



Venezuela under Chavez:

The Bolivarian Revolution Against Neoliberalism

By Greg Albo

In spite of so many determined efforts of the past to impose a uniform architecture, there is no blueprint for making a revolution against capitalism. And there is just as clearly no single design for the Left today to break out of the straitjacket of neoliberalism, and re-open possibilities for more democratic and egalitarian social orders. Indeed, the thing about social revolutions is, as the saying goes, that they keep coming around in unexpected ways and in unexpected places. Who would have dared predict the eruption that was Seattle in November 1999, when the powers behind neoliberal globalization seemed completely incontestable? And who would have then predicted – certainly none of the sages of the global social justice movement who quite consciously moved to the margins the issue of winning state power as another failed blueprint – that Venezuela under Hugo Chavez would emerge as the key zone asserting that alternatives to neoliberalism must not only be asserted but tried? But this is exactly the importance of Chavez and the Bolivarian revolutionary process, as the Chavistas refer to their struggle, for the Left at this juncture.

The politically-charged context that has become Venezuela revealed all this and more during the August 15th Presidential Referendum on President Chavez's tenure in office. Coming to power in 1998 after the self-destruction of Venezuela's 'stable democracy' through the 1990s, Chavez pushed for passage of Venezuela's Bolivarian Constitution refounding the Republic. The new

Constitution was a massive departure in the extent to which it deepened democratic proceduralism, rights and citizen initiatives in a direction completely alien to what liberal democracy has become. Indeed, the new Constitution allowed for a presidential recall vote if enough signatures could be gathered, an entirely unique process that could not even have been imagined in Latin America before Chavez. Although the signature campaign was filled with irregularities, and mounting evidence of external funding from the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy and other offices, Chavez declared that the Referendum should go ahead. The political arithmetic in the President's office was coolly calculated: the failed military coup of April 2002 and the disastrous disruption of the oil sector later that year by the Opposition, allowed the Chavez government to consolidate in turn control over the military and the state oil company PDVSA; a failure to defeat Chavez in a Referendum would leave the Opposition in further political disarray and advance the social base for the Chavista reform agenda.

The Referendum result itself was electrifying and anti-climatic at one and the same time. The Chavez 'No' against removal of the President was resounding at almost 60 percent of the vote, with 4-5 million more voters than when Chavez was first elected, and adding to the string of electoral victories of Chavez and his followers. But the Opposition signalled its rejection of the results, to

what should have been no one's surprise, before the Venezuelan Electoral Commission could even report. This act was pure theatre and it signalled that the play was far from over and that the ruling classes still in place would use their economic and social power to disrupt, discredit and wear down the government as best as they could. This, too, the Referendum results recorded: the insistence of the poor and the Chavista cadres to get on with the job of constructing a 'Bolivarian' Venezuela, and the declaration of the Opposition that much of the ground for construction had yet to be broken.

This has been the point of 'political rupture' where the old ways of doing things are no longer sustainable if the new ways are to be given life and allowed to develop their independent course. More than one process of social transformation has turned back at this point, or hardened itself into a permanent war setting to attain stability for the new regime at all costs. But others have pushed ahead. The tasks of the social transition are no longer only of winning the political terrain, but foremost of fostering the democratic and organizational capacities of 'the people' to deepen and forward the revolution. This is precisely what Che meant when he complained, well into the Cuban revolution, of the lack of control over the bureaucracy and that "we can consider the need for organization to be our central problem." Chavez and the Bolivarian revolution is, in its own specific way, at this juncture in the struggle against, and effort to move beyond, neoliberalism in Venezuela. The importance of Chavez to those outside Venezuela is that the Bolivarian movement is again posing the question of 'what we want to become' and not just of 'what we no longer want to be' after all the destructiveness of the last decades. And that is why the vote for Chavez in August, it needs to be said, was a vote for the Left everywhere, that can only be paid back by re-imagining our own movements. ■