

Venezuela's Revolution Accelerates

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To thunderous applause and chants of approval, Hugo Chávez has called on the Venezuelan people to radicalize the revolution towards the new socialism of the 21st century

CARACAS: Returning once again to Venezuela — having last spent four months here in 2005 — I recalled a refrain that had been constantly repeated by Venezuelans: “After we re-elect Chávez in 2006, the real revolution will begin.” It took very little time for me to realise exactly what they meant.

I arrived on the eve of the fifth anniversary of those historic events that shook Venezuela from April 11-13 in 2002 — a US-backed coup that was overturned by a subsequent mass uprising of the poor in alliance with the majority of the armed forces. Across all of Caracas, banners and billboards carried the slogan that summarised what had occurred on those fateful days: “Every 11 has its 13 — From oligarchic counter-revolution to civic-military revolution.” Throughout the city, numerous screens had been set up to play video footage of the massive rebellion that reversed the coup — which was aimed at putting an end to the Bolivarian process and protecting the interests of the wealthy elite — and reinstated President Hugo Chávez. State television played documentaries through the three days, detailing the events surrounding the coup and subsequent uprising.

On the streets, everyone was remembering what it was that they did during those days. It was impossible to miss the upbeat feeling among the people on April 13, as hundreds, and then thousands, began to congregate outside the presidential palace, just as they had five years ago, to await their president.

Speaking in front an estimated million-strong demonstration, Chávez recalled the events that led up to the coup attempt, pointing out that it had acted as a “trigger,” pushing the process towards “an anti-imperialist revolution, because we know from where [these events] were led and planned from, the US.”

Now five years on, Chávez called on the Venezuelan people to “radicalize” the revolution towards the “new socialism of the 21st century,” to thunderous applause and chants of approval.

Throughout most of 2005 and 2006, the Venezuelan government focused its attention on consolidating its support internally and internationally. On the domestic front the government paid particular attention to strengthening the social missions in order to attack poverty and organise the population.

In the international arena Chávez travelled the world, seeking support for his government in the face of continued US hostility and Washington’s attempts to isolate Venezuela

diplomatically. Throughout the Third World, the Venezuelan government signed trade agreements, deepening both economic and social ties as part of a campaign to create an international anti-imperialist alliance.

By trading not just in dollars and petroleum, but in human capital — providing, jointly with revolutionary Cuba in many cases, education and health programs — and through Chávez's defiant and outspoken stance, such as his denunciation of Israel's invasion of Lebanon, the Bolivarian revolution has captured the hearts and minds of millions across the world.

This has helped provide the space for a rapid acceleration of the Bolivarian revolution, and with it an opening up of a period of definition of the process's goals and line of march. In the economic sphere, Chávez told the April 12 rally, the government has “no plan to eradicate private property in Venezuela, as long as it subordinates itself to the national interest and the socialist project.” If it didn't, then it was “condemned to progressively disappear.”

He added, however, that the government's emphasis would be in working with “new forms of property, social property ... collective property ... co-management, self-management.” It would encourage “direct or indirect social property via the companies of social property, of social production, and many other mechanisms that we are designing.”

The first morning here I attended a meeting called by one of the currents in the National Union of Workers (UNT) to discuss the formation of Bolivarian Councils of Workers, more commonly dubbed workers' councils. Describing the nature of the discussion over these councils, Marcela Maspero, a national coordinator of the UNT, said that the councils had to be “political organisations of the working class, based on direct democracy and control over production.”

They had to play the role of “eradicating capitalist exploitation, and transforming relations of production in order to create socialised ownership over the means of production.” Although these councils have only just begun to appear in a handful of companies, an intense debate at both the governmental and grassroots levels is unfolding over their nature and role.

In the social sphere, Chávez has called for “an explosion in communal power,” urging the rapid construction of Communal Councils. These councils are based on the coming together of 200-400 families in urban areas, even less in rural areas, in order to plan and execute projects for the benefit of the community. In some areas, this has already progressed to the point where discussions have begun on the need to establish federations of Communal Councils, in order to tackle larger projects. There are now more than 19,000 Communal Councils. In essence, the aim of the Communal Councils is for power to reside in the communities. This has led to some cases where these councils have come into conflict with the existing state structures, where those who currently hold power fear losing it — a constant battle the revolution encounters as it comes up against the structures of the old state bureaucracy.

Perhaps most importantly, Chávez stated in his speech on April 13 that the revolution once again called on the Venezuelan people to participate in the formation of the new united socialist party. Stating that to date the revolution “hasn't had real parties,” he referred to the construction of the new party as “the greatest necessity of this revolution.”

On April 19, 16,000 promoters of the new party were initiated. Their task is to agitate for,

and involve the communities in, the construction of the party, which organisers estimate will bring together 4-5 million people.

Chávez's call has opened up a big debate on what the nature and program of such a party should be. For now, apart from Chávez's party, the Movement for a Fifth Republic (MVR), the main Chavista parties have decided not to dissolve into the new party. However, large fractures have begun to occur as both leaders and rank-and-file members of these parties — Homeland For All (PPT), Podemos and the Venezuelan Communist Party — are leaving en masse. Most of the parties outside of the official Chavista electoral alliance but committed to the revolution have decided to integrate themselves into the new party, with a few waiting on the sidelines to see how things unfold first.

The party will be established along democratic lines, from the bottom up. For several weeks from April 29, 6000 booths will be set up all over the country for people to sign up to the new party. Next, the new joiners will be divided up into basic cells of 200 people based on territorial divisions, universities and factories. Out of each, a spokesperson will be elected to participate in the founding congress. No quotas have been set aside for party officials, nor will anyone automatically secure a place in the congress. Even Chávez will have to be elected by his local cell if he is to participate in the conference.

The founding conference will run for approximately three months. As the congress deliberates, spokespeople will return to their local cell, back to the congress, then back to the community and so on. On December 2, a referendum of all members will decide whether or not to approve the founding program of the new party. To ensure transparency and democracy, the national electoral commission will run the whole process.

It will be a truly democratic and participatory process, never seen before on this scale, with the aim of drawing together the real leaders from the communities into a process of discussion and debate aimed at driving the process forward.

Without doubt, the more this revolution deepens the more desperate the opposition will become. At the same time as Chávez was giving his speech, a small explosive was detonated in the building that houses the legislative council of the state of Miranda. This followed two other explosions in shopping centres earlier that week. Although no-one was killed, the intent was clear.

May 28 is the expiration day of the license of RCTV, a television station that openly participated in the 2002 coup plot. While the government never shut it down, it has decided to hand RCTV's license over to community media as part of a program of expanding access to media. Chávez warned that the government had reliable information that the opposition had begun a destabilisation plan aimed to culminate on the day of the expiry of the license, of which the bombs and the attempts by big capital to create food shortages are only the first steps.

But the Venezuelan people, side by side with the military, have etched in their memories the events of April 13, 2002, because as they say in Venezuela, "every 11 has its 13."

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