

Venezuela: Left wins, but right makes gains

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Venezuela's September 26 National Assembly elections gave an interesting insight into the state of class struggle in a country sharply polarised by the revolutionary changes led by the government of President Hugo Chavez.

The significance lies in the vote occurring after 11 years of the Chavez-led Bolivarian revolution, which has resulted in big improvements in the living standards of the poor majority.

This process has divided Venezuelan society along class lines. This has been reflected in the right-wing opposition's repeated attempts to overthrow the elected Chavez government by any means necessary — and the poor taking to the streets to defeat these US-backed attempts.

The opposition boycotted the 2005 National Assembly elections, but this time waged a ferocious campaign, with US funding, that included media lies and economic sabotage. The opposition aimed to break the powerful relationship between Chavez and the people.

Colombia, with US backing, launched a series of provocations against Venezuela in August that brought the two countries close to war. There is also a permanent state of semi-civil war in states near the Colombian border due to infiltration by Colombian paramilitaries.

In light of this, the results can be seen as a bittersweet victory for the revolutionary forces and a defeat for the opposition — but one that gave it a taste of victory.

Out of 165 seats, the ticket for Chavez's United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) won 98. The right-wing, US-funded opposition, grouped in the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD), won 65 seats.

The Homeland for All Party (PPT), which recently made a right-wing break with the Chavez government, presented itself as a "third force" and won two seats.

The PSUV won a clear majority, but fell short of its goal of winning two-thirds of all seats. A two-thirds majority is needed to pass "organic" (entirely new) laws. This will make it harder to provide a legal framework to deepen the radical changes underway.

Also, the popular vote was closer than the ultimate distribution of seats. In the nationwide vote for the Latin American parliament, the PSUV won 5,268,939 (46.7%) and the MUD won 5,077,043 (45%).

In the vote for the state-wide party lists, from which 52 of the 165 seats are allocated, the PSUV won 5,422,040 votes and the MUD 5,320,175.

If the vote is broken down area by area, it is clear the opposition made some important advances.

There is no doubt local factors (disgruntlement with sitting members or resentment at candidates who won PSUV pre-selection through corrupt practices) affected votes in different electorates.

But these elections were also polarised on a national level. Both sides saw the vote as a step towards the 2012 presidential election.

The opposition increased its votes in the states bordering Colombia. The MUD won the Zulia state list vote by 54.8% to 44.4% (compared with 53.3% to 45.2% in the 2008 elections of governors).

In Tachira, it won 56.5% to 42% (compared with 49.4% to 48.1% in the 2008 governor vote).

The PSUV won more deputies than the MUD in the opposition-controlled Carabobo state, and tied in Miranda. However, the opposition actually won the popular vote across both states.

In Zulia, however, the opposition won 13 out of 16 seats despite winning only 54% of the vote.

The opposition narrowly won the popular vote in the Capital District of Caracas.

The vote indicates that, amid sharp polarisation, there is little space for forces seeking a middle ground.

As the revolution has grown more radical, some groups have broken with it. Presenting themselves moderate alternatives, groups such as Podemos and now the PPT have ended up crushed between the two main forces that stand for socialist revolution or pro-capitalist counter-revolution.

This is also true for those currents that have tried to present themselves as “left” alternatives to the Bolivarian movement (some representatives of which ran with the PPT in the latest poll).

Despite failing to stop supporters of the revolution winning most seats, the opposition has been emboldened by its strong showing.

Declaring that “Chavez is in the minority” and the people “don’t want the government’s radical path”, it hopes to push the lie, begun before the poll, that the opposition really won but had votes robbed through intimidation or an unfair electoral system.

By doing so it aims to energise its base and hold together its fragile alliance of grouplets in preparation for new confrontations.

It also seeks to isolate the Chavez government internationally.

The opposition hopes to use its numbers in the assembly to block legislation with the argument that the government has no mandate. It also aims to use the assembly as a platform to attack Chavez and mobilise its base.

This occurs in the context of an offensive by US imperialism that led to the successful coup in Honduras last year, the new US military bases in Colombia and military activity in the region.

On September 30, just four days after the Venezuelan poll, left-wing Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa survived a coup attempt thanks to mass protests and the actions of loyal soldiers.

As Chavez said, the election results were a “solid victory” and “sufficient to continue deepening democratic and Bolivarian socialism”.

However, with the PSUV denied a two-thirds majority, it also means the path of least resistance for radical change is now blocked. Unable to rely on full control of the assembly, the revolutionary forces will have to strengthen popular mobilisation.

The close national vote is another warning sign of the internal problems facing the revolution — problems the opposition, backed by US funds and control of most media outlets, was able to exploit.

Bureaucratic abuses and corruption are undermining the revolution from within and eroding its gains.

However, despite these problems, more than 5.4 million people voted in favour of advancing the socialist revolution. They did so despite the threat of war, the impact of the global economic crisis, capitalist-created food shortages, a serious energy crisis and a sustained corporate media offensive.

This demonstrates the revolution has a powerful social base with which to push to deepen the process towards socialism.

The local grassroots organising during the election campaign helped strengthen the PSUV, which again acted as a political school for hundreds of thousands of activists.

The role of Chavez was key. Once again, he was forced, by the PSUV's internal problems, to carry most of the weight of the campaign.

The revolutionary process has converted Venezuela into a school of political education. For millions of people, political activity has become part of everyday life, despite the problems and obstacles.

It has given the project of socialism real meaning again as a living movement for change made up of millions of ordinary Venezuelans fighting for a better world.

This movement will now be forced down the path of further confrontations as the popular desire for change comes up against the weight of the old institutions the revolution has inherited.

There is no doubt that the “old state that refuses to die”, as Chavez has described it, will clash even more forcefully with the mass revolutionary movement, whose strength is based on growing workers' and community organisation.

A renewed push to strengthen the new bodies of popular power, as part of an offensive against the old state, is badly needed.

This struggle requires bringing the popular forces together into a revolutionary current within the PSUV, in which more right-wing forces still hold a lot of weight. Such a current could take the lead in the public debate started by the election results on what path is needed to build socialism.

For the revolution to advance, there needs to be a push to expand and deepen democracy. This could help transform people from objects simply called upon to vote for representatives that, in many cases, do not represent their interests, into true subjects defining their own destiny.

An important step would be the approval by the current National Assembly — which sits until January — of a long-delayed labour law that creates a legal framework for creating workers' councils.

What happens in the next period will depend not just on Venezuelan developments, but also the international situation. US imperialism, caught up in a serious economic crisis, is seeking to reassert itself as a global military power.

In this context, Chavez's proposal, raised last year but put on the backburner by the internal needs of the Venezuelan revolution, for a Fifth Socialist International to bring together socialist parties,

currents and social movements from around the globe becomes more important.

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P.S.

* [Based on notes for a talk at a September 28 Socialist Alliance public meeting in Sydney.]

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<http://www.greenleft.org.au/node/45599>