

Venezuela Chooses its Future

A panel discussion on the context and consequences of the recent referendum in Venezuela

Reviewed by Shana Yael Shubs

On September 23, 2004, CERLAC hosted a panel discussion on Venezuela's historic presidential referendum that was held on August 15, 2004. In the first referendum of its kind in the hemisphere, a majority of Venezuelans voted to retain Hugo Chávez as their president, effectively endorsing his Bolivarian Revolution and once again thwarting opposition plans to oust him from office.

The panelists celebrated the inspiration of Chávez' triumph, while also noting the challenges and contradictions as Venezuela attempts to push forward its alternative to neoliberalism.

Sam Gindin and Greg Albo, both Professors of Political Science at York University, were in Venezuela for the referendum and formed part of the international delegation of observers invited by the National Electoral Commission of Venezuela. Maria Victor Paez, a consultant and Professor of Sociology at the University of Toronto, is active in the Louis Riel Bolivarian Circle of Toronto and was in charge of a voting station here during the referendum. Nicolas Lopez, a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Political Science at York University and a member of the Latin American Bolivarian Circle of Toronto, was in Venezuela and participated in the referendum.

Maria Paez Victor opened the panel with a discussion of the historical and political context around the referendum. She noted that prior to recent events,

Venezuela hardly received much international attention, and was largely known for its Miss Venezuela beauty pageants and for its oil reserves. Victor held Chávez' opposition – Venezuela's elite – to be largely responsible for the drastic inequalities in a country with abundant natural resources. She discussed how the Bolivarian revolution presents an alternative to neoliberalism with its model of endogenous development in Venezuela and its Latin American integrationist approach to foreign policy.

Paez considers that democracy has been strengthened as Venezuelans take active roles in issues such as public education, public health, land reform and food security. For the first time, she contended, people are talking about human rights and developing an incredible class-consciousness. Victor pointed out that the outcome of the referendum grants international recognition to the legitimacy of the Chávez government, while the opposition has discredited itself internationally with its anti-democratic response to the popular Bolivarian movement. She passionately emphasized that Chávez' triumph signals a resounding "no" to the neoliberal policies encouraged by the United States, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and represents a shining beacon of hope that is an example for the rest of Latin America.

Greg Albo noted that Chávez currently represents a significant challenge to

neoliberalism during a period of neoliberal consolidation worldwide. He focused on what can be learnt from the processes underway in Venezuela, primarily with respect to neoliberalism, power, and the state.

He stressed that we should see neoliberalism not as a set of policies or as a specific political party, but rather as a system of rule and of social relations. In Venezuela, while there have been many attacks on neoliberal policies, it is still unclear how the power structure and system of reproduction are being challenged. The tendency towards social polarization remains unchanged.

In reference to contemporary debates about power, Albo contrasted the extensive concentration of power in the Venezuelan state and in the highly class-polarized structure of Venezuelan society with the notion of power as being dispersed, outside class and beyond the state. With respect to debates about whether the state is dead or continues to be essential terrain in the current context of globalization, Albo noted that major challenges to globalization in Venezuela have emerged in and through the state.

The challenges that face Chávez include moving beyond continual campaigning and plebiscitarianism; breaking out of international isolation; gaining state control over social programs; and converting oil rents into new economic development projects. Crucially, there is a need to develop political power at the base – a central problem for

revolutionary and transformative governments.

Nicolas Lopez focused his presentation on the role of popular organizing and participatory democracy in the Bolivarian project, noting that such principles are now included in the Bolivarian constitution. A result has been increased political consciousness in the Venezuelan population.

To further this process of democratization, Lopez suggested that increased technical and political capacity at the grassroots level would strengthen the Local Councils of Public Planning, which allow citizens to have input into decisions about resource allocation. His recommendations were that local governments should be developed for co-governance with community groups, popular participation in social programs has to be expanded, and methods of accountability must be implemented. Lopez sees the transfer of decision-making to organized communities as absolutely necessary. Such political empowerment, facilitated by the state, can effectively combat corruption and, importantly, sustain the Bolivarian Revolution.

Sam Gindin began his talk by pointing out the contradiction of the opposition's claims: they accuse Chávez of being a dictator, yet using the media they own and in the midst of a democratic referendum allowed by Chávez himself.

Emphasizing the incredible class polarization in Venezuela, Gindin argued that the arrogance and racism of the rich – present in their attitude of “how do these people think they could rule?” – has backfired and allowed Chávez to consolidate his power and to build internal and international legitimacy.

Gindin recognized the importance of the numerous programs being developed under Chávez: literacy programs; a free Bolivarian university with stipends for living expenses and politicized content; alternative television programming; and the beginnings of land reform and the democratization of food. A major

challenge, facing all capitalist states but essential to the Bolivarian revolution, will be to learn how to operate democratically and not bureaucratically. The population remains very vulnerable to what Chávez decides, and so it is necessary to build towards democratically administering everyday life.

All of the panelists saw the Bolivarian process underway in Venezuela, including the recent referendum, as incredibly inspiring for all of Latin America, offering us an example of what alternatives to neoliberal capitalism and globalization might look like.

True to the strongly divided opinions in Venezuela on Chávez and the referendum, there were those in the audience who insisted with allegations of fraud, and disbelief that Chávez could have won. There was also some excellent discussion of how to move on, engage sectors of the population currently hostile to the Chávez government, and strengthen the important steps being taken to bring about the profound social transformation promised by the Bolivarian revolution.



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