LATIN AMERICA - How Has Latin America Moved Left?

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June 15, 2006 - The discussion on the leftward trend of Latin America in recent years reflects all the confusion, worldwide, about what it means to be on the left in the twenty-first century. The confusion is among all wings of world political opinion. There are various explanations for this confusion. The most obvious reason is that different people are measuring different things as the criterion of moving left. The second is that no such political tendency is perfectly linear. It always reflects ups and downs, but that doesn't mean that there isn't an overall trend. And the third reason is that politicians notoriously speak multiple languages to different audiences, but that doesn't mean one cannot discern bottom lines.

The first thing to distinguish among criteria is whether we are speaking of a given regime's position on geopolitical issues or their internal policies. Of course the two are linked. But nonetheless regimes are not necessarily consistent. For Latin America the main geopolitical issue is their attitude towards and relationship with the United States. There seems little question that, on this issue, the vast majority of Latin American states have moved a considerable distance since 2000. One only has to ask the U.S. Department of State about it. They are quite aware that their voice is no longer heard with the respect and fear it once was. This is more than a matter of Chavez's strident tones. We can see this even in the volatile actions and largely centrist views of the present government in Ecuador. The fact is that openly rightwing candidates do not win elections any more, except in Colombia. This simply wasn't true as recently as a decade ago.

The second thing to look at is the position of the various regimes on questions relating to the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the multiple propositions for free trade agreements offered by the United States. If the WTO is stymied in its present negotiations, if the IMF matters a lot less than it did a decade ago, and if the United States can get nowhere in the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), it is in large part due to the numerous "left-of-center" governments in Latin America which have put obstacles in their way. This is not the doing of Cuba but of Brazil and Argentina. Even in Peru, the newly-elected very centrist president, Alan Garcia, who defeated Ollanta Humala (openly endorsed by Chavez), said in his first post-victory declaration that he was going to review critically every clause of the bilateral free trade agreement the previous Peruvian government had been negotiating with the United States.

Those who criticize the various new Latin American regimes from the left tend to emphasize what they have been doing internally more than their geopolitical stances. There are several critical "internal" issues. The first is the rights of the so-called indigenous populations. This has been a political issue in Latin American countries for over two centuries. But it is only today that there is beginning to be a breakthrough in terms of their rights. This is in large part the result of the increased consciousness and political mobilization of these populations.

Of course, this varies country by country. And the power of indigenous populations is in part related to their demographic strength. Still, notice what has been happening. Presidential candidates of indigenous origins have been elected in a number of countries. Their mobilization was a crucial factor in the election of Evo Morales, himself of these origins, in Bolivia. Their mobilization has made it difficult for Ecuador to stay in its traditionally rightwing political position. We need scarcely mention the obvious case of Mexico, which now lives and operates within the context of a situation changed fundamentally by the Zapatista

rebellion. Even in a country which has a rather small percentage of indigenous peoples, such as Chile, their struggle has now become a major issue with which the government must contend.

The second issue, often closely allied to the first one, is that of land reform. Here the left critics of the concept of a leftward turn have probably their strongest case. The fact is that the Brazilian Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) has in effect reneged on its pledges to carry out some significant reform. And, in consequence, its crucial supporter, the Movimento dos Sem Terras (MST), has moved further and further away from the PT. But the new Bolivian government has just announced that it will move forward on land reform. And if it does, this should create a big boost for such movements in other countries.

The third internal issue is the control of natural resources (not only mining and energy but water). This doesn't always mean outright nationalization but it certainly means a significant degree of state control and a significant national retention of income generated. Here too, bit by bit, albeit often slowly, there has been movement. One need only read the screams about protectionism to see that this is a reality with which multinationals know they have to come to terms today. In past decades, they could easily arrange friendly coups d'état. This has become very difficult, as Venezuela has demonstrated.

The fourth internal issue is the degree to which the new regimes allocate significant additional resources to education at all levels and to health-related structures. Here too, as with land reform, the results so far have been limited, although one of the reasons has been lack of governmental resources, something which may be overcome by measures in other domains. We have to reserve judgment on this account.

Finally, there is the question of the degree to which the military is being constrained from direct interference in the national decision-making processes. Latin America today is very different indeed from the epoch, not so long ago, of military coups supported by the United States, and military regimes specializing in torture. Indeed, the amnesties that the military arranged for themselves when they returned to the barracks are being revoked, slowly and carefully but up to this point successfully.

So, what is the overall picture? Latin America has definitely moved left from where it was. Whether this will continue and amplify in the next decade is a function both of the evolving world geopolitical picture and the degree to which left social movements within Latin America will maintain cohesion and put forward lucid programs.

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