

Victory for Venezuela's Socialists in Crucial Elections

November 2008 Landslide

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Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Global Research, November 25, 2008

25 November 2008

The pro-Chavez United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) won 72% of the governorships in the November 23, 2008 elections and 58% of the popular vote, dumbfounding the predictions of most of the pro-capitalist pollsters and the vast majority of the mass media who favored the opposition.

PSUV candidates defeated incumbent opposition governors in three states (Guaro, Sucre, Aragua) and lost two states (Miranda and Tachira). The opposition retained the governorship in a tourist center (Nueva Esparta) and won in Tachira, a state bordering Colombia, Carabobo and the oil state of Zulia, as well as scoring an upset victory in the populous state of Miranda and taking the mayoralty district of the capital, Caracas. The socialist victory was especially significant because the voter turnout of 65% exceeded all previous non-presidential elections. The prediction by the propaganda pollsters that a high turnout would favor the opposition also reflected wishful thinking.

The significance of the socialist victory is clear if we put it in a comparative historical context:

- A. Few if any government parties in Europe, North or South American have retained such high levels of popular support in free and open elections.
- B. The PSUV retained its high level of support in the context of several radical economic measures, including the nationalization of major cement, steel, financial and other private capitalist monopolies.
- C. The Socialists won despite the 70% decline in oil prices (from \$140 to \$52 dollars a barrel), Venezuela's principle source of export earnings, and largely because the government maintained most of its funding for its social programs.
- D. The electorate was more selective in its voting decisions regarding Chavista candidates – rewarding candidates who performed adequately in providing government services and punishing those who ignored or were unresponsive to popular demands. While President Chavez campaigned for all the Socialist candidates, voters did not uniformly follow his lead where they had strong grievances against local Chavista incumbents, as was the case with outgoing Governor Disdado Cabello of Miranda and the Mayor of the Capital District of Caracas. Socialist victories were mostly the result of a deliberate, class interest based vote and not simply a reflex

identification with President Chavez.

- E. The decisive victory of the PSUV provides the basis for confronting the deepening collapse of world capitalism with socialist measures, instead of pouring state funds to rescue bankrupt capitalist banks, commercial and manufacturing enterprises. The collapse of capitalism facilitates the socialization of most of the key economic sectors. Most Venezuelan firms are heavily indebted to the state and local banks. The Chavez government can ask the firms to repay their debts or handover the keys – in effect bringing about a painless and eminently legal transition to socialism.

The election results point to deepening polarization between the hard right and the socialist left. The centrist social-democratic ex-Chavista governors were practically wiped from the political map. The rightist winner in Miranda State, Henrique Capriles Radonsky, had tried to burn down the Cuban embassy during the failed military coup of April 2002 and the newly elected Governor of Zulia, Pablo Perez, was the hand picked candidate of the former hard-line rightwing Governor Rosales.

While the opposition controlled state governorships and municipal mayors can provide a basis to attack the national government, the economic crisis will sharply limit the amount of resources available to maintain services and will increase their dependence on the federal government. A frontal assault on the Chavez Government spending state and local funds on partisan warfare could lead to a decline of federal welfare transfers and would provoke grassroots discontent. The rightwing won on the basis of promising to improve state and city services and end corruption and favoritism. Resorting to their past practices of crony politics and extreme obstructionism could quickly cost them popular support and undermine their hopes of transforming local gains into national power. The newly elected opposition governors and mayors need the cooperation and support of the Federal Government, especially in the context of the deepening crisis, or they will lose popular support and credibility.

Conclusion

There is no point in expecting the mass media to recognize the Socialist victory. Its effort to magnify the significance of the opposition's 40% electoral vote and their victory in 20% of the states was predictable. In the post-election period, the Socialists, no doubt, will critically evaluate the results and hopefully re-think the selection of future candidates, emphasizing job performance on local issues over and above professed loyalty to President Chavez and 'Socialism'. The immediate and most pressing task facing the PSUV, President Chavez, the legislators and the newly elected Chavez officials is to formulate a comprehensive socio-economic strategic plan to confront the global collapse of capitalism. This is especially critical in dealing with the sharp fall in oil prices, federal revenues and the inevitable decline in government spending. Chavez has promised to maintain all social programs even if oil prices remain at or below \$50 dollars a barrel. This is clearly a positive and defensible position if the government manages to reduce its huge subsidies to the private sector and doesn't embark on any bailout of bankrupt or nearly bankrupt private firms. While \$40 billion dollars in reserves can serve as a temporary cushion, the fact remains that the government, with the backing of its majorities in the federal legislature and at the state levels, needs to make hard choices and not simply print money, run bigger deficits, devalue

the currency and exacerbate the already high rates of annual inflation (31% as of November).

The only reasonable strategy is to take control of foreign trade and directly oversee the commanding heights of the productive and distributive sectors and set priorities that defend popular living standards. To counter-act bureaucratic ineptness and neutralize lazy elected officials, effective power and control must be transferred to organized workers and autonomous consumer and neighborhood councils. The recent past reveals that merely electing socialist mayors or governors is not sufficient to ensure the implementation of progressive policies and the delivery of basic services. Liberal representative government (even with elected socialists) requires at a minimum mass popular control and mass pressure to implement the hard decisions and popular priorities in the midst of a deepening and prolonged economic crisis.

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