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Venezuela

After Venezuela's elections: defeat for the right, challenges for the left

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At the beginning of October, much of the world's media descended on Caracas hoping to report on the end of an authoritarian regime. "Too close to call" was the refrain on almost every network. Market analysts at places like Barclay's Capital urged investors to pile into Venezuelan debt on the assumption of an opposition victory. Months earlier Robert Zoellick, then still head of the World Bank, revelled in the certainty that Chavez' days were numbered. Better still, Chavez' defeat would put a stop to Venezuela's subsidies to Cuba and Nicaragua and spell the end for those 'regimes' too, bringing "an opportunity to make the Western Hemisphere the first democratic hemisphere". When those pictures came out a week before the poll, of tens of thousands at the final opposition rally, it seemed they might be right. Many of us had forgotten that the Venezuelan opposition turned out dozens of equally massive rallies and marches back in 2002 to 2004. Even among left activists there were more and more of us mumbling about whether there was really much to save in the Bolivarian revolution.

In the event, of course, Chavez won with 55.08 per cent to 44.30 per cent, on a turnout of 80.5 per cent. It's worth repeating those numbers. After nearly 14 years in office, in the face of enormous media hostility outside and inside the country, a sitting president won by a margin of 11 percent; in a country where voting is voluntary (unlike many other Latin American), an unprecedented four fifths of eligible voters cast their ballot, including a huge contingent of first-time voters, meaning both young people and some of the most marginalised sectors who traditionally never registered. And no one even hinted that this was anything but the cleanest of ballots. Compare these figures with the U.S. election just past and the difference is striking. One footnote figure is also striking: the only 'far left' candidate, Orlando Chirino of the PSL, a coalition of small, trotskyist currents, got 4 thousand votes nationwide, or 0.02%.

So how did it happen and what does it mean?

First the Venezuelan opposition did put up a more united and credible alternative than it has in the past. It toned down its more rabid, sometimes overtly racist rhetoric, and adopted a smoother, centrist, social liberal posture: 'back to the free market, but let's keep some of the social policies'. This helped it win over a number of disenchanted Chavez supporters, although the increase in the size of the electorate makes it difficult to tell just how big such a "defection" was. It has of course always been true, to paraphrase Fidel Castro, that there cannot be 6 million oligarchs in Venezuela. Nonetheless, the opposition base remains firmly anchored in the rather white, middle and upper middle class neighbourhoods of eastern Caracas and their equivalents in cities like Maracaibo, Merida and Valencia. Around them orbit larger, more marginalised petty-bourgeois sectors and the least organised or politicised parts of the working class and urban poor. This hasn't fundamentally changed in ten years and in this sense the opposition's new face has so far failed.

This means that tensions within the opposition could well resurface around the state elections in December and the municipal ones next April. On one side are the more aggressive coup-mongering sections of the opposition, who want to get rid of Chavez by any means, and who probably would have cried fraud this time if the margin of his victory had been smaller. Alongside them are the larger electoral blocks, now led by Primero Justicia, but including remnants of the traditional parties like Accion Democratica and Copei, who have a vested interest in increasing their share of local, regional and parliamentary posts, and who therefore, for the time being, have adopted a more 'democratic' stance.

The failure and division on the Venezuelan right, and the spectacular self-delusion of the global establishment over the likely outcome of this presidential election, are symptomatic of a larger disarray on the right in Latin America, and

in imperialism's policies towards the region.

From the 1990s through to the beginning of this millennium, Washington had a coherent project for Latin America: free trade plus controlled, formal democracy, and a 'war on drugs' to deal with any exceptional insurgency. At the beginning of his first term, George W. Bush made his maiden trip abroad to Mexico, to emphasise that his attention would be focussed southwards. After September 11, that went out the window. The grand project of a Free Trade Area of the Americas was finally defeated at Mar del Plata in 2005. Since then successive U.S. administrations have seemed bereft of any alternative.

At the beginning of his tenure, Barack Obama briefly flirted with the soft left of Lula in Brazil and Michelle Bachelet in Chile, but his attention soon strayed. In this last election, Latin America all but disappeared off the horizon. Mitt Romney occasionally boasted he would sign lots of new free trade agreements with Latin America – as if he hadn't been watching anything over the last decade. Obama made occasional references to the supposed 'war on drugs' in Mexico. But both candidates avoided the issue if they could.

The 2009 coup in Honduras looked like it might herald a new offensive from the United States and the right across the region. It was followed by the revelation of Washington's plans for new military bases in Colombia and the election of right-wing presidents in Chile, Panama, Costa Rica. But the offensive faltered. There were divisions among the competing, middle-level cliques that now ran Washington's Latin American policy. Most of the region's increasingly autonomous bourgeois governments reacted with hostility. The Obama administration was left looking more diplomatically isolated than ever.

At the same time, Washington's right-wing allies in the region have faced mounting social resistance. The huge movement led by students in Chile is the most important, but the recent revolt in Colon, Panama, forcing President Ricardo Martinelli to withdraw plans to privatise land in the continent's largest free-trade zone, is emblematic of a wider mood. Even in Mexico and Colombia, right-wing hegemony has been dented, with the thrashing of the PAN in the former and President Santos' shift to the centre in the latter. The peace talks now underway in Cuba with Colombia's FARC guerrillas may signal a defeat for one kind of Latin American left. But they could open the lid on some of the region's most potent social struggles.

In this context, last June's parliamentary coup in Paraguay looks more like a wounded beast lashing out than the continuation of a concerted strategy.

The reason for this relative failure of the right is clear. Latin America is still the part of the world where the challenge to neoliberal hegemony – that is imperialism – has gone furthest. This remains true even after the extraordinary mobilizations in the Arab world and Europe since 2011. Venezuela's Bolivarian revolution has been the key component here: first, because it showed, in practice, that a break with neoliberal priorities was possible; second, because for the first time since the collapse of the soviet block it opened up a discussion about socialism as the framework for any alternative, under the heading "socialism of the 21st century". In this context, there is no doubt that Chavez' victory is a victory for all of us on the left, and an important one.

None of this should be cause for complacency. If the right has failed to mount a coherent counter-attack, the Bolivarian left has also run into serious problems.

Latin America's challenge to neoliberalism has broadly three pillars. First came the waves of social struggles, by students, indigenous communities, peasant organisations, environmental campaigns and movements of the urban poor – but relatively few industrial or trade union struggles. These express a wider loss of credibility among tens of millions of people of the free-market prescriptions of what used to be called the Washington consensus. Within this,

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and under the influence particularly of the indigenous movements and the organisations of Via Campesina, the last few years have seen a growing ecologist and even eco-socialist awareness.

The second pillar comprises the governments of the Bolivarian Alliance, ALBA, that emerged directly or indirectly out of these struggles, principally Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador, plus Cuba.

The third pillar also reflects, in a distorted way, the popular rejection of neoliberal hegemony. But it subordinates this to the interests of a newly assertive local bourgeoisie that simply wants greater benefits and autonomy within the existing globalized economy. Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Peru all fit in here.

The relations between these three components are shifting. The outcomes are hard to predict. But it is far from certain they will be positive.

At the continental level, we have seen repeated confrontations between social movements and the Bolivian government of Evo Morales, and a swerve to the right by the Correa administration in Ecuador. This means there is now a deepening rift between Latin America's most important social movement, the indigenous one (which has plenty of internal differences of its own) and the ALBA axis of progressive governments.

Inside Venezuela, in addition to uncertainties over Chavez' health, many left observers have noted growing disenchantment among the revolution's supporters as conservative, bureaucratic or just plain opportunist and corrupt elements strengthen their grip within the Bolivarian government. Still the outcome is uncertain. Revolutionaries in the Marea Socialista current describe how the election was won. First there was a far larger and more combative popular mobilization than expected at the final Chavez rally, changing the tone of a lacklustre campaign. Then on the day, as Bolivarian officials began to panic at worrying early signs from voting stations, the final hours saw a massive surge in turnout from the poor barrios of Caracas and other cities. Marea likened it to the masses descending from the shanty towns to defeat the coup against Chavez in 2002.

Another potentially positive sign came at Chavez' first cabinet meeting after the election, on 20 October. Chavez made a withering critique of the revolution's problems that echoed arguments made by revolutionaries inside and outside Venezuela. Quoting Marxist texts, he argued that the basis of economic production has to change, if the revolution's gains are not to be swallowed up in a sea of capitalism. That, he said, means radically democratising economic activity, because socialism is democracy. By the same token, the urgent task of building popular power through communes could not be entrusted to a ministry. It had to be done by communities themselves. And Venezuela's public media had to be overhauled to support these priorities of radicalising democracy.

The trouble is, Chavez has said similar things before in the last six years. But it hasn't happened yet.

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