

Venezuela: Reform battle continues as Chavez ally splits

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Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Global Research, November 13, 2007

[Green Left Review](#) 13 November 2007

Hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans took to the streets of Caracas on November 4, in a massive sea of red, to support the proposed constitutional reforms adopted by the National Assembly that will be put to a referendum on December 2. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has explained that the reforms aim to deepen the Bolivarian revolution that his government is leading, which has already achieved significant gains in redistributing wealth and power to the poor majority.

On November 6, Chavez explained to a swearing-in ceremony for activists involved in the National Zamora Command, launched to campaign in favour of the proposed reforms, that the referendum “is the most important battle” of the Bolivarian revolution so far. He said “destabilisation, abstention and the ‘No’ vote, are the three principal adversaries we have to defeat”.

Chavez argued that the socialism the reforms aimed at providing a framework to help construct would be “democratic and humanist”. Chavez explained that “this economic system will be managed by everyone”, claiming that democratising the economy was essential to defeat poverty and create happiness.

He argued that this conflicted with the interests of capitalism and imperialism, and that this explained the ongoing offensive against his government by the US government and local opposition.

Confirming Chavez’s speculation in his speech to the November 4 rally that some leading Chavistas would jump ship and join the counter-revolutionary opposition, the following day retired General Raul Baduel, who had been defence minister until July and who played a key role in defeating the April 2002 US-backed military coup against Chavez, broke a three-month silence declaring his opposition to the reforms. He said they represent a “constitutional coup” — the same claim made by the right-wing opposition.

During the press conference, to which only pro-opposition media outlets were invited, Baduel argued that the proposed reforms would “seize power away from the people”. “The only democratic and legal means left to us is to vote ‘No’ and defend ourselves [against] this undemocratic imposition.”

Baduel called on the armed forces to “profoundly analyse” the proposed changes to the structure of the military (transforming the reserves into a “popular militia” among other steps), declaring “it must be stopped”, adding that “the capacity of Venezuelan military men to analyse and think” should not be underestimated.

This defection came two days after a sizable mobilisation, organised by the radical opposition group, the National Resistance Command (CNR) and supported by a number of opposition parties, called for a boycott of the referendum. CNR leader Hermann Escarra proclaimed: "This is not about whether or not to vote, it is about impeding [the reforms]."

The speakers, applauding right-wing students who had led small but violent protests against the reforms, called for a march "without return" for November 26.

Speculation spread rapidly about the meaning of Baduel's statements. Within hours, two former defence ministers, general Jorge Garcia Carneiro and admiral Orlando Manigilia, spoke against him.

Carneiro accused Baduel of having held "dubious" positions for a while, and argued his comments would not have any impact in the military. Manigilia reminded the military that they have the right to exercise their democratic vote, but not to involve themselves in party politics.

Vice-President Jorge Rodriguez argued that Baduel's speech would have little effect, "not even a breeze". "Baduel has said the same thing that the opposition has been saying ... he is not saying anything new." Rodriguez welcomed, however, Baduel's call to participate in the referendum.

Chavez declared Baduel a "traitor" and said he had become "a pawn in this game [of the opposition]. We will be on alert because it is part of a plan that without doubt aims to fill the streets of Venezuela with violence".

He added that Baduel's shift to the opposition in the context of the deepening struggle for socialism was good because it clarified his position. "It is not strange that when a submarine goes deeper the pressure is increased and can free a loose screw. The weak points are going to leave, and I believe it is good that they leave", Chavez said.

Chavez added "I'm completely sure there is no current within the armed forces that has the necessary strength to carry out a successful coup d'etat or to lead the country to a civil war". However he explained that there would be a meeting of the military high command because "there is nothing innocent about this".

Miranda Governor Diosdado Cabello also criticised Baduel, saying that his arguments were the same as the opposition's, and that "I believe he must have met with them". Cabello added that he never swallowed the story that Baduel was a hero during the 2002 coup.

A different take was provided by Chavista National Assembly deputy Luis Tascon, who said that it would be "stupid" to say that this was simply about the betrayal of one person, and would not affect Chavismo. Tascon argued that Baduel's treachery represented "a division within Chavismo", adding that Baduel had been widely respected among Chavistas.

Rather than simply attacking Baduel, Tascon argued it was necessary to politically debate the issues at stake and that there could be further rumblings within Chavismo. He also pointed to the influence of powerful groups and business interests behind Baduel's moves.

Immediately after Baduel's press conference, six opposition parties, some of whom were previously calling for a boycott, called for "massive" participation in the referendum and

registered at the National Electoral Council to officially become part of the “No” campaign. They were later joined by another eight, including Podemos — a social-democratic party that until this year had been part of the Chavista camp, but have moved rapidly towards the opposition as more radical, socialist-oriented measures have been introduced.

The opposition press were quick to point to the potential emergence of a new opposition leader in Baduel, changing their editorial lines from supporting a boycott to backing a “No” vote.

As speculation whirls around the possible ramifications of Baduel’s declarations inside the military, most analysts, pro- and anti-Chavista, agree that it is unlikely that this could lead in the immediate future to a military coup.

At his press conference, Baduel, who was dressed in civilian clothing as opposed to his military uniform, made clear he did not speak for the military and repeatedly emphasised the need to vote “No”, which seems to indicate that his statements were more aimed at giving confidence to those individuals in the military who are opposed to reforms, and not necessarily a direct incitement to rebellion. It has been widely reported that Baduel sought out other military figures to speak out at the same time, although no one was willing to accept. Given that strong opponents of the revolution are a small minority in the military, a premature move would lead to a quick defeat and a further purge of counter-revolutionaries.

The Venezuelan military has been undergoing a significant transformation since the uprising of much of the armed forces along with the poor majority that defeated the 2002 coup against Chavez. This led to the clearing out of large sections of those who had been involved in the coup, with control of the military passing over from the capitalist elite to the Bolivarian forces. This was further deepened during the bosses lockout in December 2002-February 2003, when the armed forces, alongside the people and particularly the oil workers, worked to regain control of the oil industry and break the sabotage of the capitalist class.

However, the process is ongoing and not irreversible. As the revolution deepens, the possibility of increased internal fractures grows. Comprised of men and women who live in a society, there is no doubt that the full spectrum of politics in Venezuela is also reflected within the military. No-one doubts that US imperialism and the opposition retain some influence within the military, and they hope to deepen divisions among those that have until now backed Chavez. One issue in relation to this is the resistance within the military to moves away from the concept of a “professionalised” armed forces — reflected in some of the amendments subsequently made to Chavez’s initial proposals to reform articles of the constitution relating to the military.

Given Baduel’s statement that he would not rule out a future political career, and the timing of this declaration to coincide with the beginning of the official referendum campaign, it seems to indicate an intention to position himself as the new leader of the opposition. His statement’s timing, after three months of public silence, lends credence to the idea that this is part of a bigger plan around which he has been conspiring with others.

Presenting Baduel as separate from the thoroughly discredited old opposition forces, the aim is to win over a section of Chavismo that, while supporting Chavez, is not convinced, or is opposed to, the reforms and would prefer to abstain rather than support the opposition.

However, Baduel's mimicking of opposition catch-phrases, such as "constitutional coup", have undermined this attempt.

Although the full impact of this fracturing of Chavismo is yet to be seen, it no doubt will have a greater impact than previous splits, including by Podemos. Baduel was widely seen as a real hero of the revolution, and many in the civilian left had worked closely with him in strengthening organisational bonds with sections of the military around the time of the coup. He continues to proclaim his adherence to "Bolivarianism" (while rejecting its radical aspects), giving him more potential than the existing opposition to draw behind him sectors of Chavismo.

Chavez revealed that in the lead-up to the presidential elections last year, some Chavistas were campaigning to make Baduel vice-president. This year, Baduel began to express publicly some disagreements with aspects of the Bolivarian revolution, raising doubts over what kind of socialism was being built and defending the need for a "professional" standing army in counter-position to the proposed reform re-organising the reserves into a popular militias. Chavez pointed out that behind all this are business interests and groups of power, fearful of losing their privileges, and that it reflects the ideological weakness of the revolution.

These points tend to point to the idea that Baduel's defection, carried out both in collaboration with the opposition and some of the right-wing Chavista elements whose position is referred to as "Chavismo without Chavez" hopes to take advantage of confusion amongst Chavista ranks and conservative sections of the military. The aim is to create a counterweight to the radical course that Chavez, and the majority of working people, seem determined to take. Part of the plan is to attempt to slow the revolutionary process by arguing for negotiations with "moderate" opposition sectors.

Baduel's defection provides further evidence of a new campaign of destabilisation that is being unleashed by the opposition — with the backing of the US — which has so far failed in a number of attempts at overthrowing the Chavez government and rolling back the gains of the revolution.

The violent campaign by small groups of fascist students — with the burning of buildings and vehicles, including that belonging to the environment minister — continued the day after Baduel's press conference. The campaign has included a number of shootings on university campuses. The national and international media have attempted to portray the students as victims of a "dictatorship", either implying or outright lying that the shootings were carried out by Chavista forces.

One example was a highly publicised shooting in the University of Zulia on November 2 that was initially blamed on Chavista students. Once it was revealed that the death had been a result of a shoot out between two rival opposition parties, the overwhelmingly anti-Chavez private media quickly dropped the story without clarifying the truth. (This should at least put to rest the lie these days Chavez controls the media.)

Combined with the growing presence of paramilitaries on the border region with Colombia, this is further evidence that the opposition has unleashed a new destabilisation plan with the backing of US imperialism — with Baduel a key component. They hope to substitute for their lack of any mass support base with a climate of tension and fear — amplified by the national and international media who are central to this plan.

If they cannot stop the reforms from going ahead, they hope that they can encourage or intimidate enough people to either boycott or vote “No” in order to present the reforms as illegitimate, adding weight to argument of conservative sectors of Chavismo to slow down the process.

It is in this context that Chavez has described the referendum as the revolution’s “most important battle”, because “it is much more defining” of the fundamental nature of the process than previous struggles.

Speaking at the November 4 rally, Chavez explained that the 1999 constitution had left in place some obstacles to the “development of the Bolivarian project and the construction of socialism”. The reforms represent a break with the “false principal that politics is the art of the possible ... No, politics is the art of making possible tomorrow what today seems impossible, this is truly revolutionary politics”

“By signalling socialism as the goal ... [the reform campaign] began to generate additional tensions in the process”, Chavez explained. He said that while some argue that it is necessary to reach this objective via slow moves, “many times these end up being slower every day until it reaches zero”.

“That is why the proposal is a proposal of rupture ... We will never get to socialism with the bureaucratic trickle down from above ... The reform overturns this concept; we will only reach socialism by unleashing the power of the people ... That is the essence of the proposal.”

That is why, Chavez declared, that “our campaign strategy, our principal objective is to approve the constitutional reform in a resounding manner”. He added that popular mobilisation was “the vaccine against a coup, against destabilisation, against the oligarchy, against Bush. This is what happened” when the 2002 coup was defeated, it was “the people in the streets, popular mobilisation, and of course, our soldiers together with the people.”

He added that the “fundamental motor” of the campaign would be the socialist battalions, the base units of new United Socialist Party of Venezuela, whose explicit aim is to organise the revolutionary vanguard into a united fighting organisation to deepen the process.

It is clear that the battle over the next three weeks — and then immediately afterwards — will be crucial for the future of the revolutionary process. Not just for what a defeat would mean for Chavez and the opposition respectively, but for the process of change as a whole.

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