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Notes on the situation in Latin America

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a) Latin America has veered left. The combined outcome of a rejection of liberalism and mass movement resistance - some forms of which have opened onto pre-revolutionary situations in recent years, as in Venezuela, Argentina, Ecuador and Bolivia - the traditional right has undergone a series of electoral defeats. The next will most likely be the Mexican, Peruvian and Nicaraguan rights. Colombia is the only major country where the reactionary right will in all likelihood continue to govern, with paramilitary support.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/ChavezMoralesgreet.jpg>]
Morales (far right) with Chavez and Cuban VP Carlos Lage (left)

b) This situation is provoking new inter-capitalist contradictions, in particular new tensions with US imperialism. There is an option of "confrontation", which remains the choice of the Bush administration, of the reactionary right of most countries, and which can even take the path of military interventions, in particular around Plan Colombia, a country where "US military advisers" are already present. But, at the present juncture, the US presence in Latin America is weakened by US strategic involvement in Iraq, in the Middle East and in Central Asia. Despite the US military power, it is proving hard to occupy Iraq through military means ... along with another country, in Latin America!

c) There is a "second choice" for the ruling classes; reorganizing their system of class rule by using the new left governments that follow the path of liberalism or social-liberalism. This is the case in Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Chile and Ecuador. Relying on the interests of an agro-exporting bourgeoisie with its own policies as we have seen in the case of Brazil at the WTO, seeking to use its strengths to reorganize resource markets - petroleum, gas, water - with a more integrated Latin American policy, benefiting from the high rate of growth between and 9% in recent years, and defusing the subversive charge of social movements with the help of the Brazilian PT, neo-Peronism in Argentina, the Frente Amplio in Uruguay, these new governments have achieved a degree of "stabilization" of the social and political situation. The most significant example is Kirchner in Argentina.

These governments do not succeed in resolving the main contradictions of capitalism: the liberal counter-reform continues, social inequalities are growing and there have been no noteworthy changes in the situation of the popular masses. Moreover, in the framework of capitalist globalization, these governments have not succeeded in carrying out policies of autonomy with respect to imperialism in the middle or long term, in the vein of those implemented by Cardenas in Mexico or Perón in Argentina.

Nevertheless, while respecting financial market, IMF and World Bank dictates, and attempting to implement regional policies as in the case of Mercosur, these governments are trying to conquer new positions for the benefit of local ruling classes.

d) The "confrontation" and the "social-liberal option" both run up against a major impediment, the reality of social movements that can resurface in particular forms at any movement: trade unions and piqueteros in Argentina, landless movements in Brazil and Brazilian trade unionism that can wake up despite CUT leadership policies, Indigenous peoples and their organizations in Ecuador.

But the two main obstacles to stabilization on the continent are the "Bolivarian revolution" and the Bolivian situation. Beyond State diplomacy and the need to bring all countries of the continent into a Latin American integration project such as ALBA, there are indeed two positions debated within the Latin American left: the social-liberalism represented by Lula and Kirchner and the Chávez Bolivarian process. Whether via a policy of confronting US imperialism, or the application of a series of social and democratic measures: health, education, plan against hunger,

occupation of certain firms and lands, housing policy, co-operatives, and especially a high degree of mobilization and polarization of millions of Venezuelans, the Venezuelan situation is the hot spot on the continent.

All of this effervescence is now stimulated by the debate launched by Chávez on socialism in the 21st century. Those are the positive aspects. However, there are a series of problems in the Bolivarian process, first of all tied to the "bonapartist" features of Chávez's power: the concentration of power, the direct relations between Chávez and the people, the absence of real parties: these are often merely electoral apparatuses, the calls to mass mobilization and organization are often thwarted by the limits imposed on mass democracy and self-organization by those in power.

For example, the progress achieved in terms of self-management of the PVDSA - the national petroleum corporation - after the petroleum management strike - had no follow-up. On the contrary, the technocrats have returned. The political representatives of the Cuban CP are playing a negative role in terms of everything relating to the development of democracy, control and co-management.

If bold objectives have been achieved in the struggle to meet the people's basic needs in terms of health, education and food - policies funded by petroleum revenue - the socio-economic structure of Venezuelan capitalism has not been substantially transformed or overstepped.

The two coming years will be decisive to the revolutionary process in Venezuela. Chávez is in the habit of quoting Trotsky, explaining, "Every revolution needs the whip of the counter-revolution." The Bolivarian revolutionary process was indeed marked by reactions to the right-wing counterrevolution and US imperialism, which radicalized the process each time.

Nobody doubts that if there is another confrontation and new provocations by the "putschist right", that this will mean further radicalization. But the right and the Bush administration can also draw the lessons from their failed coups and, on the one hand, seek to delegitimize the Chávez regime by refusing to take part in the upcoming presidential elections late in 2006, while seeking to mire down the process by blocking all socio-economic progress. In that case, Chávez, and all protagonists in the Bolivarian process must find forces to deepen the process, in terms of mass democracy and socio-economic content. And for that, income from the petroleum windfall may not be enough. It calls for new political choices.

e) But one of the dimensions of the scenario is international. It will play out in Venezuela. Many commentators depict Evo Morales as "between Lula and Chávez". In fact, although the Bolivian vice-president has made statements on "the need for a plan for Andean capitalism", Evo Morales' initial measures put him closer to Chávez: booting out the old Army staff, put out to pasture, a self-imposed 57% cut in the presidential salary, which should entail similar cuts for all high-level government officials, negotiations with one of the landless movements and land reform.

We can even say that relations have been inversed between Venezuela and Bolivia, in terms of the leadership of the process and the masses. In Venezuela, although Chávez is the product of an entire historical process, his political weight stimulated and also limits spaces for the mass movement.

In Bolivia, the mass movement has heretofore determined the course taken by Morales, such as his position on calling a Constituent Assembly and nationalizing hydrocarbon resources is the direct outcome of mass movement demands. Will he respect his commitments? In any event, in this country, we find one of the apexes of social and political revolt in Latin America. The coming weeks and months will tell the story. The situation is open, but mass movement pressure is such, in the political, administrative and institutional chaos in Bolivia, that alongside Venezuela, one of the keys to the Latin American situation can be found in this country.

f) From an international viewpoint, this means there is a series of issues at stake, with a dual polarization: between

US imperialism, the traditional rights and on the other side, the peoples and anti-imperialist governments: Cuba, Venezuela and Bolivia and a second, more subtle polarization between social-liberal governments - Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Chile, Ecuador - and the aforementioned anti-imperialist governments. Lula and Kirchner are on the offensive to put rightwards pressure on Chávez and Morales.

There is also a fight between Lula, Kirchner and Chávez, to “win over” Morales. The Latin American left is currently going through this choice of going along with liberal counter-reform or breaking with imperialism: Lula or Chávez? All of this will depend on US policies of confrontation and the dynamics of the mass movement vs. those of the ruling classes, defending their own interests in these countries.

g) This situation has several consequences in political and programmatic terms:

– Put it, along the struggle against the war in Iraq, at the centre of our solidarity actions, develop an international solidarity campaign with the Bolivarian process in Venezuela: Venezuela collectives, solidarity meetings, sending aid and solidarity brigades. The International and FI organizations must be at the forefront of this campaign.

– In programmatic terms, combine a program of social and democratic demands backed by the demand for national and popular sovereignty over natural resources, lands and wealth of each country, linked to land reform, of course. The needs for public appropriation, and nationalization of hydrocarbon resources must also be at the heart of social and political demands in these countries. The question of democracy is also central, whether it is getting rid of corrupt politicians - this is the meaning of demands such as the constituent assembly - or to deepen processes of social appropriation - demands for control, co-management and management of firms are a priority, as in Venezuela or Bolivia.

– Finally, there is a notable chance linked to the tilt in the social and political situation, the opening of a debate on socialism in Venezuela but also throughout the continent, launched by Chávez.

Despite the limits dictated by the country's place in the world and in Latin America, the Bolivarian experience makes it possible to resume discussion of socialism. This debate is taking place in all organizations today, and it is only beginning. Of course there are all sorts of socialism, but in an ideological environment which had been first marked by themes such as “liberal democracy as the end of history” in the early 1990s, the themes of anti-liberalism in 1990 and the early 2000s, the way Chávez is positing the problem of socialism vs. liberalism and capitalism bear witness to a deepening development of consciousness among sectors of the Latin American social and political vanguard, and above all the repercussions of a series of strategic questions.

This is a significant fulcrum against social liberalism in the left. It posits the satisfaction of popular demands as a central question in a strategy of opposition of liberal capitalism and not taking part in counter-reform.

It enables progress on co-operative experiences linked to a dynamics of control, and in acute crisis situation or pre-revolutionary situations, to move forward on this theme of control linked to co-management between workers and public authorities. It posits the need for another logic, another system, centred on social needs and another form of property - public and social appropriation - as a central question.