

Venezuela, 6 December 2020: An illusion of election

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On 6 December 2020, parliamentary elections were held to choose the deputies of Venezuela's *Asemblea Nacional* (National Assembly - AN). Since 2015, the AN has been mainly composed of opposition MPs following the defeat of the government coalition, the *Gran Polo Patriótico* (Great Patriotic Pole - GPP). To overcome this defeat, President Maduro decided in 2017 to create from scratch a National Constituent Assembly (ANC) which played the role of the AN. This manoeuvre accentuated the political crisis and radicalized the right, which denounced it as dictatorship.

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Within this right, the most radical and violent wing, led by Juan Guaido and Leopoldo Lopez, gained the upper hand to the point that Juan Guaido appointed himself as president of the Republic on 23 January, 2019 during a meeting in Caracas. The imperialist countries, USA, France and so on, hastened to recognize him as "legitimate president".

This conjunction between the hardening of the regime and the extreme right-wing opposition was marked by periods of violent anti-Maduro protests, as in 2014 and 2017.

But the effects of the economic crisis, the combined result of a catastrophic economic policy and the sanctions imposed by the US since 2015, have become the main concern of the population. With nearly 80% of people living in poverty, a minimum wage which fell to a 20th of its previous value between 2013 and 2019 and a dizzying drop in GDP since 2015, the Venezuelan population is experiencing hunger and misery. All this with inflation out of control, going from 274% in 2016 to 130,060% in 2018 then falling to 7,374% in 2019. Added to this is COVID, which is hitting the population as US sanctions ban the country from importing medical equipment.

No wonder the opposition mobilisations against the regime have stopped. This has had have two consequences. The first is the attempt by part of the opposition to come to terms with the regime. This roughly corresponds to the two historical parties of the Venezuelan bourgeoisie, *Acción Democrática* (Democratic Action - AD) and the *Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente* (Independent Electoral Political Organization Committee - COPEI), but also partially *Primero Justicia*, led by the 2013 presidential candidate, Henrique Capriles.

The preparation of the elections

One event allowed Maduro to divide the opposition, the attempted landing of mercenaries on 3 May, 2020 in Macuto. On that day, several boats landed with the goal of overthrowing Maduro and were immediately arrested by the Venezuelan army. The US press discovered that this operation was carried out by Silvercorp, a US security company, and that the contract was signed by Juan Guaidó's immediate entourage.

This was the perfect opportunity for a part of the right to negotiate with the authorities in order to return to the electoral game, deeming the attempt to overthrow the government to be a failure. Maduro played a double game: trying to negotiate with part of the opposition and at the same time subduing it by bringing in the Supreme Court of Justice. Within weeks, the elected leaderships of AD, COPEI, *Primero Justicia*, *Volundad Popular*, and several left-wing parties such as the PPT (*Patria Para Todos*) and *Tupamaro* were dissolved and replaced by "accommodating" leaderships.

In response, all right-wing parties called for a boycott of the elections. The Episcopal Conference condemned this call and after secret negotiations between Capriles and the government, Capriles announced his participation in the electoral process. It took a European Union "intervention mission" to get Capriles to change position again and join the "hawk" camp led by Guaidó.

But the crisis on the right is deep and many leaders of its parties decided to join in the electoral process. To curb this, the US Treasury Department decided to sanction several opposition figures in Maduro who said they wanted to participate in the elections, a message relayed by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on 22 September, 2020.

Despite this, some 30 national parties and more than 50 regional organizations registered for the 6 December elections. These organizations were stripped of their elected leadership. The voters had choice mainly between four major coalitions, the GPP, the Democratic Alliance (grouping a part of the "historic" right), *Venezuela Unido* (right) and a left coalition, *Alternativa Popular Revolucionaria* (Popular Revolutionary Alternative, mainly the PCV [Communist Party of Venezuela], the PPT and *Tupamaro*).

In order to prove that the ballot was not tainted with fraud, the Venezuelan government asked the European Union to send observers to ensure that the polls ran smoothly, which was refused. Despite this, some personalities responded positively to this call, such as José Luis Zapatero, former Spanish Prime Minister, alongside two hundred other personalities.

In order to counter the electoral process, the faction of the right calling for a boycott decides to launch a national consultation from 7-12 December, either by internet or physically. It was therefore in a context marked by violent social crisis affecting the vast majority of the population and a political crisis with confusion on the right that these elections to the National Assembly took place.

The independent left

Contrary to what might be thought, the Venezuelan left is not reduced to Maduro's *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* (United Socialist Party of Venezuela - PSUV), nor the GPP which brings together the majority party and a few subordinate groups. There is a left, made up often of former PSUV members. This is the case of former ministers like Jorge Giordani, former Minister of Planning, Hector Navarro, former Minister of Education, Gustavo Marquez, former Minister of Industry and Trade, Ana Elisa Osorio, former Minister of 'Environment and so on. There is also a network of

activists and intellectuals grouped together in different associations, such as the *Plataforma Ciudadana de Defensa de la Constitución* set up to denounce the creation of the ANC or the *Plataforma contra el Arco Minero del Orinoco* (a special economic zone with an area equivalent to that of Portugal, where tax, social, environmental and indigenous peoples' rights are abolished to facilitate the exploitation of resources by national and foreign companies). In this informal group we also find animators from the *aporrea* news site as well as the *Marea Socialista* organization, which called for a spoiled vote in the 6 December elections.

Then we have the APR. Founded on 11 August, 2020, it has published a programmatic press release which explains its areas of demand. First, the fight against imperialist aggression and corruption, then the fight for decent living and working conditions, and finally, a commitment to radicalize popular and revolutionary democracy, with the aim of creating a socialist society. This coalition insists on the social mobilization of workers, peasants and popular bases. The significant difference between the APR and *Marea Socialista* is mainly due to the fact that in the statements of the APR there is a criticism of the regime limited to the sole call to fight corruption.

The third actor of this independent left is the trade unionists and workers who lead struggles in public or private companies. Despite the violence of the economic crisis, many social conflicts are taking place throughout the country, such as the struggles of oil workers in Zulia state, those in health, electricity, the shipping company PDV-Marine, CANTV, Ferrominera and so on. All denounce the deterioration of their living conditions but also the repression of trade unions, too often the only government response, punctuated by arbitrary detentions, invasion of union premises and severe sentences.

This left, beyond its differences, is invisible to the apostles of *Chavismo* in Europe whose reading of Venezuela is limited to a struggle between two actors: Maduro and the USA. Exit the real people who fight every day for their survival and dream of a society free from both the bourgeoisie represented by the right and the Bolibourgeoisie in power. This misguided prism is found in particular in the curious appeal for the European Union to recognize the results of the 6 December elections. It is signed by international figures, such as former Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa (who criminalized and assimilated to terrorism the actions carried out by trade unions and peasant and indigenous organizations, even calling for the dissolution of the teachers' union) or France's Jean-Luc Mélenchon. The latter recalls the "plethora of political proposals", forgetting that the Venezuelan regime has forcibly replaced the leadership of the parties on the right and several on the left. What would Mélenchon have said if the French government decided to dissolve the leadership of his party, *France Insoumise*, and forbade him to be a candidate so that his party was allowed to participate in elections?

The results of the elections

In the absence of the main opposition leaders and given the groupuscule nature of the right-wing parties authorized to participate in the poll, the main interest of the result was to verify popular support for the electoral process, knowing that it took place in the particular conditions of the renewed COVID-19 epidemic, and in the midst of a social and food crisis. Maduro's bet was that these restructured right-wing parties would attract enough voters to make the election credible.

In this context, the right-wing intelligently decided to hold its "popular consultation" after 6 December, the organization of which is open to fraud. There are two solutions for the right. Either it will record a result greater than the number of voters for the election of deputies and can claim the illegitimacy of parliamentary elections. Or their score will be below the turnout and they will cry

fraud. In both cases, they win on the international scene.

In support, members of Congress for the US Democratic and Republican parties did not wait for the results to denounce the “electoral fraud” of Maduro’s electoral, following identical denunciations by the European Union and the OAS (Organization of American States).

On the morning of 7 December, the results were a cold shower for Maduro. Indira Alfonso, president of the National Electoral Council, said in a first statement that the turnout was only about 31%, against 74% in the previous legislative elections in 2015.

Despite the mobilizations of supporters of the PSUV in the last days of the campaign, with meetings in all the cities, the government’s hope of exceeding 50% participation had not been achieved.

By way of comparison, in 2015, the GPP totalled 5.625 million votes for 40.9% of the votes. In 2020, it barely scored 4.3 million voters, or 68.4% of the vote, 21% of the electorate. The right wing allowed to run for office represented around 18% of voters with 1.1 million votes, up from 56.2% in 2015. This shows that the call for a boycott has been widely heard among the ranks of right-wing voters. As for the APR, it totalled less than 200,000 votes, or 2.7% of voters.

Of the 277 parliamentarians making up the National Assembly, the GPP is expected to secure a comfortable majority with more than 250 seats, due to a particularly complex ballot that favours the leading party. Beyond the health and social obstacles that explain the low participation, there is also a political explanation. In recent years, the government has experienced difficulties in mobilizing and even though numerous meetings have been held across the country to support the GPP candidates, we are far from the magnitude of those which punctuated Chávez’s last campaign in 2012. .

This weakness in the mobilization of the government camp was glaring during the riots of the right, especially in 2017. For months, the right was on the streets and the Madurist party was unable to mount large-scale counter-demonstrations. This is not the simple result of the social and humanitarian crisis. There is also, among the popular classes, a feeling of mistrust vis-à-vis a government which does not meet social needs. Maduro’s permanent reminders of the effects of US sanctions do not completely convince the people. Because while there is great poverty, that does not prevent the Bolibourgeoisie from benefiting greatly from the system.

But these results also opened up a crisis on the right. Capriles, in an interview with the BBC-World channel on 9 December, 2020 said that now “the opposition has no leader”, questioning the legitimacy of Guaido. He openly criticized the boycott strategy, claiming that the opposition has “thrown its capital in the dustbin” and that it must change its strategy or disappear as an alternative.

These elections have certainly allowed Maduro to accumulate all powers and opened the crisis on the right, but the problems remain and in this context, it will be difficult for Maduro to make the right responsible for the social and humanitarian crisis. If a significant fraction of the population still trusts Maduro, this part of the electorate shrinks election after election and it is not certain that the new economic policy decreed by the government will go in the direction of reuniting the Venezuelan people with *Chavismo*.

Liquidation of the gains of the Bolivarian revolution

Even if *Chavismo* never had the objective of calling capitalism into question, in its early years it took

decisions that were in the interests of the poorest social strata, be it popular missions, the takeover of PDVSA (the national oil company) or the granting of rights for indigenous peoples. This explains the good electoral results for *Chavismo* until 2007.

But from 2008/2009 and especially with Maduro's rise to power, everything changed. Social programs have seen funding cuts and two essential laws have been passed to liberalize the economy and above all to accelerate the exploitation of the subsoil.

The first is the investment protection law passed in 2016, which any right-wing government could sign (the right-wing opposition did not oppose it by the way). The second, more recent since it dates from 8 October, 2020, is the anti-blockade law for national development and the guarantee of human rights. It allows the executive to violate legal norms "to overcome obstacles and compensate for damage caused by unilateral coercive measures" in all areas. The executive can also decide on any form of financing, private or not, for all public health, social security, basic services and essential goods.

More broadly, article 23 of this law provides for the possibility of reorganizing all public property according to the "mechanisms specific to the mercantile practice of Private International Law", and then specifies that all the rules of property, management and the functioning of public or mixed enterprises will be modifiable by the Executive alone. There follow articles strengthening the protection of international private investments and those of private individuals in companies, including public ones. In order to maintain control, this law implements transitional provisions which specify that this law is superior to the constitutional provisions and to those of all the organic laws in force.

This is a real blank check given to Maduro to rule without accountability. No wonder Venezuelans are not motivated to elect a National Assembly whose role will be to applaud decisions made elsewhere.

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P.S.

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