



Why the Venezuelan Amendment Campaign Is So Important

Av **DIANA RABY**

SUNDAY, 15 FEBRUARY, Venezuelans vote in a referendum on a proposed Constitutional Amendment that will allow for any candidate to stand for the Presidency, or indeed for any elective office, without restriction on the number of terms they may serve. Only the people's vote will decide whether they are elected and how many terms they serve.

In other words, if President Hugo Chavez, who is already serving his second term under the provisions of the 1999 Constitution, wishes to stand for a third term, he may do so. Equally, the opposition mayor of Greater Caracas, Antonio Ledezma, may stand three or four times if he wants (and if the people vote for him).

This is no different from the practice here in the UK, where Margaret Thatcher won four elections for the Conservatives (although we did not have the privilege of voting for her personally as Prime Minister), and Tony Blair won three times for Labour. It is of course different from the situation in the U.S., where some sixty years ago a limit of two consecutive terms was introduced for the presidency.

But why is there such a fuss about this proposal in Venezuela? Once again, as so many times before in the last ten years, the media are full of stories about Chavez' dictatorial tendencies or being President for life, and the opposition goes on about "the principle of alternation ." But they know perfectly well that Chavez will only be re-elected in 2012 if the people vote for him in elections which have been certified time and again as impeccably free and honest, and that the possibility of mid-term recall still exists and will be maintained. And alternation, as the experience here in the UK and in so



many "advanced democracies" shows, is all too often a neat device to prevent any real change while giving the appearance of choice with a superficial change of personnel.

The real problem is – and everyone knows this, they just don't want to discuss it – that Chavez represents the continuation of the Bolivarian project, a popular revolution which has transformed Venezuela and inspired similar transformations in several other Latin American countries. And that against Chavez, the opposition will again lose, and lose badly as they have done before.

Hugo Chavez is the people's candidate, and for the foreseeable future will continue to be. No, he is not a dictator, and of course he is not infallible. He himself has often recognised his failings. But he has demonstrated time and again his commitment to serving the people – the poor, the workers, the excluded – of Venezuela, and they have reaffirmed their confidence in him. If he were to go – and thank God, this is not the case – it is to be hoped that the people would find, indeed create (as they did with Chavez) another leader or leaders. But why substitute a leader of proven ability, indeed one who has grown in stature and maturity with every new stage of the revolutionary process?

In these circumstances, those who talk about "Chavismo without Chavez" are either naive or ill-intentioned. What is at stake in Venezuela is a fundamental clash of class interests, although one which is being played out as far as possible in peaceful and democratic fashion. The campaign for the Constitutional Amendment to abolish term limits is simply the latest battleground in this contest, and as such, a victory for the "Yes" camp on Sunday 15 February is crucial – and let's hope the victory is a decisive one!

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Socialism, Democracy and the Re-Election of President Chavez

Av **JAMES PETRAS**

ON FEBRUARY 15, 2009, Venezuelan voters will go to the polls in order to vote on a constitutional referendum, which would allow for the indefinite re-election of the President. The vote on the constitutional amendment has raised fundamental questions about the relation between electoral politics and democracy. The proposed constitutional change, and specifically the constitutional amendment allowing for the indefinite re-election of the President requires an examination of two basic concepts: electoral systems and democracy. The distinction between these two concepts dominates the political conflict between the supporters (pro-Chavez) and opponents (anti-Chavez) of the amendment.

Electoral Systems and Democracy: Substance and Structure

A democratic political system involves at a minimum: (1) Free and equal competition for political office, (2) access to the means of communication, and (3) competing ideas and freedom to act without physical or psychological coercion. Procedures and conditions leading up to elections, which violate these norms, are incompatible with the notion of democracy. The most obvious case is Colombia whose state terror against opposition groups is practiced in every recent election. Electoral processes are necessary but not sufficient conditions to define a democratic system. In other words, there are numerous examples where electoral processes are embedded in institutional structures (oligarchy-controlled mass media) and preceded by political conditions (threats, patronage and corruption), which violate the basic norms of democracy. In other words, we can have non-democratic (authoritarian) as well as democratic electoral systems.

The most common authoritarian features of electoral systems, which deny its democratic character include:



1. Restricted access to the mass media because of monopoly ownership denying freedom of expression and undermining equality of competition.
2. Unlimited spending on electoral campaigns favoring the moneyed classes capacity to monopolize electoral campaign spending and biasing the competition to favor candidates who amass the greatest funds.
3. State violence and repression of opposition parties, candidates and electoral constituencies during the electoral campaign. This nullifies any claims to a legitimate outcome based on 'an honest vote count' on election day.
4. Large scale financing by external foreign powers of the internal electoral process, drastically undermining internal competition and distorting free and equal competition. Important organizational and financial links between foreign multinational corporations, intelligence agencies and foundations to domestic parties, personalities and NGOs introduce non-democratic, non-elected actors.

Taking account of these possible structural constraints, we see that there are numerous non-democratic variants of electoral systems. These include:

1. Death-squad electoral systems in which long-term, large-scale state violence against dissident civil society organizations (trade unions, peasant movements and human rights groups) is practiced prior to election day. Colombia is the prime example in which, over the past decade, the military and paramilitary groups murdered over 2500 trade unionists and 4 million, mostly peasants, were driven from their homes and communities.
2. Imperial-collaborator electoral regimes in which there is a mass infusion of political financing by European/US state entities to incumbent regimes and parties to counter growing mass popular opposition. Nicaragua, El Salvador and Dominican Republic are prime examples of electoral regimes, which have experienced 'externally controlled political processes'.
3. Oligarchic electoral systems are the most common type of authoritarian systems, many emerging from the crisis of military dictatorship of the 1970-80's. They resulted from a political pact between economic oligarchs, political party elites and the military. The usual pattern is a two-party or modified three-party political system or coalition where the parties compete for the vote in order to represent competing ruling class interests. Mexico, Chile, Uruguay and Brazil represent this type of oligarchic electoral system.

Electoral Systems in Flux

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In recent years, mass popular movements and uprisings have led to the overthrow of oligarchic electoral regimes. Such events have taken place in Bolivia, Argentina and Ecuador. In addition, established oligarchic electoral regimes have been defeated because of mass mobilizations in Venezuela, Brazil, Uruguay and Paraguay. As a result, some of the authoritarian political constraints have been temporarily reformed, while the economic ruling classes remain intact. The inequalities in economic resources and access to the mass media remain in place or are, at best, merely modified.

In other words, in recent years a process of democratizing the electoral system has been underway. However this process is not linear, homogenous or irreversible. Promising democratic beginnings via mass mobilizations have been cut short or even reversed once the democratic 'reformers' take office. Democratic reformers frequently retain the repressive state apparatus, limiting changes in authoritarian structures and repressive practices. In summary, electoral politics, and not democracy, resulted from the transition between military to civilian rule.

Over the past eight years the democratization of electoral politics advanced with the breakdown of the neo-liberal political-economic system, the rise of popular mass movements and the defeat of abortive oligarchic uprisings designed to restore strict authorization rule.

Venezuela represents the most exemplary case of a sustained effort to democratize electoral politics. Venezuela, during the Chavez Presidency (1999-2008), represents a unique case of an effort to combine the democratization of electoral politics with the socialization of the economy, deepening and extending democratic politics into the sphere of the economy.

Venezuela: The Transition to Democracy

Venezuela is the one country in Latin America that best exemplifies the transition from oligarchic electoral politics to democracy. During the preceding 40 years (1959-1998) the country was ruled by a two-party elite (Democratic Action and Social Christian – COPEI), which competed to represent the petrol-rentier oligarchy, powerful importers, and the real estate-financial speculative elite. The two parties were dominated by a predator political class, which pillaged the public treasury. The economic collapse during the infamous decade of 1989-1998 resulted in a 10-fold increase in poverty, which led to the mass uprising and state massacre of 1989 known as the 'Caracazo'. This, in turn, paved the way for the election of President Chavez in 1999. President Chavez took the first steps toward reforming the authoritarian electoral system through a referendum and subsequent new constitution. Chavez's opposition to Washington's imperial 'War on Terror' was part of a foreign policy designed to end US tutelage and affirm Venezuela's national sovereignty.



The colonial oligarchy sought to regain power and return the country to its authoritarian past via a US-backed civil-military coup in April 2002. The coup was defeated. Chavez was restored to power by a popular uprising backed by loyalist military officials. The President dismissed the coup participants within the government and arrested their civilian collaborators. As a result, authoritarian organizations in civil society and the state were weakened. A subsequent lockout was led by an elite group of petroleum executives who sought to sabotage the economy and overthrow the elected president. They were defeated by a joint effort of the Government and the petrol workers. This victory further weakened the colonial oligarchs in the strategic oil industry. The defeat of the strategic pillars of authoritarian electoral power led to the effective nationalization of the petroleum industry. Through these victories President Chavez strengthened the process of democratization of the state and civil society.

Under the leadership of President Chavez the petroleum industry became more responsive to the social needs of the majority of its citizens. Under democratic leadership the PDVSA (the national oil company) financed a vast number of citizen educational programs enhancing democracy. With a powerful electoral mandate after his re-election and vast increases in public revenues through public ownership and high world oil prices, President Chavez pursued policies, which encouraged citizen participation through elected community councils providing a new dimension to the process of democratization. Democratizing the electoral process and dismantling the oligarchic electoral system took several directions:

1. The encouragement, promotion and financing of a vast array of neighborhood cooperatives, peasant organizations and trade unions, which increased the power and political influence of the working class and informal workers. Freed from upper class patronage and control, the new social organizations equalized the effective role of the poor in the political process. Greater freedom and equality provided essential ingredients in the strengthening of democratic politics.
2. The weakening of the linkages between the oligarchic political and economic elites and the military/Pentagon diminished the power of the authoritarian state over civil society. Electoral outcomes were less subject to the intervention by undemocratic imperial agencies. Conversely the new mass organizations increased the importance of internal democratic processes. While the US and EU continued to channel funds into opposition oligarchic NGOs this is countered by domestic mass social movements and social programs funded by these democratically elected public institutions.
3. Publicly financed television stations and the proliferation of popularly controlled community radio stations have broken the oligarchy's media monopoly. The result is more pluralistic, balanced and diverse sources of



information. Better-informed citizens can make more rational political decisions.

4. Freedom of speech has been greatly enhanced by the proliferation of political forums not controlled by the oligarchy. More diverse opinion leaders have greater access to more organized groups and media outlets than ever before.

5. Civil society has been enriched by the growth of multiple trade unions and community-based groups. Competing voter lists in social movements have greatly increased internal democracy in civil society organizations. Electoral competition within civil society has been greatly enhanced. Civil society has been strengthened in relation to the state. The democratization of civil society movements has strengthened public debate and the electoral processes.

[...]

Democratic Socialism and the Re-Election Amendment

On February 15, 2009 Venezuelans will vote on a constitutional amendment, which will permit the electorate to re-elect an incumbent President without term limits. In the past, many democratic analysts were opposed to 'presidential re-election' for several reasons. According to their critique:

1. Re-election was a method used by dictators to provide pseudo-legitimacy to regimes, which repressed democratic freedoms of speech, assembly, and access to mass media.
2. Re-election allowed incumbent regimes to utilize the state apparatus to engage in fraud and violence, perpetuating authoritarian oligarchic rule and undermining free and equal competition.
3. Re-election allowed the incumbent president to monopolize the mass media and deny the opposition equal access to campaign resources.
4. Repeatedly re-elected presidents concentrated and accumulated state power while weakening popular social organizations in civil society and strengthening the links between the state and the oligarchic civic and economic organizations.

These were legitimate criticisms of presidential re-election in past historical contexts, but are not applicable to the case of Venezuela today.

The historical record of the past decade and the present realities in Venezuela today demonstrate that democratic principles and practices have deepened and extended following each election and re-election of Hugo Chavez. For example:



1. The mass media are much more diverse; access is more equal and there is a greater variety of competing socio-economic paradigms under debate.
2. Civil society contains a greater number of free and independent competing and organized social classes than ever in the history of Venezuela. Between 1999-2009 competing neighborhood groups with diverse social perspectives have flourished.
3. Electoral campaigns and procedures are less subject state corruption, intervention and violent manipulation than ever before.
4. Citizen participation and defense of democratic freedoms was never more widespread and intense as was witnessed by the massive popular mobilization defeating the US-oligarchy-military coup of April 2002, and the restoration of the elected President (Chavez), the Congress and the Venezuelan constitution.
5. The nationalization of foreign and oligarchy controlled strategic enterprises has made key economic enterprises subject to legislative and executive oversight by elected public representatives.
6. The re-election of President Chavez has resulted in politics which lower socio-economic inequalities, increased social expenditures for the poor, the working class and peasantry thus increasing their stake in democratic institutions, their interest in electoral campaigns and provided them with greater time and resources to participate in social and political organizations.

Contrary to previous historical experiences, in Venezuela under President Chavez, there is a positive correlation between his re-election and the extension and deepening of democratic institutions and practices as well as a richer civic culture. In the 40 years prior to the Chavez presidency (1959-1998) during which re-election was prohibited, the alternating Presidents perpetuated a profoundly authoritarian oligarchic electoral system which effectively disenfranchised the mass of low-income voters, offering few choices and subjecting them to a corrupt party patronage system.

The key is to view re-election versus single-term presidencies in their historical context and in terms of the political practices and pragmatic consequences of each. For example, the 're-election' of Alvaro Uribe means the perpetuation of death squads and forced dispossession of millions of peasants. The limits on re-election of presidents in Mexico has not altered highly authoritarian rule, vast inequalities, foreign control of all strategic sectors of the economy and the power of the capitalist class to replace one oligarch for another.

Approval of the constitutional amendment allowing for the re-election of President Chavez is essential for the continuation of the democratic process and social welfare of Venezuelans. Because of President Chavez' audacious



and courageous defense of world peace and humanitarian justice, his re-election is especially important in the face of imperial wars and genocidal colonial wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine and elsewhere.

Approval of the amendment will result in the continuation of vital socio-economic reforms, which provide free education, health and subsidized food for the vast majority of Venezuelans.

Particularly in a time of worldwide capitalist recession/depression, only a democratic-socialist government will give highest priority to protecting social welfare programs over and against bailing out bankers, industrialists and export elites. All alternative capitalist candidates in Venezuela would follow the practice of the North American, European and Asian rulers of cutting social programs to save the ruling class.

The re-election of President Chavez would facilitate the democratization of the economy through nationalization and socialization. The defeat of the re-election amendment would abort and reverse the process leading to the privatization of strategic economic sectors, which would lead to foreign capitalists arbitrarily making all key economic decisions. The privatization of the mass media would lead to oligarchic monopolies, eliminating the diversity of political views.

[...]

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Gale Chávez

Noen mener Hugo Chávez virker gal. Jeg mener han minner mer om Einar Gerhardsen.

Av MAGNUS ENGEN MARSDAL

Jeg er på ferie i Venezuela. I 1998 ble Hugo Chávez valgt til president her. Det er han fortsatt, ti år senere, tross et statskupp mot ham i 2002. Flere jeg kjenner mener at Chávez er mer eller mindre gal.

Før jeg reiste hit, var det særlig to anklager jeg hadde merket meg.

1. Regjeringen stengte en riksdekkende TV-stasjon fordi den var kritisk til Chávez, som har diktatoriske tendenser.

2. Den sosialistiske president Chávez kjøper seg de fattiges stemmer ved å bruke Venezuelas store oljeinntekter på tiltak rettet mot de fattige, som er svært mange velgere.

Det finnes utvilsomt en viss Chávez-dyrking blant mange av Venezuelas nær 30 millioner innbyggere. De går med Chávez-skjorter og Chávez-caps, for eksempel. Men diktatur? Jeg har tvert imot oppdaget at denne mannen er mer folkevalgt enn de fleste statsledere.

Chávez ble valgt med 56 prosent av stemmene i 1998. Han ble gjenvalgt i 2000, denne gang med 60 prosent. Så, i 2002, forsøkte toppene innen militæret, næringsliv og massemedier et statskupp mot de fattiges president. Kuppmakerne oppløste nasjonalforsamlingen og høyesterett og arresterte demokratiets statsråder uten lov og dom.

Ulikt mange andre tilfeller i Latin-Amerika, mislyktes dette kuppet. De fattige folkemassene i hovedstaden strømmet ut på gatene til støtte for sin president. Etter 47 dramatiske timer var Hugo Chávez tilbake. Deretter vant han presidentvalget i 2006, med 63 prosent.

En test på det demokratiske sinnelaget kom i fjor, da regjeringen og presidenten ville gjøre endringer i grunnloven. De ble lagt ut til folkeavstemning i desember. Et knepent flertall på 51 prosent stemte nei. Chávez aksepterte resultatet. Det kan man ikke kalle diktatoriske tendenser.

Hva med TV-kanalen som ble stengt, og omtalt i alle vestlige medier? Sannheten, finner jeg ut her i Venezuela, er at RCTV fortsatt sender i beste velgående. Kanalen ble ikke stengt. Den mistet konsesjonen. Slik vår egen radiokanal P4 mistet sin konsesjon under Valgerd Svarstad Haugland. RCTV gikk fra å sende på lufta som TV 2 til å sende over kabel og satellitt, som TV3.

Der P4s synd var for lite nynorsk på lufta eller noe sånt, var RCTVs problem blant annet at kanalen var dypt delaktig i statskuppet mot landets lovlig valgte president. Kuppgeneralene takket faktisk under sin 47 timer



lange seiersrus TV-folket som sine viktigste allierte. Men RCTV ble altså ikke stengt.

Faktisk oppdager jeg her borte at mediebildet i Venezuela er helt overveldende anti-Chávez. Mens regjeringa har to TV-kanaler her, fins det 5-6 privateide, kommersielle TV-kanaler som alle er motstandere av presidenten.

Men den andre anklagen er muligens sann, at Chávez «kjøper» støtte blant de fattige.

■ Under Chávez har alle fått rett til offentlige helsetjenester. Dette åpnet sykehusenes dører for millioner av fattige. Det bygges nå klinikker ute i slumområder som aldri før har hatt noe helsevesen.

■ Alle som har falt ut av skolen har nå fått rett til å fullføre grunnskole og videregående gratis og uansett alder.

■ I 2003 gjorde Chávez noe med det skammelig lave pensjonsnivået for landets eldre. Han firedoblet det.

■ Innbyggerne i de såkalte *barrios*, slumaktige områder som huser 60 prosent av landets bybefolkning, får nå for første gang legal rett til å eie sine hus, som er «ulovlig» oppført. Denne reformen kan bety en vendepunkt i 10 millioner fattige menneskers liv.

Mye av det regjeringen Chávez nå går i spissen for, er faktisk ikke annet enn den samme velferdsstatlige politikk som mange nordmenn er så stolte av at Einar Gerhardsen og andre gikk i spissen for her hjemme.

Det som foregår her i Venezuela nå, er blant annet at oljeressursene brukes så de kommer hele landet til gode. Dette er noe de fleste nordmenn vil dra kjensel på.

Men for mange høyreorienterte er Chávez bare gal. Like gal som Gerhardsen!

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