

Latin America's struggle for integration and independence

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Commenting on how much the two had in common — same age, three children, similar music tastes — Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa said to Mexican President Felipe Calderon on April 11 that “perhaps we represent the new generation of leaders in Latin America”.

He added, however, that one difference still remained: Calderon had still not become a socialist. “Being right wing is out of fashion in Latin America ... Join us, you are always welcome.”

The election of Fernando Lugo as Paraguayan president seems to confirm the idea of a new fashion for presidents. The former priest joins the ranks of current Latin American presidents that includes two women (Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner in Argentina and Michelle Bachelet in Chile), an indigenous person (Evo Morales in Bolivia), a former militant trade unionist (Lula de Silva in Brazil), a radically minded economist (Rafael Correa in Ecuador), a doctor (Tabare Vasquez in Uruguay), a former guerrilla fighter (Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua) and a former rebel soldier (Hugo Chavez in Venezuela).

“Each day the peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean are electing presidents that — look like our peoples and, its not just that we look like them, we are the people, we come from the people!” Chavez stated on July 19 at a speech in Nicaragua to mark the anniversary of 1979 Nicaraguan Revolution that overthrew the US-backed Somoza dictatorship.

He was standing next to Ortega — the first Central American president to join the craze — who was a central leader of the revolution, winning elections for president in 1984. Although the revolution was defeated by US-backed counter-revolutionary forces that carried out a violent campaign of terror, leading to a war-weary population electing a pro-US government in 1990, Ortega was re-elected president in 2006.

There is a good chance El Salvador could join the trend, with the left-wing Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front — which waged an armed struggle against the US-backed dictatorship during the ‘80s — ahead in polls for elections early next year.

This phenomena of electing governments with progressive credentials of one sort or another, along with the rise of militant anti-neoliberal social movements throughout South America, has led many political commentators to talk about a rising “pink tide” — a general swing to the left.

Rejecting neoliberalism

But in order to understand the dynamics in Latin America today, it is necessary to go beyond broad sweeping statements, just as it is not enough to simply analyse these governments through the prism of national politics.

While intervention in Latin America from the US is increasing in different forms in a desperate attempt to retake the initiative in the region, the drive towards South American unity continues to push back imperialism.

This is occurring despite some US successes, and with tensions between competing tendencies among South American governments becoming increasingly visible.

There are two phenomena increasingly complicating the situation. On the one hand, a rise in conflict (such as between Colombia and Venezuela as well as within Bolivia). On the other, growing social polarisation (as seen in Argentina, Uruguay and Peru).

Since the late 1990s indigenous, peasant and worker-led social movements have succeeded in getting rid of an increasing number of corrupt, pro-US neoliberal regimes via the streets, turning the US's traditional backyard into one big headache for Washington.

Leaving aside the ongoing example of revolutionary Cuba, at the turn of the century only the Chavez government could be pointed to in the region as willing to buck US-imposed dictates.

The deepening of Venezuela's Bolivarian revolution over the next few years, where by the mass of the poor confronted and pushed back the capitalists' offensive against the government, helped win Chavez the sympathy of millions across the region. This included the likes of the Mothers of the Disappeared in Argentina, who campaign for justice for victims of Argentina's military dictatorship and who initially rejected Chavez because of his military background.

Five years after Chavez's 1998 election, while governments had tumbled through popular insurrections in Ecuador and Argentina, only Lula in Brazil had joined Chavez as an ally at regional presidential summits.

A historic leader of the Workers' Party, which during the '90s had been a symbol of hope for much of the left in the region and internationally, by the time of Lula's election many had become disillusioned with his increasingly right-wing trajectory — confirmed by his government's policies since.

Brazilian social movements subsequently went into a period of decline.

A further five years on, the Latin American political map has radically changed, with old and new left and popular parties winning elections on the back of the massive discontent with policies that only enrich the mostly foreign multinational corporations and the traditional parties that implemented them.

To openly run on a platform of neoliberal policies, worse still on the ticket of a traditional party, meant humiliating defeat for presidential candidates in country after country.

In the 2005 Bolivian elections, for instance, all of the traditional parties either polled below 10% or did not present presidential candidates. Morales was elected Bolivia's first ever indigenous president with a historic 53.7% of the vote.

Regional convergence, US decline

At the 2005 Summit of the Americas in Mar de Plata in Argentina, the US-pushed pro-corporate Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) was decisively defeated through a combination of mass opposition across the region and the refusal of Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay to back down inside the meeting.

US President George Bush reportedly turned to his Argentinian counterpart at the summit's end and said: "I am a bit surprised. Something happened here that I hadn't envisaged."

The arrival of new representatives within the different South American trading blocs — such as Market of the South (Mercosur) and the Community of Andean Nations (CAN) — began to impact on these institutions that had operated in a neoliberal framework.

In many cases, they have become arenas for regular denunciation of US hegemony and support for greater regional integration — although often without a lot to show in the way of concrete steps forward.

In May, the Union of South American Nations (Unasur) was formed involving 12 countries. As a bloc, it represents the fifth-largest GDP in the world (US\$973.6 billion), is the biggest producer of food and has hydrocarbon reserves to last 100 years.

The formation of Unasur marks a continuation of the dynamic towards regional integration — representing in the political sphere what the defeat of the FTAA represented in the economic sphere.

Its importance is even more apparent when considered in the context of the counter-offensive launched by Washington since 2005. Using both the carrot and the stick, the US has been furiously working to turn back this tide, as evidenced by the continual "tours" by high level US government officials, including several by Bush.

This has included working to sign up countries to individual Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) to circumvent its defeat on a continental scale, offering large agribusiness big incentives through its diabolical plan of turning food into biofuels and intensifying its propaganda campaign against Chavez as the most radical and consistent South American leader pushing liberation from imperialism. The US have accused him of involvement in terrorism, narcotrafficking and the trafficking of children. Former US defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld even compared Chavez to Hitler.

The US scored some partial victories. Colombia and Peru's decision to sign FTAs with the US resulted in Venezuela leaving CAN, while Brazil and Paraguay are yet to vote to accept Venezuela as full member of Mercosur.

Competing currents

However, the decision to form Unasur confirms that the underlying dynamic of convergence continues to gain ground. And yet, at the same time, tensions between the different tendencies demonstrate the real challenges in continuing to move forward.

The first thing to note is the right-wing, openly pro-US regimes that still remain — the Colombian government of Alvaro Uribe and Peruvian government of Alan Garcia. Both

governments are part of Unasur, but do not hide their opposition to the process and continue to align themselves with Washington.

With the gravitational pull too strong for them to not jump on board, they continue to seek ways to undermine the process and do US imperialism's dirty work.

Clear evidence of this was the inability to stage the meeting for the official founding of Unasur, scheduled to be held in Colombia last year. Venezuelan foreign minister Nicolas Maduro decried on January 19 that these delays "had to do with attempts to make sure that Unasur did not advance. These projects always face obstacles from those who do not believe in the union of South America because they continue to think that the future of the continent is being vassals to interests of North American power."

With March 28-29 finally settled as the date for the official founding, it proved impossible to occur in the aftermath of Colombia's illegal March 1 bombing on Ecuadorian soil.

The Bolivarian alternative

On the other extreme is the proposal for an anti-corporate integration project that places cooperation and human solidarity at its centre.

This is spearheaded by Venezuela and Cuba and takes embryonic form in the shape of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), a trading bloc that groups together Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia and Nicaragua. While Ecuador is yet to join, it falls within the same camp.

Dominica has also joined ALBA for its own reasons, but does not fall into the same anti-imperialist camp.

The economic motor of this unity process has been Venezuelan oil. Having wrested control of its oil industry, PDVSA, from pro-US elites, Venezuela has put the massive wealth it generates to attempting to tackle the needs of the poor — resulting in a significant reduction of poverty rates. The oil wealth has also funded productive projects, such as the construction of basic industry and infrastructure.

From a company with almost no presence in Latin America, PDVSA is helping drive important plans for regional energy integration. Chavez has proposed the creation of four regional oil companies to promote unity: Petrocaribe, Petroandina, Petrosur and Petroamerica as a unifying project within the framework of ALBA.

Through Petrocaribe, for instance, Venezuela provides discounted oil to 18 Caribbean and Central American nations, whereby those countries are only required to pay 40% of the price Venezuelan oil upfront, with 25 years to pay off the remainder as a low interest loan. As well as guaranteeing energy security to impoverished nations at a time of escalating fuel costs, Petrocaribe also promotes state-driven national development in the industry.

While different issues have impeded the full development of these projects, PDVSA has signed contracts directly with numerous countries in the region to build oil refineries, tankers, oil exploration and technical assistance. Such a policy has been aimed at industrialisation in order to break dependency on, and subordination to, the US.

This is combined, in alliance with Cuba, with regional health care and literacy programs.

Possibly the most important part of the struggle for integration by the anti-imperialist current has been the battle of ideas being waged. Representatives of this bloc have regularly denounced capitalism, with Chavez in particular opening up a continental discussion on socialism and Latin American unity.

This ideological battle has helped encourage the struggles of millions from below.

In all the regional institutions this bloc has constantly hammering home the need to create a real political union: a Confederation of Latin American States.

The Brazilian axis

It was, however, the third axis that was key to the formation of Unasur. Faced with resistance by Colombia to staging the meeting, Brazil offered to be the host nation.

Lula stated that Brazil “is the biggest economy, the most industrialised country with the biggest [GDP]. Therefore, we have to be conscious of the fact that the integration of South America depends on the actions of Brazil”.

Recalling that only days before he had met firstly with Chavez and Morales, and then Garcia and Uribe, he said, “on one hand we have a photo with presidents considered to be left, and on the other with presidents considered to be from the centre”.

“What is the role of Brazil? To be a kind of bridge, to make a connection between all the political currents of South America, because, given it is the biggest country, Brazil has to work towards creating a situation of political, economic, social and cultural equilibrium.”

The Lula government is the political representative of Brazil’s capitalist class, whose main interests lie in a process of integration for its own benefit. It wants to negotiate with the US, but from a better bargaining position.

Integration, for Brazil, is the development of a regional capitalist system, under the hegemony of the Brazilian bourgeoisie, that can become an important bloc in the world system. Brazil’s weight in the region leaves the capitalist governments of Argentina, Uruguay, Chile and others with no option but to follow its lead.

As a counterbalance, some have been working to sign up the other regional economic power, Mexico, into Mercosur.

While PDVSA promotes integration through dialogue and cooperation to build up other state oil companies to aid industrialisation, Brazil’s nominally state-controlled energy company Petrobras works to purchase other state companies or sign contracts favourable to itself to supply Brazil’s domestic industry.

While not a systematic challenge to imperialism, such as represented by ALBA, Brazil’s project collides with the needs of the US. While Chavez denounces imperialism and Lula seeks to negotiate a better deal for Brazilian capitalists within its framework, both have worked to block US plans in bodies like the World Trade Organization.

This is why Brazil was one of the first to propose a South America Defence Council, along with positioning itself as peacemaker in bellicose clashes in the region, such as through its leading role in the UN occupation mission in Haiti.

When asked about what possible role the US would play in such a body, Brazilian defence minister Nelson Jobim clarified that “we are under no obligation to ask permission from the US to do this. And they also have to understand our necessity to reach integration.”

While Venezuela supported this initiative as a counterweight to US military influence, Colombia announced at the Unasur meeting that it was not interested in joining and the proposal was dropped. Uribe has since stated his interest in the proposal.

Two new phenomena

Talk of a defence council also comes at a time when both the Argentine and Brazilian governments have expressed discontent with the reactivation by the US navy’s Fourth Fleet — dormant since the end of World War II — to patrol Latin America waters. Along with the increasingly aggressive policy of Colombia towards its neighbours — and the push by the US-backed right-wing opposition in Bolivia towards a violent confrontation — it forms part of a new regional phenomenon.

Beginning with Colombia’s massacre of Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) fighters within in Ecuadorian territory, a series of incidents point towards attempts by Colombia, behind which stands the US, to find a way to provoke neighbouring countries.

Evidence that the US and its regional allies are seeking to provoke an armed conflict can be found in a series of recent incidents, including: Colombian soldiers illegally entering Venezuelan territory; the release of supposed documents linking the Venezuela and Ecuadorian governments to FARC “terrorism”; Colombia’s willingness to allow the construction of a US military base on the border with Venezuela; a new US base in Paraguay near the Bolivian border and reinforcement of other regional bases; a US military plane violating Venezuelan airspace; and the arrival of US troops in Peru.

Uribe has also held talks with the opposition governor of the Venezuelan border state of Zulia, expressing his desire to deepen relations between Colombia and the state.

At the same time, a wave of conflicts are sprouting as social polarisation increases. Ongoing strikes in Peru, growing unrest in Chile, worker mobilisations in Uruguay, rural strikes in Argentina and a multiplicity of social struggles in Brazil — while often confused expressions of social discontent — are likely to increasingly place these governments in difficult situations.

This is already the case in Argentina (under threat from the right) and Peru (from the left).

Social unrest is also affecting Mexico. Following the massive outpouring against the 2006 electoral fraud that robbed centre-left candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of the presidency, the struggle is now focused on preventing the privatisation of the state oil company.

European Union

Into the mix, the European Union has been working hard to take ground lost by the US, offering alternative development programs and opportunities for further economic ties with Europe.

With the prices of natural resources skyrocketing, Latin America is becoming a crucial

region. Unlike Washington, which attacks Venezuela and tries to pressure Brazil, the EU instead works behind the scenes to undermine Chavez while offering support to Brazil. Brazil and Argentina look to the EU as counterbalance to the US.

However, the recent approval by the EU of the racist anti-immigrant “return directive”, which could see undocumented immigrants jailed for 18 months before being deported, has been met with united opposition by all Latin American nations.

This is due to the huge number of Latin American families that depend on members working in Europe and sending money home. The law represents a serious threat to regional economies.

Bolivia and Venezuela have threatened to reply with a “return directive” on capital from EU countries that apply the law, as well as cutting off oil and gas exports.

All this helps explain the real significance of Unasur as well as the obstacles ahead.

Socialist strategy

One of US imperialism’s key objectives is to divide the pro-integration currents, along with arming its remaining allies, in order to regain lost ground. To impede this division is a crucial task for Latin American socialists.

This is something understood by Chavez, who seeks to utilise all openings towards integration, whatever the limitations, while simultaneously advocating and seeking ways to implement the Bolivarian revolution’s anti-imperialist program. Venezuela is both seeking to operate within institutions like Mercosur and construct ALBA with those countries that are willing.

For the regional capitalists, this convergence is necessary to put a brake on the uncontrolled voracity of imperialism, in a context of growing demands from ordinary people.

For socialists, opposition to US plans to divide the region is for completely different reasons. While institutions like Mercosur can be supported, it is not because they represent real alternatives to the FTAA but because they can act as transitional forms towards a real confederation of Latin American states — which would alter the relationship of forces away from imperialism, creating a stronger basis for social change.

With Mercosur hamstrung by disputes between its members, the creation of Unasur represents an advance as it moves the discussion to the South American-wide stage.

In the meantime, it is necessary to transform the mobilisation of workers, peasants, urban poor and other exploited and oppressed people — such as indigenous peoples — into powerful movements for real social change.

Fundamental to this is the construction of political instruments built out of these movements that aim to win power — which means not simply winning an election but organising the mass of the oppressed to govern.

The struggle to construct the mass-based United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), led by Chavez, is a powerful example of what is needed.

Importantly, the PSUV has already set out as an immediate challenge the promotion of other such parties in the region. To this end, it seeks to organise a meeting of regional left parties with the aim of constructing an international organisation of the Latin American and Caribbean left.

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