



THE PEOPLE OF VENEZUELA GO TO VOTE



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The Venezuelan people will go to the polling stations across the country on Sunday, May 20th. This is the fifth presidential election since Hugo Chavez won the vote in 1998. It is the second since the death of Chavez in 2013.

The Bolivarian Revolution, which is the name given to the process inaugurated in the first term of Chavez's presidency, faces a decisive test.

The election will take place in a context saturated by overwhelming pressure from the United States. The administration of US President Donald Trump has increased the pressure from the US against the Venezuelan people through policies of economic destabilization and jingoistic rhetoric. Trump's threats of an armed attack and the economic warfare have given the right-wing opposition fuel for their fire. The US government, by its actions, has created a campaign to hinder, frustrate and delegitimise these forthcoming presidential elections. They have done so not only to alter the outcome to favour the right-wing, but *more importantly* to ensure that doubt is maintained when the Bolivarian forces win the election of May 20.

Venezuela, as a result of a series of factors including the economic embargo and low oil prices, faces serious socio-economic difficulties. Nonetheless, the government of Nicolas Maduro was able to recuperate the democratic initiative in the vote for the National Constituent Assembly in mid-2017. That vote clarified the popular support that the Bolivarian Revolution maintains.

Venezuela's election is not only about Venezuela. It is about the region. The United States – and its allied forces – are now on a regional and global offensive to push for a renewed version of the 'Washington Consensus', namely the slate of economic and political policies that benefit the West against Latin America. This offensive includes an attack on the process of integration that is the linchpin of the Bolivarian strategy for the region. The Venezuelan government, as one of the most important vehicles for regional integration based on policies of mutual benefit, is the key to the maintenance of this dynamic. Already, six conservative Latin American governments retreated from the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) in April 2018. UNASUR is an inter-governmental regional organisation that was formed in 2008 to counter the dominance of Western powers in the region. If the Bolivarians are defeated in Venezuela, then the future of UNASUR and of regional integration on an independent basis will be set-back considerably.

The Venezuelan elections bring together the complexities, conflicts and challenges posed to Latin American independence in this moment. What we call 'Our America' will be threatened if the Bolivarians are defeated on May 20. In this dossier, the fourth from Tricontinental, we present an introductory reflection on the issues around the Venezuelan elections of 2018. At the close of this dossier, there is a list of other readings that will help you deepen your understanding of these themes.





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Venezuelan Democracy Under Siege

Since the end of 2015, the confrontation between the Chavistas and the opposition has become red-hot. The opposition won a considerable victory in the parliamentary elections of December 2015. This victory has emboldened the right-wing opposition to exert itself across the institutions of the state – from the parliament to the judiciary to the executive branch. As Trump came into office in 2017, the right-wing opposition took their dispute onto the street. The right-wing opposition believed that street violence would end the government of Maduro. This is the well-known strategy of the ‘soft coup’ that we have seen repeatedly throughout Latin American history. Protests, attacks on public buildings, road and neighbourhood blockades, hate crimes against alleged Chavistas, looting, paramilitary actions, political repression as well as *guarimbas* (street blockades that come with burning tires and rock throwing) are the general events that are supposed to culminate in a soft coup. Between the 120 days of April, May and June of 2017, these right-wing actions resulted in the death of 125 people.

The government of Maduro did not call its supporters onto the streets and provoke a civil war. That would have been catastrophic for Venezuela. Instead, the government took the path of a democratic initiative. In May, in the midst of the worst of the right-wing violence, the government called

for elections towards a National Constituent Assembly. Voting in Venezuela is not mandatory. Nonetheless, 41.5% of the registered voters bravely confronted the street violence and intimidation to vote in these elections. This trend of democratic participation continued despite the violence as voters came out to exercise their rights to the franchise in the regional elections held in October 2017. More than 60% of the registered voters participated in these regional elections. The forces of Chavism won 18 of the 23 governorships that came up for elections. The remaining five were won by the right-wing opposition. At the municipal level, the forces of Chavism won 54% of the vote (according to the National Electoral Council – CNE).

In January 2018, the Constituent Assembly decided to postpone the date of the presidential elections. The Assembly – because of the election results (and the boycott by the right-wing opposition) – is made up largely of the representatives of the pro-Chavist government. The right-wing opposition demanded the postponement. The Assembly decided to accommodate its request. A dialogue took place on this issue between President Maduro's government and the right-wing opposition. It was mediated by the former president of Spain Rodriguez Zapatero and others. However, as sociologist Atilio Boron has pointed out, just as the two sides were ready to reach an agreement, the opposition interrupted the negotiations and proposed new demands (Boron 2018).

The agreement was sabotaged with encouragement from the

US government of Donald Trump. The mediator – Zapatero – wrote a public letter, in which he wrote of his surprise and called for a return of the dialogue (Rodríguez Zapatero 2018).

Despite the new boycott proposed by the opposition and egged on by the Trump administration, five candidates announced that they would run for president in the May 20 elections. These five candidates are:

- (1) Nicolas Maduro, United Socialist Party of Venezuela and its allies.
- (2) Henri Falcón, former governor of the state of Lara and principle representative of the opposition. He is backed by the Progressive Advance formation, the Movement for Socialism (MAS) and a fraction of the COPEI (Social Democratic) party.
- (3) Reinaldo Quijada of the Popular Political Unity (UPP or Unidad Política Popular 89) is running within the Bolivarian Movement.
- (4) Luis Alejandro Ratti, a former Chavista, is running as an independent candidate.
- (5) Javier Bertucci of the Hope for Change (Esperanza por el Cambio) party. He leads the evangelist Marantha Church.

The five candidates signed an agreement that laid out a set of standards whose enforcement would be guaranteed by the CNE – the electoral council. It is important to underline that one agreement is for a petition to be sent to the United Nations in which the candidates call for the deployment of electoral observers, to audit the electoral system by international specialists and to give each candidate equal access to the media. In large part, the final result will depend on the confidence the Venezuelans have in the sanctity of the polling process.

To win, Chavism must look to the election as a public gesture as it has in the past. It must focus on not losing votes through demobilisation and through excessive confidence.

Falcón's candidacy, from the right, depends on the backing of staunch anti-Chavista elements who are, however, divided. There are those who have decided to boycott the elections and those who wish to participate in them. Oppositional disunity has put the right-wing in a disadvantage.

The electoral campaign, the elections themselves and its audit are taking place in an unconventional – hostile – environment. If the opposition loses, it will surely try to delegitimise the election process. This is the nature of the siege that now surrounds Venezuelan politics (Teruggi, 2018).



PHOTO: Rafael Stedile



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The Unconventional War

Neoliberal policies entered Latin America in the 1990s with idyllic and pacific promises about the end of history. But, in no time at all, neoliberal transformations were stained by violence. The imperialist interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq and their regional effects of militarised social relations announced a ‘neoliberalism of war’ (Gonzalez Casanova, 2002). Overextension of warfare and the financial crisis of 2007-08 threatened the hegemony of the United States that has seemed, in the first half of the first decade of the 21st century, to be secure. The policies promoted by the Trump administration demonstrate the use of geo-political and military power at a scale so as to reverse the decline of US hegemony in Latin America and elsewhere (Katz 2018).

The most aggressive military interventions of the West – led by the United States – have taken place in the path of oil (Ceceña and Barrios 2018). Territories that contain the world’s oil reserves focus the attention of imperial interventions. With one of the most important hydrocarbon reserves on the planet, Venezuela has not managed to find itself on the map of violent re-colonisation. As João Pedro Stédile, a member of the National Coordination of the Movement of Rural Landless Workers (Movimento de Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, or MST) puts it, ‘At the end of the day, the dispute isn’t about Maduro’s Government. The dispute is for oil profits, which

during the 20th century were appropriated by US corporations and by a minority of Venezuelan oligarchies that lived like kings. That era has ended' (Stédile 2017).

In the past few months, as the Venezuelan people have anticipated their elections, the military siege against Venezuela has been reinforced. Bases have been resupplied and massive military exercises have been conducted near the Venezuelan border. AmazonLog 17 is one such exercise. Under the aegis of the United States military, this exercise included the armed forces of Brazil, Colombia and Peru as well as the US forces. It took place in the very heart of South America, sending a message to all the governments in the region that have not surrendered to US power (Ceceña and Barrios 2018).

The theories of the US military – as articulated in Pentagon manuals – propose not only wars waged on battlefields or that presume conventional confrontations between states. They are interested in Unconventional Wars. These unconventional wars of the 21st century open up not with a bombing raid but, as Ceceña points out, have the particularity of sometimes seeming to be mobilizations for citizens' rights. This strategy spans the entire spectrum of infiltration by Western intelligence agencies into all dimensions of social life, picking at all kinds of legitimate and illegitimate grievances to spark a revolt (Ceceña 2018).

Venezuelan researchers have closely studied the way that imperialist agencies adapt their strategies to any condition so

as to intensify a siege against the country if the government poses an obstacle to economic accumulation for multi-national corporations and financial interests. The unconventional warfare includes ‘a dynamic of daily violence’ that is essential for neo-liberal globalisation to undermine state sovereignty and promote the interests of economic domination by global capital (Serafino, Vielma and Borges 2018). This unconventional war destroys the social fabric and cuts at collective bonds – using chaos to get its way. This is what Naomi Klein calls ‘the shock doctrine’ (Klein 2007).

In the history of the Bolivarian process starting in 1999, the Venezuelan people have suffered from all kinds of offensives by international capitalists and local oligarchies. The capitalist and the oligarchs experimented with a variety of tactics in Venezuela that they then successfully applied to other countries (Stédile 2017). These tactics include:

- (1) The ‘traditional’ coup of 2002 that removed Chavez from the presidency for a few days.
- (2) The assassination of leaders, such as in the case of Torrijos, former president of Panama from 1968 to 1981.
- (3) The use of economic blackmail, the shortage of basic products and the creation of an economic crisis – as was the case in the destabilisation of the Salvador Allende government in Chile (1970-73).

(4) The use of violence – such as the *guarimbas* – and selective assassination to generate fear and terror, as was the case in Ukraine.

(5) The use of an economic, financial and commercial blockade – as against Iran.

In the Venezuelan experience, these tactics have failed. The conviction and force of the Venezuelan people demonstrated – among other ways – at the ballot box on numerous occasions indicates that the power of the people is the best defence of the Bolivarian process.

Venezuela has faced an economic war since at least 2013 – one created by a drop in oil prices (which has been catastrophic for this oil-export dependent state) and by the sabotage and siege of its economy by external actors. Beginning in 2015, an executive decree by the Obama administration declared Venezuela to be a national security threat to the United States. This measure was tightened by Trump at the start of 2017 as the US expanded the reach of the Obama decree. In August of 2017, the US – for the first time – adopted financial sanctions against the Venezuelan government. The European Union mimicked these sanctions a month later.

What these sanctions did was to deeply hurt the issuance of state bonds and for the consolidation and management of Venezuela's debt. Sanctions such as this hurt Venezuela's core business – its oil exports through the state oil firm, PDVSA.

The Venezuelan currency faced attack. The government attempted to circumvent this attack by the creation of a parallel cryptocurrency system. All of this stimulated inflation and shortages, which meant that people could not access basic goods.

The financial siege had been designed for just this purpose, to turn people against the government. The strangulation of Venezuela's financial system sought to force the government – including PDVSA, the most important company in the state system – to default. Trump's economic blockade practically paralysed foreign trade, which is based on the use of the US dollar. It suspended the US bank accounts of Venezuelan state-run businesses, inhibited the use of US intermediary banks for basic commercial transactions, imposed sanctions on businesses that negotiated with Venezuela, and forbade shipping companies from using Venezuelan ports. This financial, economic and naval blockade of Venezuela sought to break the government of Maduro and the Chavistas.



PHOTO: Rafael Stedile

Between War and Peace

Faced with catastrophe as a result of this siege, the Venezuelan government negotiated new international agreements with China and Russia. One of the key proposals was to sidestep the dollar in the global trade in hydrocarbons. In December 2017, the Venezuelan government launched the petro-cryptocurrency. This is backed by oil and mineral reserves in Venezuela. The idea with the use of this currency was to gain access – by some means – to international financing. As oil prices rose from midway through 2017, Venezuela's state finances got some relief.

Inside the country, the economic crisis persisted. Inflation, shortages and speculation through the *bachaqueo* (the black market or the illegal sales of subsidised products) continued. This meant that Venezuelans had to wait in long lines to buy basic goods. General hardship and social malaise led to increased emigration and a problem of social morale.

The crisis reaffirmed the existence of the parasitic bourgeoisie certainly, but also of the limits to the creation of a new social and economic order by the public policies enacted by the Bolivarians since 1999. The economy remains dependent on foreign oil sales and on the dollar in the domestic market. Chávez had warned in his Plan de la Patria or Plan of the Homeland of the limits of the Venezuelan economy. 'Let's not

be deceived: the socio-economic formation that still prevails in Venezuela is dominated by the capitalist and the landowner'. Chávez argued for the state to transcend its dependency on oil exports (Chávez 2012).

The Venezuelan people – from below – had developed a set of everyday practices to try and overcome these obstacles. These practices led to the creation of the Local Supply and Production Committees (Comités Locales de Abastecimiento y Producción – CLAP), a government-driven policy from 2016. The policies of the CLAP process have led to progress in the resolution of severe shortages and have 'encouraged the public network of food distribution in a context of the economic war' (Serafino, Vielma and Borges 2018). As CLAPS have developed and become part of everyday economic life, they have also led to the increased solidarity of action by the Venezuelan people in the face of the crisis. Far from retreating into individual despondency or greed, the Venezuelan people have encouraged the building of the collective bonds that the economic war seeks to destroy.

The renewal and deepening of the democratic horizon – after decades of authoritarian rule by the oligarchy – are amongst the most significant contributions of the Bolivarian experience even though the recent tensions and social mistrust has tended to dent the power of Chavism. The Bolivarian Revolution has succeeded in recreating community practices that could aid in economic and political management and self-government. These practices have also developed experiments in democracy

within social life. One of the best examples of this is the construction and advancement of communes or what has been called ‘communal power’. Reinaldo Iturriza – who served as Venezuela’s Minister of Communes and Social Movements and then as Minister for Culture with charge of the communes – points out that, with few exceptions, the idea of the strength of the communes and of the power of the people has lost ground in the midst of this crisis (Iturriza 2017).

Despite these problems, the Bolivarian Revolution has promoted practices and programmes that transcend the liberal framework of the State and try to mobilise people into institutions for a participatory democracy. The use of television and social media to inform and stimulate popular debate as well as the participation of people in neighbourhoods and schools, including in people’s mobilisations and the permanent occupation of the streets and public spaces, has continued to enhance popular democracy (Stédile 2017). This is what accounts for the fierce Chavism that does not want to see its democracy undermined.



PHOTO: Rafael Stedile

In Perspective

On May 20, the presidential elections in Venezuela will decide more than just the question of who will be the next president or who will set the policy direction of the next government. The elections will define, in many ways, the future of Venezuela. Will the Bolivarian process deepen, or will it be destroyed?

The neoliberal offensive in the region has increased social inequality, concentrated wealth and re-colonised the territory. These processes have restricted democracy and brought the military into social life. It is not acceptable for the Venezuelan people to return to that era. They would not like to see the Bolivarian process destroyed.

The siege of Venezuelan politics threatens not only the result of this election but also its legitimacy. Pressure mounts on the Venezuelan people to get them to vote against the government of Maduro. If they do not accept this pressure and re-elect Maduro, the situation has now been created for the imperialists and the oligarchs to question the legitimacy of the election. Whether they win the vote or not, they will try to dominate the political situation.

The May 20 election will mark an end to a phase. But there is no indication that the political siege against Venezuela will be lifted. This story is far from over. Its resolution will not be

decided on May 20. The initiative remains with the Venezuelan people. If they are allowed, that is, to have their say and to build their lives as they see fit without the intervention of the imperialists.



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