

High stakes in Venezuelan election

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A rightwing victory for Capriles over Chávez next month would kill Venezuela's political culture and hopes of a new world order

In today's Venezuela, to be a rightist is out of fashion. The streets of Caracas are lined with posters showing the face of the businessman and political leader [Henrique Capriles](#), the opposition candidate for the presidency. In one picture he appears with a baseball cap featuring the colours of the country's flag and an open smile, as if to advertise some toothpaste. Above it, a legend says: "Below and left."

"Below and left" is one of the possible places in the ballot card where voters can mark their choice, but it is something else too: the political space that Capriles seeks to fill to surmount his disadvantage against [Hugo Chávez](#).

Throughout the campaign, Capriles – a rightist businessman – has presented himself as a progressive man, a politician who tries to recover Chávez's discourse from the opposite side of the street. Recently he has sought to reinforce this image by purporting to be a defender of the working class.

Paradoxically, for the first time in a long while, the Venezuelan bourgeoisie has a candidate true to his class. He was born in the bosom of two families who own communications media. His adversaries accuse him of belonging to the ultra-rightist group [Tradición, Familia y Propiedad](#) (Tradition, Family and Property). He took an active part in the [coup against Chávez in 2002](#).

This sort of political transvestism, with the right posing as a progressive force, is not gratuitous. As is shown in several opinion polls, [Venezuela](#) has given birth to a new political culture where the socialist ideal is widely accepted. Half the population agrees with the idea of building a socialist country, against 29% who oppose it. Citizens associate socialism with values such as democracy, equal opportunities, social inclusion, solidarity, co-operation, organisation, participation and, recently, efficiency.

This massive adherence to the socialist cause is a relatively new development. During the 1960s and 1970s it was, according to pollster Germán Campos, a blocked idea, one that most citizens considered forbidden. But that changed radically in the 2005 presidential campaign, when President Chávez changed his stance from Bolivarianism, nationalism and anti-imperialism to portray himself as a socialist.

This phenomenon can be explained as a result of the de-structuring of the old political culture and the formation of a new one, characterised by the emergence of a newly politicised population.

The strength of this new political culture, and of the strides towards social inclusion made by the Bolivarian government, make things quite difficult for Capriles. He has no room to manoeuvre. He can't oppose this ideal in public without damaging his chances of victory. He can't express his political and economic proposals clearly, for he would be rejected. On the contrary, Chávez's view of his nation has become widely accepted, so much so that about two-thirds of the population see him as the future.

The election on 7 October is not only a Venezuelan affair. Its importance goes beyond the country's boundaries. Its result matters to all of the continent, to the Non-Aligned Movement and to popular movements throughout the world.

A Chávez victory will deepen a post-neoliberal, socialist model of development for the country. However, were the opposition to triumph, it would be a tough blow to those countries that seek to leave the Washington consensus behind or to create a new world order, beyond US hegemony.

Since Chávez came to power Caracas has played an essential role in establishing better conditions for oil marketing and raising the oil price in international markets. It has succeeded in derailing free trade agreements in Latin America, helped to create regional trade blocks independent of the US, and transferred money and other resources to poor nations with progressive governments. It has forged alliances with Russia, Iran and China, and has gained a good reputation and influence among many non-aligned countries. All of this would be at risk if *Chávismo* were defeated at the polls.

Venezuela has been fundamental in helping Cuba to deal with the US blockade. Programmes of economic and political co-operation between the two countries have provided Cuban health and education expertise in exchange for oil. Were Capriles to win the ballot, the shipment of oil to the island would be cancelled and thousands of Cuban doctors and teachers would be repatriated.

Heads or tails? In next month's election, the stakes are high: either the radicalisation of the Bolivarian revolution and the deepening of the bet for a new world order, or the restoration of neoliberal capitalism. Its outcome will have consequences far beyond Venezuela.

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