

AMERICAS - Five Years After 9-11: Bush's Backward Slide in Latin America

Raúl Zibechi, IRC

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IRC - Five years after the September 11 attacks, the United States under George W. Bush is weaker and more cut off from Latin America than it has ever been. For the first time since World War II, the United States is no longer the most important factor in the continent's politics, to the point where we can say that a certain regional multilateralism has been developed in the hemisphere. Brazil is the main counterbalance to Washington in the region, but the growing importance of Argentina and Venezuela, and even post-Fox Mexico, should not be underestimated as new power players.

The list of events adverse to the Washington consensus since the attacks in New York and Washington demonstrate that despite the "war on terrorism," in Latin America, a new relationship is developing. Social movements continue to be the most dynamic factor, accompanied now by new progressive or left-leaning governments that, despite hesitations, generate a new reality.

In December 2001 a powerful popular uprising among the Argentine middle class ousted the government of Fernando de la Rúa, and the continuing wave of social action cornered his successor Eduardo Duhalde. In 2002 and 2003, thanks to grassroots activism, it was possible to reverse a coup d'état against Hugo Chávez and the petroleum strike that threatened to annihilate his government.

Growing criticism of neoliberalism in Brazil allowed Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva to take the presidency and in October 2003 an impressive indigenous and workers movement toppled the repressive neoliberal government of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada in Bolivia. In 2005 the movement forced his successor Carlos Mesa to resign and led to the overwhelming electoral triumph of Evo Morales. That same year, the left won in Uruguay, for the first time displacing the traditional state-controlled party apparatus.

In Ecuador, despite the betrayal by the government of Lucio Gutiérrez, social movements impeded the consolidation of neoliberal policies and in the first months of 2006 blocked the signing of the Free Trade Agreement with the United States, while also achieving an important victory against U.S. oil giant Oxy. Even in Colombia, the country closest to the United States on the continent, currents opposed to Washington's politics have made progress: guerilla forces have not been defeated in spite of Plan Colombia, and a leftist political coalition broke the two-party tradition in the Colombian elections, modifying power relationships.

In Peru, despite the defeat of the nationalist candidate Ollanta Humala, the power of the popular sectors is putting limits on the alliance between Alan García's new government and the United States.

FTAA Failure

Even in Chile, which signed an FTA with Washington in the late '90s, the socialist government of Michelle Bachelet confronts the reactivation of citizen movements—including the recent student movement in defense of public education—that question the axis of neoliberal politics. Paraguay is perhaps the South American country where Bush's military policies have most advanced, through the installation of troops with full immunity, the establishment of a huge military base at Mariscal Estigarribia, and the army's deployment of paramilitary groups assigned by the Interior Ministry to conflictive rural areas.

The events of recent weeks in Mexico represent a formidable change. The mass mobilization around the

electoral fraud against Andrés Manuel López Obrador shows a new democratic awareness that will limit the conservative tendencies of the future president Felipe Calderon. However, the decisive factor is that the Zapatista movement is no longer alone: the “Oaxaca commune,” as the vigorous movement against the corrupt state authorities has been called, is a point of inflection in Mexican politics. The irruption of wide sectors of the population questioning not only the way in which government is run but the power of the state itself, shows that Mexico is facing both a political crisis and a crisis in the model of domination that will have serious consequences in the immediate future.

Perhaps the most notable event occurred in November of 2005 in Mar del Plata during the Summit of the Americas. There the Mercosur countries (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay) and Venezuela buried the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA) that had been the model agreement between the United States and the rest of the continent, designed by the White House. Following the showdown in Mar del Plata, the Bush Administration began an offensive to sign FTAs with various countries. It has had some success. The Central American Free Trade Agreement has been joined by agreements with Colombia and Peru, and the possibility that Paraguay and Uruguay are on the same path.

But the most influential countries of the region (Brazil and Argentina) have taken significant steps to reverse the crisis and stalled integration progress within Mercosur. Venezuela’s entry in Mercosur, the recently improved relations between Brazil and Argentina after overcoming old commercial disputes and suspicions between their governments, as well as the possible entrance of Bolivia, radically modify Mercosur’s situation.

Although some of these governments cannot even remotely be considered leftist, they have produced changes beyond their intentions. Lula will be reelected with an ample margin because of changes in the political culture of Brazil’s poor. Without a doubt, this change was influenced by the social program known as Bolsa Familia that consists of subsidies of about US\$50 and other benefits to 11 million families, around 40 million people. The program has received deserved criticism for its charity orientation, but the truth is that it has transformed two power relationships within the most important country on the continent: first it broke the dominance and control of the conservative elites in the Northeast. Until now the ultra-right rural bosses developed clientele relationships that assured them the loyalty—real or feigned—of the poor. Now Lula can count on a decisive majority in the Northeast toward his reelection. Secondly, for the first time in Brazil’s history, the poorest will not mimic the political behaviors of the middle class and will vote for a candidate that they consider “their own.”

Governments and Movements

In five years tendencies have been formed that were foreshadowed in years past, but now have gained strong momentum. The list of governments that oppose Washington has grown, as has the number of governments that distance themselves from Bush and the international financial institutions. Today Cuba is less isolated than ever and U.S. aggression towards the island will find sure and firm opposition from the majority of Latin American countries. Venezuela is more secure, not only because of its domestic support, but thanks to the consolidation of the Bolivarian process and the capacity of Hugo Chavez to weave together global alliances, and the support of countries in the region including Brazil, Argentina, and Bolivia.

Some Latin American countries, such as Brazil and to a lesser extent Argentina, have begun to challenge the empire in an area as delicate as uranium enrichment. Neoliberal politics of the ‘90s led those countries to dismantle or freeze their nuclear plans, which have now been reactivated. The policy of autonomy and military cooperation between Brazil and Argentina, their joint positions against the changes demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and toward the acceleration of South-South trade and cooperation, as well as the creation of a new currency that replaces the dollar for regional commerce, are all signs of an emerging regional reality.

Finally, and most importantly, social movements of the region have not been defeated and maintain their capacity for action and their potential is intact, even when the progressive discourse and the plans focused on the poor have created some serious difficulties. Nothing indicates that the grassroots wave of

activism initiated in the mid-90s has collapsed. To the contrary, it was this wave of mobilizations that served to delegitimize the neoliberal model and generate the conditions so that a new political map in each country and as a region could be created. It is not true that this situation has been created because of the 'abandonment' of the United States of this region as a result of its focus on the Middle East and Afghanistan. This would be like seeing the world from above. And what is true is that, below, at the base of our societies, a new consciousness is growing, one that did not mesh with Bush's 'war on terrorism' unleashed in these five years.

Translated for the IRC Americas Program by Katie Kohlstedt, IRC.

Raúl Zibechi, a member of the editorial board of the weekly *Brecha* de Montevideo, is a professor and researcher on social movements at the Multiversidad Franciscana de América Latina and adviser to several grassroots organizations. He is a monthly contributor to the IRC Americas Program (www.americaspolicy.org)

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