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VENEZUELA: THE STATE OF THE REVOLUTION

While the world's major powers were undermining the Climate Change Conference at Copenhagen, two Latin American presidents were unmasking their cynical manoeuvres to the world. Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and Evo Morales of Bolivia, speaking at a largely unreported press conference, pointed an accusing finger not only at this or that president but at the capitalist system as a whole. The future of the planet, they argued, could not be left to those whose sole concern was to exploit its resources for private profit.

Hugo Chavez's radical declarations have won him an appreciative audience among the poor peoples of the world and an enormous respect and regard among the global left. Exposing Bush as "the devil" at the U.S. speaker's podium earned him the appreciation of many, and the undying enmity of the right, particularly in the United States. Chavez and Morales were not speaking as individuals, of course; they are the most identifiable representatives of a Latin American challenge to imperialism and globalization which both coincided with the emergence of the anti-capitalist movement worldwide, and drove it in new and creative political directions. In the first decade of the 21st century, the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, the growth of a mass anti-war movement with a clear anti-imperialist vision, and the rising popular struggles in Latin America were the three fronts on which global capitalism faced resistance. And to some extent, Venezuela under the leadership of Hugo Chavez, has come to symbolize that struggle from below, particularly since Chavez's announcement at the World Social Forum in January 2005 that Venezuela was moving towards "a 21st century socialism".

Yet five years after that declaration, the content of that 21st century socialism and the extent to which Venezuela itself has moved or is moving in a leftward direction towards a new and different kind of society remain unclear and ambiguous. Much of the debate around the question centres on Hugo Chavez himself, on his attitudes and declarations, and on the policy directions that seem to be largely set out on his Sunday television broadcast 'Alo Presidente'. This is more than an amusing anecdotal detail. The Venezuelan people as well as members of the government and the social movements await these programmes and the signs of things to come they might offer with real enthusiasm. But they are not public debates, or opportunities for workers or other organized sections of Venezuelan society to participate in a decision-making process – they are instead substitutes for discussion and debate. And they expose two of the most important weaknesses of the political process – its lack of clarity and its dependence on Chavez himself.

As 2010 begins, a number of changes appear to be taking place at the level of government. Important ministers – the vice president Carrizales, Infrastructure Minister Jesse Chacon among others – have resigned suddenly and without explanation, though in Chacon's case it was the direct result of his brother's involvement in large-scale financial fraud. Last year's Education Law and a new statute on the responsibilities of broadcasters and the mass media

have produced large-scale right wing mobilizations and a corresponding response from sectors supporting the government. What exercised the right wing opposition in both cases was what was seen to be direct government interference in both areas – in the first case with a national curriculum, and in the second with the requirement that all broadcast media transmit national state and government broadcasts when required.

These issues are familiar grounds for confrontation. The denial of a licence to Radio Caracas TV and the attacks on the Globovision network have been represented to the world as attacks on free speech. What is clear to any observer, however, is how freely and how venomously the right wing media (which remain the majority) attack Chavez and the Bolivarian republic with apparent impunity. Student demonstrations in support of RCTV in recent weeks mirrored those which took place in 2008, and sadly also produced a toll of dead and injured. Yet these stations continue to broadcast (unless they refuse to pay their taxes of course) and the right continues to organize its relentless attacks on Chavez. As new elections loom in a society which seems to have more of them than most, the right has little to offer for the parliamentary elections in September this year and shows no signs of reaching any kind of agreement around a candidate for the presidential elections of 2012 – their last unity meeting ended in blows! It is hard to imagine where any credible challenger to Chavez could come from, especially since the demise of possibly his most important ex-supporter, General Saul Baduel, once minister of defence and now in jail for misuse of military funds.

Much discussion within Venezuela and outside centres on Hugo Chavez on the one hand and what seems a ceaseless round of elections and referenda on the other. But revolutions are not a matter of individual decisions and actions even when, as is the case of Venezuela, a single individual has played a key role in launching Venezuela's Bolivarian revolution. And elections are the key events in parliamentary democracies, but a process of radical transformation is marked by other, less programmable, moments of decision and advance. Although legislative elections are still some seven months away, current political decisions seem to be focussed almost entirely on them, just as in the past debate and discussion has been subordinated to the achievement of electoral victories. The result has been a simplistic polarization, in which the options are simply to support Chavez and 'Chavismo' on the one hand, or the anti-Chavista right wing opposition on the other. As always, things are far more complicated than that.

The central contradictions in the history of the Bolivarian revolution are not limited to the confrontation between the new state and the old ruling class and its allies. There are also critically important political conflicts to resolve within the revolution, and in the relationship between the state and the majority of working class people.

What makes a revolution?

The 27th of February 1989 may seem very remote from the Bolivarian revolution of the 21st century – but for many it is where it began. On that day, the population of the poor barrios of Caracas (and later of other cities) rose up in protest at the economic measures announced by the newly elected President Carlos Andrés Pérez. They had been imposed by the IMF as part of the 'structural adjustment' requirements attached to their loans and required

massive cutbacks in public spending, the removal of subsidies on basic food, transport and so on, and large scale privatization of the public sector. These measures typical of neo-liberalism were not as familiar in 1989 as they are today. But they had a dramatic impact on Venezuela's poor, whose living standards had risen slightly during the oil boom years of the 1970s, but who now faced new levels of poverty. Three days of rioting followed – or that is how it was described. In fact the *Caracazo* as these events were called were a more organized response than they might have appeared to be. Throughout the previous decade grass roots and community organizations had grown up in the urban barrios and many rural communities, defending themselves against regular encroachments from the state and maintaining communal organization in the face of increasing privation. They participated in and to some extent led the events of 1989.

The Caracazo was savagely repressed, leaving a toll of dead probably of around 3000. But it left a popular memory and the basis of community organizations, though these groups were often suspicious of political parties which had regularly failed them. In 1992, again in February, an attempted military coup led by Hugo Chavez failed within twenty four hours. Chavez was arrested – but a brief television broadcast gave him the opportunity to announce that his small revolution was over “*por ahora*” – for the moment. For those who had exploded in rage and frustration in 1989, Chavez became a symbol and a spokesman; and a further attempted coup later that year, which was in fact far more violent, involved many of the same people.

In Venezuela, as in the rest of Latin America, the 1990s were a period of deepening poverty, rising unemployment and a strategy of privatization which removed even the minimal supports that the state had been able to offer to the poor.

“The proportion of the population living below the poverty line soared from 36% in 1984 to 66% in 1995, and the number of those living in extreme poverty trebled, rising from 11 to 35 percent. Over the same period, urban unemployment more than doubled, topping the league for the continent. Yet while the share in national income of the poorest two-fifths of the population fell from 19.1% to 14.7% between 1981 and 1997, that of the richest tenth jumped from 21.8% to 32.8 percent”¹

So by the late 1990s, on the eve of the 1998 presidential elections, over 65% of the population lived below U.N. defined poverty levels – and this in a country rich in oil whose wealthier classes lived lives of extraordinary luxury in the modern city centres. It was therefore not surprising that the poorest majority of Venezuelans gave their support to Hugo Chavez's candidacy and that he won the presidency in November 1998.

Chavez came from a lower middle class family in the province of Barinas. He joined the army and rose quickly through the ranks. At the same time he made contact with socialists and in particular with the guerrilla organization led by Douglas Bravo, whose strategy of the “civic-military alliance” convinced Chavez of the necessity of organizing a radical group within the army that would work secretly with revolutionary and grassroots groups. It was a way of organizing which looked forward to a revolution built from the ground up, linking and

¹ Gregory Wilpert in *New Left Review* 21, May/June 2003, 105.

coordinating social movements with elements within the military. An electoral campaign, by contrast, had to look to a wider audience and define itself within the framework of the very imperfect parliamentary democracy that Venezuela was. As Chavez had put it in 1996:

The current political model is mortally wounded and no viable alternative can exist without breaking the bourgeois, neo-liberal system that has operated in Venezuela since 1945. In our model of democracy . . . there has to be direct democracy, people's government with popular assemblies and congresses where the people retain the right to remove, nominate, sanction and recall their elected delegates.²

At his inauguration, Chavez agreed to abide by the extremely flawed constitution only until a new one was drawn up by a Constituent Assembly of elected delegates, which produced the new Constitution ratified (unsurprisingly) by 71 percent of those who voted in the referendum of December 1999. Its main provisions were directed at rebuilding the discredited political system and making elected officials accountable and open to recall; it set out the obligation of the mass media to be 'truthful', which evoked howls of protest before such 'unjustified intervention in the democratic press' from the monopoly owners of the mass media. The Church turned its large guns against the promise to raise subsidies to state schools at the Church's expense and the threat to introduce abortion rights. The new Constitution introduced a right to health and an entitlement to land for landless peasants, as well as basic trade union rights. But it was the plans for the reorganization of the oil industry that provoked the most vehement hostility.

Although formally nationalized, the Venezuelan national oil company PDVSA was effectively an independent multinational whose higher executives and managers made millions from selling Venezuelan oil to foreign interests at absurdly low prices. The ruling class was not about to let this golden goose be taken from them without a fight. Yet effective state control of the oil production and distribution which represented the country's wealth and close to 90 percent of its export earnings was the necessary basis for the social programmes and public spending promised in the new Constitution. Inevitably, then, the key confrontation would be over oil – and it would be very clear which side the U.S. government, held in thrall by the oil multinationals and aware of the 12 percent of their oil that came from Venezuela, would fall.

The first attempt to paralyse PDVSA came late in 2001 and failed; but it was a sign that Venezuela's bourgeoisie was actively seeking Chavez's overthrow using a combination of economic sabotage and ideological assault. At this time Chavez, re-elected to the presidency under the new Constitution in 2000, was essentially offering a programme for national economic recovery and growth with a welfare state programme financed by oil. There was no suggestion of attacking capital, however – instead Chavez was seeking collaboration and change which would not require making any direct inroads into the incomes or indeed the profits of the bourgeoisie.

² Quoted in Justin Raimondo "The New Bolivar" Jan 5th 2001. On <http://ww2.antiwar.com>.

Perhaps that is what gave them the confidence to attack directly on April 11th 2002, launching a coup against him after preparing their own supporters for direct confrontation. Chavez was arrested and removed to an island prison and a coalition of the representatives of big capital and their allies in the corrupt trade union movement marched gleefully into the presidential palace at Miraflores and announced that the new Constitution would immediately be rescinded.

Yet within 48 hours Chavez had returned. What had changed the situation? It was brilliantly illustrated in the extraordinary RTE documentary 'The revolution will not be televised' (but of course it was!). The people of the barrios flooded down into the city and surrounded the presidential palace demanding Chavez's immediate return. The look on the faces of the coup-makers told its own story. The balance of power shifted from those inside the palace to the masses in the street – and at that moment, the high ranking military officers who supported the coup (some of them old allies of Chavez) lost control of its rank and file as they identified with the people.³

This was the beginning of the Bolivarian revolution – the moment when a new actor entered the stage of history and changed it. That new actor was the Venezuelan people. Their arrival in central Caracas may once again have seemed to be a spontaneous reaction; in fact many of them were already mobilized in anticipation of a right wing demonstration in the city centre, and they in turn were able to move others through their local organizations. In other words, there was a movement here that was able to act in a concerted way. Politically, it was not tied to any particular strategy for the conquest of power nor led by any identifiable socialist or other political force; it was, in a real sense, a *Chavista* movement, moved by the defence of the Bolivarian project and of its leader and symbol, Hugo Chavez. But that had a separate consequence, which was the absence at that point of a political strategy born out of the central role of the movement. For its logic pointed ahead to a struggle for power, but it vested that element of its politics in the person of Chavez. It could be said that at that moment that identification gave the movement unity and cohesion. At a later stage, however, the issue of its independent capacity for action would be posed.

The Venezuelan ruling class suffered a dramatic and profound defeat in those April days. The generals and politicians had drowned in champagne on the 12th; by the 13th they were defeated. But they did not give up, preparing instead for a direct attack on Venezuela's life blood – its oil industry, where the right still retained control and power. When the bosses strike was launched, on December 3rd 2003, it was assumed that the bourgeoisie would mobilise again and that the right wing in the military would act to support the 18,000 managers, executives and employees of PDVSA who walked out that day – having first sabotaged production, cut cables and hidden the passwords which made the complex business of oil production and distribution possible. The reality was that the right in the country did not move; unlike Chile in 1973 – which was almost certainly the model – the bourgeoisie was not organized and united. But this is not to minimize the catastrophic effect of paralysing oil production, which at one point fell from two and half million barrels a day to just over 200,000.

³ The young bugler who refused the command to play the national anthem until Chavez returned came to symbolize that shifting mood

The strike also failed, but only because the mass mobilizations around the oil installations protected them from sabotage and maintained production. Student hackers from the university set the computers to work again, retired electricians found and repaired the severed cables, mass pickets kept out the armed and violent right wing gangs trying to invade, and in a famous incident a retired captain took control of a tanker immobilised on the high seas and brought it safely to port. In the main PDVSA offices in the city centre those who remained committed to the revolution and went to work were shot at by snipers placed on surrounding buildings. Yet by March 2003, production was back on track. The 18,000 were summarily sacked in typically melodramatic form when Chavez blew a whistle on television and announced that they were all “offside”. A new layer of workers came into PDVSA now headed by the highly respected ex-guerrilla Ali Rodriguez Araque who as Oil Minister had led Venezuela’s negotiators in OPEC (now OPEP) and was largely credited with its re-emergence. What they lacked in experience and knowledge was compensated for by their dedication to the creation of a socially responsible oil corporation.

The period from 2003 to 2004 was marked by a radicalization. In the aftermath of the April coup, Chavez had been conciliatory towards those powerful economic interests not directly involved in the organization of the coup, like the immensely wealthy and powerful media magnate, Gustavo Cisneros. After the bosses strike, however, it was clear to everyone that the fate and the maintenance of the Bolivarian revolution lay with the mass organizations who twice had defended it against its enemies. Chavez’s original strategy had relied on progressive elements within the military; many of his erstwhile radical friends, however, had proved to be unreliable allies at best in April and again in December-March. Chavez now turned to the masses.

The revolution turns left

For the observers of the Bolivarian revolution, its character and significance are symbolized by the *Misiones*. In essence they were nationwide programmes to carry through the promises of social provision enshrined in the new Constitution. While there had been slow changes in the previous two years, these projects were now propelled forward with new energy and purpose. Two things made that possible; the first was the control of oil wealth which would directly finance these projects. The second was the political will to carry it forward. The main beneficiaries of the Missions were Venezuela’s poor working and lower middle classes. The first, Misión Rivas, made secondary education available free to all; Misión Robinson offered literacy programmes to those who had been denied access to education, while Misión Sucre opened higher education to all. The state university had always been free but in the previous decade had increasingly excluded those who had come through the state rather than the private education system. These were exciting and radical measures and the difference that they made to the lives of Venezuela’s marginalised populations was dramatic.

Perhaps the most spectacular change was Misión Barrio Adentro, the creation of a free public health system in the poorest areas. While virtually all Venezuela’s doctors refused to work in the state sector, a new generation of students were sent to train in Cuba while some 20,000 Cuban medical personnel came to Venezuela to staff the new centres in their

recognizable hexagonal brick buildings⁴. These staff were highly trained and committed – and the difference they made to people’s lives was enormous. Other Missions were dedicated to defending the country’s indigenous communities, recognising the role of women at home, and to encouraging people to return to Venezuela’s neglected and unproductive agricultural sector with land grants.

In some ways, the Missions could be seen as massive social welfare projects, but what was important was the administration of these projects fell to new layers of people at local and regional levels who had come out of the community organizations. It was this aspect of control that gave these organizations their revolutionary credentials, and gave a new generation of Chavistas their first chance to carry through the Bolivarian project.

There was an urgency about the establishment of the Missions which gave them their air of improvisation and spontaneity, as well as producing some amusing contradictions. When the new university, the Bolivariana, was set up Chavez announced its existence and invited anyone who wanted to study to apply. Staff at the university had not been forewarned, and they had just two weeks to prepare for new applicants for the 17,000 available places. Within a week just under double that number had applied! But this joyful and slightly anarchic way of approaching things was part of the sense of a creative and revolutionary project. There was another reason for the urgency, however; for while PDVSA was now under government control the state – the Ministries, civil service, national institutions were still controlled and run by the bureaucrats who had learned their trade under the old, corrupt political system that had been in place in Venezuela since the early sixties. The promise of democracy and openness carried very little weight with them, and they continued to administer the state on the basis of clientelism, favours and bribery. Such a state could not carry through the social transformation that Chavez had promised. The Missions, therefore, became effectively a kind of parallel state, driving through the programmes of social change in every area with the active support of a mobilised grass roots. This was the period too when the veteran revolutionary Carlos Lanz put forward plans for workers control in industry, first implemented in the Alcasa aluminium factory in Puerto Ordaz. Peasant organizations began to occupy land and some factories, often threatened with closure by their owners who wanted to take what they can and run away to Miami, were taken over by their workers.

The right now turned to the Constitution and called for a recall referendum on Chavez as the Charter allowed. It was delayed and by the time it took place in August 2004, the Missions had generated a new level of enthusiasm for the Bolivarian project. The result (58% against the recall) was another clear victory for Chavez. Yet at the same time another, far more discouraging development was taking place. It is described here by Luis Tascon, a popular left wing member of the National Assembly and one of the few to criticise the process publicly.

“By August 15th 2004, the Missions were having an effect and we were rising in the polls. We did well, but not everything was positive. For at the same time there were people who were becoming very powerful, who were doing deals and opening banks and making money from

⁴ The commitment and attentiveness of these medics, as I can testify personally, were remarkable. At the same time it should be recognised that their presence in the country was the result of an exchange deal between Cuba and Venezuela based on oil.

the currency exchange rules. Diosdado Cabello and other groups dedicated themselves to profiting from being in power while the rest of us were busy defending and strengthening the revolution. In 2004, the political process began to take a wrong direction and the groups in power began to exclude and replace us. The revolutionaries were no longer needed”⁵

As always in the Bolivarian republic there is a radical gulf between rhetoric and reality. Hugo Chavez continues to employ the anti-imperialist discourse and the revolutionary rhetoric for which he is known (and much admired). It was in January 2005, after all, that he announced that the revolution was now socialist, and began to quote Marx and Trotsky in some of his public speeches (though it should be said that Jesus Christ rated more mentions). Yet at the same time, as Tascón points out, the role played by the Missions was changing as they became gradually reincorporated into a state now run by a new layer of bureaucrats and administrators, some continuing from the previous state and some new people, many of them transferred directly from the Missions.

Why did things change at this point and the revolution from below begin to lose its impetus? For all the repeated references to “the people” in the political speeches of Venezuela’s leaders, the mobilized and organized people may have seemed slightly threatening to the new leaders emerging at the level of the state. Presidential elections were due in 2006 and these quickly came to take priority. Public spending was guaranteed by a rising oil price and Chavez’s attention now turned to the search for alternative markets for oil and the creation of a Latin American economic bloc that could challenge U.S. domination of the region.

A disjuncture

Having won the elections of November 2006 with an increased majority, Hugo Chavez announced the formation of a new political party – the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) in December. The announcement caused enormous confusion among the left and the working class organizations both within and outside Venezuela. The reality was that the party had not grown organically out of the grass roots organizations, as it might have done had it been declared two years earlier. Those organizations had become bureaucratized, their leadership tied into the various ministries and their interest groups, and their resources used in many cases as a kind of patronage to win friends and loyalties. The announcement had been preceded by consolidation of a new Chavista bureaucracy in government. The new party’s statutes and organization would be determined by two four-person commissions appointed by Chavez and, as the Tascón case showed, it would be firmly controlled from above from the outset. For the left, this posed a problem. To remain outside it would marginalise them from the rank and file of Chavismo; but there was absolutely no guarantee that there would or could be open and critical debate internally. Many organizations split on the question.

Yet Chavez’s call to join was answered by nearly 6 million Venezuelans. This is a clear expression of the paradox of Hugo Chavez. On the one hand, Chavez has constructed an apparatus of power which includes and embraces many whose commitment to the revolution is verbal and opportunistic. It is common knowledge in the Venezuelan street

⁵ Luis Tascón *El chavismo por dentro* : Eds Libros Marcados, Caracas , 2008, 60. Tascón would later be expelled from the government party PSUV for his openly critical position. We shall return to Diosdado Cabello below.

who has grown rich at the revolution's expense, who is responsible for the half-finished infrastructural projects, the endless delays in any administrative measure, the runaway inflation that affects the prices of the most basic goods and so on. Many of those who have grown astonishingly rich in so little time were Chavez's military colleagues – the level of corruption and money-laundering here is hard to quantify and even harder to imagine. How much money goes on sweetheart contracts, how many family members and lovers are employed in ministries and offices, how far the currency exchange regulations have enable black market dealings on a grand scale. In a way the rising price of oil concealed much of this, or delayed its exposure at the very least, but there was no doubt at all that it was happening and on a grand scale.

The other Chavez, to whom millions of ordinary Venezuelans owe their unstinting allegiance, is the person who speaks with the accent of the *barrio*, sings their songs and constantly refers to his own provincial background. He is the revolutionary leader who takes on the leaders of the world and denounces them, who sends oil to the South Bronx and the victims of Katrina. Above all, he is the man who identified himself with the people's cause on that February day in 1992. The mounting scepticism of many people about the realities of daily life and their solution seem always to exempt Chavez, whose discourse of "people's power" seems to provide reassurance even though it is well known that many members of his own family have grown rich very quickly since he came to power. That residual loyalty has kept many revolutionaries, and the best grass roots activists within the PSUV despite the fact that internal democracy is minimal and that the party has been a vehicle for the ambitions of individuals whose only qualification in many cases was their willingness to do as they were told.

The times to come

As 2010 begins the reassurance of government ministers that Venezuela's oil plus its enormous reserves would shield it from the world economic recession are now proving ill-founded. The electricity crisis which led to power rationing is almost certainly the result of long-term neglect if not actual sabotage. While the *Exito* supermarket chain was recently nationalised and given to its workers after long-term speculation and price-fixing, food distribution remains overwhelmingly under the control of private capital, and the inflationary spiral affecting consumer goods is sometimes staggering. The use of that control has been very obvious before every election or referendum, when stocks of basic goods suddenly disappeared from supermarket shelves – presumably to create a sense of panic. The mass media are still controlled in their great majority by capitalist interests bitterly hostile to the Bolivarian process – and the two state-controlled TV channels are poor in quality and technically deficient.

During the last year or so extremely disturbing evidence of frontal assaults on workers and community organizations have come more and more to light. Some 400 peasant leaders have been murdered in the struggle against the big landowners and their hired guns. 8 trade unionists exercising their right to strike have been gunned down on picket lines. Leaders of the Yukpa indigenous communities protesting at the occupation of their lands by a state run enterprise have been beaten and arrested. Workers fighting for wage increases, on the Caracas underground system for example, have been denounced as counter-revolutionary

by Chavez himself. And there have been increasing problems in the health sector, which has played such a central role in the Chavez revolution. Yet this has not diminished the enthusiasm of the working people of Venezuela for a revolution that would make “people’s power” a reality.

Where are the enemies of the revolution today? Venezuelan capitalists have enjoyed a privileged relationship with the Bolivarian republic so far; they are even represented within PSUV as “patriotic business sectors”. Tax increases have been limited to VAST which disproportionately affects people on low incomes while the middle and upper middle classes still seem able to fill the expensive restaurants of Caracas every night and to consume their malt whisky in vast quantities. The organized right won significant victories in the elections of late 2008, winning control of four key border provinces as well as Greater Caracas. They won largely because of the abstention of sections of Chavez supporters grown sceptical. The Constitutional reforms which Chavez failed to push through were presented again early in 2009 and won after an intense and expensive campaign which allowed Chavez to be a candidate again in 2012. The Right has no obvious candidate of its own and while it remains frenetic and violent, it seems unlikely that it will defeat a candidate in Chavez who has brought major improvements to the lives of the majority of Venezuelans.

But the revolution has another enemy – those who have made fortunes and careers and have won power within the state. This new bureaucracy is as ferocious in its defence of its own interests as the right elsewhere. The stakes, and the gains, are huge.

And while some of the more obvious culprits have recently disappeared from power others have taken their place who may or may not be more loyal, or more honest, but who cannot claim to represent the real revolution, the people mobilized and organized to defend and advance their own interests. The reality is that the mass organizations, which were the revolution, have been disarmed or disoriented, controlled from above and undermined from below by the accumulating problems of social violence and inflation. In the past, enormous resources of money and energy have been used to win elections and another period of respite. The Bolivarian revolution will not be advanced or saved by electoral performance, just as it was not saved in the past by votes or opinion polls.

A revolution is a transfer of power from one class to another – and it is an act of self-emancipation by the working classes who become the governors of their own destiny. Venezuela itself has demonstrated the real possibility that this can happen. But it cannot, by definition, be the result of a command from above, whoever that instruction comes from. While one minister here or there may be exposed and replaced, the relationship between the state and the mass movement remains passive and controlling. And that state is dominated by a new bureaucracy whose interests, beyond the rhetoric and the red tee-shirts, lie in creating a strong, economically successful state competing and negotiating in a world market. Venezuela may benefit from trading with China, for example, buying its bicycles and computers, or with Iran, whose cars and lorries may successfully compete with imports from the U.S. and Japan. A strong Latin American trading bloc may indeed improve the terms of trade in the global market. But none of these developments will advance the cause of socialism for the 21st century.

Recent events in Latin America suggest a resurgence of the right – the presidential victory in Chile, the expansion of U.S. military bases in Colombia, the coup in Honduras and the militarization of Haiti. It was to be expected of an Obama who during his election campaign expressed the concern that “we (the –U.S.) are losing Latin America”. If Venezuela, with Bolivia, symbolized the emergence of a new kind of power and a demand for control of society’s resources for the benefit of all, it also reinforced the hope of the reality of revolution. It can still represent that hope – and signal a different future for the region - but only if Venezuela’s people take back control over the state that carries their name.