Turmoil Deepens as Maduro Clings to Power

written by Dan Davison | August 4, 2024

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro

Protests continue to erupt across Venezuela following the disputed presidential election of July 28. Demonstrators have faced tear gas and pellet shots. As of July 30, human rights NGOs had registered at least 11 deaths. Tarek William Saab, the Prosecutor General of Venezuela, claims that 749 detentions have been made, that the detainees are all “delinquents”, and that they will be prosecuted for terrorism and instigation of hate.

Nicolás Maduro of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) has ruled the country since the death of his predecessor Hugo Chávez in 2013. In Venezuela, votes are made via machine at voting centers. The votes are recorded in tallies (“actas”), the data is sent electronically to the National Electoral Council (CNE), and the CNE can stop the transmission at will. In the early hours of July 29, Elvis Amoroso, a key Maduro ally and president of the CNE, declared Maduro to have an “unassailable lead” of 51.2% of the vote against 44.2% for Edmundo Gonzáles, the candidate for Unitary Platform (PU), the main, right-wing opposition, after 80% of the votes had been counted. Later that same day, the CNE ratified Maduro’s victory.

The CNE did not provide a breakdown of the claimed results. According to Gonzáles and PU leader María Corina Machado, the transmission of information was interrupted an hour before Amoroso’s announcement, when they had received only 40% of the results (https://venezuelanvoices.org/2024/07/29/the-frauds-second-stage-begins/). Amoroso alleged that this was due to hacking, later claimed to have been traced to North Macedonia and coordinated by three opposition leaders, including Machado. Gonzáles and Machado assert that, at the point of the transmission’s interruption, Gonzáles was leading by a proportion of around two thirds to one third. This is consistent with the exit polls, which had projected a landslide victory for Gonzáles, and with opinion polls since 2015, which indicate the Maduro government’s popular support to be somewhere between 10 and 20% (https://venezuelanvoices.org/2024/07/28/presidential-elections-in-venezuela-what-to-expect/).

In the run up to the election, the government arbitrarily blocked the nomination of opposition candidates, including Machado, who had won the right-wing opposition’s primaries; her successor Corina Yoris; and Manuel Isidro Molina, who had been supported by leftist organizations, including the Communist Party (PCV). On the election day itself, there were reports of voting centers closing early, opposition witnesses being denied entry, CNE personnel preventing access to the actas, and people being denied access to citizen verification, a process required by law to reconcile the voting

receipts with the data registered by each center's scrutiny report. Out of the over 7.7 million Venezuelans who have left the country, only just under 68,000 are registered to vote, often due to bureaucratic obstacles designed to limit the vote abroad.

Aside from PU, the center-right candidate Enrique Márquez (supported by the PCV), the independent centrist candidate Antonio Ecarri, the left-oppositionist Socialism and Freedom Party (PSL), and the Fatherland for All party (PPT), which had previously been a longtime ally of Chávez, have all rejected the official election results.

Chávez and the PSUV's predecessor, the Fifth Republic Movement (MRV), came to power in 1998. This means that Venezuela has experienced 25 years of near-uninterrupted Chavista rule. Since Maduro came to power in 2013, the economy has shrunk by an estimated 80%. While this is frequently blamed on U.S. sanctions, the economic crisis was underway well before those sanctions were imposed. In 2023, the inflation rate reached 360%. With low pay and chronic shortages of basic amenities, many Venezuelans struggle to buy food.

Despite its pro-worker posturing, the PSUV regime systematically attacks the working class through austerity measures, keeps a Mafia-like grip on the unions, and persecutes labor activists like Rodney Álvarez, who was imprisoned for over ten years. Most of the Communal Councils hailed as participatory venues for working-class democracy are little more than passive feedback mechanisms for the bureaucracy. For all of Maduro's "anti-imperialist" rhetoric, his government is itself backed by imperialist powers like Russia and China. Under joint venture contracts, Maduro has permitted multinational corporations to conduct ecologically destructive mining for natural resources in Venezuela's Amazon region. Last December, Maduro held a demagogic, nationalist referendum to annex the Essequibo region, which makes up around two-thirds of Guyana. In March he moved to sign this annexation into law and almost certainly intends to let Russian and Chinese companies extract oil in the region.

In the election, a number of Trotskyist organizations like the PSL, Socialist Tide (MS), and the League of Workers for Socialism of Venezuela (LTS), plus the PPT, called for a null vote under the slogan "The working class has no candidate". They raised important political and economic demands like guaranteeing freedom of association and raising the minimum wage. Another section of the left grouped itself under the originally Zapatista slogan "The other campaign", calling in a fairly abstract manner for an "alternative of the exploited ones". The PCV hoped its integration into Márquez's campaign could constitute an alternative pole and develop a "workers' government" (https://venezuelanvoices.org/2024/07/28/presidential-elections-in-venezuela-what-to-expect/). How is anyone's guess.

The real decider of who rules Venezuela is the military top brass https://tempestmag.org/2023/12/venezuelan-ambitions-and-guyanese-oil/. So far, they have remained in lockstep behind Maduro, as they did in the 2017 protest wave against the government's increasing authoritarianism and in the presidential crisis of 2019-2022. Chavismo has long been based on an uneasy alliance between sections of the working class, the national bourgeoisie, and the military, with the latter playing a central role in state administration. This is why I regard Chavismo as a form of Bonapartism.The international left should support the Venezuelan working class against the attacks it faces from imperialist powers and the PSUV regime alike.

This means, among other things, pushing back against right-wing calls for foreign intervention while amplifying and making direct links with anti-regime socialists and trade unionists in Venezuela. In other words, to show genuine solidarity with Venezuelan workers, we must reject campism.