

Whither Bolivarian Revolution?

Gregory Wilpert

The ten percentage point victory (55-45%) that President Chávez and his movement achieved on Sunday, February 15, 2009, in favor of amending Venezuela's constitution so that Chávez may run for president again in 2012, represents a very important victory for the effort to create socialism in this oil producing Latin American nation. However, Chávez and his supporters ought to recognize that this victory comes with a certain degree of risk because it increases the Bolivarian movement's dependency on its charismatic leader. In other words, even though Chávez is the best guarantor for socialism and progressive social change in Venezuela today, his movement's dependency on him was strengthened by the referendum victory, which is an Achilles heel for the movement.

But before one can examine the consequences and meaning of this particular electoral result for Venezuela and for the socialist project, it makes sense to first briefly go over the reasoning behind eliminating term limits in general and in the specific case of Venezuela.

Opinions on term limits are as varied as opinions about politics go. Also, this is one of the few issues that does not fall neatly along the left-right political divide. For example, sometimes it is progressives who advocate term limits because of the ridiculous obstacles challengers face against incumbents, particularly in elections for the US Congress and US state legislatures where incumbents enjoy massive fundraising advantages against challengers. In this case, so the argument goes, the lack of term limits for members elected representatives entrenches the status quo and makes progressive change extremely difficult. It is well known, for example, that historically 97% of incumbents win their reelection bids in the United States and a vast majority of those running are incumbents.

The most famous term limit, though, is the two-term limit on the US presidency, which was implemented by Republicans in 1951 because they sought to prevent another more than two-term presidency such as Franklin Roosevelt's.

In other words, the arguments in favor of term limits cut both ways. On the one hand it is said that not having term limits makes needed change more difficult because of the power that long-time office holders amass. On the other hand, term limits can also be seen as an obstacle to long-term needed political change because it forces a change of leadership at a time when the leader's project might not be ready for such change (along the lines of, "You don't switch horses in the middle of the race"). Also, some add the argument that it is more democratic to allow citizens decide if they want a long-serving representative to continue to serve, rather than to force them out via an artificially determined time limit.

In the case of Venezuela, Chávez supporters generally argue that since the Bolivarian Revolution represents a long-term project, and since Chávez is the best leader for seeing this project to its conclusion, he ought to be able to hold office for more than two presidential terms. Already when Chávez was first elected in 1998, he argued it would take about 20 years to complete the Bolivarian Revolution, which is why he favored a seven-year term in office for

the president (as used to be the case for France), with at least one reelection possibility, when the 1999 constitution was drafted. Constitutional Assembly members, though, convinced Chávez to accept a six-year presidency with one single opportunity for reelection.

Unfortunately, the recent debate about term limits in Venezuela was generally quite distorted. Rather than discussing the pros and cons of allowing people to run for office repeatedly, the opposition tried to make people believe that the amendment proposal was really about whether Chávez should be "president for life" and that holding this constitutional amendment vote somehow violated Venezuela's constitution. Meanwhile, Chávez supporters presented the issue as one that was merely about "expanding citizens' right to choose" whomever they want for an office, without the restriction a two-term limit imposes. Supporters of the proposal practically never addressed the underlying issue that holding office for several terms in a row could lead to the accumulation of power and the unfair and illegal use of one's office to get reelected.

Indeed, unfair advantage is enjoyed on both sides in the Venezuelan conflict. Media owners and the wealthy face few restrictions in campaigning and the government has been known to make use of some of its advantages to compensate (an accusation, though, that the opposition massively exaggerated).

If the opposition had managed to focus on the real issue, supporters of the amendment would have been forced to address this issue and Venezuela would have enjoyed a more serious debate about the pros and cons of term limits. The ultimate result could have included better legislation to protect against using one's office for reelection and better legislation to protect against the advantages that wealth and private media ownership convey when running for office on behalf of the wealthy.

Leaving aside the more general arguments for and against term limits, why eliminate the two-term limit for President Chávez? The main reason for this is that the Bolivarian project needs Chávez in order to continue and to be carried to its completion. First, he is the only undisputed leader who has so far proven to be able to unite an otherwise notoriously fractious coalition of Venezuela's progressive and radical left forces.

Second, not enough time has passed for the Chávez government to implement its vision of 21st century socialism (also known as Bolivarian Socialism and as Socialist Democracy). While ten years in office might seem like a long time, the Chávez government's program did not get off to a good start because of the vehement and often violent opposition it faced. Also, it was not really until late 2005, once the opposition in Venezuela had been soundly defeated, that Chávez fully embraced socialism and anti-capitalism. So, in effect, the Bolivarian Socialist project has only been pursued in earnest from 2006 to 2008—a mere full three years until now.

In addition, even though Chávez has a mandate for building 21st century socialism because he won the presidency with 63% of the vote in December 2006 on a platform of establishing 21st century socialism, in December 2007 the project suffered an important setback when Chávez narrowly lost the constitutional reform referendum, which was supposed to provide the constitutional groundwork for the socialist project. To a large extent this defeat was self-inflicted, in that it was a confusing proposal, the campaign was poorly

conducted, and many voters felt that too many issues remained unresolved for whose resolution a constitutional reform was not necessary. Nonetheless, Chávez has appealed to the Venezuelan people that he needs more time and a majority of the Venezuelan people has now agreed to give him this time.

Given the importance of Chávez for leading the Bolivarian project to its conclusion, the February 15 victory is extremely important for Venezuela and for creating a real progressive alternative to capitalist democracy as usual. As the sociologist Max Weber pointed out about 100 years ago, there are times when charismatic leaders are necessary to break through the ossified social institutions in order to create something new. In other words, according to Weber, charismatic authority is often the only way that old institutions can be transformed. Examples of this type of charismatic leadership would be Lenin, Mao, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, or Nelson Mandela. This is not to say that Chávez is on a par with these leaders in every respect, but he probably is with respect to his ability to lead and inspire. And such leadership should not be wasted if a people democratically decide that the cost of losing such leadership far outweighs the possible benefit of maintaining term limits.

The recent referendum victory becomes all the more important if one considers that the world is currently in a process of entering its worst economic crisis since the Great Depression 80 years ago. Back then people were desperate for an alternative to capitalism and there is no reason to believe that a similar development will not take place this time around. Viable alternatives to capitalism, whether under the heading of 21st century socialism or some other name, will become more important than ever. For better or worse, Chávez has become one of the few leaders in today's world to forge a path in the direction of this alternative.

However, while this might be true on a global scale, Chávez's electoral success bears some inherent risks for the Bolivarian movement. That is, it is precisely the dependency of the Bolivarian movement on Chávez that is simultaneously its greatest strength and one of its greatest weaknesses. This dependency is a strength in the sense previously mentioned, that Chávez unites what would otherwise be a very fractious movement. But it is also a weakness because such dependency makes the movement somewhat fragile. First, if anything were to happen to Chávez, the movement would probably fall apart into its component parts in no time. Second, given this fragility, questioning the leader is quite difficult because criticism rapidly threatens to undermine the movement's stability and main strength. As a result, debate within the movement tends to be possible as long as it does not question the leader's decisions or opinions. This, in turn, makes movement self-criticism difficult and makes the potential for errors all the greater.

One of the first tasks for the Bolivarian movement thus is that it must continue to develop the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) so that the Bolivarian movement becomes less dependent on Chávez and more stable and more open to wide-ranging debate. This means, first of all, developing alternate leaders and strengthening party structures so that the whole party is more movement-driven and less leader-dependent. The recent referendum victory has expanded the time-horizon for this task because without the elimination of the two-term limit this development would have had to happen within the next four years. Expanding this time horizon, though, carries the risk that the task of strengthening the party and decreasing the dependency on

Chávez is postponed until Chávez loses a presidential election or a recall referendum or is otherwise removed from fulfilling his office (via assassination, perhaps).

Second, as Chávez himself recognized during his victory speech, his government must take the fight against insecurity and the high crime rate far more seriously. In a recent interview with CNN Chávez said that one of the reasons he has not pursued the reduction of crime with stronger police measures is because he believes that crime is primarily caused by inequality and poverty and that reducing these ought to reduce crime. While it is an established fact that poverty and crime correlate very highly, it is also true that all available statistics indicate that reducing poverty in Venezuela has not meant a reduction of crime. Rather, that crime increased in tandem with the decrease in poverty and inequality. In other words, the government needs to complement poverty reduction with other measures in order to reduce crime. Along with the fight against crime also belongs the general fight against corruption and increasing the state's efficiency and effectiveness.

Third, as some opposition critics have noted, the real test of Chávez's economic policies is yet to come, when the price of oil is declining at a time when he cannot argue that the opposition caused the economic problems (as was the case during the oil industry shutdown 2002/2003). That is, the government will have to find ways to strengthen its efforts to create social justice in a time of fewer (oil revenue derived) resources. This would probably either mean going into debt so as to stave off a recession and/or taxing the country's rich far more heavily.

Finally, the fourth outstanding task for the next period is the deepening of participatory democracy against the resistance of chavismo's mid-level managers: the ministries, mayors, and governors. If popular power, as the system of direct democratic communal councils is often known, is the heart of Bolivarian Socialist democracy, then this will be the true testing ground for the viability of an alternative to capitalist democracy. So far, the communal councils have achieved much, but only in their own localities of 200-400 families. The real challenge, which Chávez has repeatedly announced, but which has yet to happen, is to bring these structures to a higher level, to the municipalities and perhaps even to state and national level. However, as many have observed, this is going to be difficult because few mayors and governors are willing to let go of their power. □□□