

Venezuela: The political significance of the election results and the new struggles ahead

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Supporters and opponents of Venezuela's Bolivarian revolution have come out with differing assessments post the November 23 regional elections, which Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez had defined as the most important electoral contest yet for the process of change.

In the lead-up to the poll, which involved 22 governorships, 328 mayors and 233 legislative council positions, Chavez presented the vote as a virtual referendum on his government's socialist project — and goal of deepening the revolutionary process that has succeeded in significantly reducing poverty, but is facing increasing pressures with huge amounts of power still in the hands of the corporate elite.

Echoed by the international media, the opposition — whose traditional support is drawn from the upper and middle classes — claimed it stood on the verge of delivering a significant blow to the Chavista movement that has drawn its support from the poor majority, while continuing its attempts to paint the government as dictatorial.

However, as with the previous 12 national polls held since Chavez was first elected in 1998 (11 won by pro-Chavez forces), the vote was free and fair, as noted by the more than 130 international observers.

Outcomes

The United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), led by Chavez, has highlighted to its victories in 17 governor races, as well as winning 81% of all mayoral positions and a national PSUV vote that surpassed that of the counter-revolutionary opposition by 1.5 million.

The PSUV, with almost 5 million votes on its own, far surpassed its next contender, the opposition A New Time (UNT) party, which scored just over 1 million.

The US-backed right-wing opposition has highlighted the fact that it won the three largest states — Zulia, Carabobo and Miranda — and the Greater Caracas mayoralty.

It now has control of five states.

In the last regional elections, held in October 2004, the pro-Chavez forces were riding the wave of their crushing victory in the August 2004 recall referendum on Chavez's mandate. Against a demoralised opposition, who — following unproven claims of fraud by their leaders in the referendum — largely abstained, the Chavistas won all but two states.

In elections traditionally marked by low turnouts, only 46% of registered voters participated.

This time, on top of an increase in the number of registered voters, a massive 65% voted — reflecting the increased political participation that has occurred as part of the Bolivarian revolution

These elections occurred one year after the first electoral defeat suffered by the Chavista forces. On December 2 last year, voters narrowly rejected the government's proposals for a wide-ranging, and at times confusing, package of constitutional reforms that in large part were aimed at opening the path to deepening the revolution.

After a record vote for Chavez in excess of 7 million in the December 2006 presidential elections, some 3 million abstained in the constitutional reform referendum, allowing the opposition — whose vote was only slightly larger than the 4.3 million it received in the presidential poll — its first electoral victory since 1998.

The opposition parties and the 95% of media outlets aligned with the counter-revolution immediately announced the beginning of the end for Chavismo. The private media talked up the possibility of the opposition winning 12-15 governorships.

The right wing hoped that some of the factors that contributed to the referendum defeat — dissatisfaction with the bureaucracy and corruption, the poor performance of a lot of Chavista officials and ongoing problems such as crime and housing — would pave the way for significant gains based on making inroads into Chavez's impoverished support base.

However, far from focusing on individual candidates, the campaign became in large part a referendum on the direction of Venezuela — between accelerating towards socialism or else ratifying the decline of support for Chavez and opening up important spaces from which the opposition could launch a frontal attack on the revolution.

Results

Given this scenario, what do the results mean?

The Chavista vote rose from just over 4 million last year to more than 5.5 million this year, a reflection of an important recuperation of support although only half way to the 7 million votes for Chavez in 2006.

Especially significant is the nearly 5 million votes cast for the PSUV, consolidating it as the primary political force in Venezuela less than a year after it was formally constituted.

Chavez had called for the formation of the PSUV after his 2006 victory as a way of uniting the often dispersed revolutionary forces and creating a badly needed political tool to lead the process towards socialism.

Only properly formed this year, the lack of such a tool to lead the constitutional reform campaign contributed to the campaign's defeat.

Previously, the process had to rely on the amorphous electoral machine of the Movement for the Fifth Republic (MVR), viewed by much of the ranks as a vehicle for opportunists, and a number of smaller parties.

Significantly, the PSUV held primary elections for its candidates, involving 2.5 million people — the first time this has occurred in Venezuela's history.

On top of the PSUV vote, a further 500,000 votes were obtained by candidates from other parties that are part of the pro-Chavez Patriotic Alliance that involves the PSUV, while a number of “dissident Chavista” candidates that stood against PSUV candidates garnering just over 400,000 votes.

These originated either as candidates that didn’t win PSUV pre-selection or else were proposed by the Communist Party of Venezuela or the Homeland For All party — both of whom have declined to join the PSUV, but formed part of the Patriotic Alliance.

This comparatively low vote indicates the general rejection of those from within Chavismo who attempted to pose as alternatives to the PSUV.

While in some cases such candidates expressed discontent from the left with the PSUV candidates, but in most cases they were candidates whose political positions were counter-posed to the revolutionary process.

The vote for opposition candidates nationally tallied up to just over 4.1 million, a drop of almost 10% from their vote in the 2007 referendum.

Opposition gains?

Much has been made in the Western media of the fact that the opposition won five states, as opposed to the two it secured in 2004. However, before the latest poll five governors elected as pro-Chavez candidates in 2004 had broken with the government.

Two of the governors who broke with Chavez — in Aragua and Sucre — were aligned with the social-democratic party Podemos that left the pro-Chavez camp in 2007. This time, Podemos candidates were supported by the opposition and vice versa.

Three other governors — in Carabobo, Guarico and Trujillo — openly broke with the process this year, standing candidates against the PSUV.

This means from 16 states previously controlled by Chavista forces, the PSUV no hold 17.

While the PSUV did not win the two states the opposition won in 2004 (Zulia and Nueva Esparta), they regained control of Aragua and Sucre — destroying Podemos on the way — as well as Guarico and Trujillo.

In Carabobo, the opposition candidate won a narrow victory — with the votes won by the right-wing Chavista “dissident” almost certainly preventing the PSUV candidate from winning.

Having narrowly won Tachira, which borders with Colombia, in 2004, the Chavistas lost it this time.

Furthermore, the PSUV won 264 municipalities, up from the 226 the Chavistas won in 2004, including 80 of the 100 most populated municipalities. The opposition dropped from 70 to 56 mayoral offices.

The biggest upsets, however, came with the opposition victories in the state of Miranda — which includes part of Caracas — and the Greater Caracas mayoralty.

Balance sheet

The first thing to note when drawing up a balance sheet is the partial revival of the Chavista vote. This can be explained primarily by three factors.

Firstly, some decisive government measures this year to combat widespread problems causing dissatisfaction among the population had an impact.

This includes the nationalisation of strategic industries such as cement, steel and milk production, together with policies that helped overcome food shortages, increase the construction of housing and, in part, improvements in combatting crime.

Secondly, the non-stop political campaigning by Chavez, who remains hugely popular, ensured that each time he visited a state and raised the hand of a PSUV candidate, their standing in the polls rose several percentage points.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, was the eruption of the PSUV. Together with Chavez, it was the grassroots units of the PSUV that drove the election campaign.

This dynamic relationship between Chavez and the grassroots, revived after a certain weakening in 2007, was for the first time expressed in an organic manner through PSUV structures.

This was crucial for overcoming some of the discontent among the popular sectors.

This relationship was ratified on election day when internal PSUV exit polls looked bleak around midday. The PSUV moved into action and mobilised the popular sectors that recognised the danger.

This helps explain not only the fact that voting booths in many areas remained open well past the official closing time of 4pm, but also why the opposition tried to pressure the National Electoral Commission to close the polling booths after that time — despite Venezuelan law stating that as long as there are people waiting to vote, a booth cannot be closed.

In the other direction, it also explains the surprising losses in Miranda and Greater Caracas.

While an important turnaround in voting trends occurred, with many of the last polling booths to close being in impoverished neighbourhood of Petare, this was not enough to secure victory in the Sucre municipality, handing the opposition victory in Miranda and Greater Caracas.

The mismanagement and corruption of the previous mayor of Greater Caracas, Miranda governor and Sucre mayor — all Chavistas and all with jurisdiction over Petare — meant that many in poorer areas of Petare refused to vote for Chavista candidates.

In these areas, abstention averaged between 40-45%.

Another factor was popular rejection of candidates like incumbent Miranda governor Diosdado Cabello — widely viewed as a leader of the Chavista right wing.

The opposition vote overall stayed solid at around 40%. While such a vote is not enough to

win national elections, a process that aims to move towards socialism — which requires the support and mobilisation of the great majority to defeat the capitalist elite — has to break down this bloc.

This consistent vote can be explained more by the corporate media monopoly than the policies of a divided opposition, which is only capable of uniting around the goal of removing Chavez.

Another important factor is US intervention. On the border states of Zulia and Tachira, right-wing Colombian paramilitaries played a significant role in ensuring opposition victories, while the US government agency USAID funded opposition-run “popular networks” that built a base of support among discontented sectors of the poor in Petare.

The election outcome and reactions to it seem to point in the direction of growing confrontation, and a possible return to the turbulent period of 2002-2003.

While the opposition secured control of some crucial posts, it is clear there remains strong support for Chavez and the revolutionary process.

At the same time, the revolution needs to resolve some internal questions.

The rejection by the revolution’s support base among the working people of right-wing Chavista candidates, and the possibility of newly elected Chavista governors jumping ship — potentially in Lara where the new PSUV governor previously expressed his willingness to run on an opposition ticket and formed his own party during the campaign — demonstrates the need to carry out the “revolution within the revolution” that Chavez has spoken about.

Crucial will be building on the momentum to develop the PSUV into not simply a powerful electoral machine, but a real political instrument at the service of working people and the revolution.

Chavez has stated that the election results are a mandate for accelerating the pace towards socialism. This will require dealing with the domination of the corporate media, US subversion and capitalist economic sabotage.

Opposition violence

Chavez has openly warned the opposition governors that any destabilising activity will be met by the full weight of the law. A number of opposition governors were openly involved in the 2002 military coup that briefly overthrew Chavez, and will undoubtedly seek to use the institutions they control against the national government.

Already, disturbing reports have emerged of opposition thugs in the newly opposition-run areas in Miranda, Tachira and Caracas, as well as other places, violently attacking activists involved in communal councils, social missions and other popular organisations.

In some places, violent street battles broke out, while in others activists were violently ejected from buildings that house the popular projects that have helped tackle the needs of the poor.

Addressing supporters on November 28, Chavez read for eight minutes straight examples of attacks on the pro-poor social missions that have occurred, without completing the list. He

declared: "They want confrontation. Venezuelan people, Venezuelan soldiers, we are ready to defend the gains of the Bolivarian Revolution!... We are willing to die for the Bolivarian revolution, for the spaces that the people have recuperated and the path we have chosen to take.

"Where a civil or military functionary tries to interfere in the process of the recuperation of the property that belongs to the people, they need to be singled out by the people ... and we need to apply the full weight of the law against this functionary, no matter who they are.

"This is part of what I call a revolution within the revolution."

That day, thousands of people marched in defence of the social missions in the capital of Miranda, Los Teques, and against the newly elected opposition governor, Henrique Capriles Radonski, who has been accused of orchestrating violent attacks.

The march was led by Chavista mayor-elect of the Guaicaipuro municipality, Alirio Mendoza, who stated: "We are here today supporting the people in defense of their constitutional rights. We can not allow the representative of capitalism, of fascism to violently seize the spaces that we have won with struggle and revolutionary commitment."

In this new political context, the PSUV will have to develop a strategy to directly confront any coup-plotting activity in Miranda, Caracas, Zulia and other regions, which can only occur by simultaneously confronting the powerful right-wing within the PSUV.

The next year looms as decisive for the Bolivarian revolution, as the process faces the pressure of likely lower oil prices, internal battles over direction and the newly secured control over important positions by the counter-revolution.

On the other hand, the important gains in 2008, as well as the still-high popular support for the process, indicate the potential for significant progress.

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