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Venezuela

Venezuela: After the Chavez victory

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We publish here an interview conducted by Franck Gaudichaud with the members of the National Coordination of Marea Socialista, a current in the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV): Gonzalo Gómez (founder of the website Aporrea.org), Stalin Perez Borges (trade union leader), Juan Garc a, and Zuleika Matamoros. The interview took place in Caracas on October 9, 2012.

In your opinion, what importance does the recent election victory of Hugo Chavez have? What are the main points and what will its regional impact be in Latin America?

Gonzalo G mez: firstly, in the light of the election results, it should be noted that Chavez has won and that with him, it is the people who won. The Chavez re-election means that the revolutionary process remains open in Venezuela and continues the opportunity for further progress of the social and political transformations that have marked the Bolivarian revolution.

Juan Garc a: Actually, the October 7 election has not allowed the bourgeoisie and imperialism to halt the Bolivarian revolution. The country continues to pursue an orientation of relative independence in relation to imperialist domination. The bourgeoisie has not managed to gain the space that would allow it to restore its neo-liberal policies and its direct control of the state, of which it was deprived by the revolutionary process.

Gonzalo G mez: With regard to the regional impact, with the victory of Chavez, the relationship of forces in Latin America continues to be favourable to the revolution and the so-called "regional integration". The interventionist imperialism option was weakened and delayed, which opens the way to other strategies which they attempt to use to neutralize the Bolivarian revolution on the Latin American geopolitical scene.

Zuleika Matamoros: Having said that, even if we begin our analysis by recognizing the significance of the triumph of Chavez, we must also recognize the growing threat of the right. In this election the gap in favour of Chavez was slightly more than 11% of the votes, which is very significant. But we must not forget that, compared to previous elections, like the presidential election of 2006, Chavismo has lost its lead in percentage of electors and the right has made advances.

Juan Garc a: Of course, Zuleika is correct and we must draw attention to this in the debate which will take place on the results of the elections. In 2006, Chavez won almost 63% of the vote while the candidate of the right won nearly 37%. The difference in favour of Chavez was 27%. At the election of October 7, 2012, Chavez won with slightly more than 55% while Henrique Capriles Radonski got slightly more than 44%; the gap has been reduced to less than 12%. In number of votes, Chavez received 7,500,000 more than in 2006, while the right won 2,100,000 votes - there were more than 3 million new voters (these are approximate figures published today). Chavez won in 22 of the 24 States and the right lost the majority in many regions that it led, but it has also been strengthened in many big cities and has progressed significantly, both in percentage and in number of votes.

Stalin Perez Borges: This is why you need to draw attention to the danger posed by this trend. If electoral behaviour continues to evolve in the same way as we observed on October 7, there is a serious danger that the next Bolivarian presidential nominee (either Chavez or anyone replacing him) would lose the Presidency: the right would have a great chance of winning. The same risk may occur halfway through, if the bourgeois opposition were able to call a presidential recall referendum, as it did in 2004. That is why, although we were celebrating the victory, we say that there is a problem because Chavez has gone backwards, while the right has gone forward. And this has happened

when the rate of abstention was the lowest of all recent national elections. So we can speak of electoral erosion for Chavez.

Before we talk about the causes, reasons explaining this result, can we talk a bit about the outline of the programme of the candidate of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) during this campaign

Gonzalo Gómez: Chavez presented a program around five historical objectives. The message of his campaign sought an emotional attachment, an emotional bond with the people. To do this, he used the slogan "Chavez, the heart of the country". But this slogan, beyond the psychological impact it can have, was by no means an ideological definition of the left and could be used by his opponent to the right, Capriles Radonski. Of course, he doesn't have the emotional impact of Chavez in the population and his image is not associated with the feelings of patriotism, sovereignty and national independence that Chavez wanted to express. But in reality the objectives set out in the programmatic proposals of Chavez were little discussed and his campaign was more focused, especially in the final weeks, on the denunciation of the threats posed by the neoliberal agenda of Capriles and his right wing Coalition of Democratic Unity (MUD) to the national independence obtained during the fourteen years of the Bolivarian revolution.

Juan Garc a: You know this people has been marked, historically, by its reaction in 1989 against attempts to impose a neoliberal package of measures designed by the International Monetary Fund. It was the revolt of February 27, 1989, which initiated the revolutionary period that we live through, that is how the figure of Chavez emerged as well as the constituent process which took place after he came to power in 1998. That is why the denunciation of Capriles' intentions to challenge these policies has had a great impact. Here, the "spectre of communism" that the right always uses to scare people into believing that they will lose their personal property, has an opposite effect. This time it's Capriles who has embodied the threat that the Venezuelan people would lose the gains accumulated under the mandate of Chavez: access to health, education, housing, pensions, the reduction of poverty and so on.

Zuleika Matamoros: With regard to the people's movement, it was stifled by the PSUV and the machinery of government. The Great Patriotic Pole, which had generated great expectations and was seen as an opportunity to create an enthusiastic campaign, which was to be a space of participation for the rank and file and social subjects, was deflated because its policy initiatives were sequestered by the PSUV and the electoral machine, which imposed their line. It is distressing, because during the elections of 2006, the participation of the rank and file was much more vigorous and gave better results. This election campaign was much more bureaucratically controlled and it is a source of political damage. The PSUV was not up to it, it was not the true engine of the campaign because of the insistence of the bureaucracy on stifling the initiatives of the rank and file and the autonomy of the social movements. Ultimately, the most important factor in this campaign was Chavez himself, who really threw himself into it during the last weeks, as well as the participation of the population, aware of the threat posed by the right, despite the fact that its enthusiasm has been undermined by bad experiences of the bureaucratisation of the process.

How do we analyze the Capriles campaign, his achievements in the construction of a united opposition for the presidential elections, his actual ability to mobilize the masses well beyond the "hard core" of the right (and the oligarchy) and his electoral results in Caracas and in the provinces?

Stalin Perez Borges: With the help of imperialism and at its dictation, the right has managed to unite through a primary election, regardless of its tensions and its minor fractures. From the point of view of its own objectives, it has waged a very successful campaign and has been able to reach disgruntled popular sectors, who, despite the benefits obtained, resent the abuse of the governmental bureaucracy within public institutions and state enterprises, just as they resent its lack of consistency and its ineffectiveness with regard to the issues which cannot be resolved in the context of capitalism. For the first time in years - in fact since the failed coup of 2002 - the right was able to mobilize in the centre and west of Caracas, in Chavista and popular areas, and gather some 150,000 people in the capital on Bolivar Avenue. But the Chavista popular reaction on October 4 brought together, in various nearby avenues, more

than five or six times more people at the same time. That said, it is clear that the right has been able to penetrate little by little into the popular sectors, in particular the so-called “middle class”, who feel dissatisfied and make Chavez responsible for unsolved problems, such as insecurity and delinquency.

After this victory a new period of six years of government opens. Which will be the last government of Hugo Chavez, how is he going to address important issues such as bureaucracy, clientelism, state inefficiency and insecurity?

Gonzalo Gómez: If we follow the trend of electoral growth for the right and take into account the uncertainty generated by the possibility that the right will not have to confront Chavez at the next election, we cannot rule out the possibility of seeing here what happened to the Sandinistas at the end of the 1980s, when the bourgeoisie returned to power. If we do not advance the anti-capitalist measures and if the bureaucratization continues, if we do not build a collective leadership, working class and popular, of the revolutionary process, if the extreme dependence on Chavez continues... the erosion may be irreversible. That is why Marea Socialista says we need to promote, with all our strength, the exercise of social control and genuine participatory democracy against bureaucratism. We say it is necessary that Chavez opens a permanent consultation with the organizations of the working class, the peasants, organs of popular power and social movements active in the process, so as to share the design and approval of policies. We need a revival of the constituent experience, around the new program presented by Chavez in this election, and with the participation of the social actors of the process in the exercise of governance of revolutionary type. It is with these movements that we need to identify the priorities and the measures to be implemented.

The president has been weakened by his illness and, at the same time, he was very present in the last weeks of the campaign and there is no doubt that his popular and charismatic leadership was fundamental for the victory. Is a “Chavismo without Chavez” imaginable?

Juan Garc a: Without Chavez as a factor and without the construction of a collective leadership originating from the organized people, we believe that “Chavismo” will sink into dispersion and confusion. That is why we are saying we need to build a new government that would be the real expression of the popular movement and organizations of the working class.

What are the prospects for the December local and regional elections?

Zuleika Matamoros: Some speak of a “knock-on” effect from Chavez’s electoral victory of October 7. But we believe that the designation from above of the candidates for governor, without taking into account and even ignoring the popular rejection of some names, will not contribute to reversing the clear trend in the rise of the right. There is a real risk of loss of regional government and allowing the right to obtain an even more favourable relationship of forces.

What are the medium and long term perspectives of the Bolivarian process, as well as the positions which compete in the political space of Bolivarianism concerning the deepening – or not – of the conquests and ways of transcending its contradictions? What are the positions defended in this debate by your current, Marea Socialista?

Gonzalo G mez: We increasingly insist on the need for a radical left current in the revolutionary process. While the government spoke recently of the need for a “responsible right”, with which it is possible to have a dialogue and reach an agreement, we and a good part of the radical activists believe that what is needed is a consistent revolutionary left able to pressure for a change of direction. It must be a force able to guide the implementation of the policies that we will take to complete the break with capitalism, which allows us to go beyond the “mixed economy” schema and thus facilitate the transition to socialism. Because the construction of the new society has been slowed and bureaucracy slows down the solution of important problems, both urgent and structural.

Where are we in relation to the experiences of popular participation such as experiences in workers' control (at Sidor for example) and popular power at the neighbourhood level (communal councils) and the communes? We hear much about 21st century socialism, but the campaign has focused on more "emotional" or general slogans such as "Chavez, the heart of the homeland": what does "21st century socialism" mean beyond the rhetoric?

Stalin Perez Borges: As you have noticed, the rhetoric often takes precedence over the concrete policy. In the case of workers' control, we recognize that Chavez has opened the possibility of trying it out, on the basis of the fight that the workers led; but the behaviour of the state bureaucracy stifles and perverts these experiences. Of course, the challenge that we face is to overcome these challenges by combative capacity and revolutionary consciousness. As for popular power, with the neighbourhood councils and communes, even though this is a very progressive experience, it remains confined to the local level and these emerging organizations must also face bureaucratization, cooption by the State and clientelist relations, while there is no specific policy which would allow them to pass from the neighbourhood level to a real involvement in the exercise of territorial and national power. That is why we say that Chavez should make a call - and we must demand it - so that what has been built as structures of popular power, as well as the social movements, have a right to expression at the level of the government and the policies it will impose, in close consultation with the people. We need a clearly anti-capitalist and socialist orientation and that means the real implementation of the power of the workers and the people.