

Venezuela's Chavez turns further right in face of election challenge

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Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez briefly addressed a rally of hundreds of thousands assembled in Caracas on Thursday as the last act in the campaign for the presidential election slated for Sunday, October 7.

His right-wing opponent, Henrique Capriles, staged a similar event last Sunday in the Venezuelan capital. Leaders of Capriles' electoral coalition, known by its Spanish acronym MUD (Mesa de Unidad Democrática—Democratic Unity Roundtable), accused the government of dragooning state employees into attending Thursday's event. By Venezuelan law, all campaigning was to cease by midnight.

Polls have varied wildly and are generally treated with suspicion. Some have shown Chavez leading his challenger by as much as 20 percent; others placed the race as a statistical tie. In almost all cases, however, the polls have shown the gap between the two narrowing. Now in his 14th year in office and campaigning to make it 20, Chavez appears to be facing the most serious challenge of his political career.

In the last presidential election, in 2006, Chavez beat his right-wing opponent by a nearly two-to-one margin. This time around, the Venezuelan right has tried to cast its candidate, Capriles, the former governor of the state of Miranda, as a moderate social democrat in the mold of Brazil's former president, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

He has sought to capitalize on popular discontent over Venezuela's soaring crime rate—itsself a reflection of unemployment and social inequality—deterioration of infrastructure, including frequent blackouts, and corruption within the social layer known as the *bolibourgeoisie*. These are capitalists and functionaries who have enriched themselves off of Chavez's so-called Bolivarian Revolution.

Capriles has vowed that he will not scrap the social "missions," or assistance programs, directed at providing cheap food, housing, health care and education to Venezuela's poor, but rather would make them more efficient and would decentralize them, ceding them to the states and municipalities. In the past, the right had denounced these programs as merely a bribe to the poor

aimed at buying the government a base of support.

The scion of a wealthy family that controls a media conglomerate and a chain of movie theaters, Capriles, 40, has been involved in right-wing politics since his student days. Then he was a member of the fascistic Catholic group "Tradition, Family and Property," which played a role in supporting the wave of military coups that swept Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s.

He was a supporter of the abortive CIA coup that briefly deposed Chavez in 2002 and, as mayor of Baruta, a district of Caracas, helped organize a violent siege of the Cuban embassy, where Chavez supporters were believed to have taken refuge. Subsequently, he backed the attempt by management of the state-owned oil company, PDVSA, to destabilize the government with a "strike."

Chavez and his supporters have charged that Capriles is deliberately hiding his real program, which they say will include a free-market economic policy and an austerity program aimed at transferring wealth into the hands of the country's oligarchy.

While his opponent has attempted to run as a social moderate, Chavez has himself run a more right-wing campaign, pitching a special appeal to the upper middle class and the wealthy to vote for him as a guarantor of social peace.

Last month, during a press conference of his party, the PSUV (United Socialist Party of Venezuela), Chavez declared: "Even the rich families ... should vote for Chavez. The middle layers, the professionals ... should vote for Chavez, because we guarantee peace, the country's stability and the continuation of the development to convert Venezuela into a power."

Chavez has warned of the potential for "civil war" if he is not re-elected, while his defense minister, Gen. Henry Rangel, stated that "intelligence reports" indicate that some groups were planning actions in violation of "constitutional legality" in the wake of the election.

During his campaign last Sunday, Chavez told Venezuelan state television that if he were a US citizen, he would vote

for Obama, whom he described as a “good guy.” He added, “I think that if Obama was from Barlovento or some Caracas neighborhood, he’d vote for Chavez.” He also praised Obama for saying “something very rational and fair ... that Venezuela is no threat to the interests of the United States.”

Making it clear that these were not merely clownish remarks, Chavez continued by saying his goal in a third term in office would be to “initiate a new period of normal relations with the government of the United States.”

While Chavez’s opponent claims to represent the politics of Lula, Chavez’s own campaign is being directed by one of the Brazilian ex-president’s campaign strategists, Joao Santana—a political marketer who also played a major role in the election campaign of Peru’s ex-military officer and current president, Ollanta Humala.

While social assistance programs, funded by Venezuela’s oil bonanza, have succeeded in cutting the country’s poverty rate in half, social inequality, unemployment and insecurity have persisted. The country has been plagued by Latin America’s highest inflation rate, 27.6 percent in 2011; fully half of the workforce is employed in the so-called informal sector, subjected to super-exploitation and frequent joblessness.

While using the slogan “21st Century Socialism” to describe his oil-export-funded nationalism and social populism, the reality is that 14 years of rule by the “comandante-presidente” Chavez, have left the foundations of capitalism in Venezuela untouched.

According to figures produced by Venezuela’s Central Bank, the private sector accounts for 71 percent of the country’s gross national product (outside of the oil industry, which has been nationalized since the mid-1970s)—a greater share than in 1999, when Chavez took office.

Venezuela’s national institute of statistics reports that as of 2008, the country’s employers appropriated 48.8 percent of the wealth produced, compared to 32.8 percent paid out in salaries. This compared to 36.2 percent for the bourgeoisie and 39.7 percent for labor in 1998.

Part of this process is driven by the vast enrichment of a layer of Venezuela’s native ruling class, largely through financial speculation fueled by the country’s oil wealth. Banking profits in Venezuela are among the highest in the world, amounting to over \$3 billion last year, a 92 percent increase compared to 2010.

The reality is that Chavez’s “21st Century Socialism” has done nothing to alter the dependency and oppression that are the legacy of the 19th and 20th centuries. Venezuela’s economy remains today, as it was then, entirely dependent on the export of oil and the import of both capital and consumer goods.

With Venezuela sitting on an estimated one-fifth of the

world’s proven oil reserves, Chavez has sought to achieve room to maneuver by forging new economic ties, particularly with China, while diverting a portion of oil profits to pay for social assistance programs. But the fundamental relationship of dependency remains, and US oil conglomerates, such as Chevron, continue to play a major role in the country’s economy.

The Venezuelan working class, however, is coming into increasing conflict with the *Chavista* setup. According to the Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict, the number of protests organized by sections of the working class rose to 225 in August, the highest number since the year began. The group reported that along with a growing combativeness in the working class, the number of union members killed in the course of these struggles has also risen, with 65 deaths recorded between January and September of this year.

The Chavez government has attempted to criminalize strikes and protests, particularly those carried out by workers in the public sector, who are branded as “counterrevolutionaries.”

For an entire layer of the pseudo-left in Latin America, Europe and the US, Chavez’s “21st Century Socialism” is embraced precisely because it is founded on a rejection of genuine socialism. That is, it disavows the Marxist conception that a socialist transformation can be carried out only through a conscious revolutionary struggle by the working class, and holds out the prospect of it being implemented as a program imposed by a petty-bourgeois nationalist movement or a charismatic *comandante*.

Whoever is elected on October 7, the class struggle in Venezuela will intensify under the impact of the global capitalist crisis. The decisive question is the construction of a new, independent revolutionary party, fighting for the political mobilization of the Venezuelan working class as part of a global struggle against capitalism.



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