

# Latest Step in a Long Road: The Venezuelan Elections

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## Contents

- [Gutless Platitudes](#)
- [... from the Democrats and \(...\)](#)
- [Why Chávez Won](#)
- [New Wine in Old Bottle](#)
- [And Now What?](#)

That Hugo Chávez had to win last Sunday's elections in order for the Bolivarian process to continue – in whatever form – was recognized by close to the entirety of the Venezuelan Left over the last several months, including those sectors especially critical of the limits to the political economic program of the government, and the lingering influence of an important conservative bureaucratic layer within the ruling party. Chávez's victory straightforwardly represents a stinging blow to the domestic right, represented through their candidate Henrique Capriles Radonski, and a setback for the interests of the United States in the region, a region which has – in no small part due to the ascendancy of Chávez, and the oil power he exercises – established a new relative autonomy from its Northern neighbour since the late 1990s.

A defeat of Chávez would conversely have signified a serious reversal for the fortunes of popular movements that have arisen in the country, especially since they defeated the April 2002 coup attempt and oil lockout of 2002-03. Momentum would have shifted to the domestic right, and whether under Obama or Romney in coming years, the geopolitical and geoeconomic interests of the U.S. state within Venezuela, and more broadly within the region. The significant social gains achieved under Chávez would have been severely undermined.

Whatever the internal contradictions of the Bolivarian process, then, the electoral victory of Chávez was the necessary starting point for addressing them, salvaging the social gains that have been introduced, and radically extending the breadth and depth of a radical conceptualization of democracy in the country and the region – that is to say initiating a transition to socialism.

*"The elections are a mix," the Argentine-Mexican Marxist Guillermo Almeyra suggests, "between a legal and democratic process of conflict resolution, a disguised and mediated, but sharp, class struggle, and a dispute within the Bolivarian process itself – between a bureaucratic-technocratic caste which is securing itself inside the government, Hugo Chávez who manoeuvres in a Bonapartist fashion, and, finally, the popular struggle to build elements of popular power."* [1]

## **Gutless Platitudes...**

Now, if one's introduction to Venezuelan politics was rooted principally in the most important newspapers or other media outlets of the English-speaking world, one could be forgiven for reaching

the conclusion that those voting for Chávez must have been completely delusional.

Roy Carroll, writing for the *Guardian* in the week before the elections announced, for example, that Chávez was elected “via the ballot box but in power [he] created a personality cult, abolished term limits, curbed private media and put the armed forces, legislature, judiciary and state oil company, PDVSA, under his personal control.”[2] Getting increasingly worked up toward the middle of the piece, Carroll proclaims that “Venezuela is falling apart. In the case of infrastructure, literally. Roads are crumbling, bridges falling, refineries exploding.... Public hospitals, with a few exceptions, are dank, dingy affairs where patients must supply their own bedsheets, bandages and food.” The economy, for its part, is said to be “warping.” While the Bolivarian process might not include “gulags” or “torture chambers” Chávez is at best a “hybrid: a democrat and autocrat, a progressive and a bully.” In short it is a process, for Rory, characterized by “gutted institutions, a caudillo (strongman) cult, [and] economic dysfunction.”

Moisés Naím, senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and former Venezuelan minister of industry and trade in the early 1990s, follows Rory’s lead in the pages of the *Financial Times*. [3] He opens with a stirring lament: “Last Sunday Goliath crushed David. Hugo Chávez, Venezuela’s political giant, defeated Henrique Capriles, the 40-year-old opposition candidate.” If Chávez represents “ideological, divisive tactics,” Capriles embodies “messages of national harmony, tolerance against political opponents, and pragmatism.”

Naím goes on to compare Chávez to Russia’s right-wing duo Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin, just before climaxing: “the country is a mess. It suffers from inflation and homicide rates among the world’s highest, decrepit infrastructure, declining oil production, a deeply distorted economy, dismal productivity and rampant corruption.”

Whereas it is common to read in the major press around American or British election time that announcements of corporate tax cuts are rationally considered measures to reassure investors and create an attractive business environment, when Chávez introduces a new welfare initiative for building subsidized housing for the poor, this is denounced as crude, clientelistic, manipulative “vote-buying.” Meeting human needs is populist witchcraft, while meeting the imperatives of profit is the science of economics. A report the day before the elections in the *Financial Times*, for example, disdainfully reports that “Mr. Chávez, who regularly taunts the U.S. as the ‘evil empire,’ boosted his support by increasing state spending by 30 per cent this year and tapping the world’s largest oil reserves to provide subsidized food, housing and healthcare.”[4]

Inside the major financial institutions one hears the same refrain. Immediately prior to stepping down as president of the World Bank in June, Robert Zoellick happily reported that “Chávez’s days are numbered,” leaving the subsidies Venezuela provides to countries like Cuba and Nicaragua in jeopardy. Such a turn of events would present “an opportunity to make the western hemisphere the first democratic hemisphere” rather than a “place of coups, caudillos, and cocaine.”[5]

Of course, such racist caricatures have a much deeper pedigree than the recent electoral season in Venezuela. Mainstream punditry in North America and Europe has long associated Venezuela with the bad Left in contemporary Latin America. This Left, in the words of Jorge Castañeda, for example, is “nationalist, strident, and close-minded,” “depends on giving away money,” and has “no real domestic agenda.”[6] For the bad Left, “the fact of power is more important than its responsible exercise,” and for its leaders, “economic performance, democratic values, programmatic achievements, and good relations with the United States are not imperatives but bothersome constraints that miss the real point.”

George W. Bush’s national security strategy documents claimed that Hugo Chávez was a

“demagogue awash in oil money,” seeking to “undermine democracy” and “destabilize the region.” Donald Rumsfeld compared Chávez to Adolf Hitler, reminding us that Hitler, too, had been elected.[7] Not much has changed since Barack Obama took over the world’s most powerful presidency. The White House message continues to be that Chávez runs a dangerously authoritarian regime in desperate need of “democratization” – the same Orwellian code employed during the recent right-wing coups in Honduras (June 2009) and Paraguay (June 2012).[8]

### **... from the Democrats and Freedom Fighters**

It is perhaps in the areas of democracy and the media that Mark Weisbrot’s recent complaint of coverage of the country rings truest. Weisbrot, a U.S.-based progressive economic analyst, expressed his dismay with “the state of misrepresentation of Venezuela,” arguing that “it is probably the most lied-about country in the world.”[9] On the alleged creeping authoritarianism or hybrid autocratic character of the Chávez regime, of the many counters Weisbrot could have employed, he came packing Jimmy Carter, Nobel prize winner for his work on election monitoring through the Carter Center. “As a matter of fact,” Weisbrot quoted Carter as saying, “of the 92 elections that we’ve monitored, I would say that the election process in Venezuela is the best in the world.” A similar statement was released immediately before the elections by the head of the team of electoral observers for UNASUR, or Union of South American Nations, a new regional integration association.[10] Weisbrot also pointed out to naysayers within the U.S. state the fact that it is predicted, in a poll cited in *USA Today*, that roughly 90 million eligible voters in the United States will not cast a ballot in the next U.S. elections. In Venezuela, 80 per cent of eligible voters turned out for last Sunday’s event.

It is worth noting here as well that while the domestic opposition recently acquired a taste for participating in electoral contests, this was only after a failed coup attempt in April 2002 – which was celebrated by the *New York Times* in an editorial the following day – and an extended 2002-03 oil lockout orchestrated in an attempt to undermine the basis of the Venezuelan economy and destabilize the Chávez regime. These freedom fighters are liberal democrats of convenience.

On the question of the media, it is an absolute commonplace to hear of Chávez’s restrictions on the private media, and the overarching Chavista control of information in the country. For example, in a recent report from the U.S.-based Committee to Protect Journalists, it is claimed that the Venezuelan government controls a “media empire.” In fact, Venezuelan state TV reaches “only about 5-8% of the country’s audience. Of course, Chávez can interrupt normal programming with his speeches (under a law that predates his administration), and regularly does so. But the opposition still has most of the media, including radio and print media – not to mention most of the wealth and income of the country.”[11] No one who has ever perused the headlines of a news kiosk in Caracas could credibly reach any other conclusion.

### **Why Chávez Won**

If the state of Venezuela is in such disrepair as Rory and Naím would have it, and if the elections were clean and fair, what explains the support for Chávez? We still need to address this question in very basic ways, because they continue to elude the analyses of mainstream journalists.

According to some reports, relying on official governmental data, poverty has been cut in half under Chávez, and extreme poverty by 70 per cent.[12] Moreover, this only includes income poverty statistics. Adding access to the increasing social wage – new social services and welfare initiatives –

would only amplify these figures. More conservative figures from the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean still show a 21 per cent reduction of income poverty between 1999 and 2010.[13] Millions now have access to healthcare for the first time, literacy has been dramatically improved, college enrolment has soared, and there has been a fourfold increase in the number of people now eligible for public pensions. After a recession in 2009, induced by the global crisis and the concomitant temporary drop in world oil prices, the economy resumed growth over the last two-and-a-half years, reaching a rate of 5.6 per cent in the first trimester of this year.[14] The new subsidized Housing Mission introduced by Chávez in 2011 has built 200,000 units for the poor already, an initiative which enjoyed a 76 per cent approval rating in polls prior to the elections.[15]

### **New Wine in Old Bottle**

Meanwhile, Capriles, the opposition's chameleon candidate, cast himself as above the petty divisions of ideology, a moderate loathe to taking sides. He courted the approval of Lula, promising the continuation of some of Chávez's most popular social initiatives; alas, his sentiments proved to be unrequited when the former Brazilian president publicly backed Chávez. Ultimately, Capriles found it difficult to dissociate himself from his membership in the conservative Justice First Party (MPJ), the electoral statements of the coalition of parties backing his presidential campaign, the Democratic Unity Table (MUD), in favour of privatization and the liberalization of markets, his right-wing record as mayor of the well-off municipality of Baruta in Caracas between 2000 and 2008 and as governor of the state of Miranda since late 2008, and his own family's riches in real estate, industry, and the media.

All of this was eerily reminiscent of the neoliberal era that preceded Chávez's assumption of the presidency in 1999. Many Venezuelans, it would seem, remembered the severity of the social repercussion of that model, initiated in earnest in 1989. Per capita income by 1998 had declined 34.8 per cent from its 1970 level, the worst collapse in the region. Likewise, by 1997, workers' share of the national income was half what it had been in 1970, and the country's gini coefficient measure of income inequality was worse than in the notoriously unequal Brazil and South Africa.[16] Cuts to wages and social spending in 1989 precipitated an increase in poverty from 46 to 62 per cent over the following decade.[17]

It was against this backdrop that Chávez was first elected on a reformist ticket, and it has been the successes – however uneven, modest, and fragile – in reversing some of the direst of these socioeconomic perversions that have allowed him to maintain such a level of popularity even after 13 years in office.

### **And Now What?**

The above equips us, necessarily, with an escape from some of the distortions and crudity of the politics of empire vis-à-vis contemporary Venezuela. But so far, so social democratic. This was, it should be remembered, an electoral contest between two models of capitalism – an oil-dependent state capitalism with a heavier weight for the state in the capitalist market, versus a capitalism inflected with a freer market and the privatization of oil.[18]

*"If he loses it would be a terrible setback," long-time Venezuelan revolutionary Roland Denis reminded us in August of this year. "But if he wins, we have not really 'won' anything, but the horizons would remain open. What I do sincerely hope happens, is that after the election all of this*

*discontent, this tension that is mounting between the popular forces and the bureaucracy will come to a head. I hope that people will begin to speak and name the problem for what it is. Right now everyone is silent because they are waging an electoral campaign.” [19]*

To begin, the right needs to be taken far more seriously than an easy triumphalism permits. It is far too complacent to consider the millions who voted for Capriles oligarchs and fascists. Large layers consist of workers and lower middle class sectors who are dismayed by the persistence of violent crime, corruption within the state, and the bureaucratic and hierarchical form that the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) has assumed. These are not inveterate stooges of imperialism, but popular sectors that must be won over politically through the thoroughgoing democratization of the Bolivarian process from within.[20]

Moreover, an easy triumphalism evades the fact that large numbers of those who voted for Chávez did so out of a politically mature reading of the situation which dictated the priority of defeating the right, even while they simultaneously abhorred the corruption, hierarchy, bureaucracy, and military intrusion into the control of the Bolivarian process. These include workers who have gone on strike and been repressed by the Bolivarian government, and grassroots activists who have witnessed the oxygen being sucked out of their community initiatives by the stultifying and authoritarian layer of bureaucratic administrators in the party, the unions, and the state institutions. The massive uptick in participation, politicization, and self-organization of the popular classes is what guaranteed the continuation of the Bolivarian process during the most fierce attacks from the right, and its extension and amplification is what will determine the character of the process into the future, after the basic condition for its survival was secured last Sunday.[21]

Moreover, while a victory of 10 per cent over an opponent would be considered a decent margin in most countries of the region, it falls decisively short of the bold claims coming from the Chávez administration early in the campaign season. This does not bode well for the state governorship elections on December 16 of this year. To put it mildly, many of the Chavista candidates in this race are less popular than Chávez himself – all the more so, given that in myriad situations the candidates were not selected by the bases, but rather imposed from on high.[22]

The key battles then are still to come. Chávez has resolutely failed to facilitate the development of a collective revolutionary leadership – long a subject of discontent among revolutionaries within the process, the urgency of the matter obviously intensified with the president’s recent bout with cancer. “This has raised a whole series of questions around the continuity of leadership,” Gonzalo Gómez explains, “given the unifying role that Chávez has played in this process. He will not be easily replaced. The social movements, the working class, and their organizations, have not organically constituted themselves as a social subject with sufficient strength to have weight in the exercise of power within the government. We need to move toward a form of government, even while Chávez is still present, where there are mechanisms through which the organizations of the working class and social movements are taken into account, are consulted, where they have a direct role in the design of policies and decision making.”[23] Thus far, Chávez has lined up Diosdado Cabello – a figure on the military right of Chavismo – as his most likely successor.

Added to the potentialities of right-wing gains in December, and the absence of a revolutionary collective leadership to step in in the event of a post-Chávez vacuum, a fall in oil prices precipitated by further mutations in the ongoing global economic crisis can certainly not be ruled out, with all the difficulties in maintaining the social programs that such a turn of events would imply. It may be the case that cheap credit would continue to flow momentarily from China, but that would be, at best, a stop-gap measure. Oil has been the lubricant maintaining the flow of resources to social programs; in its relative absence, zero sum class decisions regarding the future character of Venezuelan development will rise much more sharply to the fore.

The Bolivarian process then has entered a crucial conjuncture. The victory in the elections was its basic condition for survival. The strengthening of self-organization and independent popular class politics from below is what will ensure its deepening into the future – particularly one ridden with dangers of bureaucratic consolidation, economic instability, and right-wing advances in the state governorship elections.

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  18. Guillermo Almeyra, "Chávez presidente, ¿y después?" *La Jornada*, October 7, 2010.
  19. Personal interview conducted together with Susan Spronk, Caracas, August 8, 2012.
  20. Guillermo Almeyra, "Venezuela ante las elecciones."
  21. Ibid.
  22. Guillermo Almeyra, "Chávez presidente, ¿y después?"
  23. Personal interview conducted together with Susan Spronk, Caracas, August 9, 2012.
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## **P.S.**

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