

Dangerous Liaisons: Center-Left Governments & the Grassroots

By Raul Zibechi | December 7, 2004

Grassroots movements often become prisoners of their own success. This is the essential paradox and challenge of popular struggle. When movements develop the ability to mobilize large numbers of people and gain influence in the political arena, they create a new scenario that often turns against them. Too often, their success weakens and even divides social justice movements, thereby leading to a period of withdrawal and demobilization.

Latin America has seen the rise of center-left governments, or governments that before assuming power embraced an anti-neoliberal program. In Peru, Alejandro Toledo gained office thanks to a broad-based movement that ousted Alberto Fujimori. Colonel Lucio Gutierrez rose to the presidency of Ecuador largely due to the support of a powerful indigenous movement. In Argentina and Brazil, Nestor Kirchner and Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva became presidents in the wake of vast social movements that weakened or caused crises in the prevailing neoliberal model.

The so-called “Bolivarian Revolution,” headed by Hugo Chávez, would never have gained its current momentum without the insurrection of 1989 (dubbed “Caracazo”), which marked the beginning of a deep crisis in the Venezuelan political party system. Something similar, although with some important differences, is happening in Uruguay, Paraguay, and Bolivia.

New Questions for Social Movements

But once these center-left governments came to power, social movements faced an array of new dilemmas and questions. For example, how should they relate to political forces with which they share common features? How to go from mobilization to some form of action not based on confrontation? Should they participate in government or remain in the opposition? How to continue building their own movements when the government seeks to divide and co-opt their most capable leaders?

These questions have no simple answers. We see this in the cases of the Landless’ Movement in Brazil (Movimiento Sin Tierra, MST), the Ecuadorian and

Bolivian indigenous movements, and the unemployed (*piquetero*) movement in Argentina.

For starters, the social movements and the new governments usually differ in their sense of priorities and timing. Popular movements typically respond to the timing their communities operate on, but increasingly they must also respond to the timing dictated by institutional politics, or state power. This often creates tension between the leaders and the membership of organizations within social movements.

Recent events show that changes in government leadership provoke readjustments within social movements. This is especially true when these movements find themselves caught up in the institutional agenda of state power and in the process abandon the priorities of their own constituencies.

Ecuador: Internal Timing and “Political” Timing

Since 1990 the Ecuadorean indigenous movement has been the chief social and political actor in its own country and an obligatory point of reference for social movements throughout Latin America. That’s because it has been the broadest, most powerful, and mature movement in the region. Since the Inti Raymi uprising in June 1990, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (Conaie) has managed to unite the indigenous communities of the mountains, the coast, and the Amazon region while at the same time developing a potent form of social action that has led to several militant uprisings. This mobilization not only modified the national political agenda but also succeeded during the apex of the uprisings in toppling two governments: Abdala Bucaram in 1997 and Jamil Mahuad in 2000.



The Ecuadorean case provides many insights into both the possibilities and the pitfalls of social movements when involved in government. As one of the strongest popular movements in Latin America, in the past decade and a half the Ecuadorean social movement has gone through popular insurrections, construction of broad political alliances with a diversity of sectors, creation of a political-electoral front, direct participation in elections, taking power nationally for several hours, and integration into government. Moreover, it has the experience of leaving government and returning to the opposition and militancy in the streets.

Ecuador then represents a unique case in movement-government relations in Latin America. It has a movement formed and directed by the poorest and most marginalized people that has participated in a wide variety of political arenas, and even managed to reach the pinnacles of power within the national government. Today, the indigenous Ecuadorian movement is trying to cure the wounds it suffered from the failures of its participation in government.

In 1996 the Conaie, along with some other movements, created Pachakutik, an electoral-political entity designed to make it a powerful actor in formal politics. The axis of its political proposals was the demand for plurinationality—a demand that implied the reconstitution of the Ecuadorean state. Sociologist Pablo Dávalos wrote that “the plurinational state is the axis of a theoretical and political hinge that allows the Indians of Ecuador to make the transition from a social movement to a political entity.”

Pressure from grassroots movements in 1998 resulted in the convocation of a Constituent Assembly to define the characteristics of a new state. As Dávalos pointed out, through their proposals the Indians were seeking a new prescription (*deber-ser*) for the state. This was a task that implied debating “the epistemological contents of difference, mainly in the construction of new subjects like the communal subject, and of new institutions, such as the administration of indigenous justice, communal economic institutions, etc. These definitions of difference would be the basis for the new principles of the state.”¹

But the political class resisted and diverted the aspirations of the movement. By formulating the rules for the election of constituents for the Constituent Assembly, the political elite favored established political parties, thereby placing the representatives of the social and indigenous movements at a distinct disadvantage. In other words,

the authoritarian mechanisms of traditional power still held force at the time of the election.

Although the electoral process occurred within the framework of an important social mobilization including popular assemblies and the election of a People’s Constituent Assembly, popular demands were sidelined. Or worse yet, popular demands were formally accepted by the elite but with no practical consequences—in keeping with the political practice under colonial rule when the motto for colonizers was “accept but don’t comply.”

“The strategic error of the indigenous movement,” according to Dávalos, “was to underestimate the political system and to think that the Pachakutik political movement was by itself sufficient to confront and resolve disputes with the political system.”²

In 1999 Conaie led two uprisings in reaction to the growing paralysis and decomposition of the state. In this critical context, however, the indigenous movement took an unprecedented turn. Conaie became an alternative power. Its leaders separated from the bases and adopted a tactic of conquering state power that had little to do with the original project of building a plurinational state. In other words, the Conaie went from being an alternative social movement that pressured for major reforms to becoming a political actor itself that competed for standing in the political arena. In doing so, it adopted the logic of the state. As a result, by 2000 the political space that the grassroots indigenous movement had been successfully reclaiming since 1990 was suddenly closed off.

According to Dávalos, a close observer of the country’s indigenous organizing: “To become a power implies the conviction that it is necessary to set aside the dynamics of resistance and build institutional formats that serve in the long term as mechanisms to control the rise of possible resistance by other social actors. For the Indians, it means to exchange their logic of resistance for the logic of power. But in the social dialectic, to assume the logic of power can mean destroying the experience gained as a counter-power.”³

These changes have resulted in the current uncertain political conjuncture. The adoption of the logic of power was the first step in explaining how the Indian movement came to “take” power on January 21, 2000, and then to support the presidential candidacy of Lucio Gutierrez and for six months form part of his administration. The response to the governmental crisis in January 2000 and Pachakutik’s decision to accept posts in the

new government in 2003 represented the second step down this risky political path.

Once the movement adopted this political strategy, it became imprisoned in a logic that inevitably led to the self-destruction of the movement. In the end, the decision to withdraw from the government was the only way to avoid the complete dissolution of the movement.

The blame for attempting to destroy, divide, and subject the movement cannot be laid exclusively on the Gutierrez government, since the movement itself had already taken decisions that allowed the government to weaken it. Moreover, if we contrast the attitude of the Ecuadorean indigenous movement with the Zapatista indigenous movement in Mexico, two distinctly different paths emerge. After the “Color of the Earth” mobilization in 2001, the EZLN (Zapatista Army of National Liberation) mobilized its energies toward building *de facto* autonomies, leading in August 2003 to the creation of what it termed *Caracoles*—literally “Snails”—that united and consolidated local and regional self-government. They did this on the margins of the national state rather than by directly confronting state power.

The Ecuadorean indigenous movement is hotly debating which way to proceed. On August 21-13, the Amazonian Parliament of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon (Confeniae) devoted sessions to analyzing the current delicate moment. One of its historical leaders, Antonio Vargas, is now minister of Social Well-being in the neoliberal government of Gutierrez. In the assembly, Vargas announced he would soon deliver \$300,000 USD checks to the different nationalities of the jungle if they agreed to sign an agreement between the Confeniae and the minister’s office. The indigenous parliament became sharply divided and confusion reigned. One upshot was that the Achuar, Shuar, and Kichwas of Pastaza rejected the majority position to accept the government aid. That divisive session of the new indigenous parliament left a bitter memory in many participants, who viewed it as a betrayal of the movement’s principles.

An evaluation of the session by Kichwa parliamentarian Monica Chuji Gualinga described the differences within the movement: “This instability of the indigenous movement can be traced back to the alliance made by the Pachakutic movement, which directly involved the Conaie with the Gutierrez administration without consulting the rank-and-file of the organization and without any discussion or programmatic agreement. This political alliance forged behind the backs of the base communi-

ties was the beginning of the steady, progressive weakening of a movement that at its height was the reference point for all Latin America.”

The parliamentarian reiterated the importance of undertaking a profound self-critique and going back to the grassroots to “start to solidly rebuild the road we have lost during the last period of representational participation in the so-called political democracy of the established power, forgetting our political roots based on the direct and participative democracy of the nationalities and peoples that accomplished so much during the decade of the 90s.”⁴

The Ecuadorian case is the best example of the double dynamic of the internal timing of a popular movement and the external timing dictated by national politics. To become part of the political system has its costs and benefits: a movement might have a greater impact on the official agenda, but the organization has to be in tune with official forms and timing.

Communal sense of time—slow according to the parameters of modernity and the media—is often abandoned to give answers, almost always urgent, to immediate requirements. In a practically unavoidable way, when a popular movement adopts the imperatives of political timing, it results in a separation between the bases and the leaders—in which the former are no longer controlled and mandated by the latter.

Zapatismo manages this challenge of timing in a way that places the communities first, but that attitude—profoundly political—carries the cost of distancing the movement from national events. That is, at least, one of the main complaints articulated by the political left.

The Movement of the *Piqueteros* in Argentina

Other movements have adopted slightly different criteria. The movement of the unemployed (*piqueteros*) in Argentina has suffered serious fragmentation due to its relationship with the Kirchner government. Only a few groups have been able to distance themselves from the official agenda. Among the largest and most influential groups, the Federation of Land and Housing, directed by Luis D’Elia, chose to join the *piquetero* arm of Kirchner’s government. By doing so, the organization assured a permanent flow of resources but consequently lost ethical and political credibility within the movement itself.

In contrast, groups linked to leftist political parties (communists, Trotskyites, Maoists, and Guevarists) have committed themselves to continue street mobilizations as way of facing the problems that arise from a conjuncture marked by a “generous” government attitude toward the poor.

Only a few groups have managed to escape from the two extremes of cooptation and endless, exhausting, and generally unfruitful mobilizations. The MTD of Solano is perhaps the *piquetero* group that has the broadest perspective on this new situation. Since the insurrection of December 19-20, 2001, according to analyst Neka Jara, the real changes that are happening are no longer visible and this lack of visibility seems to frustrate militants and leaders. Jara notes that the movement building that is occurring behind the scenes is “more worthwhile than the show.” Activists in Solano insist that the trick is to know how to wait and to give time a chance to do its work. “This is a pregnant silence,” they conclude.⁵

Bolivia: The Complex Relationship with the Government

In Bolivia, the powerful social movement that overthrew the neoliberal government of Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada split in two when Carlos Mesa gained power.

On the one hand, the Bolivian Workers Central (COB), the landless groups, and the neighborhood assemblies of El Alto that constituted the core of the October 2003 insurrection and that maintain the struggle to nationalize gas have clearly established a place for themselves on the political scene. But their power to reach new constituencies has been weakened by a government that makes selective concessions and seeks to isolate them. On the other hand, the cocaleros movement—led by Evo Morales and his Movement toward Socialism (MAS)—that was for several months the main base of support for the Mesa government, has set its sights on winning the December municipal elections, which it regards as a launching pad to the presidency for Morales in 2007.

The division between these sectors came to a head during the gas referendum on July 18, 2004. This took the form of a confrontation between Felipe Quispe (who abandoned his seat in Congress to protest the government in the streets) and Morales’s institutional strategy for political victory. This division in the popular sector has allowed President Mesa to continue his plan to let the country’s natural resources slip into foreign hands.

The Aymara indigenous sector, led by Quispe, seeks to build an “Aymara nation.” In the provinces north of La Paz, “a strategy is emerging that seeks to substitute all state authorities with our own traditional authorities.” This constitutes an incipient form of self-government that is moving toward “making our own laws, exchanging the political constitution of the state with our own constitution, substituting the capitalist system for a communal one, and changing the three-color flag for our seven-colored flag.”⁶

At this point, the Aymaras are forging a strategy that differs from the one adopted by the Zapatistas, who have chosen to build autonomy within the existing framework of the Mexican nation. It also differs from the demands of Ecuador’s indigenous movement for plurinationality. The Aymaras do not talk in terms of a single state but rather of a nation of communities. They have no plans to occupy or seize the existing Bolivian state. Instead, the Aymaras plan to replace the sharply polarized Bolivian state with a nation self-governed by the communities. This is a much more radical project than the ones promoted in Chiapas or Ecuador, albeit obviously much more difficult to implement. For that reason, the relationship of the Aymaras to the Bolivian state is very conflicted and without any apparent solution unless it takes the form of social civil war—which, in fact, they have already declared.

Brazil: The Landless Movement

The case of the MST in Brazil is unique, considering that Brazil is the only country in Latin America, according to one analyst, that has a “local bourgeoisie with its own force.”⁷ The landless are a powerful socio-political movement that acts autonomously and does not answer to any political party. The MST maintains fluid relations with the government; and the government, in turn, subsidizes several enterprises of the movement.

Recently, the MST has chosen to avoid a head-on confrontation with the Lula government, concentrating instead on consolidating and accumulating its own forces. In April 2004, the movement launched a national campaign with the occupation of 150 haciendas. MST installed 200,000 families—nearly a million people—in camp sites on the edges of highways to pressure for land. MST members call for a new kind of agrarian reform based not only on the redistribution of land but also on the “democratization of capital.” It also advocates the creation of cooperative-based agroindustries and the “democratization” of education. This year the MST has

also launched a protracted battle with agrobusiness—an important ally of Lula's government.

The MST affirms that Lula's electoral victory changed the correlation of political and social forces in the country, but that the victory of the Workers Party did not represent the defeat of the neoliberal model. MST leaders acknowledge that it has been impossible to demand structural reforms in the economy because the country's social movement has been suffering a long decline. Therefore, MST has determined that organization and mobilization are its current priorities, and has been one of the main supporters of establishing a common front for all the social movements in Brazil, called the Coalition of Social Movements (CMS).

The MST believes that first they need to solve some of the internal challenges facing social movements. These include: "to recover grassroots working methods, that is, to concentrate on the small tasks in the communities," and "to go where the people live, work, and study to debate ideas and organize them." The MST states that it "will never become a party, that would kill it; but it will continue to be progressively more political in the sense of disputing a national project and hegemony in society."

According to the MST, elections are not the only forum to influence state control. However, neither does it believe that an "assault on power" is the "magic pass" to gain control of the state in the interests of the common people. In contrast to the experiences and demands of the indigenous movements in Ecuador and Peru, the MST advocates a political project whereby popular sectors "control the state and transform it from a bourgeois state to one that serves the majorities."⁸

In essence, this MST vision could be described as an orthodox Marxist concept. Nonetheless, MST maintains an unorthodox political view in that it has sought to keep considerable autonomy from the state and from Lula's party and government. The key to its autonomy lies in MST's 5,000 settlements, where more than two million people produce basic foods and provide education for their children. In that sense, the settlements of the landless movement are not unlike those of indigenous communities elsewhere in Latin America.

This panorama of Latin American social movements highlights the conclusion that there are no sure-fire models or recipes. Certainly, the more progressive a government is, the more possibilities will be open to movements. But at the same time, these governments confront the grassroots movements with new challenges for

which they are ill-prepared. In Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador, new governments have caused new divisions in social movements and co-opted some popular sectors by integrating them into government. In Brazil, the landless movement so far seems to be eluding both dangers.

What is also clear is that in none of these countries have the new political realities succeeded in completely demobilizing popular movements. Indeed, the new conjuncture presented by the ascent of progressive governments has in some cases led to a strengthening of grassroots movements. At the same time, though, the new political context marks another starting point for social movements. The experiences in Ecuador, Bolivia, Argentina, and Brazil represent important lessons (and warnings) for social movements in other countries that sooner or later will face a series of dilemmas and challenges that have no easy answers.

Raúl Zibechi is a member of the editorial staff of the weekly Brecha de Montevideo, a teacher and researcher on social movements at Multiversidad Franciscana de América Latina, and an adviser to several social groups. He is a monthly contributor to the IRC's Americas Program (online at www.americaspolicy.org).

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- 2 Ibid.
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