

The Continental Drift of the Left

by Laura Carlsen

ON HIS FIRST TRIP ABROAD AFTER re-election, George W. Bush, in Chile for a meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC), was greeted by thousands of angry Chileans protesting his trade and military policies and telling him to go home.

The November protests in Santiago were not just another manifestation of historic anti-U.S. sentiment in response to an imperial president. Rather, the anti-Bush demonstrations highlighted a new political trend in Latin America: many countries are moving to the center-left, just as the United States is taking a sharp turn to the right.

With all eyes focused on the presidential elections in the United States, key elections in Latin American countries went almost unnoticed over the past several months. The results in Uruguay, Venezuela, Chile, Nicaragua, Bolivia and to some extent Brazil, showed a shift toward the left in many countries and a consolidation of left-leaning leadership in others.

The victory of Tabaré Vázquez in Uruguay was the first sign. Vázquez's Broad Front coalition brought an end to 170 years of political power shifting back and forth between the rural elite in the Blanco Party and the urban elite in the Colorado Party. Vázquez's win was not a surprise. The Broad Front has governed Montevideo since 1990 and polls showed him in the lead. But his victory demonstrated the steady accumulation of power and credibility that the left has built up over the past three decades. The equally impressive failure of the two conservative parties to solve growing problems of poverty, inequality and corruption

also contributed significantly to the Broad Front's win.

The gains of Chilean President Ricardo Lagos' progressive coalition in the municipal elections of October 31 was yet another sign of the problems that the Latin American right has had in maintaining or building political force. Most observers viewed the municipal elections as a precursor to the presidential elections in December of this year. With the right winning only 39% of the mayoral races to the progressive alliance's 45%, the prospects for a center-left victory in 2005 look increasingly favorable. The two main contenders for the coalition candidacy, former Defense Minister Michelle Bachelet and former Foreign Relations Minister Soledad Alvear, now seem well positioned for a successful presidential bid.

In Brazil's first-round elections on October 3, Lula's Workers' Party (PT) garnered the most votes and now governs in more cities than any other party, including nine state capitals. But the October 31 second-round loss of São Paulo to the social-democratic candidate, and the loss of Porto Alegre—after 16 years of being a PT showcase and center of the World Social Forum—dampened any conclusion that the PT had received a resounding vote of confidence. Although a clear majority supports the center-left over the right, the nation continues to be living a political experiment with contradictory and unpredictable results.

Bolivia's municipal elections in December converted the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) party led by Evo Morales into the nation's strongest electoral force with 18% of

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UPDATE

the vote. The MAS now has more council members than any other party, mostly in rural areas but also in six of the ten largest urban municipalities. The 2004 municipal elections showed a huge increase in MAS strength from its ninth place showing in 1999, when it received only 3% of the vote.

Nicaragua's municipal elections provided yet another sign of a turn in the tide. The Sandinistas, who were voted out of government in 1990 and have repeatedly lost to the right since then, swept municipal elections against a divided right with over 45% of the vote and easily maintained control of the nation's capital. The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) alliance seeks to consolidate power on the local level with a platform of effective governance, reconciliation and anti-corruption.

Finally, in Venezuela, a somewhat vote-weary nation gave President Hugo Chávez a mandate with a sweep of provincial governorships—a fact that no doubt galls key figures on the Bush team who consider Chávez a major threat in the region. Chávez has used the mandate to consolidate his government and its “Bolivarian Revolution” and to embark on a campaign to unify Latin American countries in an alternative to the U.S.-led Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). The “Defense of Humanity” meeting of leftist intellectuals in Caracas last November sought to rethink the left throughout the region and develop mechanisms to regain ground in the cultural and political arenas.

BESIDES VOTING FOR CENTER-LEFT parties and candidates, Latin American societies are also beginning to demonstrate their rejection of the dominant political economy

in other ways. In Uruguay, voters rejected privatization of the water system. Efforts to hold referendums rejecting free trade agreements have gained momentum in Ecuador and Peru. But the urns are not the only focal point for dissent, and in many countries not even the principal one. Popular demonstrations against privatizations, price increases, free trade and military intervention have increased.

Bolivia began the year with another cycle of grassroots mobilizations. After thousands of residents took to the streets in El Alto, the government agreed to cancel a contract with the French utility giant Suez for control of the water system. This is the second time Bolivians have turned back water privatization plans. The mobilizations follow the historic “Water War” in Cochabamba that resulted in the cancellation of a similar contract with Bechtel in 2000. As part of the same massive demonstrations, Bolivians also won an agreement from President Carlos Mesa to backtrack on a major price increase in gas he had decreed several weeks earlier. The demonstrations showed the people's capacity to defend the family economy and local control of resources. They also constituted a show of strength in opposition to the Mesa government.

The demonstration of over 60,000 people in Chile was, according to organizers, the largest since the transition. Despite glowing marks from the U.S. government, civil society's evaluations of the Chile-U.S. Free Trade Agreement after its first year are negative, with resilient unemployment and growing inequality within the country. Thus, even the nation that Roger Noriega called “a trendsetter in instituting the types of political and

economic reforms so desperately needed here in the Americas” has become fertile soil for protest of those very reforms.

Many factors have converged to push Latin America to the left. Foremost is the failure of the neoliberal economic model to improve standards of living. Signs that patience has run out have become commonplace—from the street chants of angry Argentines that “they've all got to go!” to widening citizen movements against free trade. The economic crisis in Uruguay in 2002, precipitated by the financial free-fall in neighboring Argentina, played a big role in Vázquez's triumph.

Another reason is that center-left forces have adopted more conciliatory attitudes toward the market economy, in some cases embracing it enthusiastically. Traditional ideological differences have blurred in the new context of economic integration, which now seems inevitable to many Latin Americans, even many on the left. Although the left's accommodations to market forces have caused frictions with its traditional constituencies, especially social movements, it has allowed left-of-center parties to rejoin the mainstream of national politics previously dominated by strict adherence to the neoliberal model.

IN CONTRAST TO FORMER TIMES, most of the modern left does not envision storming the palace. Vázquez calls his platform the “cautious revolution” or the “agreed-on transition.” Even the FSLN has left its radical past behind and worked to mend fences within Nicaraguan society, while Lagos' progressive alliance has turned out to be one of the region's most vocal champions of free trade—to the chagrin of

much of the traditional left. The Brazilian Workers' Party government, meanwhile, is walking a tightrope between conservative economic policies and commitments to its grassroots constituencies and leftist origins.

Despite these accommodations, Latin America's center-left clearly sets itself off from Washington's plans for the region. Among its shared key principles are commitments to social justice, an active role of the state and a rejection of U.S. hegemony in the region. In the name of defending national sovereignty, center-left forces are seeking greater control over natural resources, and in many countries they are confronting corporations that have gained unprecedented ground through the investment-protection clauses and increased access that resulted from neoliberal economic restructuring.

The strengthening of the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) as an alternative to the FTAA and the recent formation of the Community of South American Nations may not be examples of radical politics, but they do represent an attempt to build a counterweight to U.S. hegemony in the region. Chávez's strength in Venezuela and Uruguay's new administration have thrown monkey wrenches into U.S. programs to impose the FTAA and isolate Cuba. The new Uruguayan government, for example, immediately announced its intention to re-establish ties with Cuba and to stick to its principles of non-intervention and regional solidarity.

The primary objective for the left—the overriding importance of which few would deny—is to fight the exclusion that has marginalized their nations from the benefits of economic integration and plunged an ever-growing proportion of the

population into poverty. How to do that remains a subject of debate.

On the one hand, political parties in power have bet they can use state power to fight exclusion. The tools they wield include domestic social policies, mobilization of constituencies in new ways, and coalition-building with other progressive states to resist the worst aspects of corporate-led globalization. At the same time, in a world where rich countries and transnational companies establish supranational rules, they find themselves severely limited in the range of available policy options.

On the other hand, some social movements in the hemisphere are determined to fight exclusion through the practice of establishing autonomous spaces and grassroots democracy. Among Brazil's landless movement, part of the piquetero movement in Argentina, the Zapatistas in Mexico and indigenous groups in Bolivia and Ecuador, local struggles for autonomy and resource control are mounting. This cumulative process is generally less visible, slower and certainly further from the daily headlines. But these groups insist that "inclusion" must be based on respect for differences and a pluralist view of society, and that building from the ground up creates a firmer foundation for real change.

The Bush Administration can either accept Latin America's bid for greater policy independence or attempt to divide the continent into simplistic categories of "unconditional allies" that it will favor and "dangerous foes" that it will seek to undermine.

So far, the look of Bush's new foreign policy team does not bode well for the accommodation route. As a Russia-focused scholar, Secretary of

State Condoleezza Rice was intellectually raised on the Cold War and has insisted on recovering the ideological offensive of that era. Rice's condemnation of Chávez during the short-lived coup attempt and the Administration's undermining of the Aristide government in Haiti, show a willingness to place conservative interests above the rule of law.

A new kind of continental drift, one born on political currents, appears to be distancing the North and South in the Americas. The U.S. government can either choose to respect the innovative attempts by southern nations to meet the region's economic and political challenges, or it can force the North-South fault lines to widen. The latter course could be cataclysmic. ■

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