

Venezuela: Constituent Assembly opens new chapter

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The convening of a new Constituent Assembly has opened the latest, and possibly decisive, chapter in Venezuela's political crisis. President Nicolas Maduro summoned the Assembly to give his regime greater democratic legitimacy and to sideline the parliament, which is dominated by the right wing opposition alliance, MUD. It was a desperate measure in response to increasing instability, inflation and hunger but one that is likely to narrow the government's base of support and increase its reliance on a repressive apparatus that is itself unreliable. Although it echoed the Constituent Assembly that drew up the present Constitution, today's Assembly is a very different body from that of July 1999, elected at the height of the ?Bolivarian Revolution?.

One of the first acts of the new Assembly was to remove Luisa Ortega from her post as Attorney General. Ortega, who was appointed under Hugo Chavez and reappointed by Maduro only two years ago, had opposed the calling of the Assembly as an undemocratic manoeuvre. Her sacking will undoubtedly be used by the MUD to strengthen their claim to be ?defenders of democracy?.

The opposition itself condemned the call for a Constituent Assembly and boycotted the election, enforcing that with road blocks and pickets. Whatever the truth of the figures for the actual turn out, the boycott ensured that Maduro supporters completely dominate the Assembly, vividly demonstrating the institutional clash between it and the parliament. Now, the ?democrats? of MUD are calling for parallel state institutions, a kind of ?round table? of ?democratic unity?, clearly a pseudo-democratic façade for an alternative government of the pro-imperialist right wing.

This comes after months of campaigning against the government, seeking to take advantage of the impact of the worsening economic situation. The roots of the crisis undoubtedly lie in the Bolivarian regime's failure to restructure the economy away from complete dependence on oil but the immediate effects; hyper-inflation, dramatic shortages of food and other essential goods have been exacerbated by systematic hoarding and black marketeering. Rather than mobilising the masses and recognising the right of popular organisations, including trades unions and community groups, to take direct action to resolve such problems, the government has resorted to repression.

The opposition in Venezuela is not out for ?power sharing?, but for regime change. In this it is backed by US-imperialism and other Western powers, all the pro-US Latin American regimes and the media. In Venezuela, the MUD represents the class interests of the ?old? oligarchy, who treated the country and the state as their private property. It has been able to rally the ?middle? classes, sections of the bourgeoisie, the intermediate professional strata in town and countryside as well as students and even disillusioned former supporters of the regime.

Until now, it has not been able to win over the army, or even key units. The attack on the barracks in Valencia on August 6 by para-militaries, led by former officers, however, shows that disaffection is spreading. In addition, the Western imperialists are actively encouraging the ousting of Maduro, even by armed uprising and civil war. Washington has officially branded the Venezuelan regime a 'dictatorship' and imposed further sanctions. That well known democrat, the Brazilian putschist Michel Temer, has joined the campaign and, together with the other full members; Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay, has suspended Venezuela's rights within Mercosur, South America's common market.

Whilst the US-government is openly hostile to Maduro, other imperialists take a less direct approach. The French president, Emmanuel Macron, has offered himself as a 'mediator'. However, what could a 'mediation' achieve other than extending the time and space for the opposition to further undermine the regime and achieve the ousting or capitulation of the Bolivarian government, be it via a total retreat, a 'transitional period' or an outright armed assault?

The policy and character of the current regime

In that light, it is ironic that Maduro himself has called for 'mediation' with the opposition or, more precisely, with the Venezuelan capitalist class and imperialism, for years. Indeed, a number of the uncritical supporters of the Bolivarian government never tire of explaining that it has aimed at compromises, agreements and incorporation of the oppositional forces on several occasions. What they seem not to understand is that the old elites and their imperialist backers are not interested in regaining a part of their wealth, they want it all, and now they see the chance to get it.

The current economic crisis originated in the financial crash of 2008 and deteriorating oil prices. Under Chavez and Maduro alike, the whole Bolivarian project, redistribution of the country's wealth, social programmes for the poor, targeted incentives for investment by the Venezuelan capitalists, all rested on the oil revenue. As long as the country achieved a surplus, it could sustain real social improvements for the poor in the form of minimum income and wages. However, it did not tackle the country's dependence on oil exports and so failed to change its economic structure.

There is a simple, fundamental reason for this. Under both Chavez and Maduro, the Bolivarian brand of 'socialism' did not take on private ownership of the means of production. Rather than expropriation of the imperialist and indigenous capitalist classes, it aimed to 'encourage' the 'patriotic' bourgeoisie and to develop a 'mixed' economy, a nicer word for a capitalist one.

This not only failed to overcome the economic legacy of the semi-colonial structure of the country but also to appease the traditional ruling class. They continued to aim for the overthrow of the regime although, after several failed coup attempts and electoral defeats, they were obliged to adopt a more defensive strategy and present themselves as more 'democratic'.

At the same time, the maintenance of capitalist property relations and the market, and reliance on the bourgeois state apparatus, also led to the creation of a class enemy within the Bolivarian movement. Many bureaucrats and officers did not only 'mediate' bureaucratically between antagonistic classes, often at the expense of the workers and poor, but became capitalists themselves, the 'Boli-bourgeoisie'. The Army also established a number of economic initiatives for itself.

Once the oil revenue could not finance the domestic social programmes, the regime tried to maintain them by devaluation of the currency and foreign debts. This resulted in a massive increase of public debt. Today, Venezuela, despite its huge oil reserves, is one of the most indebted countries in the world. However, just as the regime avoided any serious challenge to private property in the country and only

resorted to occasional nationalisations where it was forced to, usually by workers' protests against their bosses, it has continued to service its debts until now.

All this, however, could not prevent the collapse of the economy, which has been shrinking since 2013. The IMF estimates that GDP shrank by 35 percent in the last 4 years, a sharper contraction than the US economy between 1929 and 1933. The country or, rather, the working class, the peasants and the poor, has been hard hit by hyper-inflation and growing poverty. Hunger has become a widespread phenomenon, not primarily as a result of shortage of food, but because of speculation, hoarding and an expanding black market. All this encouraged corrupt and bourgeois elements in the state apparatus to enrich themselves. Moreover, the right-wing see the growing economic crisis as a golden opportunity and resort to economic sabotage and boycotts in order to demoralise the masses, increase their desperation and thus destroy the social base of the PSUV and the government.

Maduro's own policy has actually done much to that effect already. Whilst the claims that his government has no base whatsoever are clearly untrue, it is equally clear that its social support is shrinking. The constituent assembly not only failed to appease the opposition, it did nothing to enthuse the Bolivarian movement either. What could a new constitution bring if the government fails to solve the burning questions of the day; the question of food, the revival of economic life? What was needed was not a ?constituent assembly? stuffed full of the government's chosen supporters, but drastic measures to expropriate the rich, the capitalists, the speculators, both from the opposition and from within the ?Bolivarian? state apparatus.

Strategy

That, however, would require a complete change of political strategy and programme. The current crisis has revealed the inner contradictions of the whole Chavista/Bolivarian, populist ?socialist? strategy. It is a utopian attempt to reconcile the interests of the working class and the popular masses with those of the capitalist class, to serve the exploited and the exploiters alike. The impossibility of implementing such a strategy is what has led to a further move to the right by the Maduro government, offering concessions to imperialist capital, not only US, but also Russian and Chinese. It can also be seen in the increasing concentration of power in the state apparatus and thus the bonapartist character of the regime. Whilst the government may have intended to ease the situation of the masses, this proved impossible because it would not touch private property or the social power of the capitalists and their supporters.

Revolutionaries must not hide these facts or turn into apologists for the government as have a number of the Stalinist or left-nationalist supporters of the Bolivarian revolution. It is essential to openly raise the criticism and point to its roots in the Bolivarian project, since the gains made in the past decades cannot be defended, let alone extended, as long as that project lasts. Only a change of strategy; expropriation of the imperialists, capitalists and big landowners and the replacement of the ?Bolivarian? bourgeois state by a workers' state based on councils and armed mass militias, will be able to defeat the counter-revolution that is already being prepared.

Faced with the offensive of the right-wing and US-imperialism, revolutionaries have to advance a political alternative to Maduro, a strategy for socialist revolution and the creation of a workers' government based not on the existing bureaucratic apparatus or an army that cannot be relied upon socially or politically. At the same time, however, it must also take into account the immediate danger of a counter-revolutionary, pro-imperialist takeover or even a US-sponsored armed intervention.

Although the Maduro regime is by no means a workers' government, its defeat at the hands of the pro-imperialist opposition would be a defeat for the working class and popular masses. The situation is

comparable to that in Chile before the coup against Allende or the civil war and the popular front in Spain. In those cases, too, popular front governments, that is, cross-class governments including working class organisations from social-democratic and Stalinist origins, limited the radicalism of the masses in order to compromise with capitalism. In Venezuela, the Bolivarian movement incorporated a popular front from within. The PSUV, a mass party of millions, is itself a popular front. As Trotsky observed, such a formation has an inherent tendency towards bonapartism, since it needs a strong man, a caudillo, to present itself as standing above the classes. The more adverse the situation becomes, the more it develops towards a bonapartist form of rule. The more it tries to rest on the forces of order, the bureaucracy and bourgeois army, the more it prepares its own overthrow.

As with Spain and Chile, Maduro's regime does not mark the beginning of a period of stability imposed after the defeat of a revolutionary class struggle, as with the classical bonapartism of Louis Bonaparte. Instead, it is a regime of crisis in the midst of economic decline, political instability and heated class struggle. It is, therefore, transient and will either be replaced by a government that resolves the crisis by expropriating the bourgeoisie and establishing a workers' state or it will be overthrown by a pro-imperialist counterrevolution.

Clearly, the latter development would be a defeat for the workers, peasants and poor not only of Venezuela but the whole of Latin America. It would signal a massive strengthening of US imperialism and encourage reactionary forces everywhere, most obviously in neighbouring Brazil. Across the globe, it would be used to 'prove' the failure of 'socialism' and left wing populism with the aim of disorienting and demoralising working class and left wing activists.

Despite its move to the right, it would be foolish, indeed politically criminal, to present Maduro's government and the right wing opposition as equally reactionary forces. The right wing expresses the interests of the traditional, pro-US elite and is aiming for state power by any means. The PSUV-government and Maduro are bourgeois populist forces which, despite their strategy of compromise with the national bourgeoisie and imperialist powers, also represent a mass movement, even if their own leadership constantly undermines it. Therefore, the immediate priority is to prevent its overthrow by the right and, in that sense, to defend it.

This does not mean dropping our criticism of Maduro and the whole 'Bolivarian' project. Far from opening the road to socialism, it has created a cul de sac in the form of a crisis of Venezuelan society that can only be resolved by its removal. But that removal must be the work of the revolutionary working class and that is why we demand the arming and mobilisation of the workers' and neighbourhood organisations. Many of these were brought into existence by the Bolivarian regime, but they must now cease to be mere auxiliary supporters of the regime and become a force in their own right.

In this, we are consciously echoing the tactics of the Bolsheviks 100 years ago when they demanded the arming of the soviets to defend Kerensky against Kornilov. It was precisely at that time that Leon Trotsky finally joined the Bolshevik party but today those who claim allegiance to Trotskyism in Venezuela have turned their backs on his programme. In a statement published by International Viewpoint on August 5, the 'Anticapitalistas' while insisting that they do not give the Maduro government 'unconditional support' nonetheless recognise it as part of 'a socialist, revolutionary and radically democratic project' and go on to explain that their idea of a 'revolution in the revolution' is '...expanding liberties, combating bureaucracy with democracy, redistributing wealth more and building institutional mechanisms that guarantee control of the economy and the state by the popular classes?.'

Not a word about the need to overthrow the bourgeois state and replace it with a workers' state, based on armed workers' councils, that will immediately take control of all stocks of food and other necessities and

distribute them as needed and expropriate large scale capital and subject the national economy to planning in order to meet needs, not profits. While these comrades are right to say that it is 'a priority is to stop the onslaught of imperialism and the ruling class' and revolutionaries should stand alongside them against the right, their own strategy is that of the Mensheviks of 1917.

Far worse are the positions of those groups that come from the Moreno tradition in Latin America. The UIT, a part of the FIT, Front of the Left and Workers, in Argentina, actually supports the right wing and downplays their imperialist backing. Others from the same tradition such as the LIT and the Fracción Trotskista, FT, do not go so far but still make unprincipled concessions to the right. The FT calls the right-wing and the Chavistas 'equally reactionary'. This is not 'working class independence', as they claim, but a sectarian failure to defend the working class when faced with an onslaught from the right. Such overt support for counter-revolutionary forces (UIT) or passive abstentionism (LIT, FT) has to be denounced sharply.

An overthrow of the government by the right wing would not only be a defeat for Maduro and his circle but, above all, for the Venezuelan masses. Therefore, revolutionaries need to combine clear criticism and a programme for working class power with the preparedness to join forces against the counter-revolution. They need to demand the arming of the working class, peasants and the urban poor, military training under trade union control, the expropriation of the capitalist class, a purging of the army, the police and the state apparatus of counter-revolutionary forces, not by increasing the power of a bourgeois apparatus, but by the creation of workers' and popular councils. They need to demand full freedom for all forces who want to defend and extend the gains of the masses. And, most importantly, they need to form their own political party, a party based on the programme of permanent revolution.

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