

Opinion

LATIN AMERICA - How Far Left Has Latin America Moved?

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May 15, 2008 - Everyone seems to agree that Latin America has moved leftward in the period after 2000. But what does this mean?

If one looks at the elections throughout Latin America, parties to the left of center have won them in a large number of countries since 2000 - most notably in Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and most recently Paraguay. There are of course important differences between the situations in these countries. Some of these governments seem pretty close to the center. Others talk a more revolutionary language. And there are a few exceptions - notably Colombia, Peru, and Mexico (although in Mexico, the conservative government won the last elections with about the same degree of legitimacy as Bush won the 2000 elections in the United States). The real question is not whether Latin America has moved left, but how far left has Latin America moved.

There are, it seems to me, four different kinds of evidence that one could put forward to say that Latin America has moved leftward. The first is that all of these governments have in one way or another sought to distance themselves from the United States to one degree or another. The Bush administration would have preferred in all of these cases that their electoral opponents had won. In the past, when unfriendly governments came to power in Latin America, the United States tended to work to bring about their replacement, indeed their overthrow. But the decline of U.S. power in the world-system, and in particular the preoccupation of the United States with the wars it has been losing in the Middle East, seems to have sapped it of the political energy with which to move decisively in Latin America in ways it had previously. The failed coup against Chavez in 2002 is good evidence of this.

How have these governments put distance between themselves and the United States? There have been a series of ways. In 2003, the United States was unable to persuade the two Latin American members of the U.N. Security Council at the time (Chile and Mexico) to support the resolution it sought to obtain to legitimize the U.S. invasion of Iraq. In the last election of the Secretary-General of the Organization of American States (OAS), the U.S.-supported candidate lost, which had never before happened in the history of the OAS. And when the one sure friend of the United States in Latin America today, Colombia, got into a severe quarrel this year with Venezuela and Ecuador, the other Latin American states in effect sided with Ecuador and Venezuela. Ecuador is now refusing to renew the U.S. military base that is located there.

The second kind of evidence for a leftward trend has been the acute rise in political importance and power of the indigenous movements throughout Latin America - most notably in Mexico, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Central America. The indigenous populations of Latin America have long been the most oppressed sectors of the population and have for the most part been kept out of the political structures. But today we have an indigenous president in Bolivia, which represents a veritable social revolution. The strength of these movements in both the Andean zone and the Mayan areas of Central America has become a major factor in their politics, and an enduring one.

The third kind of evidence has been the survival, and indeed resurgence, of liberation theology. The Vatican moved to suppress these movements during the last three papacies with at least the same vigor as

the United States used against left governments in the 1950s and 1960s. Theologians have been silenced and sympathetic bishops carefully replaced by distinctly unsympathetic ones. Nonetheless, Catholic movements inspired by liberation theology continue to flourish in Brazil. The presidents of Ecuador and Paraguay have emerged from that tradition. And the inroads of Protestant evangelical groups in Latin America may be moving the Vatican to become more tolerant of the liberation theologians, who are at least Catholics, and may help to stem this loss of the faithful to the church.

Finally, Brazil has been pursuing a reasonably successful effort to become a leader of a regional South American bloc. This may not seem in itself a leftward move. But in the context of a worldwide process of multipolarization, the establishment of such regional zones weakens the power not only of the United States but of the entire North in terms of North-South relations. Brazil's leadership of the so-called G-20 countries has been a major factor in the evisceration of the World Trade Organization's ability to implement a neoliberal agenda.

So, what does this all add up to? Certainly not a "revolution" in the traditional meaning of the term. What it means is that the median point in Latin American politics, the locus of the "center," has moved considerably to the left of where it was a mere decade ago. This must be put in the context of a worldwide movement. This shifting leftward is going on in the Middle East and East Asia as well. Indeed, it is going on in the United States. The impact of the world economic recession, soon probably to become even more severe, will no doubt push these tendencies even further.

Will there be no reaction by forces of the right? No doubt there will. In Latin America, we see it today in the attempt of the wealthier and "whiter" eastern regions to secede from Bolivia and get out from under the majority indigenous populations who have finally won power in the central government. We are in for shaky times politically, in Latin America as elsewhere. But the left is in a far stronger position to fight these battles today in Latin America than they have been for half a century.

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