

# Maduro government suffers steep electoral losses to Venezuelan right

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Sunday's legislative elections in Venezuela delivered a stunning political defeat to the government of President Nicolas Maduro, with the vote going two to one in favor of the right-wing opposition coalition, the Roundtable of Democratic Unity (known by its Spanish acronym MUD).

In its first official results early Monday morning, the National Electoral Council (CNE) declared that the MUD had won 99 out of a total of 167 seats in the Venezuelan parliament, with the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) holding onto only 47 seats.

Voter participation approached 75 percent, one the highest rates in the country's history.

It marked the first outright political defeat for the *chavista* ruling political party since the late Hugo Chavez, the former paratrooper officer and leader of an abortive coup, first won the presidential election 17 years ago.

Later on Monday, the leadership of the political right claimed to have secured 113 seats and said that it was still in the running for four more. This would give the MUD more than enough legislators to hold a two-thirds super-majority in the parliament, giving it the power to sack government ministers, pass legislation, approve constitutional amendments for submission to popular referenda, convoke a constituent assembly, remove judges from the Supreme Court and name members of the National Electoral Commission.

It would also have the power to convoke a recall referendum next year, with the aim of ending Maduro's presidency, which runs until 2019. A number of right-wing politicians made clear that this is their intention.

Prominent MUD leader Henrique Capriles, the governor of Miranda and a former presidential candidate, declared, "Either the government changes or there will be a change of government."

"The economic war has won," President Maduro declared in a speech accepting the election's results. He described his party's defeat as "circumstantial."

The "economic war" had everything to do with the election results, but not in the way that Maduro interprets it. He has attributed the country's deepening economic crisis and the plummeting of working class living standards to outside intervention by US imperialism and sabotage by sections of Venezuela's capitalist class.

While no doubt Washington has backed Venezuela's right-wing opposition and Venezuelan capitalists have worked tirelessly to increase their profits, the fact is that the Maduro government has functioned as a full partner in what has developed into a relentless war on the Venezuelan working class.

In a country where workers have no independent party, large numbers cast their ballots for the right as a *voto castigo*, or punishment vote, directed as a protest against the policies of the ruling *chavistas*.

Real wages have been decimated by an annual inflation rate that is expected to hit 159 percent this year and could top 200 percent next. Shortages of basic goods such as milk, rice, corn flour, cooking oil, coffee and sugar are chronic.

The country's GDP is projected to fall by 10 percent this year, and mass layoffs have begun to mount in both the public and private sectors. According to a recent study conducted by three Venezuelan universities, 73 percent of the population is now living in poverty, compared to just 27 percent in 2013.

In addition to reversing much of the gains made in reducing poverty levels over the past 17 years, the economic crisis has also hollowed out other reforms implemented under Chavez, with the public health system increasingly crippled by shortages of supplies

and inadequate funding. In the education sector, teachers are among the worst paid in all of Latin America, while lack of adequate infrastructure has forced many schools to function on the basis of half-day shifts.

While the working class suffers, Venezuela's financial oligarchy continues to accumulate unprecedented wealth. In the first quarter of this year, the profits of the country's domestic banks soared by 72 percent.

The "economic war" has resulted in such enrichment because it has been entirely one-sided, with the Maduro government functioning as the protector of foreign and domestic capitalists as they loot the country by manipulating currency controls, shipping their profits out of the country.

On a more fundamental level, for all of the government's official rhetoric about "Bolivarian revolution" and "21st century socialism," 17 years of rule by first Chavez and then Maduro have left the capitalist private sector in control of both the commanding heights and the bulk of the country's economy.

This includes the country's food supplies, which are largely monopolized by a single capitalist corporation, Polar, whose billionaire owner, Lorenzo Mendoza, is demagogically cursed by Maduro for waging "economic war," but remains firmly in control of the supply network.

The historic curse of Venezuela, its total dependence on the export of a single raw material, oil, remains unaltered. For all of the ruling party's anti-imperialist slogans, Venezuela still ships the lion's share of its oil, which accounts for over 90 percent of the country's export revenues, to the United States.

Venezuela remains dependent upon imports for 70 percent of what it consumes, with the government having done nothing to build up its industry and infrastructure.

While under conditions of rising oil prices, the government was able to direct a portion of export income to alleviating the conditions of grinding poverty that had long made Venezuela a social tinderbox, with the cost of oil having plummeted from \$140 to less than \$40 a barrel, it is no longer able to play the same role in buffering the class struggle.

The election results open up new dangers for the

Venezuelan working class. Those celebrating victory in the MUD coalition are the country's most right-wing figures, who have repeatedly sought the overthrow of the government, going back to the US-backed coup against Chavez in 2002. Their aim is to crush the struggles of the working class and drive it back to the conditions that existed before the *caracazo*, the bloody mass revolt that shook the country in 1989.

There is no doubt that the election results will also drive the Maduro government further to the right, while opening up a crisis within the *chavista* movement, where tensions have always remained just beneath the surface between its various constituencies, first and foremost the military and the so-called *boliburguesia*, the nouveau riche layer that has enriched itself off of speculation, corruption and ties to the government.

With a deepening of the economic crisis and rising social struggles, the danger grows that a Pinochet-type figure may emerge from among the senior military officers who hold many of the top positions within the government.

From the various pseudo-left elements in Latin America and internationally who have tried to pawn off *chavismo* as some new road to socialism, the reaction to Sunday's election will be to blame the working class and hope that the government can respond with increased repression.

For the Venezuelan workers themselves, however, the central lesson of the election is that they can rely only on their independent strength to defend their jobs, living standards and social rights. To the extent that they are subordinated to the PSUV, the Maduro government and the unions that support them, they will remain powerless. The decisive question is the building of a new revolutionary leadership to lead the fight for a workers' government.



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