

Venezuela: the class issues in Chavez's constitutional referendum

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The approach of the December 2 referendum on the proposed reworking of Venezuela's constitution has produced a sharp intensification of the country's political crisis.

On Monday, the political violence orchestrated by right-wing opponents of the left-nationalist government of President Hugo Chavez claimed the life of Jose Oliveros, a 19-year-old oil worker, who was shot in the back by opponents of the constitutional reform while heading for work at a state-owned firm in the central state of Aragua. When he attempted to drive down a street blocked by protesters, he was shot and killed.

The young worker's death comes after nearly a month of demonstrations—both for and against the reform, which includes 69 additions or amendments to the country's current constitution.

Leading the campaign against the reform are the political forces tied to Venezuela's wealthy oligarchy, backed by Washington, the same forces that sought to overthrow Chavez in the abortive US-supported coup April 2002 and which have since staged a series of political provocations.

Egged on by Venezuela's privately owned right-wing media, the "no" campaign has generated an atmosphere of hysteria over the referendum, managing to mobilize demonstrations drawn largely from the most privileged sections of middle and upper class students.

These right-wing and often violent student protests have drawn the great bulk of the attention of the international mass media, which has cast them as a struggle against authoritarianism and in defense of democracy. No section of the mass media has taken note of the political irony that these supposed champions of democracy were precisely the same elements that backed a military coup aimed at overthrowing an elected president.

For the most part, demonstrations supporting the reform, consisting of more predominantly working class crowds, have been larger, but have drawn no comparable media attention.

Conflicting opinion polls have either indicated that the reform will pass with a clear majority or placed the "yes" and "no" votes in a dead heat.

By every indication, political tensions in Venezuela are sharper than at any time since the attempted coup of 2002. The traditional bastions of the ruling elite have sought to foment a confrontation. The Catholic bishops, for example, issued a statement Monday describing the reforms as "morally unacceptable." Similarly, Fedecamaras, the main business association, which was one of the principal supporters of the failed coup, called Monday for a no vote, while insisting that their position had nothing to do with its members' "lifestyle."

"In Fedecamaras we are democrats," the statement read. "We are not nor do we want to be communists."

More telling in terms of the depth of the political crisis is the defection of some political parties—the social democratic Podemos being the most significant—and leading figures previously identified with "Chavismo."

Most important among the latter is retired general Raul Baduel, who had been Venezuela's defense minister until July of this year. On November 5, Baduel called a press conference for Venezuela's right-wing media condemning the proposed reform as a "constitutional coup." While urging

a "no" vote, he also called upon the military to "profoundly analyze" proposals for changes to the structure of the armed forces and declared that "the capacity of Venezuelan military men to analyze and think" should not be underestimated.

The content of such words is unmistakable. Denouncing the referendum vote as a "coup" essentially legitimizes the real thing, while the appeal to "military men" to "analyze" the political proposals presumably implies that once they have done so, action is warranted.

The significance of this veiled appeal to the officer corps is all the greater in that its author was one of Chavez's oldest political allies and long considered his most important supporter within the Venezuelan military.

Baduel was one of the initial members of the Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement (MBR-200), the conspiratorial cell formed within the Venezuelan military in the 1980s that ultimately gave rise to the abortive 1992 coup led by Chavez, then a paratrooper colonel. While Baduel did not participate in the coup and apparently questioned its feasibility, he subsequently defended Chavez and backed his presidential bid in 1998.

More importantly, in 2002, it was Baduel who led the forces within the Venezuelan military that ultimately defeated the US-backed April coup. In 2004 he was named the army's commander and in 2006 the country's defense minister.

This turn by Baduel—who had proclaimed himself a firm adherent of Chavez's "21st century socialism"—undoubtedly reflects broader divisions within the army as a whole, and the threat of another coup can by no means be discounted.

There is also no doubt that the US State Department and the CIA are actively fomenting the opposition to the constitutional reform as a vehicle for uniting forces that could potentially overthrow the Chavez government. Just as in the Middle East, Washington is determined to reassert its hegemonic control over a region that contains some of the most important energy reserves on the face of the planet by installing a more pliant regime.

The mass sentiment in favor of the referendum is founded both on the hatred among masses of Venezuelan workers and oppressed for their most rabid class enemies, who make up the "no" camp, as well as the constitutional reform's promise of various social benefits, which are promoted by the Chavez government and its supporters as the implementation of "socialism."

These reforms include promises to implement a six-hour workday and the establishment of a supplementary health insurance program for the millions of Venezuelans—up to half the population—who are classified as part of the "informal" sector of the economy, without any regular employment. Making these programs into articles in the constitution, however, does not create them beyond the level of a legal principle.

The reality is that the changes advanced for Venezuela's constitution have nothing to do with putting an end to capitalism or establishing a socialist society, and the dangers that the various amendments proposed

by the government pose to the working class are far greater than any promised benefits.

The essential thrust of the reforms is the amassing of greater presidential power in the hands of Chavez, furthering the consolidation of a personalist bourgeois regime resting on both the military and populist appeals to the poorest sections of the population, made possible by oil export-funded social programs.

The amendments include an extension of presidential terms from six years to seven and allow the unlimited reelection of incumbent presidents, both of which are designed specifically to keep Chavez in Miraflores, the presidential palace.

While much has been made about the left and even “socialist” rhetoric that suffuses the proposed amendments, the reality is that the rewritten constitution includes explicit guarantees for the private capitalist ownership of the means of production. It also enshrines the status of “mixed” private-state enterprises, which exist most prominently in the deals signed between the Venezuelan government and the foreign energy conglomerates for the exploitation of Venezuelan oil. Other clauses in the existing constitution guaranteeing equal treatment for foreign and national capitalist enterprises, patents and intellectual property rights remain untouched.

To the extent that the document envisions state expropriation of capitalist industries, it is within the general framework of its defense of private property, to be carried out along the lines of the recent nationalization of CANTV, the Verizon-owned Venezuelan telephone company, which was accompanied by compensation exceeding its value on the stock market.

There are also amendments redefining the Venezuelan military as an “anti-imperialist popular entity” and renaming the National Guard the “Bolivarian Popular Militia,” but, these semantic changes notwithstanding, these bodies remain under the same structure and discipline of the bourgeois armed forces.

The most significant change in this regard is, once again, a strengthening of presidential power, with the president given the authority to determine all promotions within the officer corps.

In the political sphere, the reform would give Chavez power to create by decree federal provinces, territories and even cities, while naming unelected “vice-presidents” to govern over them, essentially usurping the power of elected provincial and municipal governments.

Similarly, the entire public treasury—including the central bank and the country’s currency reserves—will be placed under the direct control of the president. Meanwhile, however, Venezuela’s financial system remains firmly in the control of the international banks and their Venezuelan subsidiaries—which are recording the highest rates of profit in all of Latin America—while the government remains committed to the repayment of the country’s foreign debt.

As window dressing, communal councils are enshrined in the constitution, with Chavez and his supporters touting these bodies as a form of “people’s power” and “parliamentarism of the street.” The reality, however, is that these are not councils of workers and peasants arising from below in the struggle to overthrow capitalism and establish a new state based upon the working class, but rather structures imposed from above that are totally dependent, politically and economically, on presidential patronage and Chavez’s disbursement of oil revenues. Their function is not to organize the class struggle, but rather to suppress it and subordinate the masses to the government.

The most menacing amendments, however, empower the president to impose a state of emergency in which the government could suspend rights of due process, essentially allowing detention without charges, trial or legal representation. Also, the reform would remove any limits on the length of such states of emergency.

Supporters of and apologists for the Chavez government have insisted

that such dictatorial measures are needed to combat a reprise of the 2002 attempt to overthrow it. The reality, however, is that Chavez did not utilize even the legal means available under the old constitution to punish those who led the coup against him in 2002, none of whom have been tried, much less jailed.

There is a far greater likelihood that the bourgeois state—under Chavez’s leadership or anyone else’s—would employ such repressive measures against a revolutionary movement of the working class against the rights of capitalist private property enshrined in the same constitution than to suppress a military coup.

No such military uprising backed by domestic and international capital has ever been stopped through the abrogation of democratic rights. Rather, the only force capable of defeating such a coup is the independent mobilization of the working class and oppressed masses in struggle.

Chavez’s choice of the slogan “21st century socialism” to describe his oil-export-funded nationalism and social populism has a dual significance. On the one hand, it is designed—as he himself has made clear—to distinguish his policy from genuine socialism and Marxism, particularly in denying that it is based upon the independent revolutionary struggle of the working class. Secondly, it serves to obscure history and deny the bitter lessons of the twentieth century.

Over and over again, in the struggles of that period the lesson was written in blood that the working class cannot defeat the threat of US-backed fascist-military coups by subordinating itself to a bourgeois government—no matter how populist or “socialist” its political rhetoric. Such was the case, most catastrophically, with the Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973, as it was with the “left” military regimes of generals J.J. Torres of Bolivia and Juan Velasco Alvarado in Peru—in 1971 and 1975 respectively—or, for that matter, Peronism in Argentina in 1976.

Defeating the right-wing forces behind the “no” campaign over the present referendum and as well as the very real threat of a US-backed coup that would unleash a wave of savage repression can be achieved only through the independent struggle of the Venezuelan workers and oppressed.

This requires the building of a new, independent revolutionary party fighting for the political mobilization of working people in Venezuela as part of an international struggle to put an end to capitalism.



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