



Elections in Venezuela

Aparaajita Pandey *

Venezuela held its 20th elections in 17 years on 6th December 2015.¹ It resulted in a sweeping majority in the National Assembly for the opposition coalition Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD). The MUD secured 109 seats out of a total 167 seats in the unicameral Venezuelan National Assembly; with the support of the three indigenous candidates who joined the coalition post their election to the Assembly, MUD ended up with a 'Supermajority'.

The MUD victory is the first time the opposition won majority in the National Assembly since 1999. The Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) managed to secure 55 seats making them a minority.² The Venezuelan National Assembly is the legislative branch of the Venezuelan government. It is a unicameral legislature and representatives are elected to it in a 'Universal, direct, personal and secret' vote, partially through a direct state – based voting and partially on a state-based party list proportional representation system. Three seats are reserved for representatives of Venezuela's indigenous peoples. These three representatives are elected by all Venezuelan citizens and not just those hailing from an indigenous background.³

The present unicameral legislative system was set up in accordance with the 1999 Constitution that was drafted under the supervision of the former President Hugo Chavez

who was first elected in 1998. Since then two political parties have emerged and held ground on the Venezuelan political landscape. Hugo Chavez's political party, Fifth Republic Movement came together with smaller parties and formed a coalition in 2007. This coalition was named the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) and since 1999, it has held majority in the Venezuelan National Assembly.⁴

The opposition is also represented by a coalition called the Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD). The MUD came into being in 2008 and has served as an umbrella group for the opposition parties since then. Coordinadora Democrática served as the opposition coalition till 2004 when it collapsed after the failure of the Venezuelan Recall Referendum which was a referendum to determine if Hugo Chaves, then President of Venezuela, should be recalled from the office.

The third party, Patria Para Todos, has a limited presence and usually aligns with either of the larger coalitions. In the 2015 elections, the party won two seats and aligned with the PSUV.⁵

The results have been a revelation against the bold claims made by President Nicolas Maduro on wide spread popular support.⁶ President Maduro had been facing protests since 2014. These protests were mostly peaceful and were against inflation, shortages of common staples, allegations of corruption, and wide spread violence on the streets of Venezuela.⁷

The Maduro regime concentrated on running a campaign based on blaming the 'capitalist and the far right' for the problems of Venezuela. They slammed the media for showcasing a skewed version of events that did not show how peaceful Venezuela was in reality and portrayed Venezuela as a crumbling state which influenced the thinking of the Venezuelan people. The Maduro regime also made allegations against the US, of trying to influence the election results by placing several sanctions on government officials of Venezuela; there were also allegations of covert interference of the US and its 'buying' of the Venezuelan media.⁸

The Maduro government has faced allegations for corruption and nepotism in the past. Venezuela has suffered an economic slowdown and the Maduro regime has proven itself incapable of effectively handling the situation. The rate of inflation in Venezuela in July 2015 was 64 percent, which was further aggravated by the decline in oil prices and was recorded to be 68 percent by the end of the year.⁹

The Venezuelan economy is suffering from a downward spiral and according to the IMF, the Venezuelan GDP deteriorated by 10 percent in 2015 and the IMF has estimated that this deterioration will continue to the tune of another 6 percent in 2016.¹⁰ This has been fuelled by the decline in oil prices. Venezuela now faces a scarcity and rationing of staple food products and common consumer goods which has led to rising dissatisfaction among the common people. The state has also seen a rise in social tensions and an increase in the rate of crime (with a total of 27,875 killings by the local mafia in 2015) which can also be attributed to the reasons for this political shift.^{11 12}

The supermajority in the National Assembly means that MUD has a two-thirds majority which now awards them the authority to propose a referendum in the Assembly to undo any previous political decisions, suspensions of personnel, to free political prisoners, control appointments to the judiciary, introduce a new constitution, and introduce a no-confidence motion against the President and the Vice-President.¹³

The Venezuelan election has brought to the fore the following broad issues:

- Nicolas Maduro's Presidential term that ends in 2019 faces a possible termination before its time as the MUD has supermajority. The loss in the Assembly may cause further divisions between the military and the PSUV. If the opposition coalition succeeds in staying united, they may seek removal of the President.¹⁴
- MUD is now faced with its own set of challenges; the opposition coalition itself is not a strong united group and may be ultimately unsuccessful in staying together long enough to drive any significant change. The PSUV continues to hold its position in

the Venezuelan Judiciary and this may lead to political showdowns between different branches of the government. The MUD is a loose coalition, it came together with the sole purpose of defeating the socialist majority party and it is expected that with time, personal ambitions of the members of MUD may aggravate the existing fragmentation within the MUD.¹⁵

- MUD will also face significant challenges if they try to improve the conditions in Venezuela in the short term. The deteriorated Venezuelan economy, the dwindling oil prices, rampant increase in crime, severe shortages of common household products and bottlenecks in governmental functioning might make it difficult for the MUD to make significant improvements to the Venezuelan economy in a short period of time. This might not sit well with an already impatient and discontent public.¹⁶
- MUD has also not clearly outlined a political agenda for policy formation, except for uprooting the Chavista regime. The MUD came to power with vague claims of change; however, they have not outlined a clear game-plan for the Venezuelan economy which the IMF claims, needs immediate measures to stop its rapid deterioration.
- The election results have significant political and symbolic value. Politically, this is the first time since 1999 that PSUV has not emerged as the winning party in the Assembly elections and a non- Chavista political coalition has been voted into power by the Venezuelan people. Symbolically, at the very least, the results imply that a non-socialist regime can be voted to power in the country keeping in mind the apotheosized place that the Bolivarian Revolution holds in the Venezuelan psyche. It also points towards a long term shift in Venezuelan politics which may lead to a change in the nature of socio-political and economic policies.¹⁷

The most immediate problem for the newly formed MUD-led National Assembly will be to tackle the negative growth rate of the economy. The deterioration in the economy would be the first hurdle that the new Assembly would need to overcome to encourage trust among the people and also to attract foreign investment in Venezuela. Prof. Elie Habalian, who was once the Venezuelan Ambassador to OPEC, believes that Venezuela must open its doors to foreign investment to make proper use of its oil resources and help stop the deterioration of the economy.¹⁸

Post election scenario has shown an evolution of President Maduro's stance. After the results were announced, he first stated that he has "accepted the mandate of the people" but since there has been a hardening of his stance and a few days later he was quoted saying, "Either we get out of this bottleneck by way of revolution or Venezuela is going to be submerged in a big conflict that will affect all of Latin America," he said. "I'm not going to give up; I'm going to fight." The political tactics to de-stabilise the MUD have begun. 12 officials of the MUD have been suspended for the time being under the allegations of corruption made by President Maduro. The Venezuelan court is still to give its verdict. However, despite the lack of clarity for the Venezuelan political future, the world has taken notice of the change in the Venezuelan Assembly¹⁹

During Mr. Nicolas Maduro's presidency Venezuela had isolated itself from the global political community participating in only the two - week long OPEC meetings. The US in July 2015, declared Venezuela 'a threat to their National Security' and placed sanctions on several Venezuelan government officials. In November 2015, US declared Venezuela a 'Narco-state' alleging that Venezuela as a state encourages drug-trafficking. Nicolas Maduro's wife and the Venezuelan Head of National Guard Nestor Reverol, have been implicated in a drug- trafficking scandal and now have a case against them in the Manhattan court.²⁰

China has been for long been providing loans to Venezuela. However as the Venezuelan economy deteriorated and instability rose in the country, China has been reluctant in approving loans for Venezuela.²¹

On 7th December a day after the elections were held, China's Ministry for Foreign Trade announced that China was willing to work with Venezuela.

The 2015 election results have indicated a new way forward for Venezuelan politics and the international community has taken notice.

Mauricio Macri, the newly elected Argentinean President, had asked for the ousting of Venezuela from Mercosur, seeking the 'democratic clause' on the grounds that the Maduro government has been accused of Human Rights abuses. However after the elections, President Macri backtracked from his request and the Argentinean foreign minister-designate, Susana Malcorra stated that "the democratic clause is applied to facts, and the facts were yesterday's election. I think that today we can say that the elections have worked as established by the democratic framework and it appears that the results, which have been recognized by President Maduro, are a majority for the opposition".²²

The US stance on this election result is still awaited. They have however, appreciated that the elections were not held fraudulently and no tactics were used by the Maduro regime to tilt the result in their favour as was being predicted by the US politicians, especially Hillary Clinton who stated that Maduro would "rig" the elections.^{xiv}

The results of these elections reflect a need for change felt by Venezuela. However with a significant economic and social challenges and the tussle between the PSUV- led judiciary and MUD-led National Assembly, it would be interesting to see how the political, social, and economic landscape of Venezuela changes.

**Aparaajita Pandey is a Research Intern at Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.
The Views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

Endnotes:

¹ The Causes and Consequences of Venezuelan Election Results,7-12-2015, Telesur, <http://www.telesurtv.net/english/analysis/The-Causes-and-Consequences-of-Venezuelan-Election-Results-20151207-0002.html> (Accessed 5-01-2016)

² Bondholders See a Grim Future in the Political Brawl Over Venezuela, 15-12-2015, Bloomberg News, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-12-15/venezuela-s-maduro-digs-in-for-a-fight-bondholders-are-worried-> (Accessed 5-01-2016)

³ "Ley Orgánica de Procesos Electorales" , Consejo Nacional Electoral, <http://www.cne.gob.ve/web/index.php> (Accessed 7-1-2016)

⁴ Milne, Seumas. "Venezuela protests are sign that US wants our oil, says Nicolás Maduro". The Guardian. 9-04-2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/08/venezuela-protests-sign-us-wants-oil-says-nicolas-maduro> (Accessed -07-01-2016)

⁵ "Nicolas Maduro sworn in as new Venezuelan president". BBC News, 19-04-2013 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-22220526>, (Accessed 07-1-2016)

⁶ An Act of Desperation in Caracas?, 22-12-2015, Stratfor Global Intelligence, <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/act-desperation-caracas>, (Accessed on 05-01-2016)

⁷ What Lies Behind The Protests In Venezuela , BBC News , 23 -03-2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-26335287> (Accessed 07-1-2016)

⁸ Information gathered from the lecture given by the Venezuelan Ambassador to India, Augusto Montiel at Jawaharlal Nehru University on 1-12-2015.

⁹ Venezuela Faces Hyperinflation 'Death Spiral' as Inflation Hits 615%, 6-11-2015, <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2015/07/11/venezuela-faces-hyperinflation-death-spiral-as-inflation-hits-615/> , (Accessed 7-1-2016)

¹⁰ República Bolivariana de Venezuela and the IMF, updated 14-12-2015, IMF, <http://www.imf.org/external/country/ven/> (accessed on 5-01-2016)

¹¹ A democratic counter-revolution, 12-12-2015, The Economist, <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21679798-voters-have-rebuked-repressive-regime-now-they-must-have-chance-recall-president?zid=305&ah=417bd5664dc76da5d98af4f7a640fd8a> (Accessed on 05-01-2016)

¹² Venezuela: Murder Rate for Year May Be World's Worst, Report Says 28-12-2015, New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/29/world/americas/venezuela-murder-rate-for-year-may-be-worlds-worst-report-says.html?ref=topics> (Accessed 06-01-2016)

¹³ The Causes and Consequences of Venezuelan Election Results,7-12-2015, Telesur, <http://www.telesurtv.net/english/analysis/The-Causes-and-Consequences-of-Venezuelan-Election-Results-20151207-0002.html>"(Accessed 5-01-2016)

¹⁴ La América sin miedo,07-12-2015, El Pais, http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2015/12/07/actualidad/1449443207_871777.html (Accessed on 5-01-2016)

¹⁵ Venezuela's National Assembly Elections, 09-12-2015, Albright Stonebridge Group, <http://www.albrightstonebridge.com/files/ASG%20Analysis%20-%20Venezuela%20National%20Assembly%20Elections%20-%20December%202015.pdf> , (Accessed 5-12-2016)

¹⁶ Venezuela: Opposition Victories Are Challenged, 29-12-2015, New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/30/world/americas/venezuela-opposition-victories-are-challenged.html?ref=topics>, (Accessed 05-01-2015)

¹⁷ Political Change Continues across LATAM after Elections in Venezuela, 09-12-2015, Allpago, <http://www.allpago.com/2015/12/political-change-continues-across-latam-after-elections-in-venezuela>, Accessed 06-01-2016)

¹⁸ Could Venezuela's Socialists Lose the Coming Elections?, 25-08-2015, Green left Weekly, <http://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/11484>, (Accessed 7-01-2016)

¹⁹ Venezuelan opposition's landslide victory in legislative elections debunks fears of fraud,9-12-2015, <http://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2015/12/09/venezuela-president-maduro-vows-to-fight-opposition> (Accessed 7-1-2016)

²⁰ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/southamerica/venezuela/12052758/America-preparing-to-charge-Venezuelas-border-chief-with-drug-trafficking.html> (Accessed 4 Jan 2016)

²¹ Venezuela's National Assembly Elections, 09-12-2015, Albright Stonebridge Group, <http://www.albrightstonebridge.com/files/ASG%20Analysis%20-%20Venezuela%20National%20Assembly%20Elections%20-%20December%202015.pdf> , (Accessed 5-12-2016)

²² Argentina's Macri Backtracks on Ousting Venezuela From Mercosur, 7 -1 -2016, Voice of America, <http://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/11484> (Accessed 7-1-2016)