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Venezuela

The Bolivarian Revolution at the Crossroads

- IV Online magazine - 2008 - IV403 - August 2008 -

Publication date: Thursday 31 July 2008

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The defeat of President Hugo Chavez in the referendum last December marks an important turning point in the Bolivarian process, which began more than ten years ago. Following this defeat a crucial choice arises: to accelerate the process towards a socialist society or on the contrary to prefer the status quo by centring the revolution solely around the image of the president. After thirteen electoral victories in a row, the defeat in December was a body blow for the whole of the Bolivarian Left. For the first time in ten years, the Venezuelan people had expressed its disapproval, in spite of the widely-recognised gains of the revolution.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/chavezmarchreforma23.jpg>]

The gains of the revolution

In a country which is the fourth world exporter of oil and which has the greatest oil reserves in the world, oil is a very powerful financial weapon. The profits generated by PDVSA (the state oil company) make it possible to finance the “missions” of the revolution. Among the most important are those concerning education:

- The Robinson mission aims at teaching illiterates how to read and write.
- The Ribas mission trains graduates.
- The Sucre mission gives access to the university to students that the former republic had excluded. To this end, a Bolivarian University has been established and located all over the country. It functions parallel to the traditional Venezuelan universities, of which the best known are the Central University of Venezuela (in Caracas) and the Andean University (in Merida).

These educational missions are extremely successful. The students, of all ages, are very numerous, so much so that the centres where they operate are being multiplied. This enthusiasm can be explained partly by the methods of teaching that are used. The courses are given on video cassette and a teacher is there to help the group, which is always quite small. There is no place here for the system of evaluation and sanction. Everything is done to encourage the student’s progress. And the results speak for themselves: in October 2005, UNESCO officially proclaimed Venezuela “a territory freed from illiteracy”.

Another of the best known missions is “Barrio adentro”, which is a medical mission. In the framework of an agreement with Cuba, nearly 15.000 Cuban doctors are today employed by the Venezuelan government. Access to health has thus become completely free. Installed in doctors’ surgeries, all built on the same model, these doctors treat the population, but at the same time they inform and make people aware of the rules of hygiene and contraception. They also keep many statistics up to date, in order to observe the evolution of the medical situation of the population. It is clear that progress is being made, and the whole of the population, in particular in the barrios, has seen its living conditions improving, largely thanks to these doctors.

We could also speak about the Mercal mission, which markets food products at low prices. Created for all Venezuelans, it addresses itself more specifically to the poorest sectors of the population.

We could furthermore mention the Piar mission which aims at improving the living conditions of children, or “Vuelvan Caras”, the purpose of which is to develop co-operatives of production, or Guaicai which works to restore the rights of the indigenous peoples and communities of the country. Chavez often repeats that “to fight against poverty, it is necessary to give power to the poor”. The missions are there for that... to help the needy populations of the barrios, those who took to the streets at the time of the coup d’etat in 2002 to put Chavez back in power.

Lastly, how can we speak about the gains of the Bolivarian revolution without evoking one of the essential reforms of the process: the law on land and fishing. Just eight families in the country own between them more than 150,000 hectares of land. That represents roughly the equivalent of eighteen times the surface of the capital of Venezuela, where more than 4 million people live. Furthermore, these immense landholdings remain most of the time uncultivated, whereas they are located in the most fertile areas of the country. It should be stressed that some big landholdings, such as for example the liquor-producing Santa Teresa company, established in the valleys of Aragua, do not have any documented title to the land that they occupy. The law has made it possible to launch a process of more equitable distribution of land resources, by regularizing the division of the land among peasants through the National Land Institute. It has encouraged the construction of rural population centres equipped with basic services, giving their inhabitants access to health and education, in order for them to have a better and more dignified life. The law protects the poor peasants and encourages the formation of co-operatives and other associative forms of production, by supporting them financially and technically and by creating at the same time the conditions of their economic viability, through establishing the necessary means of transport and marketing of their produce.

Again on the lost referendum

So we might be astonished that in spite of these well-known gains, Hugo Chavez lost the referendum last December. All the more so in that in the president's proposal we could find in particular:

- recognition of popular participation through the Councils of Popular Power (such as, for example, the Student, Peasant Councils, etc.), and through workers' associations, co-operatives, community enterprises;
- strengthening of the right to work, including the creation of a fund of social stability for workers, allowing them, with the help of the state, to take advantage of wide-ranging rights concerning retirement, pensions and paid holidays;
- the reduction of the working day from 8 to 6 hours, and from 40 to 36 hours a week;
- recognition of the specificities of the indigenous groups and the groups descended from forced African immigration, guaranteeing the exercise of their rights and special attention from the law;
- the creation of a state productive economic model, based on the values of humanism, co-operation and the preponderance of social interests over private interests. The state promotes and develops specific forms of companies and economic units based on social, communal or state property, social production and distribution, mixed enterprises between the state and the private sector, creating the best conditions for the realization of the socialist economy.

All these social gains would make you think that the popular classes would mobilize to once again vote massively in favour of the proposals of Chavez. However that was not what happened, quite the contrary. The referendum was more a defeat of the Venezuelan president than a victory of the opposition. If we compare the results with those of the last presidential election, won by Chavez with 61,35% of the votes, the opposition stagnated, with 4 million votes, whereas Chavez lost 3 million votes. The abstention was 45 per cent. In the final analysis, it was by only 200,000 votes that the constitutional proposal was rejected.

Most of the Western media were quick to salute the wisdom of the Venezuelan people. For them, the explanation of this failure was simple, linear, and came down to two points: the refusal of a "Cuban-style" socialist model and the refusal to allow Chavez the right to stand for the presidency indefinitely. Admittedly, article 230 of the new Constitution proposed a lengthening of the presidential term to 7 years, with the possibility of standing again immediately and indefinitely. Such a proposal is obviously not satisfactory. But to conclude from it that Chavez wants to make Venezuela a dictatorship, as the media said, is to forget a little too quickly that this same system is in force in France and in other European democracies without it posing the least problem for these right-thinking media people. Besides, they even quickly forgot to point out that Venezuela really is a democracy, since Chavez recognized his defeat and congratulated his opponents on the evening of the results.

The reasons for the defeat are undoubtedly to be looked for elsewhere.

Reasons for the defeat

First of all, by aiming to broadly satisfy the population, the proposal did not in the end satisfy anyone. The renewal of the presidential mandate was clearly there to satisfy the moderate wing of the Bolivarian process, the wing that wants a Chavism without socialism. It could not however satisfy the most radical wing of the process. So we saw personalities like Orlando Chirino, a member of the leadership of the country's main trade-union confederation, the UNT, officially come out against the proposal. On the other hand, the entire social aspect of the reform, which we outlined above, was unacceptable to a new Bolivarian bourgeoisie which does not want socialism. From this point of view, it was highly symbolic that General Baduel, an old associate of Chavez, came out strongly against the reform.

Furthermore, there was very clearly a problem with the method chosen by Chavez. The Venezuelan president worked on a constitutional reform, consulting only a group of friends selected by him and gathered around his own person. Over and above the reform proposals, Chavez thus made disappear by decree the original formula of this revolution: that of a popular, revolutionary, democratic process of a constituent nature. The maximum that was obtained was the kind of open discussion that there was around the constituent assembly of 1999. At a moment when the context made it possible to go much further, to undertake a reform by establishing spaces of dialogue and power all over the country, Chavez threw down a challenge to the entire Bolivarian and revolutionary movement, forcing it to be with him or against him. There was a possible way out of this, making the model of reform proposed by Chavez a working draft for a great many constituent spaces organized all over the country, seeking perhaps their approval but gaining a model of legitimacy and a concretization of constituent and revolutionary democracy. In fact, the reform almost faded into the background because in the campaign Chavez personified the referendum to the point of transforming it into a plebiscite. The line was: "To vote No is to vote for Bush, to vote Yes is to vote for Chavez".

In the face of that the opposition developed a highly effective campaign. Through advertising spots on television, but also by going into the popular quarters, it ceaselessly explained that with the reform and "the arrival of socialism", the state would be the owner of all private goods and could seize in an absolutely legal way anyone's house or car. Exploiting people's fears by explaining that socialism would take from those who had little or nothing, this line of argument was extremely successful .

Lastly, the primary reason for this failure was undoubtedly the rise of a certain contestation within the Bolivarian camp. The desire to identify the Bolivarian revolution with the sole figure of Chavez, the way in which the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) is being constituted, without much consultation, and then the way in which they tried to impose the reform, explain this disaffection. Abstention was high because the proposal of Chavez, both in its form as and in its essential contents, did not offer practical democratic and counter-hegemonic perspectives. As Sebastien Ville and François Sabado wrote in Rouge n° 2230, "this defeat is a response to the degradation of the relations between the government and the most combative sectors of the Bolivarian revolution".

It is utopian to think that in the Latin America of today, it is possible to impose socialism from on high. The challenge is to build a radical democracy, opposed to the present status quo but pluralist in terms of actors and popular ideologies. Faced with this first setback, there are strong temptations for the moderate wing of Chavism to impose a new reform that would reduce the socializing or socialist aspects, explaining that they were the cause of the defeat on December 2. So what is at stake for the social movement is to keep the process moving forward. And from this point of view, there are fortunately some positive points.

The nationalization of SIDOR

First of all, there is of course the very recent nationalization of SIDOR. After three months of a determined strike and

of struggle, on Wednesday April 8, Hugo Chavez finally intervened and agreed to renationalise the most important iron and steel plant in the country, which had been privatized in 1997 by President Caldera.

At the heart of the debate was the denunciation by the workers and the UNT trade union of the violation by SIDOR of Venezuelan labour legislation. Completely ignoring the collective bargaining agreement, the management of Ternium-SIDOR, a company owned 20 per cent by the state, 20 per cent by the workers and 60 per cent by the Italo-Argentinian consortium Techint, had maintained for 15 months a situation of absolute wage insecurity for the 15.000 workers, including 9.000 who had no contracts. Not only did the management refuse until now to implement the wage increases voted legally in a general assembly by the workers, but on the contrary it sought to impose a reduction of the workforce, wage cuts, modifications of work contracts in the direction of greater insecurity, as well as a downward revision of the pensions paid to former employees.

Worse still, whereas the fact of having 20 per cent of the capital enabled the workers to appoint one of the co-presidents, the management categorically refused to recognize the validity of this vote. Hitherto protected by Jose Ramon Rivero, the Minister of Labour, the management of the firm thought it could count on the fact that it benefited from foreign capital to continue flouting Venezuelan law. Whereas Rivero never sought to negotiate and on the contrary preferred to impose a trial of strength on the workers, as he had previously done last August with the comrades of the UNT in the public sector, he has just been repudiated in a scathing fashion by Chavez.

On April 4, the UNT trade union organized a referendum where two questions were put to the workers of the factory: first of all, did they or did they not agree with the proposal that the employers had made at the negotiating table; then, whether they wished to continue the strike and the negotiations. In spite of three months of struggle, the workers answered No to the first question by 3,338 votes to 65, and Yes to the second by 3,195 to 97. On Monday April 7, weary of the workers' resistance, the government decided, in the person of Vice-president Ramón Carrizales, to convene new negotiations. Negotiations to which the minister Jose Ramon was this time not invited. Under the constant pressure of 600 workers guarding the factory permanently, it took less than 48 hours to resolve the crisis.

The fall of Rivero

This struggle led in addition to the fall of Jose Ramon Rivero. It was not the first time that the comrades of the UNT had clashed with him. On August 15 last year, the trade-union representatives of the UNT, workers in the Venezuelan Ministry of Labour, had an appointment with the director of his cabinet, Lennina Galindo, in order to present their draft of a national collective agreement for the whole of the workers of the public sector. On their arrival, they were told that she was in a meeting with the minister Jose Ramón Rivero. So the trade-union representatives decided to wait. At the end of the day, someone came back to see them to tell them that by order of the minister, Lennina Galindo was not authorized to receive them.

The trade unionists, furious, then decided to occupy the Ministry until they were received. Forty-five people, men and women, thus continued to wait. Initially, the director of his cabinet and the vice-minister were sent to convince the recalcitrant workers to leave the Ministry. Then, understanding that he could not avoid a confrontation, the minister ordered the doors to be closed, but also for water and electricity to be cut off. Six days passed thus, without any change in the situation. Fire-fighters were prevented from entering, all contact was prohibited with the employees of the ministry who, out of solidarity, vainly tried to forward get food to them.

Deprived of water, food and medicine, faced with this serious lack of respect for the elementary rights of the human person, the courageous trade unionists nevertheless remained in place. The minister then called on the army to evacuate them. Soldiers came to the scene, noted the occupation, but decided not to intervene. Furious, the minister then decided to use purely and simply gangster methods, by calling in roughnecks from the neighbourhood.

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Promising each of them 50,000 bolivars (approximately 15 euros), he asked them to forcibly make these trade unionists leave, presenting them as anti-Chavist oppositionists. A violent evacuation of the ministry ensued, with the trade unionists being driven out by thugs armed with revolvers.

But the funniest part of the story was not in the evacuation itself.

In fact, these trade-union comrades were all members of the C-CURA and Marea Socialista currents of the UNT, and many of them were Trotskyists. And at the time as the evacuation was taking place, this same minister was making an inaugural speech on the occasion of the first official homage paid by the Bolivarian Republic to... Leon Trotsky! Such are the methods of Rivero.

Finally, at the time when he was ousted, Rivero was trying to set up a new trade-union confederation, directly in competition with the UNT, and which would have followed his orders. Although this project seems to have been frozen with the departure of Rivero, nothing indicates that it will not be taken out of the closet one day by the right wing of Chavism.

The internal manoeuvres in the PSUV

The right wing seems for the moment more preoccupied by the PSUV, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, the new party bringing together the old MVR (Movement for Fifth Republic) of Chavez, and part of the Venezuelan Communist Party, of PPT and of Podemos. During March, the election of the leadership took place.

The first stage consisted of designating the members who had the right to vote. Out of 5 million members, only 80,000 could vote, without anyone knowing on what criteria this choice was based. In a second stage, Chavez announced on live television a list of 70 names from which it was necessary to choose the 35 people who were going to make up the national leadership. Lastly, in the third stage, once the 35 members of the national leadership had been elected, Chavez designated on live TV the members of the political bureau. There you can only find members of the government, and there are no representatives of the social or trade-union movement. The vote of the delegates in each battalion (base organisation) proceeded without there being any control of the results.

In spite of the way the bureaucracy arranged this election, there remain political spaces within the PSUV. Thus for example, when there was the election of the 35 people who were to make up the national leadership, a list drawn up by the government was circulated, indicating the names for which it was necessary to vote. Unfortunately for those thus designated, the 80,000 grand electors did not follow instructions and voted freely. Which undoubtedly partly explains Chavez taking matters in hand directly by nominating the political bureau. In the same way, comrade Gonzalo Gomez, a member of Marea Socialista, succeeded in being elected a delegate, in spite of the opposition of the bureaucracy.

Admittedly, learning how to work within the big machine that the PSUV is, is extremely complicated. Nevertheless the assiduity and the sharpness in the political struggle that the comrades of Marea Socialista, above all Stalin Perez, have shown, is making it possible for them to win a hearing. These small day-to-day political victories validate a posteriori the choice of going into the PSUV and calling for a Yes vote at the time of the last referendum. Inversely, the positions of the comrades of C-CURA and Orlando Chirino on these two principal points, tend to put them off the political field.

The next electoral deadlines

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In this context, the municipal elections in November look like being very complicated. There is a strong chance that the Chavist camp will lose quite a few towns and cities, which would weaken the process a little bit more. At the time when the revolution seems to be looking for its second wind, the problems of daily existence are coming to the fore again. Galloping inflation (20 per cent per annum), insecurity, the problem of refuse disposal, unemployment, corruption are elements which contribute to weighing on the process and which will play a preponderant role at the moment of putting a voting paper in the ballot box. Admittedly, these problems did not start with the Bolivarian revolution and are inherited from the former republic. However, the Chavists must be able to respond to questions relating to living conditions at the same time as proposing a project for another society.

For ten years, the revolution has continued to be unceasingly attacked by the capitalist bureaucracy, which forces it to solve the strategic problems of industrialization and nationalization, of the development of agro-industry in the countryside, and especially of private banking which still controls public finances and the rates of interest and borrowing (which is about 32 per cent). If the Bolivarian camp does not grapple with these problems, the towns of Ciudad Guayana (the most important iron and steel basin of Venezuela), of Puerto Cruz (an oil town), of Valencia (the main industrial city in the country) and even Caracas, the capital, can be lost, which would lead to a halt in the revolutionary process.

So it is more than ever important to defend the Bolivarian process. Of course it makes mistakes, even takes condemnable decisions such those that we have described above, and we will not cease to condemn them. Nevertheless, it is worth repeating with force that the Bolivarian revolution remains by far, and in spite of its errors, the most interesting phenomenon existing on the planet today. On it depends the equilibrium of the entire Andean and Caribbean region. If a fatal blow was dealt to it, the Bolivian and Ecuadorian processes would crumble. The Cuban experience would end. In spite of undeniable gains which have benefited the most underprivileged layers, the bureaucratic heaviness of the state apparatus as well as the continental context weigh enormously. That is why it is important to follow and support the Venezuelan social movement. Admittedly, it remains weakened and divided. But it is its capacity to unite which will make it possible to give a second wind to the revolution and will radicalize a process which is still and always too dependent on the sole figure of Hugo Chavez.