

Latin America's Social Movements Gain New Ground

By Raúl Zibechi | June 10, 2005

Throughout 2004, Latin America's principle social movements encountered an ever more complex scenario and tended to distance themselves from left leaning or progressive governments, thus preparing for new offensives.

Unlike 2003, a year that was marked by social movement offensives and imperial defeats, this past year represents a pause that tended to restore equilibrium to the region's balance of power. The situation has become more complex and the social movements have not won big victories like those of the immediate past. The most notable exception is the resounding triumph won by the Bolivarian process in Venezuela, which resulted in the defeat and fragmentation of the opposition during the referendum to remove President Hugo Chávez from office. This victory was won thanks to mass participation by broad sectors of the population.

The year 2004 closed with a feeling of frustration, while dark clouds began gathering on the horizon. The recent illegitimatization of the neoliberal model has not given way to political alternatives, which has led governments in the most important South American countries, in particular Argentina and Brazil, to implement economic policies that are far from the faults of the neoliberal model, and therefore, on the contrary, have tended to reinforce that very model. At the same time, the re-election triumph of President George W. Bush in the U.S. elections has strengthened the trend toward intervention in Cuba and Venezuela, where the empire has been forced to redesign its strategy, which shifts between an improbable cooptation of the Bolivarian process and the more probable destabilization through military uprising.

Ever More Complex Scenario

The regional state of affairs tended toward stabilizing itself in 2004. The U.S. government, one of the region's principal forces, has President Álvaro Uribe's Colombian government as one of its main allies, and Uribe is preparing for reelection with no alternative or destabilizing elements in sight. Colombia has become a huge airport of sorts, from which to launch interventionist policy to neighboring countries – something that already has been

achieved with relative ease vis a vis Ecuador, but still faces enormous difficulty.

In the short term, the most important challenge is Venezuela; in the mid term is Brazil. The White House can expect almost sure socio-political crises in Peru, Bolivia, and possibly in Paraguay – countries where the governments of presidents Alejandro Toledo, Carlos Mesa, and Nicanor Duarte suffer from varying levels of instability, due in large part to the active presence of social movements that deeply question the balance of power.

The existence of various leftist or progressive governments in South America (Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Chile and, since March, Uruguay), which represent the second strongest force operating in the region, are not capable of making sharp and lasting changes, as would be hoped. A number of factors — from narrow national interests to weak policies and the fear of instability — are keeping the continent from determining its own political fate. Washington's stance towards Chávez, which encourages the insurrection of the middle class and business owners, provoking destabilizing paranoia, is a clear message to all governments that consider breaking from the mold that they will face very high costs, and none of them can count on key resources like petroleum, a powerful weapon for confronting any difficulty.

Nevertheless, all of the mentioned governments plus Ecuador and Bolivia have managed to complicate the political situation by proclaiming themselves defenders of the same objectives as the social movements and because a good number of them have arisen as a result of the offensives launched by the movements in past few years.

With none of the countries in the region resorting to structural changes, the progressive governments tend to see themselves as trapped between the divisive dynam-



ics of the United States that promote bilateral free trade agreements and the reactivation of the movements. With the exception of Paraguay and Bolivia, the decline of social conflict has been important in the entire region. This decline is not a reflection of positive changes for the population, but rather it appears to be a response to the aforementioned increasing complexity of the political scenario, which tends to confuse the social bases of the movements and make mobilization more difficult.

At the same time, the repression has not diminished. In Brazil, five landless peasants were killed by the hired guns of large landowners, as violence in the countryside tends toward reactivation. In Paraguay, Duarte's government has criminalized the farmers' protest in demand of land, using armed forces in the repression. In 2004, some 1,500 Paraguayan farmers were arrested and 190 were imprisoned, while the Minister of the Interior announced that the United States' government will cooperate with Paraguayan security by training police. In both Brazil and Paraguay, a new type of fight is developing against agro-business, which has established a model of development based on the extensive use of technology and transgenic crops, forcing hundreds of thousands of farmers from the countryside.

In Argentina, more than 4,000 social activists were arrested (the majority for setting up road blocks) and 28 people (mostly unemployed workers, prostitutes, gays, lesbians, and street vendors) were imprisoned and accused of disturbing the peace by President Néstor Kirchner's government, which proclaims itself to be a defender of human rights. The Argentinean case is paradigmatic because, despite policies implemented by the government to clean up the corrupt top echelon of police, human rights violations maintain the same tendency as in the years of the neoliberal former President Carlos Menem. A recent report by CORREPI (Coordinating Against Police and Institutional Repression) established that in 2004, an average of 12 people a month were killed by gatillo fácil, which literally means easy trigger and refers to alleged summary shootings by law enforcement officers. Since Kirchner took the reigns of government on May 25, 2003, until the end of November 2004, 229 people were tortured or killed by police using gatillo fácil, CORREPI also points out. Two out of three of those killed were between the ages of 15 and 25. For its part, the International Federation of Human Rights points out that the Argentinean courts are ever more frequently deciding to keep Argentine citizens in prison as a preventative measure, accusing them of crimes that carry up to

16-year jail sentences just for participating in demonstrations where they expressed legitimate demands.

New Social Protagonists Emerge

Social movements continue to be the most dynamic factor in the region. Throughout 2004, they began adjusting to the new situation. From Colombia, where the social movements have been shaken due to war and militarism, to Brazil, where alliances are continually being formed and uncertainty is being dispelled; the movements are boldly facing up to new challenges.

The most fundamental truth is that the movements continue to be a presence, despite the serious intents to co-opt or repress them. But this continued existence demands promoting change, as much in the policy sphere as within the movements themselves. It is no wonder then that profound debate over strategy is a daily occurrence in all groups of all countries, and this is in addition to maintaining activism.

From this perspective, several feats stand out: the so-called "Red April" of the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) and El Grito de los Excluidos in Brazil, La Minga por la Vida of the Colombian indigenous movement, the Venezuelan uprising during the referendum to revoke Chávez's mandate, the large movement against the free trade agreement in Chile, and the high levels of social protest in Peru and Bolivia. This constellation of mobilizations, which is a minimal sampling of the activity of the movements, is a testament that its rearrangement and relocation in the new scenario goes hand in hand with experimentation in new forms of protest, with the search to form alliances with other sectors, and with the necessary caution to avoid strengthening the right.

In Bolivia, after a period of sharp division and confusion over the referendum on hydrocarbons, which was sponsored by the Mesa government in August, the movements again showed presence and unity at the end of 2004 and the beginning of the new year. Before retaking their initiative, the social movements need to do some housekeeping and elect new authorities, as in the case of the Federation of Neighbors' Committees of El Alto (FEJUVE), one of the key pieces of the Bolivian movement. At the beginning of January, Mesa had to go back and calm the protests (strikes, marches, occupations of public buildings, road blocks, hunger strikes), and he was forced to terminate the water service contract with a French multi-national company and reduce the price of diesel. The Bolivian example shows that in the absence

of profound reform, the cycle of protests that appears to have been snuffed out can be re-ignited.

In Ecuador, CONAIE (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador) suffered significant wear, which was rooted in Col. Lucio Gutierrez' participation in the government. Some of its leaders were co-opted and the entire organization was weakened by their distance from their constituents. In December, CONAIE held its second congress, in which it chose new directors and reinforced the unity that was in danger. Now, it is preparing to reactivate the fight against a government that uses public funds to promote division.

In Colombia, the social movements continue suffering from growing militarization, a direct product of the war. Nevertheless, they go on finding ways of overcoming the social polarization and opening spaces for mobilization. In mid-September, the indigenous movement held "La Minga por la Vida y la Soberanía", an important march of 60,000 people to the city of Cali, in which participants demanded respect for autonomy and protested the negotiations of the free trade agreement with the United States. On Oct. 12, the Democratic Coalition, which incorporates union, social, and political organizations, initiated a nation-wide general strike that was well received. Both events attest to the growing prominence of Colombian civil society.

In Brazil, the MST has demonstrated great flexibility in mobilizing without colliding head-on with a government that still has left-leaning aspects. Since demonstrations of April 2004 in which 150 inactive plantations were occupied, the landless appear to have disassociated themselves with President Lula da Silva's government, from which they no longer expect big changes. In Argentina, the movements that were not co-opted by the government began a slow process of reactivation, with no large street demonstrations, but deepening the work with grassroots constituents and building bridges between different movements, with meetings such as the two called "Autonomous January."

Movements' Role Changing

Among the novelties of 2004 was the appearance of a new relationship between social politics and party politics. Without a doubt, the movements showed a better dynamism than the parties of the left, something that was unmistakable in the days of December 2001 in Argentina and in October 2003 in Bolivia. A clear awareness of the limits of the parties is emerging and, at the

same time, the idea that the movements are something more than a social phenomenon.

The first break with the parties consists of the movements having their own agenda and their own programs, which are more or less explicit, depending on the case. No longer do they act in a reflexive or reactionary manner to the states or parties. Also, lines of communication appear to be opening between the more stable and widespread movements within given countries. Among those involved are: the Coordination of Social Movements (CMS) in Brazil; the "Autonomous January" and other forms of coordination in Argentina; the COB (Central Bolivian Workers), the CSUTCB (Confederation of Union Farmers in Bolivia) and the Neighborhood Committees in Bolivia; as well as diverse one-time collaborations, like the national or regional social forums against the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) or in solidarity with Cuba or Venezuela. All of them avoid the formation of a permanent apparatus and superstructures through agile and flexible forms of coordination. In sum, the movements do not reproduce the party form — neither in regard to its style of organization nor in its relationship with other institutions.

Ricardo Gebrim, coordinator of the campaign against the FTAA in Brazil, points out that something else could emerge to take the place of the PT, and maybe it wouldn't be a party this time. He asserts that unlike the parties of the left that are preoccupied by the elections of 2006, the movements see the important thing as the formation of a new generation of politicians, the organization of the sectors that have the greatest impact in society.

The second break is due to a newly formed consciousness of the role of the parties, the states and the movements themselves. In the Ecuadorian CONAIE, one of the central points of debate concerns the role that Pachakutik, the elected political arm created by the indigenous movements, ought to play. After the December congress, a certain consensus has been reached on the error of participating in the government with Lucio Gutiérrez, which provoked the greatest political crisis as well as identity crisis in the history of CONAIE.

The issue of the relationship between the movements and the institutions is no longer a concern only of certain intellectuals. Something new is being born, based on bitter experiences. Antonio Canuto, a member of the Brazil's Pastoral Commission on Land, presents a hypothesis for reflection: "Progress is no longer possible by way of the institutions. I believe that party politics no longer

leads to change, either. A new thing is being born, only we don't know how to define exactly what it is."

Possibly one of the most noticeable new things is the growing self-esteem of the movements, which now feel capable of drawing their own courses and establishing their own programs without waiting for political parties to take on work that only organized civil society can carry out. In this way, the Latin American social movements are preparing more extensive and substantial offensives that can once again modify the regional scenario in the coming years.

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Resources:

CELS (Centro de Estudios legales y sociales)
<http://www.cels.org.ar>

CONAIE (Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de Ecuador)
<http://www.conaie.org>

Correpi (Coordinadora contra la Represión Policial e Institucional)
<http://www.correpi.lahaine.org>

Autonomous January (Argentina)
<http://www.lavaca.org> and <http://www.lafogata.org>

MST (Movimiento de Trabajadores Rurales Sin Tierra)
<http://www.mst.org.br>

OSAL Magazine
<http://www.clacso.edu.ar>

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