

Venezuela between Ballots and Bullets

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Introduction

Venezuela's democratically elected President Chavez faces the most serious threat since the April 11, 2002 military coup.

Violent street demonstrations by privileged middle and upper middle class university students have led to major street battles in and around the center of Caracas. More seriously, the former Minister of Defense, General Raul Isaias Baduel, who resigned in July, has made explicit calls for a military coup in a November 5th press conference which he convoked exclusively for the right and far-right mass media and political parties, while striking a posture as an 'individual' dissident.

The entire international and local private mass media has played up Baduel's speeches, press conferences along with fabricated accounts of the oppositionist student rampages, presenting them as peaceful protests for democratic rights against the government referendum scheduled for December 2, 2007.

The New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the BBC News and the Washington Post have all primed their readers for years with stories of President Chavez' 'authoritarianism'. Faced with constitutional reforms which strengthen the prospects for far-reaching political-social democratization, the US, European and Latin American media have cast pro-coup ex-military officials as 'democratic dissidents', former Chavez supporters disillusioned with his resort to 'dictatorial' powers in the run-up to and beyond the December 2, 2007 vote in the referendum on constitutional reform. Not a single major newspaper has mentioned the democratic core of the proposed reforms - the devolution of public spending and decision to local neighborhood and community councils. Once again as in Chile in 1973, the US mass media is complicit in an attempt to destroy a Latin American democracy.

Even sectors of the center-left press and parties in Latin America have reproduced right-wing propaganda. On November the self-styled 'leftist' Mexican daily La Jornada headline read 'Administrators and Students from the Central University of Venezuela (UCV) Accuse Chavez of Promoting Violence'. The article then proceeded to repeat the rightist fabrications about electoral polls, which supposedly showed the constitutional amendments facing defeat.

The United States Government, both the Republican White House and the Democrat-controlled Congress are once again overtly backing the new attempt to oust the popular-nationalist President Chavez and to defeat the highly progressive constitutional amendments.

The Referendum: Defining and Deepening the Social Transformation

The point of confrontation is the forthcoming referendum on constitutional reforms initiated by President Chavez, debated, amended and democratically voted on by the Venezuelan Congress over the past 6 months. There was widespread and open debate and criticism of specific sectors of the Constitution. The private mass media, overwhelmingly viscerally anti-Chavez and pro-White House, unanimously condemned any and all the constitutional amendments. A sector of the leadership of one of the components of the pro-Chavez coalition (PODEMOS) joined the Catholic Church hierarchy, the leading business and cattleman's association, bankers and sectors of the university and student elite to attack the proposed constitutional reforms. Exploiting to the hilt all of Venezuela's democratic freedoms (speech, assembly and press) the opposition has denigrated the referendum as 'authoritarian' even as most sectors of the opposition coalition attempted to arouse the military to intervene.

The opposition coalition of the rich and privileged fear the constitutional reforms because they will have to grant a greater share of their profits to the working class, lose their monopoly over market transactions to publicly owned firms, and see political power evolve toward local community councils and the executive branch. While the rightist and liberal media in Venezuela, Europe and the US have fabricated lurid charges about the 'authoritarian' reforms, in fact the amendments propose to deepen and extend social democracy.

A brief survey of the key constitutional amendments openly debated and approved by a majority of freely elected Venezuelan congress members gives the lie to charges of 'authoritarianism' by its critics. The amendments can be grouped according to political, economic and social changes.

The most important political change is the creation of new locally based democratic forms of political representation in which elected community and communal institutions will be allocated state revenues rather than the corrupt, patronage-infested municipal and state governments. This change toward decentralization will encourage a greater practice of direct democracy in contrast to the oligarchic tendencies embedded in the current centralized representative system.

Secondly, contrary to the fabrications of ex-General Baduel, the amendments do not 'destroy the existing constitution', since the amendments modify in greater or lesser degree only 20% of the articles of the constitution (69 out of 350).

The amendments providing for unlimited term elections is in line with the practices of many parliamentary systems, as witnessed by the five terms in office of Australian Prime Minister Howard, the half century rule of Japan's Liberal Democratic Party, the four terms of US President Franklin Roosevelt, the multi-term election of Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair in the UK among others. No one ever questions their democratic credentials for multi-term executive office holding, nor should current critics selectively label Chavez as an 'authoritarian' for doing the same.

Political change increasing the presidential term of office from 6 to 7 years will neither increase or decrease presidential powers, as the opposition claims, because the separation of legislative, judicial and executive powers will continue and free elections will subject the President to periodic citizen review.

The key point of indefinite elections is that they are free elections, subject to voter preference, in which, in the case of Venezuela, the vast majority of the mass media, Catholic hierarchy, US-funded NGO's, big business associations will still wield enormous financial resources to finance opposition activity – hardly an 'authoritarian' context.

The amendment allowing the executive to declare a state of emergency and intervene in the media in the face of violent activity to overthrow the constitution is essential for safeguarding democratic institutions. In light of several authoritarian violent attempts to seize power recently by the current opposition, the amendment allows dissent but also allows democracy to defend itself against the enemies of freedom. In the lead up to the US-backed military coup of April 11, 2002, and the petroleum lockout by its senior executives which devastated the economy (a decline of 30% of GNP in 2002/2003), if the Government had possessed and utilized emergency powers, Congress and the Judiciary, the electoral process and the living standards of the Venezuelan people would have been better protected. Most notably, the Government could have intervened against the mass media aiding and abetting the violent overthrow of the democratic process, like any other democratic government. It should be clear that the amendment allowing for 'emergency powers' has a specific context and reflects concrete experiences: the current opposition parties, business federations and church hierarchies have a violent, anti-democratic history. The destabilization campaign against the current referendum and the appeals for military intervention most prominently and explicitly stated by retired General Baduel (defended by his notorious adviser-apologist, the academic-adventurer Heinz Dietrich), are a clear indication that emergency powers are absolutely necessary to send a clear message that reactionary violence will be met by the full force of the law.

The reduction of voting age from 18 to 16 will broaden the electorate, increase the number of participants in the electoral process and give young people a greater say in national politics through institutional channels. Since many workers enter the labor market at a young age and in some cases start families earlier, this amendment allows young workers to press their specific demands on employment and contingent labor contracts.

The amendment reducing the workday to 6 hours is vehemently opposed by the opposition led by the big business federation, FEDECAMARAS, but has the overwhelming support of the trade unions and workers from all sectors. It will allow for greater family time, sports, education, skill training, political education and social participation, as well as membership in the newly formed community councils. Related labor legislation and changes in property rights including a greater role for collective ownership will strengthen labor's bargaining power with capital, extending democracy to the workplace.

Finally the amendment eliminating so-called 'Central Bank autonomy' means that elected officials responsive to the voters will replace Central Bankers (frequently responsive to private bankers, overseas investors and international financial officials) in deciding public spending and monetary policy. One major consequence will be the reduction of excess reserves in devalued dollar denominated funds and an increase in financing for social and productive activity, a diversity of currency holdings and a reduction in irrational foreign borrowing and indebtedness. The fact of the matter is that the Central Bank was not 'autonomous', it was dependent on what the financial markets demanded, independent of the priorities of elected officials responding to popular needs.

As the Chavez Government Turns to Democratic Socialism: Centrists Defect and

Seek Military Solutions

As Venezuela's moves from political to social transformation, from a capitalist welfare state toward democratic socialism, predictable defections and additions occur. As in most other historical experiences of social transformation, sectors of the original government coalition committed to formal institutional political changes defect when the political process moves toward greater egalitarianism and property and a power shift to the populace. Ideologues of the 'Center' regret the 'breaking' of the status quo 'consensus' between oligarchs and people (labeling the new social alignments as 'authoritarian') even as the 'Center' embraces the profoundly anti-democratic Right and appeals for military intervention.

A similar process of elite defections and increased mass support is occurring in Venezuela as the referendum, with its clear class choices, comes to the fore. Lacking confidence in their ability to defeat the constitutional amendments through the ballot, fearful of the democratic majority, resentful of the immense popular appeal of the democratically elected President Chavez, the 'Center' has joined the Right in a last ditch effort to unify extra-parliamentary forces to defeat the will of the electorate.

Emblematic of the New Right and the 'Centrist' defections is the ex-Minister of Defense, Raul Baduel, whose virulent attack on the President, the Congress, the electoral procedures and the referendum mark him as an aspirant to head up a US-backed right-wing seizure of power.

The liberal and right wing mass media and unscrupulous 'centrist' propagandists have falsely portrayed Raul Baduel as the 'savior' of Chavez following the military coup of April 2002. The fact of the matter is that Baduel intervened only after hundreds of thousands of poor Venezuelans poured down from the 'ranchos', surrounded the Presidential Palace, leading to division in the armed forces. Baduel rejected the minority of rightist military officers favoring a massive bloodbath and aligned with other military officials who opposed extreme measures against the people and the destruction of the established political order. The latter group included officials who supported Chavez' nationalist-populist policies and others, like Baduel, who opposed the coup-makers because it radicalized and polarized society - leading to a possible class-based civil war with uncertain outcome. Baduel was for the restoration of a 'chastised' Chavez who would maintain the existing socio-economic status quo.

Within the Chavez government, Baduel represented the anti-communist tendency, which pressed the President to 'reconcile' with the 'moderate democratic' right and big business. Domestically, Baduel opposed the extension of public ownership and internationally favored close collaboration with the far-right Colombian Defense Ministry.

Baduel's term of office as Defense Minister reflected his conservative propensities and his lack of competence in matters of security, especially with regard to internal security. He failed to protect Venezuela's frontiers from military incursions by Colombia's armed forces. Worse he failed to challenge Colombia's flagrant violation of international norms with regard to political exiles. While Baduel was Minister of Defense, Venezuelan landlords' armed paramilitary groups assassinated over 150 peasants active in land reform while the National Guard looked the other way. Under Baduel's watch over 120 Colombian paramilitary forces infiltrated the country. The Colombian military frequently crossed the Venezuelan border to attack Colombian refugees. Under Baduel, Venezuelan military officials collaborated in the kidnapping of Rodrigo Granda (a foreign affairs emissary of the FARC) in broad daylight in

the center of Caracas. Baduel made no effort to investigate or protest this gross violation of Venezuelan sovereignty, until President Chavez was informed and intervened. Throughout Baduel's term as Minister of Defense he developed strong ties to Colombia's military intelligence (closely monitored by US Defense Intelligence Agency and the CIA) and extradited several guerrillas from both the ELN and the FARC to the hands of Colombian torturers.

At the time of his retirement as Minister of Defense, Baduel made a July 2007 speech in which he clearly targeted the leftist and Marxist currents in the trade union (UNT) and Chavez newly announced PSUV (The Unified Socialist Party of Venezuela). His speech, in the name of 'Christian socialist', was in reality a vituperative and ill-tempered anti-communist diatribe, which pleased Pope Benedict (Ratzinger).

Baduel's November 5 speech however marks his public adherence to the hard-line opposition, its rhetoric, fabrications and visions of an authoritarian reversal of Chavez program of democratic socialism. First and foremost, Baduel, following the lead of the White House and the Venezuelan 'hard right', denounced the entire process of Congressional debate on the Constitutional amendments, and open electoral campaigning leading up to the referendum as 'in effect a coup d'etat'. Every expert and outside observer disagreed - even those opposed to the referendum. Baduel's purpose however was to question the legitimacy of the entire political process in order to justify his call for military intervention. His rhetoric calling the congressional debate and vote a 'fraud' and 'fraudulent procedures' point to Baduel's effort to denigrate existing representative institutions in order to justify a military coup, which would dismantle them.

Baduel's denial of political intent is laughable - since he only invited opposition media and politicians to his 'press conference' and was accompanied by several military officials. Baduel resembles the dictator who accuses the victim of the crimes he is about to commit. In calling the referendum on constitutional reform a 'coup', he incites the military to launch a coup. In an open appeal for military action he directs the military to 'reflect of the context of constitutional reform.' He repeatedly calls on military officials to 'assess carefully' the changes the elected government has proposed 'in a hasty manner and through fraudulent procedures'. While denigrating democratically elected institutions, Baduel resorts to vulgar flattery and false modesty to induce the military to revolt. While immodestly denying that he could act as spokesperson for the Armed Forces, he advised the rightist reporters present and potential military cohort that 'you cannot underrate the capacity of analysis and reasoning of the military.'

Cant, hypocrisy and disinterested posturing run through Baduel's pronouncements. His claim of being an 'apolitical' critic is belied by his intention to go on a nationwide speaking tour attacking the constitutional reforms, in meetings organized by the rightwing opposition. There is absolutely no doubt that he will not only be addressing civilian audiences but will make every effort to meet with active military officers who he might convince to 'reflect' and plot the overthrow of the government and reverse the results of the referendum. President Chavez has every right to condemn Baduel as a traitor, though given his long-term hostility to egalitarian social transformation it may be more to the point to say that Baduel is now revealing his true colors.

The danger to Venezuelan democracy is not in Baduel as an individual - he is out of the government and retired from active military command. The real danger is his effort to arouse the active military officers with command of troops, to answer his call to action or as

he cleverly puts it 'for the military to reflect on the context of the constitutional reforms.' Baduel's analysis and action program places the military as the centerpiece of politics, supreme over the 16 million voters.

His vehement defense of 'private property' in line with his call for military action is a clever tactic to unite the Generals, Bankers and the middle class in the infamous footsteps of Augusto Pinochet, the bloody Chilean tyrant.

The class polarization in the run-up to the referendum has reached its most acute expression: the remains of the multi-class coalition embracing a minority of the middle class and the great majority of the working power is disintegrating. Millions of previously apathetic or apolitical young workers, unemployed poor and low-income women (domestic workers, laundresses, single parents) are joining the huge popular demonstrations overflowing the main avenues and plazas in favor of the constitutional amendments. At the same time political defections have increased among the centrist-liberal minority in the Chavez coalition. Fourteen deputies in the National Assembly, less than 10%, mostly from PODEMOS, have joined the opposition. Reliable sources in Venezuela (Axis of Logic/Les Blough Nov. 11, 2007) report that Attorney General General Isaias Rodriguez, a particularly incompetent crime fighter, and the Comptroller General Cloudosbaldo Russian are purportedly resigning and joining the opposition. More seriously, these same reports claim that the 4th Armed Division in Marcay is loyal to 'Golpista' Raul Baduel. Some suspect Baduel is using his long-term personal ties with the current Minister of Defense, Gustavo Briceno Rangel to convince him to defect and join in the pre-coup preparations. Large sums of US funding is flowing in to pay off state and local officials in cash and in promises to share in the oil booty if Chavez is ousted. The latest US political buy-out includes Governor Luis Felipe Acosta Carliz from the state of Carabobo. The mass media have repeatedly featured these new defectors to the right in their hourly 'news reports' highlighting their break with Chavez 'coup d'etat'.

The referendum is turning into an unusually virulent case of a 'class against class' war, in which the entire future of the Latin American left is at stake as well as Washington's hold on its biggest oil supplier.

Conclusion

Venezuelan democracy, the Presidency of Hugo Chavez and the great majority of the popular classes face a mortal threat. The US is facing repeated electoral defeats and is incapable of large-scale external intervention because of over-extension of its military forces in the Middle East; it is committed once more to a violent overthrow of Chavez. Venezuela through the constitutional reforms, will broaden and deepen popular democratic control over socio-economic policy. New economic sectors will be nationalized. Greater public investments and social programs will take off. Venezuela is moving inexorably toward diversifying its petrol markets, currency reserves and its political alliances. Time is running out for the White House: Washington's political levers of influence are weakening. Baduel is seen as the one best hope of igniting a military seizure, restoring the oligarchs to power and decimating the mass popular movements.

President Chavez is correctly 'evaluating the high command' and states that he 'has full confidence in the national armed forces and their components.' Yet the best guarantee is to strike hard and fast, precisely against Baduel's followers and cohorts. Rounding up a few dozen or hundred military plotters is a cheap price to pay for saving the lives of thousands

of workers and activists who would be massacred in any bloody seizure of power.

History has repeatedly taught that when you put social democracy, egalitarianism and popular power at the top of the political agenda, as Chavez has done, and as the vast majority of the populace enthusiastically responds, the Right, the reactionary military, the 'Centrist' political defectors and ideologues, the White House, the hysterical middle classes and the Church cardinals will sacrifice any and all democratic freedoms to defend their property, privileges and power by whatever means and at whatever cost necessary. In the current all-pervasive confrontation between the popular classes of Venezuela and their oligarchic and military enemies, only by morally, politically and organizationally arming the people can the continuity of the democratic process of social transformation be guaranteed.

Change will come, the question is whether it will be through the ballot or the bullet.

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