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Trump Versus the Venezuelan Revolution

By Shamus Cooke
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Trump's threats against Venezuela escalated recently from the economic to the military: after announcing sanctions he threatened that all military options were "on the table." Trump's actions were perfectly timed to lend support to the U.S.-backed opposition in Venezuela, whose ongoing violent rebellion aims to topple the government of democratically elected President Nicolas Maduro.

The apex of violence was focused on stopping the recent elections to the National Constituent Assembly (ANC), convened by President Maduro to rewrite Venezuela's constitution with the goal of resolving the current social-economic crisis.

The ANC was tasked to become the most powerful governmental body while in session. Part of Maduro's motivation in convening the ANC was to break the political deadlock that started when the U.S.-backed opposition gained control of the Venezuelan parliament, the National Assembly.

The wealthy opposition promised to prevent the ANC elections from taking place, while Trump promised economic sanctions if the ANC election wasn't cancelled. The other usual suspects of Latin American counter-revolution also condemned the ANC elections: Spain, the Vatican, and the Organization of American States (OAS) were among other governmental and western NGOs that denounced the ANC, since they recognized that the U.S.-backed opposition would be deflated if the ANC were successful.

The western media that condemned the ANC elections has consistently failed to condemn the ongoing street violence by the U.S.-backed opposition, who used attacks on voting centers, roadblocks, economic sabotage and "general strikes" to prevent the election from taking place.

But the elections happened, and the unexpectedly high turnout rattled the nerves of the opposition, who didn't expect the traditional base of Chavismo — the working and poor — would come out by the millions to support a broad diversity of candidates within the Chavismo Left.

The Chavismo Base Revived, For Now

The international media covering the election took zero notice of the enthusiasm from Venezuela's poorest neighborhoods. A U.S. labor delegation that travelled to Venezuela to witness the elections was impressed by the broad participation and long lines at various voting centers in poor neighborhoods. SEIU 1199 Executive Vice President Estela Vasquez made notice of the lack of western media attention:

"One thing that I did think was significant is that I didn't see any international media. No reporters from the New York Times, no cameras from CNN, no cameras from Fox Television, or any other international media... covering the poor working class neighborhoods that are the backbone of this revolutionary process in this country,"

The enthusiasm for the election that Vasquez noticed was echoed by a prominent left critic of Maduro, Stalin Perez Borges, who said:

"July 30 [the election] was also a tsunami within the ranks of Chavismo that propelled even those who are unhappy with the government to participate and send a message to the domestic and international right that we have not yet surrendered to imperialism nor are we willing to kneel before the neoliberal plans that the politicians and economists of the [opposition] have prepared for us...the [election] result has led to a recuperation of confidence as a social force,

and provided a glimpse of the possibility for Chavismo to once again be able to call itself the majority.”

Because the opposition boycotted the elections, the ANC consists overwhelmingly of representatives of the left, where there lives a diversity of revolutionary political opinion. A third of the ANC was specifically reserved for representatives of trade unions, communal councils, indigenous groups, farmers, students, and pensioners, all sectors that have been radicalized by their experience under Chavez and by the violent actions of the opposition.

The class basis of the Constituent Assembly — the poor and working class — provides hope that this governmental body can provide real revolutionary initiative to resolve key issues that have been demoralizing the Chavismo ranks while empowering the wealthy opposition.

The ANC will not fix every problem and it will likely not usher in a socialist economy, but radical measures can precipitate a revolutionary dynamic that carries with it a logic of its own. The left in Venezuela is more dynamic than the Stalinist images accorded to it by the western media and U.S. Left.

Ultimately, the very convening of the ANC means that Maduro has moved to the left; and it was this leftward shift that provoked enthusiasm from the Chavismo rank and file. Convening the ANC surprised everyone and carried enormous political risks, especially in the middle of an opposition uprising backed by U.S. imperialism: if the masses did not participate in the elections the government would be exposed as lacking a broad social base, and such a weakness would have been instantly exploited by the Trump-supported opposition. But Maduro proved that he has a bit of Chavez in him yet, having correctly predicted that the masses would consider the ANC as a revolutionary tool to be used against the oligarchy.

Much of the international left has either not recognized Maduro’s shift to the left or not realized its significance. Their error is rooted in a misunderstanding of the Venezuelan revolution, which has always been a contradictory movement rooted in the poorest neighborhoods of Venezuela, yet reflected through a bureaucratic prism at the top; a process that under Chavez retained, at times, a call and responsive dynamic that propelled the base to take action, which, in turn resulted in more pressure on the leadership to move left. Such a fluctuating, complicated phenomenon is difficult to pigeonhole, and requires a more nuanced analysis than the intellectually lazy “pox on both houses” approach that has long-infected the U.S. left.

It’s true that there are powerful sections of Maduro’s bureaucracy who plan to use the ANC simply to out-manuever the wealthy opposition and maintain their power and, if possible, to strike a deal with the opposition should the opportunity arise. Such a betrayal would, in effect, mark the end of Chavismo and prepare the ground for total victory of the opposition.

But the victory of the bureaucrats in the ANC isn’t a foregone conclusion, as some cynics on the left would have you believe. Maduro doesn’t command Chavez’s authority; he lacks the charisma and he’s been lacking in revolutionary initiative. The divisions within Chavismo’s upper layers opens up further opportunities for the impatient ranks that can push the project forward against the will of even the more conservative sections of leadership.

The job of the international left is to highlight the possibilities, amplify the program of the revolutionary wing and to educate people internationally about what's at stake in order to reduce the interventionist options of Trump's imperialism.

The majority of left analysis regarding the Venezuelan crisis fails at these basic tasks, focusing wasted energy on Maduro's shortcomings while proposing nothing of substance to win the fight in progress. The ranks of Chavismo need concrete solutions not endless denunciations.

The central question is not whether one is pro-Maduro or pro-opposition, the question is "how do the revolutionary forces resolve the current crisis" and "what strategy should revolutionaries deploy?" Most of the left has nothing to say about these basic questions, while refusing to even discuss the relevance of the Constituent Assembly.

The working class in Venezuela recognizes that their fate depends on the outcome of the current struggle; they are in a fight for their lives and hope to use the Constituent Assembly as a weapon. The slogan "No Volveran" remains a revolutionary demand of Chavismo that declares the oligarchy will never return to power. But unless bold action is taken to drive the revolution forward the victory of the opposition is inevitable, and such a nightmare is currently trying to kick in the front door.

False Solutions From the Left

The current intensified class fight cannot be wished away, it's based on the material conditions embedded in the economy: the unfulfilled needs of the working poor versus the opposition's demand to retake the state apparatus and privatize public resources. The two sides cannot "make peace" with another round of elections or negotiations, yet this is exactly what many pro-revolution analysts are promoting as "solutions" to the crisis.

One such mistake can be found in the analysis of Carlos Carcione from Marea Socialista, a grouping who until recently was in coalition with the other socialist parties inside of the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV).

The analysis put forward by Carcione contains some important critiques of Maduro's government, but a key error is his "solution" to the crisis, which was put forward at the end of a recent interview:

"...the only democratic road, which cannot be captured by either of the two elites [Maduro's government and the opposition] that are instigating violence, is the struggle to renew the Constitution of 1999."

The demand to "renew the Constitution" is a talking point taken directly from the wealthy opposition. To renew the Constitution means to disband the Constituent Assembly and carry on with the electoral process on its normal timeline, as if a life or death crisis wasn't engulfing the nation that requires revolutionary action now. It's as if Carcione believes that erasing the ANC would be a "pause button" to the conflict.

Such a “demand” will find zero resonance in the Chavismo rank and file; they’ve voted more in recent decades than any other population in the world, and their voting for the Constituent Assembly was itself a showcase of democracy that Carcione oddly fails to recognize as important or legitimate.

The demand to “renew the Constitution” also fails to acknowledge that the opposition is skillfully using the elections to the National Assembly to retake power and undermine the government, by exacerbating the crisis and talking openly of overthrowing Maduro.

Elections to the National Assembly have become the path to power for the oligarchy, while a more directly democratic path has emerged with the Constituent Assembly elections, an infinitely more representative body than the National Assembly with actual capabilities of taking revolutionary action.

Ultimately one’s attitude towards the situation in Venezuela shouldn’t be decided by legal or so called democratic norms, but by which actions promote the interests of the working class and poor and push the revolution forward.

A similar non-solution to the crisis was put forth by Eva Gollinger, a longtime promoter of Chavismo who has been an increasingly vocal critic of Maduro. Gollinger’s critique of Maduro is often spot on, but her solution falls into the fantasy realm, where both sides realize they’re guilty of excess and thus agree to dampen the rhetoric for the good of the country:

“Voices of moderation need to emerge without fear of being branded traitors or opportunists, as has been happening to anyone publicly criticizing the government or opposition. The opposition leadership and its international backers must immediately condemn all violence....The opposition must accept the legitimacy of President Maduro and his administration and allow him to fulfill his presidential term, which ends in 2019. In return, the parliament should be allowed to assume its full mandate without further obstacles. Fair elections overseen by an independent electoral council should be held within the timeframe stipulated by law instead of being manipulated by political parties or foreign pressure.”

Gollinger certainly has good intentions, but her “solutions” are daydreams that ignore the material interests radicalizing both sides: the ranks of Chavismo need radical solutions to the crisis and the U.S. backed opposition will continue to take radical, right-wing action to regain state power. There hasn’t been a “reasonable middle ground” between these two extremes in decades, if ever, in Venezuela.

Revolutions are notoriously absent of moderation. Chavez himself was accused of being an extremist every time he took action against the oligarchy, which earned him the love and respect of the broader population in Venezuela and inspired revolutionary movements across the hemisphere.

Maduro’s moderation is precisely what has demoralized his base and empowered the U.S.-backed opposition. The working class of Venezuela does not have moderate demands, they require revolutionary action against their class enemies before the wealthy regains the state

power to use against them. Moderate actions cannot attack the drastic inequality that pervades Venezuela to this day.

The left “demand” to renew the Constitution is a return to a dead end: one of the limitations of Chavismo was the over reliance on a representative democracy, as opposed to direct democracy. The energy of the revolution was funneled into constant electioneering, and the representative system wasn’t representative enough, allowing politicians to be unaccountable to the movement that opened the door to careerism, while the slower moving legislative system allowed the demoralization to creep in.

The Constituent Assembly is a legitimate tool of revolution that can be used or wasted. Wishing for the return of the conditions that precipitated the crisis is an odd “solution.” The opposition chose to boycott the ANC elections because they hoped for a U.S.-backed coup. Let their miscalculation be their undoing.

What actions should the Constituent Assembly take?

Instead of warning incessantly of authoritarianism the left should be advocating revolutionary solutions: ones that stem the power of both the oligarchy and Chavismo upper-bureaucrats, a “revolution within the revolution.” Divisions among Chavismo’s leadership make such a scenario possible, and it’s desperately needed.

Agitational demands from the Chavismo base in a time of flux can move mountains. Economic solutions that incorporate more socialist policies at the expense of the oligarchy-controlled private sector are also crucial to advancing the revolution, since the capitalists have used their ownership over important economic sectors — like food production — to sabotage the economy.

Some of the below demands have been discussed in different sectors of the Chavismo left, and may find expression in the Constituent Assembly if left groups organize effectively. Ultimately demands that empower the working class at the expense of the oligarchy have the potential to inspire the broader population to action, keeping the revolutionary flame lit:

1. Remove the economic power of the oligarchy by nationalizing the sectors of the economy that have been used in economic sabotage, especially food production, the banking sector and international trade.

2. Strategically default on the foreign debt repayments that are bankrupting the nation, so that the money can be used for basic necessities and rebuilding the economy. The high interest debt repayments are shifting billions of dollars from the Venezuelan state into the pockets of rich foreign investors.

3. Fully fund and expand the key victories of Chavismo: education, health care, pensions, and housing while increasing the power of localities to administer these programs. Ensure that wages are rising above inflation for all wage workers. Pay for these initiatives by drastically raising taxes on capital gains, property, inheritance, and other oligarchy-targeted measures.

4. Jail the oligarchs who promote street violence and participate in economic sabotage. A longstanding demand among the Chavismo ranks is to take a firmer hand with an opposition who's grown accustomed to no consequences for violent behavior.

5. Attack corruption of black market dollar profiteering by nationalizing foreign trade.

6. No reconciliation with the oligarchy and their patron, U.S. imperialism. Any "deal" cut by the opposition will be intended to stall the revolutionary process and require economic concessions that come at the expense of the Chavismo base. The opposition has proven that they will never accept a government they don't directly control. With each new uprising they test the resolve of the government and its popular support, and when this support dissipates a successful coup — either militarily or legislative — is inevitable.

7. Use the National Constituent Assembly as a weapon of the revolution by taking the above actions while expanding direct democracy, enshrining increased constitutional power of communal councils, labor unions and other social-political bodies of the Chavismo rank and file to directly exercise state power.

If the ANC doesn't take bold actions soon, the new constitution won't survive the national referendum vote. And if the Chavismo rank and file don't see a pathway to a better, more stable life with the ANC they will abstain, and the U.S.-backed opposition will have an unobstructed path to power.

Another reason the ANC needs to take radical action immediately is the upcoming gubernatorial elections that the opposition plans to participate in. These elections can be easily won by the left if the ANC takes swift action that inspires people to the polls.

Conclusion

Time is short. The ANC gave itself two years to fulfill its mission, but the enthusiasm generated by the election will fade quickly if revolutionary action isn't forthcoming, or if the masses conclude that the new legislative body is content on maintaining the current balance of power instead of smashing it. Maduro's bureaucratic/administrative maneuvers have outlived their usefulness, and projecting this strategy onto the ANC will transfer the disease of demoralization onto an otherwise healthy body.

The several co-occurring crises in Venezuela require a shift of power to the masses at the expense of the capitalists: any action that the ANC takes that promotes this while encouraging the self-activity of the working class will help refresh the cycle of bottom-up activity that flourished under Chavez but has waned under Maduro.

The street violence of the U.S.-backed opposition that has killed over 100 people and included two coup attempts will not subside on its own, especially when Trump has prioritized Venezuela for regime change. Successive U.S. presidents have understood the special "threat" to imperialism that Venezuela has posed, even if much of the left doesn't. Defeating Trump

requires that Venezuelans move towards socialism, while requiring that socialists in the U.S. actively support this movement.

If the new constitution is a lifeless document it will fail the referendum vote and catapult the opposition into power. However, if the path to the constitution is full of revolutionary action the people will respond enthusiastically, and the broader hemisphere will be re-infected by the revolutionary energy that originally birthed the “pink tide.”

But the pink tide politics that eschewed western imperialism and neoliberalism has reached its ideological limits, demanding deep socialist inroads against the capitalists who’ve frustrated the project. A “red tide” can rejuvenate the revolutionary forces across the hemisphere and easily drown out the recent victories of various counter-revolutions. Venezuela remains the focal point of hemispheric revolution, to be won or lost, supported or ignored.