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Venezuela

“Everyone knows what happened”

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Yoletty Bracho, a Venezuelan activist and researcher living in France, has devoted her research to the relationship between popular neighbourhood organisations and the state born from the Bolivarian revolution. Present in Venezuela in the weeks leading up to the elections, she was able to meet with representatives of various components of the left and of *Chavismo*. Here she gives her impressions of the current situation and the conduct of the elections, based on the testimonies she gathered, and calls for internationalist solidarity with the Venezuelan people

“Everyone knows what happened” is the phrase that was in the mouths of Venezuelans just after midnight on 28 July 2024 when the results of the presidential election were announced. It was then 29 July, and we learned from Elvis Amoroso, President of the National Electoral Council (CNE), that President Nicolás Maduro Moros had been re-elected with 51.2% of the votes cast, while the candidate of the traditional opposition, Edmundo Gonzalez Urrutia, had obtained 44.2%. However, this announcement contradicted a series of indications to the contrary: during the day, results unfavourable to Maduro seemed to be emerging from the old bastions of *Chavismo*, particularly in the popular urban districts. So what happened? What can the left make of this latest Venezuelan presidential election? And how can we imagine a way out that respects democracy and the votes cast by the Venezuelan people?

Doubts and demoralisation: the left divided under Madurist pressure

Identifying with the left in Venezuela while opposing Nicolás Maduro's government is no easy task. The accounts I was able to gather during a month of discussions with various left representatives, including people who still claim to be members of the *Chavista movement*, show how difficult it is to organise when you are the target of the government's political and social repression. This was all the more obvious during the election period. A former *Chavista* minister told me: “It's impressive to see that the right has been able to have its candidate, but that it's us on the left who are not allowed to have a candidate. We have no representation in these elections”. [1]

Indeed, many people have told me of their concerns about the decision to be taken on election day. For these left-wing activists, members of grassroots organisations, many of whom had also been intermediaries in public action under the *Chavista* governments, the question was whether or not to go and vote on 28 July. On the one hand, because voting for Edmundo González Urrutia seemed impossible. There was no way these people could vote for María Corina Machado, the leader of the traditional opposition, who in the past has been able to forge alliances with such repulsive figures as Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro and Javier Milei. But what about voting for Nicolás Maduro? The man who for years has kept the popular left out of government? The man who has managed the economic crisis by making the poorest people pay for the corruption within the oil company and the effects of US economic sanctions? He who repressed the popular classes during the People's Liberation Operations (PLO) between 2015 and 2017, which left thousands of young black men from the neighbourhoods dead? [2] No, that wasn't possible either. So, for some of these activists, the only option seemed to be abstention. A solution that contrasts with years of claims by *Chavismo* that the vote is a fully-fledged political tool for resolving conflicts between Venezuelans.

There are also some divergent positions: among the people I spoke to, one decided to vote for González Urrutia to “block” Maduro. The other said that it was his duty as a *Chavista* to vote for the opposition, to show the president in power that he no longer represented the ideals of this political movement. There are still other options: among the trade union, Trotskyist and Communist forces that have had more or less close relations with *Chavismo*, the blank vote seems to be the most popular. This requires voters to make a little technical effort. Let's not forget that voting in

Venezuela is electronic. It is done by machines installed in polling stations, which both transmit the votes to the National Electoral Council (CNE) and issue a voting receipt which is deposited in a ballot box. The only way to obtain a blank vote is to initiate the voting process on the touch screen, wait the three minutes given in total to vote, and collect a “voto nulo” receipt. The machine does not immediately offer an option for expressing this choice.

But beyond the electoral choice, there is the question of the collective and unitary organisation of leftists who oppose the Maduro government. Divided between political parties, trade unions, social movements and other plural spaces (think-tanks, literary reviews and so on), the convergence of struggles seemed difficult before the election, when the various parties criticised each other for their divergent positions with regard to the history of the Bolivarian Revolution. Questions of language are becoming central strategic issues: at a general meeting that was seeking to build an alliance between organisations for the post-election period, it was surprising to see that certain words had been dropped from the everyday vocabulary. We no longer speak of “people power” or “the people”, but rather of “workers” and “elite pacts”. It's a sort of victory for the trade union forces and certain Trotskyist parties, who can boast that they never joined the ranks of the *Chavistas*.

In this context, a well-known activist and researcher working on issues of violence and the popular neighbourhoods told me: “It will be the moment after the elections that will bring us together. With just a few days to go before the election (19 July), we can still talk about reclaiming the oil company by making it work through cooperatives, or nationalising the private clinics... but after the election we'll know whether we're going to have the space we need to fight for our social and collective rights, or whether we're going to have to fight simply for the right to exist politically”.

This opinion converges with that of a leader of a major organisation defending the right to housing for the popular classes: “Nicolás can't win. They don't have the votes. And if Nicolás takes the election by force, we'll have nothing left to do but defend our ability to engage in politics”. According to conversations and political expressions from these same players since the election, they seem to agree that it is the second option that is gaining ground.

28 July: the end of revolutionary democracy?

On the eve of the election I went to visit community leaders in a popular district in the west of Caracas, a historic bastion of *Chavismo*. Their positions had changed from those I had been told a month earlier. They were convinced that the *maquinaria electoral*, in other words, the electoral mobilisation structures of *Chavismo*, could win the day. After a month of discussions with various sectors of the Venezuelan left, this was the first time I had heard such a statement. Even more astonishing, a *Chavista* activist told me: “and even if we don't win, we have to win. The danger is too great”. These people, identified in their neighbourhoods as *Chavista* activists, are afraid of what might happen if the traditional opposition wins. In fact, another expression runs through the streets of Caracas and social networks: *ahora vamos a cobrar*, “we are going to make them pay our dues”. The traditional opposition seems to be referring to what they see as a new strategy that should enable them to claim this election, unlike what Henrique Capriles Radonski did in 2013 against Nicolás Maduro, an election they see as having been stolen even though the CNE audit confirmed Maduro's victory.

But for the historic activists of *Chavismo* it sounds different: *cobrar* would be more like a material and physical attack on where they live, their activism, themselves and their families. A well-known researcher who has been involved in negotiations in Venezuela for many years understands these fears: “Unfortunately, the discourse of the most radical traditional opposition does not reassure the *Chavistas*, which prevents progress from being made, including in the highest negotiating bodies”.

On 28 July, the day of the election, Caracas and the rest of the country were calm. Even though irregularities were

reported when the polling stations were set up, Venezuelans had been queuing up to vote since the evening before. Nor was it the “electoral fiesta” that *Chavismo* has historically claimed. In a country where election days have always been days of strong movements, of citizen mobilisation, of family reunions, friendships and activism, this time everything seems strangely calm, certainly too calm. It was hard to find people to spend the day with and wait for the results, apart from the closed meetings organised by NGOs on their premises to monitor the technical aspects of the election. In the east of Caracas, in an upper-middle-class neighbourhood, the absentees are making themselves felt: the older generations are voting, but their young people, who have been living abroad for years, are not present. With over seven million Venezuelans living abroad, representing a third of the country's population, it is now the popular neighbourhoods that are being emptied of their middle generations.

The announcement of the results came late. Very late. On 29 July. This is not exceptional in itself, but one detail casts doubt. Since the end of the afternoon, when the polling stations closed, we understand from various accounts that the results were not being transmitted to the CNE, or that the witnesses authorised by the same council and representing the political parties were encountering difficulties in obtaining the minutes recording the results in their respective polling stations. What is more, we understood from various sources that González Urrutia's representatives were forbidden to enter the CNE's tabulation office, where the general election results are printed and validated by the members of the Council and the representatives of the political parties.

After midnight, the president of the CNE announced Nicolás Maduro's victory, after denouncing a terrorist attack on the results transmission system. The attack was overcome, allowing the electoral authorities to issue results after obtaining, according to them, 80% of the reports from the polling stations. In Venezuela, only the CNE has the right to announce results. These are announced once they show a so-called irreversible trend, i.e. one that cannot change even after the arrival of the missing results.

The difference announced by Amoroso between Maduro and González is 700,000 votes. The 20% missing votes represent more than 2 million votes. Reversing the results was still mathematically possible. And the testimonies from the polling stations and the popular mobilisation that followed say a great deal.

Popular and citizen's mobilisation: democracy in the face of repression

At 7 am on 29 July, Caracas was still asleep. Having crossed the city from west to east, I was surprised to see how empty it was, whereas the capital usually wakes up with the sun, between 5.30 and 6 am. A few hours earlier, a friend of mine, an ecologist and feminist activist, was worried: “Six more years of this is too much! What are we going to be able to do?”. [3] She and her mother, who had worked at the CNE in the past, had no explanation for the supposedly distant terrorist attack. According to their knowledge, it's not possible. But even more important is the conclusion drawn by this activist who fights for ecofeminism in an oil-rich country where the right to abortion is still penalised by law: “The only thing I still trusted was the electoral system. But now it's like with the *apagones* (widespread power cuts that took place in 2019), then it was an iguana that came and cut everything off, and now we have no proper explanation, only results that we have to take at their word”. [4]

If at 7 am everything was calm, a few hours later the city began to move. And not just in Caracas, but in the rest of the country. A popular revolt swept through the streets. The *cacero/azos* (saucepan concerts) turned into street mobilisations. These mobilisations go beyond political organisations, beyond the binary divide that has historically been at the heart of analyses of Venezuela. Women and men from the popular classes, many of whom were undoubtedly supporters of *Chavismo*, were taking to the streets and demanding that their votes and their right to live in a democracy be respected. These mobilisations were not being led by the Venezuelan right or by US imperialism. In many ways, they go beyond them, and the leaders of the traditional opposition are finding it hard to channel them.

[5]

The same applies to the Chavista government, whose response was very quickly one of repression. In just three days, more than a thousand people were imprisoned. There have already been more than twenty deaths and a number of people have disappeared. Maduro announced the construction of new high-security prisons where forced labour and re-education would be used “as in the old days”. [6] Back then, it was during the last military dictatorship of the 20th century, that of Marcos Pérez Jiménez who, as the current president of Venezuela recalled in his speech, put prisoners to work building roads. “Let them go and build roads”, he said. One of my acquaintances, a researcher, is sheltering in her home a woman whose child was a victim of the PLOs and who was an observer at her polling station. [7] The police search the neighbourhoods for observers and take them to the prisons. Testimonies are multiplying about the repression and the control by the security forces and paramilitary organisations of the neighbourhoods from which the demonstrations originated. We are witnessing the criminalisation of popular revolt and its relentless repression.

A way out through Latin American diplomacy and internationalist solidarity

The Venezuelan political conflict is being mediated by various international players. The role of Latin American diplomats is central. Countries governed by the left, such as Brazil, Colombia and Mexico, have called on the Maduro government in a press release for a public audit of the votes cast on 28 July, as the only institutional tool that would enable a sovereign exit from the tensions, doubts and repression that are weighing down the Venezuelan people. Far from Anthony Blinken’s assertions that the United States directly recognised González Urrutia as the winner of the elections, thereby provoking even more tension, Latin American diplomats are doing the hard work of maintaining channels of dialogue with the parties involved in the conflict and seeking to build negotiations between these players.

The international left can play their part. Our comrades and the Venezuelan people as a whole need our support. Calling for respect for democracy is undoubtedly the best way forward in this situation. “Everyone knows what happened”, including our comrades who are now seeking to build a political space worthy of the name. We owe it to the popular struggles of which they are the spokespersons.

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[1] I’m paraphrasing. In general, the political situation in Venezuela prevents interviews from being recorded out of concern for the safety of both the interviewer and the interviewee.

[2] This was a security programme implemented by the Maduro government, which took the form of militarised interventions by the Special Security Forces (FAES), a police force whose masked members intervene in neighbourhoods in search of so-called criminals. Fieldwork, both quantitative and qualitative, shows that these PLOs are responsible for thousands of deaths of young black and poor people from popular urban neighbourhoods.

[3] This account echoes the press release issued by the feminist organisation *Las comadres púrpuras*, which is concerned that post-electoral repression could make life even more difficult, forcing women to develop new care practices and strategies. See “Prácticas que buscan

embrutecer y promover la mediocridad del pensamiento crítico. Pensamiento absolutista gubernamental que busca un orden dependiente del terror, miedo y subordinación”. *Las comadres púrpuras*, 31 July 2024 [online].

[4] At the time of the widespread power cuts in 2019, various explanations were put forward by the authorities, including fires and cyber attacks. These were circulating alongside more unlikely ones, such as the effects of iguanas on power stations. The iguana attacking the electricity system has become a common image, used ironically to criticise the Maduro government's failure to explain its actions.

[5] Dissident leftists and local researchers working among the popular classes show how, on 29 July, the traditional opposition did not have the means to take strategic advantage of these mobilisations. The demonstrations did not respond to any call from a political organisation. The geographical and social origins of the demonstrators, as well as their political codes, were very different from those of traditional opposition supporters. See Rebecca Hanson and Verónica Zubillaga, “Massive protests erupt again over disputed Venezuela elections - but they look different this time”, *The Conversation*, 31 July 2024 [online].

[6] <https://x.com/Karenmendez/status/1819498113071304806>

[7] Observers are people accredited by the CNE on behalf of the political parties taking part in the election, with the right to monitor the electoral process in their respective offices, and to take part in the counting and final verification of the results. At the end of the count, these observers are expected to obtain copies of the minutes from the voting machines.