

VENEZUELAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS 2015 - INTERNATIONAL OBSERVERS DELEGATION

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On December 6, 2015, Venezuela held parliamentary elections. Although these were not presidential elections, they received widespread international attention because these elections were perceived by many as a litmus test as to whether the Bolivarian Revolution, initiated by the late President Hugo Chavez, would continue to thrive now that Chavez is dead. Venezuela's current president, Nicolas Maduro, and his ruling party the *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* ("PSUV" Venezuelan United Socialist Party) have been under constant attack by opposition political parties, representing Venezuela's wealthy elite, as well as by transnational corporations and the governments of the U.S. and Colombia.

To put these elections in context, a brief description of these attacks is a must. The attacks have consisted mainly of an economic war to destabilize the government along with a well-orchestrated media campaign to blame the effects of the economic war on the ruling PSUV. The main weapon used to wage this economic war is scarcity. The economic elite of Venezuela with the assistance of the U.S. have conspired to create a scarcity of basic goods in stores throughout Venezuela, such that most people have to stand in long lines for hours to buy food or water, or any number of things. The production and distribution of most products are still in the hands of private businesses, so the economic elite can manipulate the distribution of the products under their control and then blame the scarcities on mismanagement by the government.

It is not clear what the government can do to deal with this crisis. The government might have avoided this type of manipulation by the economic elite if it had taken control of the means of production and distribution of basic goods, like the Cuban government did in the early years of its revolution. What the Venezuelan government has been attempting to do is use its oil revenues, which are considerable, to try to mitigate the worst effects of this crisis by subsidizing the costs of basic necessities of life. The recent precipitous decline in oil prices, however, has severely hampered how much of that the Venezuelan government can do.

Given the huge improvements in the standard of living that the vast majority of Venezuelans have enjoyed as a result of the reforms brought about by the Bolivarian Revolution, many of us who are concerned about human rights and social justice view the Bolivarian Revolution as an important model for other Latin American countries and developing countries around the world. Because of this, I joined a delegation of international observers to assess the fairness of Venezuela's elections and the level of democracy and effectiveness of the Bolivarian Revolution. Our delegation was organized by Terri Mattson, incoming director of the Task Force on the Americas, a non-profit that has been organizing delegations to Venezuela since 2004 (www.taskforceamericas.org), and consisted of 12 observers from the U.S., Canada, and Nicaragua. The delegation's activities in Venezuela were coordinated by Lisa Sullivan, a U.S. citizen who has lived in Venezuela for the past 32 years and has extensive contacts across the political spectrum in Venezuela.

Our delegation arrived to Caracas, the capital of Venezuela, on December 2, 2015, four days before the elections were to be held. Prior to the elections, we had meetings with representatives of all major political parties involved in these elections, to get their perspectives. We also met with the vice-president of Venezuela's Supreme Court, Justice Fernando Vegas Torrealba, and several intellectuals.

On December 2nd, we met with Ricardo Moreno, newly appointed Venezuela's Consul for the Western U.S., which includes California and Hawaii and is based in San Francisco. On that date, he expressed that although the press was reporting that the polls showed the opposition Meza de Unidad Democratica ("M.U.D."

Democratic Unity Roundtable) party was ahead, he was confident that the PSUV would win the elections because the PSUV was better organized in mobilizing their base to get out to the polls and vote. The M.U.D., on the other hand, was very fragmented and disorganized, according to Ricardo Moreno.

On December 3rd, we met with several leading members of *Marea Socialista* (Socialist Tide), a relatively new political party formed by a group that splintered from the PSUV. Some of the representatives of this party who were present at this meeting were: Hector Navarro (former minister in the Chavez administration and member of Venezuelan parliament for the PSUV), Alfredo Gutierrez (former member of the Venezuelan parliament for the PSUV), Nicmer Evan (political scientist), and Juan Garcia Vilorio. This group are *Chavistas*, who continue to support the Bolivarian Revolution, but they claim that they left the PSUV because the PSUV has gone off track and is no longer being faithful to the revolution. They argue that *Chavismo* is suffering a splintering process due to extensive corruption in the Maduro administration. They claim that their investigations indicate that from 2002 to 2012 Venezuela generated approximately \$1 trillion. Out of this trillion dollars, there is over \$250 billion which are unaccounted. *Marea Socialista* is calling for an audit of the Venezuelan treasury to spur an open debate.

Hector Navarro went even further and asserted that the lack of security measures during the Chavez administration, might have led to Chavez's death. His theory is that Chavez might have been injected with the cancer cells that killed him while submitting to flu vaccinations. He explained his theory with a series of rhetorical questions: (1) What are the probabilities that a sitting president would develop cancer? (historically, very few sitting presidents have developed cancer); (2) What are the probabilities that several sitting presidents in the same region of the world would develop cancer simultaneously? (Lula Da Silva, Lugo, Castro, and Chavez all developed cancer and were all sitting presidents of Latin American countries); and (3) What are the probabilities that all these presidents would be leftists?

On December 4th, we had several meetings. In the morning we met with Maria Pilar Garcia Lionza, who is an intellectual and professor of political sciences and urban planning at the Simon Bolivar University. Later, we had lunch with Justice Fernando Vegas Torrealba, who is vice-president of Venezuela's Supreme Court. After lunch, we met with representatives of PSUV at the "Casa Amarilla," which is the venue where Venezuelan government officials receive foreign dignitaries. Later in the day, we met with Manuel Guevara, who is a retired engineer and serving as a technical director in the M.U.D. campaign. And finally, we met with two representatives of the M.U.D.: Jose Ramos Sanchez, with the *Primero Justicia* (Justice First) party; and Carlos Luna, with the *Voluntad Popular* (Popular Will) party.

Maria Pilar Garcia Lionza is critical of the Bolivarian Revolution and of the ruling party. According to her, the Bolivarian movement has created exclusions of certain sectors of Venezuelan society based on ideology and class. She says that communities who have too many members who sympathize with opposition political parties, are frequently denied funding requested from the federal government for particular projects.

Ms. Garcia Lionza acknowledges that the late president Hugo Chavez implemented many social programs that are very popular among the general population in Venezuela. She stresses, however, that this type of revolution would not be possible without the large volume of oil revenues that Venezuela had been receiving during Chavez's rule. She indicated that the government has attempted to use oil to influence international politics, as well as national politics by using oil revenues to provide essential products at below-market prices to those who are sympathetic to the Bolivarian Revolution. That had proven to be an effective tool when oil prices were high. When oil prices plummeted, however, this policy created a huge burden on the Venezuelan

government. This combined with the lack of strong leadership, which was previously provided by Chavez, created the huge social and political in which Venezuela currently is experiencing.

In our meeting with the PSUV, the main spokesperson was Jacobo Torres, head of the PSUV International Solidarity and the Organization of Bolivarian Workers Union. He asserted that the deep economic crisis that Venezuela has been experiencing since Chavez's death is due primarily to "a destabilizing campaign waged by imperialist forces and their masters." As an example, he said that Venezuela is the target of a plot called "*Operacion Tenazas*" (Operation Pincers), in which Venezuela is being attacked from two sides simultaneously. From one side, Colombian paramilitaries have been making incursions into Venezuelan territory to create destabilization. They were most likely most likely hired by the opposition, and were responsible for killing 43 people during the violence that took place in early 2014. The 43 included mostly innocent civilians and some members of the government's security forces who were trying to quell the violence. From the other side, Guyana has recently granted Exxon-Mobil exploration rights in a territory which is currently in dispute, and in which Guyana and Venezuela had agreed by treaty not to exploit any resources until such dispute was resolved. Despite all the destabilizing campaigns and the very deep crisis that they have produced, Jacobo Torres expressed optimism that the PSUV would win the elections the Bolivarian Revolution has greatly improved the standard of living of most Venezuelans and most Venezuelans still support the revolution.

The representatives of the M.U.D., by contrast, did not acknowledge any improvements in the economic conditions in Venezuela since Chavez took office. Carlos Luna, a member of a right-wing party in the M.U.D. coalition, said that under Chavez private industry was severely attacked and taken over, and no incentives to grow the economy have been provided. He went on to say that a "competitive autocracy" has developed since Chavez was elected as president and this has intensified under Maduro. All of this has led to terrible economic conditions in Venezuela that have prompted 1.5 million Venezuelans to leave the country and go to the U.S.

In response to questions about the electoral process, the M.U.D. representatives said that they do not question the automated mechanisms of the voting system, but they do question the integrity of entering votes into the voting machines when no witnesses from their party are present. They claim that there are voting places where the witnesses of the opposition are not allowed by the military or police. They also claim that there are places where armed people intimidate or prevent people from voting.

In response to questions about what the M.U.D. would do to resolve the current economic crisis if it won the elections, the M.U.D. representatives said that their first priority would be to free all political prisoners in Venezuela. They specifically named Manuel Rosales, Leopoldo Lopez, and Antonio Ledesma. They said that the entrepreneurial class and others must be brought in to be able to figure out long term solutions. Beyond that, they proposed a decentralized market economy, based on free enterprise. When pressed, however, they said they would not privatize the national oil company but they would use the oil revenues generated by that company to stimulate the economy.

On December 6th, our delegation visited five voting centers in two different cities. We visited four centers in Barquisimeto, a city in the province of Lara, and one center in a small town called Palo Verde, also in the province of Lara. In each one of these voting centers, I verified that each voting table were staffed with the requisite five working members assigned by the *Comision Nacional Electoral* ("CNE" National Electoral Commission), as well as with one witness from each political party or coalition of parties. In each instance, I observed that the votes were being processed in an orderly manner and that the voting machines were working without glitches. I also took note of the number of votes that each voting machine had counted up to

that particular time. Most importantly, I spoke to the witnesses from each party at the voting tables, and asked them whether they had witnessed any irregularities in the voting process. In each instance, every witness said that the voting was proceeding without any problems.

In addition to observing the voting process itself, I also spoke to many voters, at random, at each voting center. Many voters expressed frustration with the status quo, and a desire for change. Some of these people blamed the problems on the current administration. Others blamed them on "the economic war." Either way, most indicated they had voted or were going to vote for the opposition out of desperation, including many "Chavistas." Although many Venezuelans realize that the severe economic crisis that they have been enduring for the past 18 months or so may not be entirely the fault of the ruling party, they have reached a level of frustration that they are willing to take a chance on any option that may bring about a change in the status quo.

Prior to the elections, there was some fear that violence may erupt. Some members of the M.U.D. had asserted that they did not believe that the elections were going to be fair, and that if the PSUV would win, they would not recognize the results. In the past, this type of rhetoric had led to violence. Thus, it was expected that if the PSUV were to win, supporters of the M.U.D. would spark acts of violence. It was gratifying to see that none of that happened. The elections were conducted very transparently and in an orderly manner. When the voting was concluded, the CNE conducted an audit of 54% of the votes, as required Venezuela's voting laws. And after the results were announced, President Maduro graciously accepted them and conceded defeat, recognizing that he and his party have made mistakes that they now need to work to correct.

By now, everyone knows the results of these elections. The M.U.D. won 112 seats and the PSUV won only 55 seats of the 167 seats in the Venezuelan parliament. This gives the M.U.D., not just a majority, but an absolute majority in the Assembly. With this type of majority, the M.U.D., if all their Assembly members vote as a block (remember that the M.U.D. is a coalition of several parties), can potentially make huge changes: it can revoke any law; it can remove cabinet members; it can remove Supreme Court justices; it can impeach the president; it can even call a constitutional assembly to amend the Constitution. The big question is: what will it actually do?

After the elections, we stayed in Venezuela for a few more days and had the opportunity to speak with many more people. The hard-core *Chavistas* were obviously sad and disappointed, while the supporters of the M.U.D. were celebrating in the streets the day after the elections. The overall mood, however, was one of cautious optimism mixed with anxiety and fear. Everyone is hoping that the new Assembly will bring about positive changes that will end the deep economic crisis. There is also, however, a lot of anxiety and fear that the M.U.D. may use its newly acquired power to undo the great advances of the Bolivarian Revolution. Many people expressed concern about this and a determination to prevent that from happening at all costs. Daniel Vargas, a 17-year-old student leader, said, "If they try to dismantle the revolution, we will not tolerate it. I know the students will rise up for sure, and I think that most *Chavistas* would too."