

Assessing Venezuela's Elections: The Good, the Bad, and the Indifferent

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The streets of Caracas were eerily quiet late Sunday evening (December 6) as the city, and indeed the whole of Venezuela, anxiously awaited the results of the critical legislative elections. Everyone knew the vote would be close: the polls had indicated as much in the weeks leading up to the elections, with many experts predicting a victory for the right wing opposition party Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD).

Traveling throughout the capital, and especially in the poor and working class neighborhoods, however, the mood was optimistic, with most Chavistas fully expecting to carry the day and maintain their control of the National Assembly. In the 23 January neighborhood, a stronghold of the ruling Socialist Party (PSUV) and a hotbed of radical activism and resistance, local party and community leaders were upbeat as they showed me around, pointing out the gains made in the years of Chavista rule: every house now having a cooking gas connection, improved sewage systems, guaranteed government pensions, low-cost government housing, among many other tangible gains.

In El Valle, another solidly red working class district, I visited two of the many punto rojos (red points) – Socialist Party tents manned by volunteers who helped organize voter turnout for their respective neighborhoods – where the mood was festive, something between a block party and a local community meeting. The punto rojos, interestingly enough, were almost always opposite from MUD tents (a recent phenomenon as the right wing opposition has adopted the PSUV organizing strategy), and all was peaceful and quiet, no confrontations to be seen. Indeed, it seemed everywhere I went that these elections were a model of a peaceful democratic process, precisely what Venezuela's government has long prided itself on, and precisely what the western media has always denied.

After having met with a number of community leaders, including PSUV candidate Jesús Faría who welcomed me with a handshake and a hug, thanking me for coming to his country to watch democracy in action, I went (along with my delegation from the US) to Tiuna el Fuerte, a cultural center and communal outdoor meeting space financially supported by the Venezuelan government. With intricate graffiti murals adorning the walls of shipping containers transformed into living quarters, computer labs, and other important resources, Tiuna el Fuerte looked like something out of hipster Brooklyn or Oakland, a meeting space where hip hop and reggae music blared from the speakers, and sancocho (a traditional soup dish) was ladled into bowls for anyone who wanted it.

But as I sat voraciously devouring the delicious sancocho, gazing calmly at the trees and public housing buildings across the dusty street, it was immediately clear that there was a

tension in the air, an unease somehow palpable in the cautious movements and facial expressions of the twenty- and thirty-somethings in charge of this cultural center. It was obvious that these people were nervous, that they had a sense that all was not well. The television around which everyone gathered flashed images from around the country, showing polling places still open well into the evening as voters waited in lines to cast their ballots. Text and WhatsApp messages went back and forth like electrical signals shot by digital neurotransmitters across the synapses of a collective Chavista brain. These people were worried, and now so was I.

I did not come to Venezuela to be objective – I am a leftist and an anti-imperialist, a strong supporter of Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution – but rather to bear witness to these elections and see Venezuela for myself, this country I have followed and defended vigorously as a bastion of resistance against global imperialism these last 17 years. I came to document the reality, but also to counter the corporate media's propaganda: President Maduro as dictator, Venezuela as failed state, and other such lies and distortions peddled by the mouthpieces of neoliberal finance capital. I came to be part of this momentous election, and to tell its story.

And then it happened. The bombshell. The National Electoral Council (CNE), the impartial body that conducts the country's elections, announced an overwhelming victory for the right wing opposition and the MUD. The wealthy and middle class neighborhoods of Caracas erupted in cheers and celebrations, while the poor and working class sections of the city seemingly went silent.

The country had taken a stunning turn to the right, an astonishing thing for the most left wing country in the western hemisphere. How could this have happened? What led to these incredible developments? And what might this mean for the future of the Bolivarian Republic and its revolution?

The Elections through Venezuelan Eyes

It would be rather easy to analyze the election results in purely political terms: inflation and economic war, corruption, the collapse of global oil prices, violent crime, a lack of responsiveness to the needs of the people from the ruling Socialist Party, and about a dozen other factors that played a role in bringing the pro-neoliberal, pro-US right wing to power in the National Assembly. Indeed, there is some value in doing so from a strictly objective and detached perspective. However this election, and the Bolivarian Revolution from its very inception, is (and has always been) about the Venezuelan people. And it is the Venezuelan people themselves who perhaps can provide the best insights into what exactly has happened here.

The morning after the election I rode the Caracas Metrocable system, a cable-propelled metro transit line that connects the working class community of San Agustín high up in the hills with the rest of city via cable cars traveling hundreds of meters above the ground, giving riders a breathtaking view of the city. The project, an initiative fully funded by the Venezuelan Government under Hugo Chávez, was designed to integrate San Agustín into the greater economy and provide the poor access to the city, while spurring development on both ends of the project. As such, the system is a visible and highly advanced testament to the grand-scale projects that Chávez's government envisioned as part of the Bolivarian Revolutionary development process.

I had a chance to chat in one of the cars with a young woman from San Agustín, her purple, ink-stained pinky finger indicating that she had voted on Sunday. She explained that she had cast her vote for the Socialist Party because she remained loyal to Chávez and the government which gave her easy access to the city, as well as adequate, low-cost housing. But behind her polite smile was a clear current of outrage, anger at the fact that her neighborhood, which had benefitted so directly from government programs, had in fact gone to the opposition in the election. “Those of us who voted for MUD are either ignorant or ungrateful,” she explained, not mincing her words in describing many of her neighbors, friends, and even family. “They will soon realize what they have done.”

At the next station, a Venezuelan colleague, and leader of our US delegation, asked a young couple whether they had voted, indicating his own purple finger. “Of course,” was the reply, with the woman wildly gesticulating, not holding back her anger, “What the hell am I going to do now? How will I get an affordable apartment? How will I afford the basic necessities?” she raged, her frustration gushing from her like so many tears shed the night before.

Stepping off the cable-car, my Venezuelan friend pointed out a tall building next to the station, explaining that it’s a recreation complex recently constructed by the government. He noted that this building included a sports center, classrooms for young adult and adult education, a small market, and many other necessities for the people of the community. Touching his open palm to his forehead as if pained physically by the realization, he simply said “I have absolutely no idea what will happen to this place. The right wing will probably close it down because they couldn’t care less about the people who live here.”

Later that same afternoon, I headed down to the aptly named “Hot Corner,” an area just a few meters from the National Assembly building, where Venezuelans regularly congregate to discuss politics. There was a large crowd there, with Chavistas angrily denouncing the right wing, and expressing their unwavering support for El Comandante and the Revolution. One man cried directly into my camera “Chavez is in my heart, the Revolution is in my blood. They’ll have to spill my blood to take my Revolution.” The tears welling in his eyes, and in the eyes of many others in the crowd, were enough to move even the most detached observer. I myself had to hold back tears as I watched this man, among others, speak directly to me, knowing I was a gringo there for the election, trying desperately to show just what the Revolution meant to him, his family, his people, his country.

While there are countless stories like these from around Caracas, and indeed throughout the country, there undeniably are many who were either pleased with, or indifferent to, the election results.

I took a taxi through the mountains connecting Maracay to the coastal town of Choroní, the point of embarkation for the boats taking people to the isolated Afro-Venezuelan fishing village of Chuao. The driver (named Pedro) was a middle-aged, middle-class man who could barely contain his pleasure at seeing the Chavistas defeated.

“This government is incompetent and corrupt,” he said, adding that “they have messed up everything with their bad economic policies and stupid decisions.” When I pressed him further, asking about whether he thought that the collapse of global oil prices – a drop from a high of \$140 per barrel to less than \$40, amounting to a decrease of roughly 75% of revenue – had anything to do with the problems in Venezuela, he dismissed the notion with a casual wave of his hand. He equally dismissed the economic war waged against Venezuela

which includes hyper-speculation, an informal embargo by foreign corporations and domestic private distributors on certain key consumer goods and staple foods, the illicit trafficking of goods along the Venezuela-Colombia border, and many other forms of deliberate economic destabilization.

"I can tell you're a Chavista," he half exclaimed, half chortled as we took another sharp turn around a blind curve roughly one thousand meters up the mountain. "Look," he said, "I was trained in economics and I used to work for a bank, but since I am not a Chavista I cannot get a job and have had to work as a taxi driver and open a restaurant." When I asked whether he really believed that things would get better under a neoliberal, pro-US party, Pedro answered unequivocally, "Yes. They will get rid of the price controls and the economy will stabilize."

But when I probed further, noting that such a policy inevitably meant sharp price increases that would hurt the poor and working class disproportionately, he again waved his hand and said, "We'll see. I think change will be good. As soon as the MUD is in office, the US will ease up and Venezuela will get back on its feet." Naturally, my immediate response was, "But right there aren't you admitting that the US is deliberately exacerbating these problems through a coordinated campaign of economic subversion?" to which Pedro looked at me in the back seat, grinned slyly, and said "Maybe so."

Pedro's story is not unique, though his perspective is more rigid than most. I encountered more than one Chavista whose frustration with the government left them utterly indifferent to the election, despite their love for El Comandante Chávez. One such man I met was Glen Martinez, the operator of Colectivo Radio 23, a collective and radio station in the working class 23 January neighborhood which had, until this election, always been strongly Chavista. With his partner holding him by the arm (Glen is blind) he explained that he was disillusioned with the government because of what he described as incompetence and inability to combat the violence and crime plaguing his neighborhood. "We have safe zones where children play...these are supposed to be protected and clear of all violence, but nobody enforces this."

Glen continued by noting that his frustration with the government had led him to not be involved in this campaign for PSUV as he had been in all previous elections. "We - I speak for the collective - did not participate because we do not feel that the government has listened to the people enough." I acknowledged the legitimacy of his many grievances, but had to ask him the basic question, "I get all that, but Glen, isn't the Bolivarian government the reason you have this radio station and collective in the first place? Without the local Chavista government, you would not have had this space rehabilitated from an old chop-shop into a functioning radio station, community center, and brand new theater with a 500 person capacity, all with government funds...And about the fact that Venezuela is one of the countries in the vanguard of resistance to global imperialism? Doesn't that mean something?" He responded, "That's true. This is a very complicated matter. There are no easy answers."

Glen and Pedro both illustrate a distorted and dangerous strain of thought among both non-participating Chavistas and opposition supporters: the belief that an opposition government will be unable to roll back the gains made under the Bolivarian government. Glen firmly believes that Colectivo Radio 23 will remain as is, and that a right wing, neoliberal capitalist government aligned with Washington will not move to shut it down, privatize the space, and destroy the infrastructure of independent power embedded in 23 January since Chávez's

initiatives were launched.

Like Glen, Pedro is committed to the idea that the sanctity of contracts and agreements will be honored by an MUD government. "It's impossible for the new National Assembly to get rid of our free health care and education. There are agreements in place, promises that must be kept." I warned him that such an assumption of benignity on the part of neoliberal reactionaries is not only wrong-headed, but frankly dangerous. I said this politely, of course.

Venezuela is full of contradictions, and this is nowhere more obvious than with these elections. However, what has become equally apparent in the two weeks I've spent here is the unanimity of opinion on key issues, at least among the poor, working, and middle class; the rich of Venezuela (like Cuban gusanos in Miami) are in another universe and they are beyond reason. Among most segments of the population there is a near consensus that Chávez was a hero and a good leader who is sorely missed. I heard this even from Pedro who had next to nothing positive to say about the government and the party Chávez left behind.

One other common theme that continually cropped up is what will happen if the new right wing government moves to dismantle the gains of the revolution. Every single person I spoke to reiterated quite forcefully that if the MUD-led government moves to dismantle the Bolivarian constitution – arguably the most progressive constitution anywhere in the world – there will be an uprising and the masses will pour into the streets to defend it. Nearly every Venezuelan has said that they think a recall referendum against President Maduro – allowed by the Constitution now that the opposition has a supermajority in the National Assembly – is unlikely, and that if the MUD moves in this direction, many of those who voted for them will vote for Maduro to keep him in power.

Above all else, there is one common theme that I have heard repeated ad nauseam these last few days: the vote was a vote against the PSUV, not for the MUD. In other words many, if not most, of those ballots cast for the opposition were simply a rebuke of the government, rather than an endorsement of the neoliberal capitalism that MUD represents. While this is undeniably frustrating, it is also heartening in a sense, because it demonstrates clearly that the general principles of the vast majority of the country remain unchanged: they want socialism and the Bolivarian Revolution, they simply want it to be improved. I heard this nearly everywhere I went, from the 23 January to El Valle, from San Agustín to the Simón Bolívar commune.

In other words, Chavismo is alive and well in Venezuela, it is the Party itself that has lost the support of many of the people. The numbers in fact bear this out. With 40% support, the PSUV still gained the votes of more than five million Venezuelans, even in the midst of excruciating hardship. Five million Venezuelans remain firmly committed to socialism and the Chávez vision. Five million Venezuelans have risen to say no to US imperialism and capitalism in the face of a crushing economic war, in the face of an unmistakable rightward shift in Latin America as the Empire makes its countermove against all the gains the Left has made in the last two decades. Five million Venezuelans remain steadfast in their commitment to the Bolivarian Revolution.

Having been here in Venezuela these last ten days, I've come to realize something I always knew on an intellectual level, but never understood on a human level: that revolutions are historical processes, not historical moments. The Bolivarian process has hit a roadblock, and it's time for the Socialist Party to self-reflect. Indeed, that seems to be what President

Maduro is doing.

In the last 48 hours he has called for the resignations of his ministers, led a demonstration to show that the Party will not miss this opportunity to improve itself, moved to appoint new judges, and promised further reforms in the coming days and weeks in the lead up to the new National Assembly taking their seats on January 5th. Maduro has moved to demonstrate to the people that he's heard the message loud and clear; that he and PSUV will work to regain the trust of the people; that the revolution will continue.

There are countless Pedros and Glens throughout this beautiful country. There are also millions of people like the purple-fingered girls on the Metrocable cars and platforms, and the teary-eyed man on the Hot Corner. The poor and the working class deserve a bright future in this amazing land, and the Revolution must work to continue building just such a future.

Anacoana, a young woman and leader I met at the Comúna El Panal 2021 in Caracas, stated it about as poetically as one can. On the eve of the election, I asked her, "What will happen to the commune movement and to the Revolution if the election goes against the Chavista government, and the right wing returns to power? Will the commune movement come to an end?" Her answer was stunning, and I will quote it verbatim:

"NO!!! We will not go back (No volverán). 'We will not go back' is not just a slogan...No volverán is not a phrase for a t-shirt. It's a principle. It's OUR principle."

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