

Editorial

The Venezuelan People Deal Another Blow to U.S. Imperialism

It was reported this morning that the Venezuelan election commission has declared President Hugo Chavez the winner of yesterday's recall referendum. Preliminary reports indicate that Chavez received almost 60 percent of the votes cast. Chavez addressed the nation in the early hours of the morning, calling on everyone to respect the results and to work together to bring stability to the country.

Since the landslide election of Chavez as Venezuela's president in 1999, the U.S. has been trying to engineer a regime change in that country. It has organized and financed at least two unsuccessful coup attempts, as well as a general strike by pro-U.S. business and labour groups which fizzled after a few weeks. It has also tried to organize an invasion by Colombian paramilitary groups which it finances. The latest attempt by

U.S. imperialism and its Venezuelan allies to overthrow President Chavez was the recall referendum held on August 15.

Venezuelan electoral law required that the petition to recall the president be signed by more than two million electors. There was evidence that the opposition forces fell far short of this number and had to resort to fraud to obtain the required number of signatures. Hundreds of thousands of signatures turned out to be forged, with the signatories swearing that they had never signed. Hundreds of thousands more names were discovered to be those of people long since dead. Despite this evidence of massive fraud, the Venezuelan electoral commission came under intense pressure from the U.S. and the Organization of

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Commentary

U.S. Gambles and Loses in Najaf

Last week, the U.S. occupation force in Iraq broke its cease-fire with the Mahdi Army of Muqtada al-Sadr and launched massive assaults on the Iraqi resistance fighters in the city of Najaf. It appears that the U.S. initiated the new offensive as an act of political desperation. The Bush administration is facing the strong possibility of defeat in the November U.S. presidential elections and needs some sort of victory in Iraq to reverse its fortunes. In particular, it needs to be able to claim that the occupation is ending and the new interim government of Iraq is in charge of the country. However, the Iraqi Interim Government, hand-picked by the Bush administration, has no credibility amongst the population and no real power. The Mahdi Army is the *de facto* state power in Najaf, Fallujah and several other cities, including large sections of Baghdad so the

U.S. is attempting to destroy it.

After a week of massive bombardment by the U.S. forces, al-Sadr and about 1,000 fighters are holed up in a mosque in the centre of Najaf, surrounded by several times that number of U.S. and Iraqi troops. If the U.S. damages the mosque, it risks an uprising of the Iraqi people, so a stalemate has ensued. At the same time, the longer the Mahdi Army holds out against the Americans, the more political support it is gaining throughout the country. Massive protest demonstrations have been organized from one end of Iraq to the other demanding that the U.S. end its offensive in Najaf. If the offensive continues, there is a growing possibility that this broad opposition movement could be transformed into a national uprising.

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Public-Private Partnerships – the New Face of Neo-liberalism

While the federal Liberal governments of Jean Chretien and Paul Martin claim to oppose the privatization of the Canadian health care system, in actual fact the privatization of health care has been escalating under the banner of Public-Private Partnerships (P3s). P3s are presented as joint ventures between the government and the private sector. However, in reality most cases have involved the transfer of publicly-owned facilities to private ownership, along with the transfer of massive amounts of public funds to the private sector.

For example, there is an increasing tendency in the health care sector for all support work to be privatized, including janitorial, laundry and food services. Once privatized, the workers in those sectors have faced intense pressures on their wages and working conditions in order to guarantee the private capitalists maximum profits. Similar trends have occurred in the education sector and postal services.

What is particularly alarming about this new form of neo-liberalism is that it is being openly embraced by many of the same trade union leaders who have verbally opposed neo-liberalism in the past. Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) president Ken Georgetti is openly touting P3s as the way to guarantee foreign investment

and keep jobs in Canada.. To date, two major public sector trade unions - the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) – have come out in opposition to P3s while most of the private sector unions, especially those based in the U.S., are openly supporting P3s

Postal workers have faced these kinds of attacks for many years, first with the opening of postal substations in pharmacies and supermarkets, and then with the privatization of mail transport services and janitorial services. The response of CUPW has been to unionize the workers involved in these privatized ventures. In the case of the mail drivers and janitors, the union succeeded in keeping the workers unionized under successor laws. The private mail outlets have been more difficult, as provincial labour boards have ruled that all the store employees and not just the postal employees must be organized.

The experience of Canadian workers shows that it is very difficult to combat these new forms of neo-liberal privatization even when their union organizes them to fight back. The endorsement of P3s by the CLC and various major private sector unions will make the struggle against them that much more difficult.

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American States (OAS) to allow the referendum to proceed.

Although both sides initially agreed to abide by the results of the referendum, in the days preceding the vote the anti-Chavez forces backed away from their pledge, stating that they would only recognize the results if the OAS, the Carter Center and the UN certify the vote as fair. Since the OAS has allowed itself to be used as an agency of U.S. imperialism on the issue of Venezuela and the Carter Center is itself an agency of U.S. imperialism, the opposition forces are counting on at least one of them to claim electoral fraud. While the initial response of the White House to the Chavez victory has been muted, the opposition forces within Venezuela are claiming that Chavez actually lost the referendum by a landslide and that the struggle to oust him will continue. Regardless of whether the Bush administration officially accepts the results or not, it is clear that it will continue its efforts to undermine the democratic will of the Ven-

ezuelan people.

However, this was to be expected; U.S. imperialism has never recognized the legitimacy of democratic elections when the winners have been opposed to U.S. imperialist domination. Since the Second World War, the U.S. has overthrown more democratically-elected governments in Latin America, the Middle East and Asia than any other power in history. At the same time, it has recognized dozens of military dictatorships and governments which came to power on the basis of blatant electoral fraud when those regimes served U.S. interests.

The struggle of the people of Venezuela for national sovereignty and social progress is bound to be a long and complicated struggle because it is facing the most powerful enemy the world has ever seen. However, the ability of the Venezuelans to repeatedly thwart the plans of the U.S. imperialists to turn their country back into an appendage of the U.S. shows that victory is within their grasp.

Commentary

U.S. Tries to Push FTAA in Through the Backdoor

In May, the U.S. and the five countries of Central America – Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica and Honduras – signed the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). The Dominican Republic announced in March that it would also be joining CAFTA. The deal still needs to be ratified by the U.S. Congress, which many expect will not be done until after the November 2004 presidential elections, but the signing of the deal is significant in and of itself.

This is the second bilateral trade agreement the U.S. has signed in as many years with countries involved in the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) negotiations; an agreement with Chile was signed two years ago.

Given that the U.S. has faced tremendous difficulty in imposing its agenda on the FTAA negotiations, especially as countries like Brazil and Venezuela have opposed every major concession the Americans have been looking for, many commentators assume the U.S. is trying to get an agreement through the back door. They argue that if the U.S. can sign enough bilateral trade agreements within the hemisphere (NAFTA and CAFTA take care of North and Central America, while the agreement with Chile firmly establishes them in South America), they will be able to force concessions by presenting countries like Brazil and Venezuela with a *fait accompli* – either sign on under U.S. terms or forget the whole negotiations.

Certainly this is the American intent; the U.S. Trade Representative, Robert Zoellick, has basically stated as much. However, CAFTA bears closer examination in and of itself because it provides a clear blueprint of what the American agenda for the Americas is.

There was a time when the U.S. had no need for long, drawn-out negotiations with countries in the Americas to achieve its economic aims. Up until about 20 years ago, they armed and maintained most of the military dictatorships in the region and simply extracted whatever they wanted in terms of market access or access to raw materials as a kind of tribute.

However, this was never sustainable and whenever the Americans could support the move to so-called democratic rule, as long as their economic interests were protected, they did. The collapse of the former Soviet Union also changed the way the U.S. could act in the Americas, as their support for brutal dictatorships had before been justified under the logic of the Cold War.

The Americans found themselves facing new complexities in the region, complexities that have multiplied with their failure to destroy Cuba and the election of popular governments that have taken an anti-imperialist stand in several countries. The economic crisis in Argentina, a country that had accepted every economic dictate of the U.S., added to their problems. The Americans had long touted Argentina as the economic miracle of the region, a claim that has been difficult to make over the last four years.

The FTAA provided the Americans with another banner to wave in their attempt to dominate the Americas – trade liberalization. CAFTA, which was signed despite strong opposition in the Central American countries, has been similarly justified. Leaders of the five nations have argued that increased access to American markets will guarantee the future prosperity of the region, which is one of the poorest in the world. Three out of five Central Americans live in poverty, while two in five live in what the United Nations defines as extreme poverty.

More than half of the people of Central America also live in rural communities and make their living in some way from agriculture. CAFTA, when implemented, is expected to decimate this agricultural base. Certainly that has been the experience of Mexican peasants under NAFTA; in a recent study, Oxfam found that the price of corn in Mexico had dropped by 70 percent since NAFTA was signed. The study attributed this largely to the “dumping of subsidized corn on the Mexican market by large U.S. agribusinesses.”

While the text of CAFTA has not yet been made public, it is also reported to contain very strong wording on the question of protecting the drug patent rights of the pharmaceutical industry. This has been one of the many stumbling blocks in the FTAA negotiations, primarily because Brazil has acted to make cheap, generic drugs available to its population for the treatment of life-threatening illnesses such as AIDS and has, repeatedly, refused to back away from that policy.

According to media reports, CAFTA also opens up the region’s public sector to private investment from the U.S. This could result in water, telephone systems, garbage collection, sewage treatment, health care and education all being opened up for privatization and foreign ownership.

Commentary

Do the Imperialists Care About the Plight of Sudan?

In the past several weeks, media reports of the atrocities being perpetrated against civilians in Sudan have been appearing regularly. In general, these reports cite Arab militia, funded by the government, carrying out brutal attacks against Christian civilians, and end by quoting activists calling for immediate intervention to resolve the situation. Many have even called on the U.S. to intervene based on the fact that they invaded and are occupying Iraq on the pretext (or actually the post-text, since it was after the fact), of putting an end to a brutal dictatorship.

The problem with these calls for intervention is that they ignore the lessons of even recent history, assuming that somehow the imperialist powers are interested in preventing genocide, dictatorship, rape, torture and oppression in Africa, or for that matter, in the world.

Before the African people won freedom from colonial enslavement, it was the major imperialist powers of the day, including Germany, Britain, France, Portugal, Italy and Belgium, that organized genocide and massacres in the region as they ruthlessly enslaved the population and robbed the continent of its bountiful natural resources. Towards the beginning of the 20th century, the U.S. also began to intervene in Africa, and stepped up its involvement after the Second World War, propping up a number of murderous regimes in the region.

Most recently, the factions at war in Sudan have

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The problem that the Americans now face is that a renewed ceasefire would be viewed by Iraqis as a victory for the Mahdi Army against a far more powerful force. It would demonstrate that the U.S. is incapable of consolidating its hold over Iraq in the face of determined resistance and would inspire even more fighters to join the resistance.

The U.S. gambled on a quick and decisive victory over the Mahdi Army in Najaf in order to deal a death blow to the Iraqi resistance movement. It failed to achieve such a victory and will now reap the consequences. At this point, no matter how the situation in Najaf is resolved, the resistance to the U.S. occupation will inevitably expand.

received arms and financial backing from different imperialist powers, with the U.S. providing weapons to forces opposed to the central government. A few years ago, under the Clinton administration, the U.S. bombed a pharmaceutical complex in Sudan, killing civilians and destroying critical infrastructure. At the time, it claimed the attack was supposed to be against an al-Quaeda training camp but it had received faulty intelligence about its location.

Given this history, calls for the imperialists to intervene and “solve” the problem in Sudan are reminiscent of the theory of the “white man’s burden” used by British imperialists in the 19th and 20th centuries to justify their crimes around the world.

The only people who can find a solution to the problems in Sudan are the African people themselves. To date, the African Union (AU) has sent a small force into Darfur to monitor and report on the situation taking place there. The international community should support these efforts and assist the AU to co-ordinate a larger, pan-African force to keep the peace in the Sudan and then establish talks to bring an end to the Sudanese civil war. Any interventions by the Americans or other western powers will only result in the further brutalization of the people of Sudan.

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