

Venezuela's Social Democracy Hits A Speed Bump

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Hugo Chavez addressed upwards of a half million supporters on the final day of campaigning for constitutional reform on December 1. He was confident of a victory that seemed assured. The turnout was impressive as a sea of red filled Caracas' main Avenida Bolivar boulevard and spilled over into adjoining streets. It dwarfed the November 29 final opposition rally Rupert Murdoch's Times online/UK and Fox News estimated at "more than 100,000" ahead of saying "polls predicted an agonizingly close result" that referred only to the corporate-run ones. They turned out to be right.

A day ahead of the vote, Chavez addressed the joyous crowd saying a "yes" vote will "open the path to socialism (and is) a vote for Chavez and the revolution (while) vot(ing) "no" is a vote for Bush. We are not simply confronting the pawns of imperialism. Our true enemy is US imperialism (that) will only recognize the results if they win."

Writing this article began on Sunday. It intended to say they didn't, but sadly they did so the struggle continues. It's too early to know what's next after this crucial election loss on top of the disturbing information James Petras and Eva Golinger reported in separate articles on November 28 - that Venezuelan counterintelligence uncovered an internal November 20 CIA memorandum from the US Embassy in Caracas. It revealed a secret plot called "Operations Pliers" to destabilize the referendum and as Petras put it: "coordinate the civil military overthrow of the elected Chavez government. The Embassy-CIA polls concede(d) that 57 per cent of voters approved (of Chavez reforms while) predict(ing) a 60 per cent abstention." They were wrong.

Golinger wrote that a CIA-funded "PSYOPS" propaganda campaign was being waged with over \$8 million in the past month for corporate polling firms to cook their numbers against Chavez, work with the dominant media to report it and continue a torrent of anti-Chavez scare talk. Petras covered the same ground and said "Food producers, wholesale and retail distributors have created artificial shortages of basic food items" and tried to "sow chaos" by "provok(ing) large scale capital flight."

Venezuelan-based Media Left editor, Gary Ghirardi, explained this further. In an email to this writer, he said: "food shortages....are the result of (elements of) the military selling food slated for the poorest Venezuelans (in) Colombia and....the black market" to enrich "unscrupulous military managers.....The poor are affected by this corruption (and that took its toll on Chavez's) support base." It helps explain "why 3 million of the poor....did not go to vote." In December, 2006, 7.3 million Venezuelans voted for Chavez's reelection. This time, only 4.4 million supported constitutional reform against 4.5 million opposed.

"Another reason (for this result was) the complexity of the reform issues" that required close reading to understand. Many Chavez supporters likely didn't do it and were easy to

sway by corporate media propaganda opposing them. Gharardi also believes Chavez overestimated the citizenry's "political education" and may have tried to advance his socialist agenda too fast. Had reforms been fewer in number, easier to understand, and directed toward social programs for the poor and community power, he'd likely have prevailed. These are lessons to be learned for a future round of social changes sure to come.

But they'll face the same stiff opposition and kinds of threats the CIA memo revealed to counter an expected Chavez win. Some actions were ongoing for weeks, others were planned (but not used) for election day, and it now remains to be seen what's ahead. The memo laid it out:

- more disruptive and violent street protests;
- provoking a "general uprising" and "climate of ungovernability;"
- discrediting the National Elections Council (CNE) by accusing it of fraud and manipulation of results; cross out this one for now;
- discrediting Chavez to isolate him in the international community; and much more including encouraging a military rebellion and readying US forces in neighboring Curacao and Colombia to support it.

In Petras' words, Venezuelans had "a rendezvous with history" on Sunday to "provide the legal framework for (further democratizing) the political system, the socialization of strategic economic sectors, (further) empower(ing) the poor, and provid(ing) the basis for a self-managed factory system." Winning impressively and avoiding a likely bloodbath from "a successful US-backed civil-military uprising" prevents the reversal of "the most promising living experience of popular self-rule (anywhere), of advanced social welfare and democratically based socialism." One electoral defeat is disheartening but changes nothing. Venezuela's struggle for social democracy continues under a man who's worked nine years to build it. Don't ever count him out or his strong popular support.

The Struggle Continues

A partial draft of this article was written Sunday under the incorrect topic heading - Savoring the Triumph. It began:

For now, victory is sweet and Chavistas savored it all night on Caracas streets. Manana was back to reality and the knowledge that triumph is never secure as long as an imperial power threatens it. Nine years of social progress can be erased with a keyboard click the way coup plotters did it on April 11, 2002 for two days. After deposing Chavez, they repealed the Bolivarian Constitution, dissolved the National Assembly and Supreme Court, and dismissed the attorney general and comptroller. Only mass people power with military support put Chavez back in office. So far, he's prevailed impressively in every presidential, parliamentary, municipal and referendum election since December, 1998....until now. Here's the record:

- Chavez elected President in December, 1998 with 56.2% of the vote;
- a national referendum held in April, 1999 to convene a Constituent Assembly for a new Constitution won with 71.8% support;

- a Constituent Assembly was elected in July, 1999 to draft a new Constitution; Chavez supporters won a large majority of seats in it;
- a national referendum for a new Constitution was held in December, 1999 that was adopted with 71.9% support;
- a new presidential election was held under the new Constitution in July, 2000 reelecting Chavez with 59.8% of the vote;
- a new National Assembly was also elected in July, 2000 in which Chavez supporters won a large majority of seats;
- municipal elections were held in December, 2000 with about two-thirds of voters supporting pro-Chavez parties;
- Chavez defeated an opposition-called national recall referendum in August, 2004 with 59.3% of the vote;
- in local and regional October, 2005 elections throughout the country, Chavez supporters won in 80% of local authorities and 20 of 22 provincial governments;
- National Assembly elections were held in December, 2005 in which Chavez's MVR won a large majority after opposition candidates boycotted the process in a desperate act knowing they had no chance to win legitimately;
- Chavez was reelected President in December, 2006 with 62.87% support and the highest voter turnout in Venezuela's history at almost 75%. His victory topped all presidential elections in US history since the nation's highest office became contests after 1820 when James Monroe ran practically unopposed.

All Venezuelan elections were judged scrupulously open, free and fair by international observers from the region, European Union and US-based Carter Center. About 100 representatives from 39 countries monitored Sunday's vote in a democratic process unimaginable in the US and in most other countries. The method used has voters cast ballots twice. They first register their vote on an electric machine that produces a paper receipt. It's then placed in a ballot box so the two records can be matched to avoid any allegations of fraud.

Further, Article 56 of the Bolivarian Constitution states: "All persons have the right to be registered free of charge with the Civil Registry Office after birth, and to obtain public documents constituting evidence of the biological identity, in accordance with law." To implement it, Chavez launched Mision Identidad (Mission Identity) in 2003. It was a mass citizenship and voter registration drive that gave millions of ordinary Venezuelans national ID cards and full citizenship rights for the first time. In 1998 before Chavez was elected, less than half of eligible Venezuelans were registered to vote. In 2000, the number was 11 million and by September, 2006 it topped 16 million in a country of 27 million people, and Chavez urges all eligible citizens to vote.

Compare this to the tainted US system in which rolls are purged of the kinds of voters most likely to oppose leading candidates unsympathetic to their interests. Electronic voting machine manipulation compounds the problem. They provide no verifiable paper ballot receipts so recounts are impossible. In addition, millions of votes cast are uncounted that

include “spoiled ballots,” rejected absentee ones, and others lost, ignored or miscounted in the tabulations. It’s because the electoral process was privatized, and large electronic voting machine companies got unregulated control over it with everything to gain if candidates they support win.

This doesn’t happen under Chavez because the system was designed to prevent it. It’s not perfect, but the National Electoral Council (CNE) is an independent body, separate from the Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches or any private corporate interests. None of its members are appointed by the President to assure free, fair and open elections in the true spirit of democracy rarely as evident anywhere.

The 2007 reform referendum the twelfth election since the first one electing Chavez President in December, 1998. Until now, he won them all impressively because he’s a rare politician, dedicated to his people and keeps the promises he makes. One electoral defeat changes nothing. The struggle for social democracy continues. It’s never smooth going.

A Long Caracas Night After A Calm Voting Day Despite Fears of Opposition-Staged Disruptions

Voting went smoothly overall on Sunday despite early warnings of planned opposition-led disruptions. Polls were scheduled to close at 4:00PM but were kept open as long as people were still queued in lines. Things were tense late in the day when Reuters reported at 6:34PM that “Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez appear(s) headed for victory on Sunday....citing exit polls. Three exit polls showed the anti-American leader won by between six and eight percentage points in a vote where turnout was low. The opposition was skeptical,” and they were right. Reuters, Sky News, Fox News and China News all reported Chavez appeared to have won.

It was unofficial because polls were still open, and at 8:00PM no exit poll figures or government results had been released. Official ones based on about 92% of votes counted from Venezuela’s National Electoral Council (CNE) finally came on Bloques A and B at 1:15AM. Venezuelapress.com reported them as follows:

— Block A: No - 50.70%; Si (Yes) - 49.29%;

— Block B: No - 51.05%; Si (Yes) - 48.94%;

— Abstention: 44.11%;

— Total votes cast: 9,002,439 with 118,693 unvalidated. Turnout was about 55% compared to 75% in last December’s presidential election.

The result is in stark contrast to a widely quoted Consultores independent poll conducted from November 26 - 30 that showed among likely voters Chavez would win with 56% against 44% voting “no.” The same poll showed among all respondents Chavez led 55% to 42%. It and others with similar recent results were wrong as Chavez suffered his first electoral defeat in nearly nine years in office. It turned out that many of his supporters were swayed by opposition claims that he’d gone too far and voted “no.” Many others didn’t vote, and that was the likely decisive factor as it appears most were Chavez supporters.

At 7:11AM, December 3, Reuters corrected its earlier report. From Caracas it said: “President Hugo Chavez crashed to an unprecedented vote defeat (announced) on Monday

as Venezuelans narrowly rejected his bid to run for re-election indefinitely and accelerate his socialist revolution in the OPEC nation....Chavez conceded defeat but said he would “continue in the battle to build socialism....This is not a defeat. This is a ‘for now.’ I have listened to the voice of the people and I will always be listening to it” as he referred to the opposition’s “pyrrhic victory.”

He was also gracious in defeat saying: “To those who voted against my proposal, I thank them and congratulate them.” He told his supporters: “Don’t feel sad. For now, we couldn’t do it. I will not withdraw even one comma of this proposal, this proposal is still alive.” He also told reporters “Venezuelan democracy is maturing (and) I understand and accept that the proposal I made was quite profound and intense.”

As expected, his opponents were gloating, but one pollster struck a positive note saying: “This defeat has two sides to it for Chavez. He came out the loser after a tough plebiscite campaign but he also gets rid of the accusation that he is a dictator.” Chavez earlier said and repeated he would accept the results of the vote, and he stands by his word. It proved the process is open, free and fair unlike elections in many other so-called democracies that aren’t. The struggle indeed continues with powerful popular support backing it.

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