of Capriles, insidious and mendacious, was more subtle by its insistence in differentiating Chávez from his successors and attaching the latter by continually stressing the privileges, corruption and scandals of the Boli-bourgeoisie and maintaining silence on his own plans and his links with imperialism. The Chavista votes that he won and the votes lost by those who abstained in no way represent a vote of confidence but a protest against inflation of 20% which eats up wages and the negative effects of the devaluation on the popular sectors. A protest also against delinquency, violence and corruption.

Capriles is now demanding a recount of the votes despite the fact that the theft of ballot papers is impossible in Venezuela. The US government, which remained silent on the scandalous electoral manipulations of 1988 and 2006 in Mexico, backs Capriles and prepares a coup disguised as a campaign for democracy. Washington and the anti-Chavistas are now linking up with the right wing of Chavismo and with the most conservative sector of the armed forces. The following stage will be a campaign combining sabotage, capital flights, press campaigns, employers' lock outs, student demonstrations intended to create victims and attempts to corrupt civilian and military personalities in the official circles.

The immediate danger resides in the Chavista right which will interpret the slim margin of votes which allow continued government as a signal to slow the rhythm of the process and to negotiate with the opposition and make concessions to it. But if the 1,600 expropriated companies function badly, it is not necessary to privatise them but rather to administer them correctly under workers' control. If the organs of popular power only half function, they should not be eliminated, but freed from asphyxiation by the state apparatus and given more responsibility. If there is widespread delinquency, control and organization in the neighbourhoods should fight it by all means necessary rather than relying on a corrupt and corruptible police force.

Democratic rights are assured by the recall referendum but to give a positive outcome to the discontent, and hold back the "democratic" momentum towards a coup, it is necessary to extend all the public offices. Instead of banning strikes and repressing unions and workers it is necessary to discuss with them on a basis of equality. Instead of transforming socialism into a propagandistic word devoid of meaning, it is necessary to discuss publicly with everyone and without restriction, what should be the measures to take to aid its realization, and how to avoid bureaucracy and corruption, with the conscious and organised participation of workers, students and intellectuals.

Instead of embellishing reality, it is necessary to identify difficulties so as to correct them. Instead of paternalism and loyalty, what is needed is room for initiative, creativity, innovation, criticism, the construction of citizenship. Maduro has promised massive and immediate wage increases and he will pay a heavy political price if they do not come. But with very high inflation and food shortages, a black market, and real wage reductions these increases can only at

The challenge after Chavez

best compensate for the loss of purchasing power. Venezuela cannot exclusively depend on the price of oil; it should produce and increase productivity.

Measures are need to put an end to inefficiency and corruption inside the administrative bodies which favour big importers and it is necessary to urgently train young administrators and technicians who are effective and innovatory.

It is also necessary to learn from the past and instead of being guided by a deformed and mythical image of the Peronist experience, understand seriously why Péron in the 1950s led the Argentine economy into a cul-de-sac before being overthrown and why he repeated this course in the 1970s opening the door to a ferocious rightist dictatorship. It is fundamental that Latin American history and socialist history are discussed without limits to learn from the past or it will be impossible to prepare the future. Faced with a pro-coup press we need to stimulate the creation of a press for the left, unions, groups and organisations: if it criticizes some government measures it will be necessary to correct them or convince the critics they are wrong. In a word to reduce the influence of pro-coup sentiments, it is necessary to appeal to the workers and deepen the process.