

Maduro sworn in as Venezuela sets vote recount

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20 April 2013

Nicolás Maduro, handpicked by the late Hugo Chávez as his successor, was sworn in as Venezuela's president Friday, just one day after the government's National Electoral Council, or CNE, announced that it would cede to the demand of the right-wing opposition for a complete audit of the April 14 presidential vote.

Maduro delivered a long and meandering speech after his formal swearing-in. He combined vows to complete the "socialist revolution" in Venezuela with appeals to the country's capitalists to cooperate in developing its economy. He recounted that just the day before he had "extended my hand to our businessmen." He announced that his government was working on plans for special economic zones in which "Public, private, national and international" capital would work together with "flexibility." He also declared that he found the example of Guangdong province—containing both China's greatest numbers of billionaires and its most exploited workers—"very interesting."

At one point in the speech, a young man rushed the podium seizing the microphone out of Maduro's hand before he was hustled away. "This was a complete failure of security," he said when he was able to resume his speech. "They could have put a bullet in me here."

The CNE's decision Thursday came in response to a formal appeal by the right-wing candidate Henrique Capriles and the coalition that backed him, which is known as MUD.

Initially, Maduro had indicated his support for such an audit of the April 14 vote, which saw the previously two-digit lead won by Chávez against similar opponents to barely 1.8 percent, or less than 275,000 votes out of nearly 15 million cast. He then shifted his position opposing such a measure.

The shift back again to support for a complete audit (54 percent of the ballot boxes were already audited in

the course of the election count) appears to be part of a calculated decision by both factions of the Venezuelan bourgeoisie—the *chavistas* and the US-backed right—to back off from a direct confrontation after violence in the aftermath of the election left at least eight people dead, scores wounded and at least 150 arrested.

Capriles issued a call in the immediate aftermath of the election being declared for Maduro for his supporters to take to the streets to "defend their vote" and to march on local offices of the CNE. The call was answered with violent demonstrations, including in some of the most well-heeled neighborhoods of Caracas, as well as attacks by fascist bands on Maduro supporters and on state-run health clinics, government offices and homes of state officials.

Maduro charged that the right was attempting to mount a coup, backed by Washington, and announced that the government would not allow a mass demonstration called by Capriles and his backers for Wednesday in the Venezuelan capital.

Capriles tried to disassociate himself from the violence and urged his supporters not to march but remain home and engage in *cacerolazos* —beating pots and pans. He alleged that the government and its supporters intended to provoke a confrontation.

Capriles accepted the CNE's decision for a complete audit of the ballots, even though he had previously demanded a vote-by-vote recount. He claimed that the audit would confirm his charges of "fraud," for which he and his supporters have been unable to present any objective evidence.

The right wing's continuing challenge is fueled in large measure by support from Washington, which has refused to recognize Maduro's election.

Speaking before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on Thursday, Secretary of State John Kerry

echoed the right's demand. "We think there ought to be a recount," he said. "I don't know whether it's going to happen."

He reiterated that the Obama administration had yet to decide whether to recognize Maduro's government. "Obviously, if there are huge irregularities, we are going to have serious questions about the viability of that government," Kerry said.

Responding from Miraflores Palace in Caracas, Maduro declared: "It's obscene the US intervention in the internal affairs of Venezuela. Take your eyes off Venezuela, John Kerry! Get out of here!"

He might well have added, "You've got the wrong country and you're nine years too late." If Kerry was serious about the sanctity of elections and ballots being counted, he should have demanded a recount in the state of Ohio in 2004, when he was the Democratic candidate for the US presidency.

On what conceivable basis is Washington in a position to lecture Venezuela about elections? In 2000, its Supreme Court installed George W. Bush as president by sanctioning ballot fraud and suppressing votes, with the abject complicity of the Democratic Party and its candidate Al Gore.

Maduro and his supporters have compared the protest march that the right had called for Wednesday to another mass march organized against Chávez on April 11, 2002, whose violent outcome was turned into a pretext for a US-backed coup that briefly saw the late Venezuelan president ousted and imprisoned before it was reversed by loyal military units and popular demonstrations.

A repeat of this history is by no means excluded, but for the moment the military, which wields substantial power within the government setup created under Chávez, has signaled its support for Maduro and the results of the election.

Nonetheless, the right clearly feels itself politically strengthened, and with US backing will continue efforts to destabilize and bring down Maduro's government.

The sharp fall in the vote for the ruling party of Chávez and Maduro is not, fundamentally, a matter of personalities or Maduro lacking the "charisma" of his deceased predecessor, as some sections of the bourgeois media have suggested.

Rather, it reflects growing disaffection among layers of the working class and other sections of the

population that had previously supported *chavismo*, but in this election cast a *voto castigo*, or "punishment vote," for Capriles as a protest against the government's policies. This was driven by a 25 percent inflation rate, growing shortages of basic necessities and currency devaluations in March that resulted in the plummeting of real wages, even as profits for the banks and corporations rose and the wealth and corruption of the so-called *boliburguesía* increased under the self-described "socialist" government.

The election results will also heighten divisions within the Venezuelan ruling party, the PSUV (United Socialist Party of Venezuela). The man who placed the presidential sash on Maduro Friday, Diosdado Cabello, the president of the national assembly, is widely seen as a political rival of the newly elected president. In the immediate aftermath of the election, he tweeted that it was necessary to "search out the failings even under the rocks" and to make the "profound self-criticism that these results demand."

A former army officer and reportedly one of the wealthiest individuals in the ruling party, he has stronger ties to both the military and the sections of Venezuelan capitalists who have supported *chavismo*.

Both external and internal pressures will push the government of Maduro further to the right and into confrontation with Venezuelan workers. The decisive question in the coming struggles is the forging of the political independence of the working class and of a new revolutionary leadership.



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