

Chávez's fight

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If liberties and universal suffrage are guaranteed, if democracy is warranted, and the citizens do not risk being expropriated by revolutionary politicians, there is no reason for citizens endowed with republican spirit to vote for candidates who defend the interests of the rich. They will be acting according to the principles of justice if they choose reasonably competent candidates who are committed to the interests of the poor. These considerations may be relevant for middle-class voters to decide on their vote, but what in the end decides the elections is the poor people's vote, as we have just seen in the re-election of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela.

His new victory in presidential elections confirmed that Venezuela is a democracy, and that the poor were able to vote according to their interests. But they also showed that middle-class Venezuelans who voted for him defended the interests of the majority, rather than their oligarchic interests, and, therefore, acted according to the republican criterion of defending the public interest.

Chávez is not a revolutionary, but a reformer. His rhetoric concerning “Bolivarian socialism” creates the impression that he is about to establish socialism in Venezuela, but his acts clearly state that he has no such an intention nor such a power. This same rhetoric feeds local opposition and the opposition of the United States – an imperial power that, since he was elected for the first time, tries to destabilize him.

More important than his rhetoric, however, are his governmental actions, which presented remarkable results. Per capita income, which was 4,105 dollars in 1999, went to 10,810 in 2011; extreme poverty went from 23.4% of the population to just 8.8%; and inequality rate dropped from 55.4 in 1998 to 28% in 2008, with Chávez.

Venezuela is a very difficult country to govern because it is poor and heterogeneous. And there are huge interests surrounding oil. In this difficult setting, Chávez has represented, in an exemplary way, the fight of a developmentalist political coalition formed by businessmen (a few), workers and public bureaucracy against a liberal and dependent coalition formed by rent-seeking capitalists, financiers, and by foreign interests; the fight of a poor country to achieve its national and capitalist revolution and improve the standard of living of its people.

In the last elections the international establishment once again supported the opposition candidate. But what has been “liberal” opposition in Venezuela since World War II? It has essentially been a corrupt oligarchy that for 50 years took turns in power in a travesty of democracy; an economic elite that reduced politics to the sharing of oil income between its members; a government of rich people that always submitted to the recommendations of economic policy coming from the North and presented, between 1950 and 1999, the lowest GDP growth rate in Latin America.

The international establishment was not yet defeated in Venezuela, and the Venezuelan nation is not consolidated. Chávez had the help of the high oil prices to carry out a developmentalist and social government. He will not always have this help. But the last elections made it clear that the Venezuelan people built a better democracy than the one that the country's development level would have made it possible to expect. And that this democracy is the best antidote against the domestic oligarchy and the imported neoliberalism.