The Venezuelan Constituent Assembly Election–What's at Stake?

August 8, 2017

On Sunday 30 July, so-called elections took place to a so-called Constituent Assembly in Venezuela. It is important, for the future, the revolution, and democracy, not to fool ourselves about the meanings of the words being used here.

For all Venezuelans, there can be no doubt: what was elected today has nothing in common with a sovereign constituent assembly. By “a sovereign constituent assembly.” we mean one which exercises power.

In order to submit the constitution to the whole of the people, in a sovereign manner, it is necessary that the assembly rule over any President, any internal or external guardian, any military or bureaucratic pressure: in other words, that the state-capitalist apparatus be defeated or dismantled. Because it is wholly democratic, the demand for a sovereign constituent assembly is revolutionary. The soviets and workers' councils are in fact organs of the same sort, which exercised power at the level of production, or over a smaller territorial area.

Maduro's assembly has been convened by a President with disproportionate powers, under the guardianship of, and threatened by, the army; it is to contain 364 deputies elected by municipal constituencies (the first piece of gerrymandering, which opens the door to cronyism in underpopulated rural areas, compared with an under-represented urban population, including the mixed-race “Chavista people” of Caracas), 173 designated by “social groups” as accredited by the state (company- or state-run unions, various organisations of the crisis-wracked Chavista milieu, bosses) and 8 representatives of indigenous peoples; and the kicker: the candidates may not be members of any political party!

Neither a constituent assembly, nor a soviet, but a plebiscitary and manipulated chamber which looks much more like the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations of Italian Fascism.

This being posed clearly, the accepted version of events in Venezuela which is doing the rounds contains two opposing accounts, which mirror each other. The dominant media in Western countries explain that there is a “democratic opposition.” which is being repressed by a totalitarian socialistic regime. The “anti-imperialists” like to tell themselves that the opposition is the CIA and the petit bourgeoisie which is aiming for a re-run of Chile 1973. They are jamming the real present situation into a false schema which is taken from Chile, by way of the failed attempt to depose Chavez in 2002, and which was, above all, an imperialist operation.

The predominance of these myths and mythical representations indicates the level of stultificaiton afflicting broad swathes of “the left.” 28 years on from the fall of the Berlin Wall. The Latin American left has much work to do after the failures of PTism [i.e. the politics of the Brazilian Workers' Party or PT] and Chavismo. Without putting class front and centre in an analysis of what's really going on, it won't manage it.

The point of departure of the current crisis of Venezuela is the total erosion of Chavismo, as it has not, at any point, threatened capitalism (its conflict with North American imperialism is real but it has never posed any threat to capitalist social relations). With Chavez dead, Maduro was elected on a slim margin, and later suffered a major defeat in legislative elections at the end of 2015, where the rightwing and centrist opposition groups around the MUD (platform of democratic unity, which is made up of the remains of the two pre-Chavez capitalist parties, which were the “social democratic party” and the Christian Democrats, plus the Primero Justicia party, the main force of the right wing today, along with various smaller parties) took around 60% of the votes (on a 74% turn-out).

In short, in order to get such a result, the MUD's electorate could not be limited to the “purely” bourgeois portion of the population, but the greater part of the population, including the poor, peasants and wage workers who had supported Chavez, but who now were moved to vote against Maduro and the policies of corruption and plunder pursued by the PSUV (the “Chavista” party). However, this by no means proves that the whole people wants to put the MUD in power and see the liquidation of the fragile social gains made since the 2000s (essentially, food allocations, however inadequate, and free school meals).

Abandoned and delegitimised, Maduro, with the backing of the gang of military types and wheeler-dealers that make up the “Bolivarian bourgeoisie.” never contemplated calling on the people and their democratic self-organisation to respond to the challenges; at the same time, he dismissed the suggestion made by the MUD leaders and some currents of “Chavista” opinion of a “national union.” favouring instead a Bonapartist flight forward. And so he went on an authoritarian offensive. This offensive is aimed against the Venezuelan people: it aims to confiscate any free election, and, soon enough, to ban them entirely.

While undertaking this offensive, Maduro (drawing on the catalogue of stupidities of the Putinist conspiracy theorists and “anti-imperialists” who provide him with his ideological baggage) supported Trump in the US Presidential elections (unlike the Cuban Communist Party, which put out pro-Clinton “signals”). He never made any kind of threat to discontinue payments of “external debt.” first and foremost to imperialist American banks; he never proposed to change the situation whereby US oil companies Chevron, Halliburton and Schlumberger hold roughly 40% of shares in the Venezuelan state oil company (what anti-imperialism!).

The victory that Maduro won thanks to his fake constituent assembly and with the goodwill of the army does not in any sense represent the preservation of the “gains of socialism.” or even of the few social gains from the Chavista period. On the contrary: elementary logic would seem to indicate that Maduro's triumphant assumption of full powers will now permit their complete elimination.

A victory for the MUD would also have given them every opportunity to turn on the poor and toiling majority of the population. The demonstrations, which have been rolling on for months, are supported by a substantial portion of the latter, but not by broader layers. When the broader masses intervene, it tends to be for “pillages” – that is, hunger riots. But the method of “general strikes” called by the MUD, with the support of a large swath of private-sector employers consists of setting up roadblocks guarded by young Guarimbas, who have brutalised, murdered, or burned alive several people who “looked Chavista.” that is, were mixed-raced people of a slightly-too-dark complexion.

On the other hand, since 2015, the regime has been running a “Popular Liberation Operation” (OLP), made up of armed groups who wear a death's-head mask, who aim to murder alleged hooligans, in the manner of similar killings in the Philippines and Indonesia. The bloodiest repression doesn't make the headlines of the world press. One way or another, the gangs of petit-bourgeois “whites” who go out hunting down “Chavista-looking types”; and the gangs of cops and lumpen “Chavistas” both represent elements which tend in the direction of the formation of fascist bands: and in any case they don't fight each other, but the population is oppressed by, fears, and hates both sides in equal measure.

In terms of the opinions of the majority of the people, we can glean some clues from an article by Zoila Mara published here, which indicates that the Party of Socialism and Liberty tendency around Orlando Chirino (one of the few who fought unceasingly for three decades against repression and for the independence of the workers' and trade union movement [see his position: Venezuela: Coup d'État or popular revolt? here) has “lost its class compass” because it says “Maduro out.” which means, according to the tendency writing here (Nuevo MAS of Argentina), calling for power to the MUD. In the same article, it writes that the population: “no longer wants this government”. If an article from Venezuela, for political reasons, condemns a current which contemplates the overthrow of the government, but nonetheless says that the popular masses who were Chavista once don't want the Chavistas any more, then it must be true…

But of course it is up to the workers of the nation of Venezuela to do away with the one who, at the present moment, represent the spear-tip of capitalist interests, who are sowing famine, murder and corruption: Nicolas Maduro. And the political question which we have to debate is this: how can we help them?

The virtual certainty of a majority abstention in the “constituent assembly” elections gives a clue. Finding a way out of the catastrophe requires the independent organisation of the workers. And they have the right to say to Maduro, from their point of view, for their rights and without entailing any kind of support to the MUD, a simple command: get out!

This article was originally published in French by Arguments pour la lutte sociale.