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Venezuela

# After the elections: A new party for the Venezuelan revolution

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**Hugo Chavez had already been clear about his general intentions. As the size of his victory in the presidential elections became clear on the night of 3 December, he joined his supporters from the balcony of the Miraflores palace. Under torrential rain, he sang with them the national anthem and shouted 'Long live socialism!' The task now, he said was to deepen the socialist revolution in Venezuela. 'Nobody should be afraid of socialism. Socialism is humane, socialism is love... Venezuela is red, red right through.'**

A fortnight later, he spelt out the first big step in this direction - the formation of a united political party, to replace the dysfunctional coalition of party apparatuses that has supported him so far. And he said he already had a name in mind, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, or PSUV. [1]

He was addressing representatives from the grass-roots campaigning bodies that had organised his election campaign in neighbourhoods across the country - 11,000 'battalions', 32,800 'platoons' and 3 million 850 thousand 'squadrons', according to his figures. These, he told them, should not allow themselves to be disbanded. Instead they should meet again, draw up a register of their members, and become the basis for this new united party of Venezuela's socialist revolution.

This is a move of huge importance. In principle, it is one revolutionaries inside and outside Venezuela should surely support. It has long been clear to many of the best Bolivarian militants that a gaping hole exists in the middle of their movement. Between the consistently inspiring leadership of Chavez himself and the explosion of local activity and self-organization among the mass of the Venezuelan people, there lies a dangerous absence of effective, national organisation.

The lack of strong, well-structured social movements has only begun to be remedied by new trade union or peasant organisations like the UNT or the Frente Campesino Ezequiel Zamora. (Venezuela never had anything equivalent to the landless movement in Brazil, the indigenous movement in Ecuador or the multitude of social and union movements in Bolivia.)

On the other hand, the so-called parties supporting the process - most gravely Chavez' own MVR, but also for the most part the PPT, Podemos, the Venezuelan Communist Party and several smaller organisations - have utterly failed to act as the democratic, collective organisers of political debate, decision-making and action. Instead they have largely functioned as bureaucratic (and sometimes corrupt) machines to organise the distribution of electoral offices, posts and favours (very much like the traditional parties of Venezuela's pre-Chavez Fourth Republic).

A truly effective, plural and democratic, mass political organisation for revolutionaries is therefore badly needed. Several of Chavez' closest advisers have been talking about this for at least the last two years. Several attempts have been made by smaller currents of Venezuelan revolutionary socialists to bring together their own forces and open the way towards a mass revolutionary party. The launching of the PRS in July 2005, involving mostly trotskyist currents from the Moreno tradition, was one. The Frente de Fuerzas Socialistas, involving Utopia and the Socialist League, was another. But without the direct backing of Chavez himself, these were destined to remain minority initiatives.

Chavez' own comments on launching this initiative are also encouraging. His insistence that it must be the most democratic party Venezuela has ever seen, built from the bottom up, inviting all the currents of the Venezuelan left to join; his insistence that it must not be dominated by electoral concerns, nor by the existing leaders of the existing

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coalition parties, and his critique of the way the Bolshevik Party in Russia came to suffocate rather than stimulate a battle of ideas for socialism - he recalls how the marvellous slogan of "all power to the soviets" degenerated into a sad reality of "all power to the party" - all these point towards precisely the kind of mass, democratic, revolutionary, political organisation that is needed.

But there are also big risks. Not for the first time in the Bolivarian revolution, serious and necessary questions are being asked about how far the reality of this new party will live up to the expectations. These questions are of two kinds. Firstly, who exactly will be in this party, if, as seems is already underway, most of the main existing parties immediately dissolve into it? And will it really be able to break with the structures and culture of bureaucracy, paternalism, even corruption, that have too often acted as a break on the revolution's most radical initiatives (including, for example, workers' control and thorough-going local participatory democracy) ?

Even before Chavez' keynote speech, leaders of the PRS and the UNT like Stalin Perez Borges made clear their concerns about the way the new party was being prepared. He pointed to comments by some "moderate" Chavista state governors and MVR dignitaries to the effect that "everything was already decided", and to negotiations behind closed doors between the main political machines on how to carve up the new party. Stalin Perez said that trade union and other social movement activists, political currents and intellectuals would be calling for a United Forum of Democratic Discussion where all the grass-roots forces in favour of deepening the revolution could discuss exactly what kind of party they want to build, and how.

The second kind of question overlaps with the first, and points to a paradox at the heart of the Bolivarian process. Chavez' own vision of the new party may be in the best and most radical, democratic mould. But the decision to move in that direction was taken, and announced, by him, and apparently by him alone. Now this may be the only way to break through the logjam of inertia imposed by the MVR and other party establishments. But does it put in jeopardy precisely the kind of radical socialist democracy that it aims to promote?

As the prominent left-wing Venezuelan intellectual Edgardo Lander - one of the main organisers of the 2006 World Social Forum in Caracas - has put it: "The form taken so far by this limited public debate is extremely worrying, especially if we assume that this may anticipate the form to be taken by the debate on Socialism in the 21st Century. ...What future can be expected, in terms of pluralism and democracy, for a party whose creation is announced by decree in this way? Is a democratic, plural, polemical debate on the future of the country possible, if some of the basic choices are announced as decisions that have already been taken before the debate has begun?"

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[1] See [the following article which reprints key parts of the speech](#).