

Tensions in the bolivarian process

Venezuela after the October 7 presidential election and Chavez victory

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The state of health of Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez is such that it is possible new elections will have to take place following his victory in October 2012. *International Viewpoint* correspondent Franck Gaudichaud was in Venezuela in October and made this assessment of the outcome of that election.

On Sunday, October 7, Hugo Chávez celebrated his third presidential election victory, with 55.1% of the vote against 44.3% for his main opponent, the neo-liberal candidate Henrique Capriles Radonski. The political polarization was such that the other four candidates in the running were literally swept aside [1]. Chávez's popularity, ability to mobilize and charismatic leadership remain then solidly demonstrated, entrenched and dominant among the popular layers, with electoral participation exceeding 80% of the electorate. The demonstration of hundreds of thousands of people (possibly more than a million!) who occupied the streets of Caracas on Thursday, October 4, was a clear demonstration of vitality of the "Bolivarian revolution" and also the omnipresence of the president at the time to raise the enthusiasm of the crowds. This under the auspices of a campaign slogan quite far removed from socialism: "Chávez, heart of the homeland".

We find here certainly the strength of popular nationalism as it is incarnated in Venezuela: that of a progressive and anti-imperialist "Caesarism" (in the Gramscian sense) or again this post-neoliberal "populist reason" described by Ernesto Laclau [2], which has managed to create, reconstitute at top and bottom, a new popular political community in Venezuela, throughout the last decade. However, if there is fervour, it is not the unique result of some "irrational" policy, as can be read regularly in the dominant press or a simple discursive plebeian emergence. This popular mysticism is also thanks to the social balance sheet, real and well understood, of the Bolivarian process: in contrast to what was going on under previous governments, much of the oil revenue was used to fund social policies. "The (many) humble shouting "Viva Chávez!" are probably the millions of people who, every day, resort to the different programmes - Mercal, Pdval, Bicentenario, Farmapatria - where they can buy basic necessities at subsidized prices. The youth who get excited - "Chavez will win!" - are evidence of the policy of inclusion and education at all levels, the free books and computers (canaimitas) that they are given. The old people who dress in red t-shirts do so probably because the 200,000 retirees receiving an old age pension at the end of the Fourth Republic have become 2,300,000 today. When the mothers of families speak fondly of the "comandante", this is because the different "missions" put in place gave them access to health, because two million of them and their loved ones have been provided for by the social security system. That the inadequately housed are supportive has come as no surprise: the great Venezuela housing mission, certainly created too late, has built tens of thousands of homes since its inception eighteen months ago " [3].

According to the UN Economic Commission for Latin America, Venezuela is the country that has seen the most spectacular decline in poverty in Latin America: between 2002 and 2010, it went from

48.6% to 27.8% and 22.2% to 10.7% with regard to extreme poverty. In addition, the country now has one of the lowest levels of inequality in the region, which is not insignificant in the most unequal continent of the planet. The changes are therefore very real, very different from the neo-liberal years of the IV Republic (1958-1998). We should add to this the creation of spaces of popular participation, particularly through thousands of communal councils or peasant cooperatives emerging from the land reform; the recent reform of the labour code, the most progressive on the continent; the implementation of the highest minimum wage in the region and the return of the discussion on popular sovereignty, socialism and anti-capitalism, far beyond activist spheres alone. The Chavez campaign program was also clearly oriented around these strategic orientations.

The election also had a clear geopolitical character. A defeat for the candidate of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) and its allies of the Great Patriotic Pole (including the Venezuelan Communist Party) would have strongly degraded the continental relationship of class forces, threatening social and democratic conquests made in the last decade, but also threatening the new relative autonomy of the South in relation to imperialism, the very young Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and above all, derailed innovative, although still incipient or limited, projects such as the ALBA or the Bank of the South.

Yet, this new electoral victory - very clear and indisputable - cannot hide the many problems unresolved after 13 years of power, the "dilemmas" and the intense contradictions of the Bolivarian process, beyond the speeches on "21st century socialism" (of which we can still barely see the blurred outlines). Let's mention some of the more obvious:

- Corruption, which remains endemic, and at all institutional levels (and in particular at the level of the governors of the federated states), to the point that we can talk of it begin structural and encysted, the heritage of a rentier oil-dependent state which has not been transformed;
- Bureaucracy, inefficiency and low institutionalization of public policies, lack of productivity of state-owned enterprises, the permanent waltz of officials in the departments and, as acknowledged and repeated by the president himself during the campaign the lack of monitoring of projects, including those intended to improve access to electricity, to diversify the productive model or to ensure food sovereignty in a country that still imports more than 75% of its food;
- Insecurity (especially in the cities) and the magnitude of crime, making Venezuela one of the countries with the highest rate of homicide by light firearms on the continent (excluding armed conflict): a concern and a daily ordeal for the popular sectors, widely exploited by the right and the oligarchy, despite some real progress with the recent reform of the police and a beginning of taking into account of the phenomenon;
- The weakness of the structuring of the trade union movement, the defeat - and including the repression - of experiences of worker's control and co-management (such as at SIDOR or Sanitarios Maracay) co-management, the questioning of the independence of the working class, powered by the permanent temptation for control from above of trade unionism by the executive, verticalism reinforced recently by internal divisions and the crisis of the UNETE (Unión Nacional de Trabajadores de Venezuela) and the creation (in 2011) of the CSBT (Central Socialista Bolivariana de los Trabajadores), effectively under the thumb of the Ministry of Labour;
- The issue of the omnipresence of Hugo Chávez, sometimes called "hyperpresidentialism" and therefore the level of personalisation of power, in a context - moreover - where the president is seriously ill with cancer and therefore considerably weakened;
- The maintenance of a rentier model of development (and a state) originating from the paradoxical

“curse” of oil abundance: a sustainable model essentially based on exploitation of this resource and a mixed capitalist economy where more than 70% of GDP is still in the hands of the private sector, while a caste - referred to as the “boli-bourgeoisie” - grows in the shade of this windfall and an “endogenous right” to government embodied by a few strong (and wealthy) men, such Diosdado Cabello (now President of the National Assembly);

– Foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East, where on behalf of a “campist” anti-imperialist strategy, Chávez has chosen to support, come what may, a number of autocratic, indeed bloodthirsty, governments in the region: a strategy renewed as early as the day after the election, when the president at a press conference reaffirmed his friendship for Bashar Al-Assad in the face of “terrorists” and NATO.

However, and this is what we have seen during our stay in Caracas during the last election, more and more voices from the “critical Chavismo” collectives are renewing their conscious support for the process (and its conquests), while denouncing its stagnation and the lack of progress in many areas, and explaining that if a part of the popular electorate has decided to vote for Capriles it is in order to express its displeasure or distress. As noted by Patrick Guillaudat: “looking closely at results, the victory is fragile, despite the fact that Chavez won against Capriles in 22 of the 24 states of the country. Between the last presidential elections in 2006 and those of 2012, Chávez gained 752,976 votes while the opposition gained 2,175,984, or more than three times as much. In the popular districts of Caracas (Petare, 23 de Enero, La Vega and so on) the Chavista vote fell by 6 to 9%. We see the same movement in the other cities of the country. On the other hand, the accurate count of the votes of each candidate, divided party by party, showing that more than a fifth of the votes obtained by Chavez came from parties other than the PSUV. [...] Defiance or criticism was also expressed by a vote for organizations other than the PSUV, including the PCV. In the days that followed the election, conflicting signals have been launched. On the one hand, Chavez advocates dialogue and openness towards the opposition. On the other, PSUV militants are demanding a “rectification” in the sense of a deepening of the process” [4].

It is also important to note that the panorama of the opposition has largely evolved: it can even be said, as the Marxist Manuel Sutherland has said, that Capriles Radonski, the candidate of the oligarchy and imperialism, is in one sense a “winner-loser”. The candidate of the MUD, (Mesa de Unidad Democrática), a broad coalition of 30 organizations (ranging from ex-Maoists to the extreme-right splinter groups), managed to win in primary, including against the main parties of the historic “ancien regime”: COPEI (Christian Democrats) and Acción Democrática (Social Democrats). In his thirties, of bourgeois origin, leader of Primero Justicia (a new party created in 2000 with the support of US ultra-conservatives) and very active during the coup of 2002, Capriles has largely achieved his goal: by imposing his strategy, he also rejuvenated and revitalized the image of the opposition, performing with brio at many meetings across the country. This was far from the semi-fascist hysteria of previous years, with a propaganda campaign of centre-left, “humanist”, tones, identifying with Lula and attached to social progress. while soft pedalling a program which was violently neo-liberal. Sutherland concludes: “Capriles Radonski clearly gave the impression of being a rival, who is preparing to take power in the medium term (2018), at a more favourable electoral context, that is at a time where the deterioration of the popularity of Chavismo because of increased problems within Venezuelan society (insecurity, high cost of living, unemployment and so on) will be crucial. If electoral trends continue to evolve in these directions on both sides, Capriles could well be the next and most neo-liberal President of Venezuela” [5].

The regional elections (elections of governors and federal parliaments) from mid-December will no doubt be a new test for the Bolivarian camp. And already some unease is felt inside militant Chavismo, faced with the candidates selected, all appointed from above and representing the bureaucratic leadership of a PSUV ever more distant from its base or directly originating from the

military regime that surrounds the President. For example, in Bolivar State, we find Francisco Rangel Gomez, who aspires to a second re-election, even though he had been known in 2008 for his fierce opposition against the workers of SIDOR or again in the State of Lara, the former governor and soldier Luis Reyes Reyes will again wear the Bolivarian colours, although accused by many social movements of being responsible for violations of human rights in the past.

Nevertheless, and in spite of this openly critical panorama (which seems necessary in order to know how to express our internationalism as well as to confront the intense anti-Chavez media campaign waged by the oligarchies of the South and North), the Bolivarian people (and its struggles) remains alive, dynamic and rebellious. The process is therefore not dead, far from it. Just browse the "ranchos" of the big cities, the streets of Caracas, the factories of Ciudad Guyana or the interior of the country to find out. What the political scientist Edgardo Lander has called a "strained alternative project" thus remains a central component of the political coordinates of Venezuela today. This project, though characterised by a "tension between control by the top and autonomy at the base", crystallizes around the core notion of all Bolivarian political discourse - the sovereign people.

And the next few months will depend precisely on this latter. According to "La Jornada" columnist Guillermo Almeyra: "those who vote for Chávez are not blind to the problems of corruption, of verticalism, of bureaucracy, the military leadership of a process which requires, on the contrary, the decisive participation of the population, open discussion of the various options to resolve the major problems, and popular control of governmental institutions and activities". He adds "instead of presenting an independent and anti-Chavista candidacy like that of the combative trade union leader Orlando Chirino, separating socialists from Chavistas, the revolutionary left should work together with the Chavista supporters of socialism to reinforce the self-organization of workers and, after the defeat of the right, battle in better conditions against the verticalism and bureaucrats-technocrats who await the disappearance of Hugo Chávez to control the state apparatus. Because the major battles will take place after October".

This option is shared, notably, by Marea Socialista, an anti-capitalist current in the PSUV. During the presidential election, these activists - strongly involved in the trade union movement and among youth - launched a campaign around the slogans "October 7: president Chávez; October 8: rid the revolution of its bureaucrats" and "for a government of working people without capitalists!" They regrouped in May 2012 in the APR (Alianza Popular Revolucionaria) which is trying to build an autonomous Bolivarian mobilization, not restricted to the structures of the state or the PSUV, alongside the peasant organization "Revolutionary Bolivar and Zamora Current", the movement of pobladores, the National Association of Free and Alternative Media Communities (ANMCLA), Surco (a university education collective), feminist organizations and so on.

Against the desire of a part of the government for reconciliation with the opposition or the oligarchy, which has seemed to emerge in recent weeks, these critical sectors emphasize that only social struggles and the deepening of the democratic conquests, forms of autonomous participation and control over the economy and the functioning of the state, and the creation of forms of real popular power will be able to give substantive content to calls for "21st century socialism". And starting thus to transcend the obstacles and contradictions of the Bolivarian process, without allowing the return of the neoliberals and agents of Washington to the country. It is certainly the last opportunity in this new political sequence which is opening after 13 years in power. And nothing says for the moment that it is the most probable outcome, far from it, even if it remains the most desirable from the point of view of consistent anti-neoliberals and anti-capitalists.

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P.S.

* Translation International Viewpoint. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>

Footnotes

[1] Orlando Chirino, a revolutionary trades unionist, Trotskyist activist and candidate of the PSL (Party of Socialism and Liberty) obtained 4,140 votes (0.02% of the vote)

[2] E. Laclau. "On Populist Reason", Verso, London, 2007

[3] Maurice Lemoine, "Au Venezuela, les électeurs ont "confisqué" la démocratie", "Le Monde Diplomatique", October 2012

[4] "Tout est à nous! La Revue", December 2012

[5] M. Sutherland. Apporea.org, October 2012