

LATIN AMERICA - Will Year of Elections Shift Region Further to the Left? (Diego Cevallos, IPS)

Wednesday 30 November 2005, posted by [Manuela Garza Ascencio](#)

MEXICO CITY, Nov 26 - [IPS](#) - Sunday's elections in Honduras will mark the start of 12 changes of government in as many months, in Latin America and the Caribbean. Analysts believe, however, that the balance of forces in the region in relation to the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and other controversial issues will remain unchanged.

Opinion polls measuring voting intentions in countries where electoral campaigns are in full swing appear to contradict predictions by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez that elections to be held in the remainder of this year and in 2006 will lead to a strengthening of opposition to the creation of the FTAA.

But even though there may be little to no change in the number of countries in favour of or against the hemisphere-wide free trade agreement advocated by the United States, experts concede that it is likely that there will be an increase in the number of centrist or left-leaning governments.

This analysis is based on the fact that centre-left parties stand a chance of winning at the polls this year in Bolivia, Mexico, Nicaragua and Costa Rica, added to the possibility of re-election of the present government in Brazil and the near certainty that the forces currently in power in Chile and Venezuela will be re-elected.

"Everything is in the realm of speculation until people actually go out to vote, but the available evidence suggests that, apart from Bolivia, there won't be any spectacular changes in relation to issues like the FTAA," Alvaro Andrade, a political scientist at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, told IPS.

In the presidential elections to be held this Sunday in Honduras, the polls predict that the present speaker of Congress, Porfirio Lobo, who is the candidate of the governing National Party, will take first place and Manuel Zelaya, of the opposition Liberal Party, will come in second. Both parties are centre-right.

After the Honduran elections it will be the people of Chile's turn, on Dec. 14, and four days later the Bolivians'. Haiti, where elections have been postponed several times, is also expected to hold them next month, although the date has not yet been set.

February will bring elections in Costa Rica, voters in Peru and Colombia will head to the polls in April, Mexicans will follow suit in July, elections are due in Brazil, Ecuador and Nicaragua in October, and Venezuela will bring up the rear in November.

According to Chávez, who is leading a "Bolivarian social revolution" in his country, the elections taking place in the next 12 months will show that Latin America is "waking up."

Chávez recently said he was convinced that over the next several months, there would be more presidents committed to the real interests of the people of Latin America.

In his view, such a commitment will be expressed as rejection of the formation of the FTAA, which is championed by the United States and supported by 29 countries out of the 34 involved in the talks (every country in the hemisphere except Cuba).

At the Summit of the Americas held in Argentina early this month, the host country together with Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay - all partners in the Southern Common Market (Mercosur) - and Venezuela took a united stand against the FTAA. The governments of these five countries range from centrist to leftwing.

The nations of Latin America and the Caribbean have seen big political changes in the last 10 years, including - in several - a swing towards the left. Nine presidents have been unable to finish out their terms, mainly due to corruption scandals, usually in conjunction with severe economic crises, which triggered popular uprisings.

But in spite of the changes and the unrest, the political awakening of the citizens of several countries, and the consolidation of democratic processes, what the data show is that everything changes in order to stay the same, stated Latinobarometro, a Chilean-based polling firm, in its latest report for 2005.

The survey shows that in the region as a whole support for democracy remains high, even though levels of satisfaction with democracy are low. In addition, the problems that people perceive as priorities do not appear to have come any closer to being resolved over the past decade, and political participation has not been strengthened, it adds.

On the other hand, the report highlights the increase in the approval ratings of governments in the region, which rose from an average of 36 percent in 2002 to nearly 50 percent this year.

"Incoming governments, whatever their political allegiance, will be called upon to consolidate democracy and fulfill the expectations of the people, who want and expect more from them," said political scientist Andrade.

But who are the most likely future leaders, according to the latest polls?

In Chile, socialist President Ricardo Lagos is set to be succeeded by Michelle Bachelet, the candidate of the ruling centre-left Coalition for Democracy, which has governed since 1990. However, she may not win an absolute majority in the first round of voting, in which case she would have to stand in a runoff against one of the two rightwing candidates.

In Bolivia, although indigenous leader Evo Morales - a declared admirer of Chávez and Cuban President Fidel Castro - is heading the polls, he is closely followed by Jorge Quiroga, a centre-rightwing candidate who governed the country from 2001 to 2002, after Hugo Banzer resigned for health reasons. (Banzer died shortly afterwards).

For either Morales or Quiroga to be able to form a government, they will certainly have to forge alliances with other political forces in Congress, which chooses the president if no candidate garners 50 percent of the vote.

Meanwhile, in Haiti there are 35 presidential candidates and no clear indication of who might win. The country is torn by violence, despite the presence of a U.N. multinational peace-keeping force since mid-2004.

Haiti is the poorest country in the hemisphere, and one of the most fragile in regard to its democratic institutions. In February 2004, after days of violent protests, the last democratically elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, was deposed with Washington's blessing, and went into exile.

In the other Latin American countries where elections will be held over the next year, political tendencies and preferences are still tough to predict, although there are some indications.

In Costa Rica, the front-runner is ex-president Oscar Arias (1986-1990), on the centre-left.

In Peru, the polls show Lourdes Flores of the conservative National Unity party in the lead. She is followed by former president Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000), even though he is not legally allowed to run in the elections and is actually in prison in Chile where he awaits extradition to Peru on 21 charges of corruption.

and human rights abuses.

While Colombia's rightwing President Alvaro Uribe looks set for reelection, in Mexico leftwinger Manuel López Obrador's lead over his closest rival, the governing conservative National Action Party's Felipe Calderón, has been shrinking.

In Brazil, the latest surveys give leftwing President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva little hope of reelection as a result of the ongoing corruption scandals dogging his government, and point to social democrat José Serra as a possible successor. Serra, the mayor of Sao Paulo, was defeated by Lula in the 2002 elections.

Other elections planned for 2006 are in Nicaragua, where sympathy is growing for the leftwing Sandinista National Liberation Front, and in Ecuador, where efforts are being made to rise above the institutional crises that have occurred since the late 1990s, but where there is still little clarity about possible voting trends.

Finally, elections will be held in Venezuela, where the polls indicate, as a virtual certainty, that Chávez will be reelected.

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