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Venezuela

A hugely important victory for the people

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On Sunday 15 February, the Venezuelan people voted by 54.86% to 45.13% in favour of a constitutional amendment to remove limits on the number of times candidates can stand for election to public office.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/411px-Chavez141610.jpg>]

1. It means that President Hugo Chavez can stand for a third term in the next presidential elections, due in 2012. State governors, mayors and members of the national and local legislatures gain similar rights. Previously, the Bolivarian constitution adopted in 1999 had placed limits of two consecutive terms for president, governors and mayors and of three consecutive terms for the others.

2. Aside from abstract arguments about the desirability or otherwise of term limits in a socialist project, this was a hugely important victory for the Venezuelan people, one that significantly shifts the balance of forces in favour of the Bolivarian revolution. A clear majority of the Venezuelan people understood that voting for the amendment meant voting for the continuation of the revolutionary process. And this they identified with the possibility that Hugo Chavez might remain in the Miraflores Palace. Speaking to an ecstatic crowd from the balcony of that palace on the Sunday night, Chavez said this meant that all those who voted for the amendment had voted for socialism. That may be an exaggeration. Among the 6.3 million Venezuelans who voted "Yes", there are many different interpretations of what this socialism might mean, and most of these are very vague. Even among the leaders of the movement, there are undoubtedly many who pay little more than lip serviced to the notion of a socialist transition. Nonetheless, in the face of an increasingly belligerent and recidivist opposition, some sectors of which exhibit proto-fascist inclinations, this peculiar identification, of the mass of poor and working-class Venezuelans with Chavez himself, and through him with the revolutionary process and with an idea of socialism, has become the vertebral column of the Bolivarian revolution. And this vertebral column is stronger now than it was last week.

3. Fourteen months ago, on 2 December 2007 (now known as 2D), Venezuela's right-wing opposition succeeded, by a narrow margin and for the first time since Chavez' first election in 1998, in defeating the Bolivarian movement at the ballot box. A much more ambitious proposal for constitutional reform, which included a proposal for lifting presidential term-limits, but alongside 68 other changes intended to provide the framework for a transition to "Venezuelan" or "Bolivarian" socialism, was rejected in a referendum. That setback has now, to an important degree, been overcome.

4. Following the 2D defeat, throughout 2008 the project to build a socialism of the 21st century, announced by Chavez in 2005, seemed to be on the defensive, partially stalled. There were steps forward: the nationalization of the SIDOR steel plant in response to the workers' struggle there, as well as nationalizations in the cement industry and some less important sectors; the growth of the PSUV as a mass socialist party which, in spite of its often bureaucratic leadership and functioning, continued to provide a new space for debate and mobilization; the continued efforts to extend and strengthen the communal councils, the local bodies that the defeated constitutional reform had proposed should become the basic nuclei of popular power and of a new, communal, state; the strengthening an axis of left governments in Latin America, particularly in response to the world economic crisis, centered on Venezuela, Cuba and Bolivia, but with occasional if contradictory support from Ecuador, Paraguay and others. There were also steps back, including the not very successful attempt to launch a great national alliance for production with sections of the Venezuelan bourgeoisie, the grave difficulties faced by the strategy for a social or "people's" economy based on co-operatives and "endogenous" or self-sufficient development, and the failure to retain or relaunch any of the experiences of workers control that had emerged between 2005 and 2007. Overall there was a shift of the entire political terrain away from the more radical proposals of 2007, away from the "five motors" of the revolution's transition to socialism and the call for communal power, and back into a more limited arena of electoral politics and the existing institutions of representative democracy. After flip-flopping between radical and conservative initiatives in

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the early months of the year, the political agenda became almost entirely dominated by the run-up to the local and regional elections in November 2008, in other words by a conventional, representative contest for precisely those offices in the old state structure – the mayoralties and state governorships – that have been, with a few notable exceptions, most resistant to the emergence of new forms of popular power and self-government in the communities and workplaces. Within days of the Bolivarian camp's qualified victory in those local elections, the agenda was taken over by preparations for a fresh battle at the ballot box, that of last Sunday's referendum on term-limits – another issue which in itself, obviously does not question or even stretch the limits of bourgeois representative democracy.

4. Chavez himself seemed to be aware of these limitations, at least in the case of the local and regional elections. First he supported the push from below to ensure that the PSUV candidates for the local elections were chosen by the rank and file and not nominated by small groups of their own supporters. The mass democratic primaries in June 2008 were important in developing the PSUV as a new political instrument of the Bolivarian process, and a first step towards democratic control over mayors and state governors, even if they produced no significant shift to the left in the profile of the selected candidates. In the following months Chavez repeatedly insisted on the need for those elected on the PSUV ticket to commit themselves to a platform of socialist measures as soon as they took office, in co-ordination with the communal councils and other bodies of popular power. Immediately after the November elections, he called a "high-level seminar" of all the new mayors and governors to discuss how they should proceed to hand portions of the public administration over to the communal councils, now to be grouped in communes, and begin to give them an economic role through the promotion of a communal economy.

5. Almost immediately, these plans were put on the back burner as the campaign for last Sunday's referendum to amend the constitution came to dominate the entire political agenda. Now the victory has been achieved, this strengthening of community-based popular power is arguably one of the two or three most important challenges ahead, one of the keys to whether or not the Bolivarian process can deepen and break the stranglehold of bureaucracy, corruption and conservatism encrusted in much of the existing state apparatus. The others are the long-overdue rearticulation of a strong and combative trade-union movement, and the development of radical, anti-capitalist, even eco-socialist, measures to confront the impact of the international crisis and the plunge in revenue from Venezuela's oil exports. None of this will simply come from above, though that vertebral column connecting the grassroots with Chavez' leadership and an aspiration to socialism, remains key to any radicalisation of the process.