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Xiii Foro De Sao Paulo; Something To Celebrate In El Salvador

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The XIII Foro de Sao Paulo (FSP) convened in San Salvador Jan. 12-14, bringing together leftist organizations from 33 countries, the majority from Latin America. It was an upbeat and celebratory forum, a departure from the years when the left met to bemoan its losses. This year, the talk turned to predictions of further advances for socialism and an end to neoliberal policies on the continent.

"Now we are in a different moment," said Medardo Gonzalez, host of the event. "We are in position to move to the defeat of neoliberalism and not only to defeat it but to go beyond it and construct a new alternative model in Latin America and the Caribbean." Gonzalez is coordinator general of El Salvador's leftist party Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN). Gonzalez recalled the first FSP, 15 years ago, when "we were in a position of resistance against imperial arrogance after what happened in the so-called socialist camp [Eastern Europe], and I recall that there were many bad-intentioned, and even well-intentioned, voices that announced that Cuba wouldn't survive. They were naive."

The agenda for this year was divided into five principal themes: deepening democracy, broadening public social policy, fundamental structural reforms, creating an alternative economic model, and self-determination. "It is not just that socialism is an alternative for Latin America," said Caracas' Mayor Freddy Bernal. "It is the only alternative, because the other one is poverty." Bernal said socialism is a historical necessity, observing that this forum is happening "when there is a change in Latin America, an upset toward the left, a rebirth of hope among people who never tired of struggle."

If the celebratory mood at the meetings produced some breathless rhetoric, it might be said that it was a long time in coming. The FSP was constituted in 1990 when the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), now the governing party of Brazil, brought together the hemisphere's leftist organizations to deal with the collapse of world socialism after the fall of the Soviet Union and the consequences of the implementation of neoliberal policies in Latin America. A decade and a half later they have begun to see progress, titling this edition of the FSP, *The New Phase in the Struggle for Latin American and Caribbean Integration*.

The panels and speakers at the meetings made much of the elections of Presidents Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in Brazil, Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador, but they also devoted time to considering electoral trouble spots in the hemisphere. One such was Mexico, where they consider the recent election of Felipe Calderon over leftist challenger Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador fraudulent (see SourceMex, 2006-07-12 and 2006-08-30).

Melding different types of organizations

The participants took the position that the Mexican election sharpened the processes of social pressure, in particular that of the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (APPO). The concern here was the relationship between leftist political parties and social movements. Their analysis was articulated in the final document of the meetings, where they called for concerted action between different forms of democratic action "and a respectful and complementary relationship between the parties, movements, and political coalitions of the left and the diversity of popular organizations."

The forum acknowledged the need for closer ties among these types of organizations, singling out not only APPO but also the Madres de Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) in Brazil, and the indigenous movements of Ecuador and Bolivia. The idea is to work toward a new model of integration for the region based on greater solidarity among the various organizations. The lack of this kind of solidarity has been one of the notable failures of the left in the past.

But that is over now, said former foreign minister of Nicaragua Miguel D'Escoto. "This forum will continue to be one of the most important elements for promoting what must be the priority for Latin America, integration. Today we are in our best moment, with new political winds." D'Escoto, a Catholic priest, added that it has been well-demonstrated that "neoliberalism is rubbish (una porqueria), an elitist and anti-human system, because it is the system that oligarchic groups support, those whom God wants to stop governing."

Forum participants showed some limits to solidarity. A resolution to deal with the issues of the Basque territories in Spain through dialogue was vetoed by delegate Willy Meyer of the European United Left (UL). Meyer had the right of veto according to forum rules and exercised it in the face of majority approval of the measure brought up by the Izquierda Castellana (IzCa). The Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) was another organization to be swept from the forum's mainstream. In both cases, critics complained that organizations that utilize other than electoral processes have been excluded.

Exclusionary practices are not to be taken lightly within the newly coalescing left. A given organization might be cast aside for reasons having to do with violence in a movement that has lost much through violence and gained a great deal through democratic processes, even bourgeois ones, but limits on solidarity could have consequences.

In Guatemala, for instance, any chance of electoral victory depends on the fusion of disparate parties. However, the two foremost leftist parties in the country have not been able to come to terms because of these issues. Analysts point out that a competitive scenario in the next presidential election in this conservative country would depend on an accommodation between the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG) and the Alianza Nueva Nacion (ANN). But the ANN does not accept that the URNG has within its ranks people with military backgrounds during the civil war.

It was precisely this kind of accommodation that won the presidency for Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua (see NotiCen, 2007-01-11). The Frente Sandinista para la Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) won with the joint participation of former enemies. Ortega's running mate was a former contra. The FSLN also

gained the support of Yatama, the Miskito party of the Caribbean coast that fought the Sandinistas during the contra war.

El Salvador was faced with a similar situation following its civil war, and the left handled it in a more sophisticated way than in Guatemala. FMLN Deputy Lorena Pena explained, "I don't know the list of military officers in Guatemala. In El Salvador we have the list of officers who are in the report of the truth commission, accused of genocide in the country." With those individuals there are no alliances. Nor are the sequela of warfare the only issues with the potential to divide the Central American left. Pena spoke of the division between the FSLN and FMLN on abortion and women's rights.

The Sandinistas embraced a severe anti-abortion platform to gain victory (see NotiCen, 2006-08-31 and 2006-11-02). Pena takes away from this, "If the left in Central America is backward, it is that it has not been able to correctly conceptualize a good way to combine class, gender, age, and ethnicity. The result is that at certain moments it doesn't have an awareness of the significance of measures like the criminalization of abortion." Pena used the forum to argue for a higher degree of sophistication for the Central Americans and for recognition that different governments adopt different policies for different reasons. "We have to make an analysis looking at the performance of each government," she said, referring to the myriad ways the governments of the hemisphere have handled nationalizations, their relationship to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and other specifics. "We cannot a priori say, 'If they pay their debt, they are right wing.'"

Summing up the meetings

The final document of the forum summed up the meeting, parsing out four major themes:

1. The formulation of anti-neoliberal policies that encourage a genuine political, economic, and social democracy; sustainable development; complete equality of all human beings; and a new solidarity-based integration.
2. The battle against colonialism and imperialist interference, and in favor of the solution of armed conflicts through peace processes, rechanneling the advance of our peoples toward indispensable political, economic, and social transformation to the benefit of the majorities and oppressed minorities.
3. Confrontation of the imperialist security doctrine of the hemisphere that promotes militarization.
4. The relationship among political forces, social and citizen movements, and left progressive governments, and the role of international solidarity.

The closing document gave recognition not just where leftists have become presidents, but also to Mexico, Peru, and Colombia where important gains occurred in legislatures and in local elections. "These advances in the political and electoral terrain create unprecedented favorable conditions for movement toward the political and ideological defeat of neoliberalism in our region, but at the same time they obligate the political movements and parties of the Latin American and Caribbean left

to act in accordance with the expectations of the people, under the penalty that their governments become just a brief respite by which neoliberal domination returns." The statement named Plan Colombia, the Andean Initiative, and other "mechanisms of interference and intervention imposed by North American imperialism as part of its system of continental domination, supported by the doctrine of hemispheric security that uses as pretext the war on organized crime, narcotrafficking, and terrorism to broaden and deepen the militarization of the region and the criminalization of the popular struggle." It called for a negotiated political solution to the armed conflict in Colombia.

The text also called for an end to violence against women, domestic violence, and labor violence. Indigenous rights were highlighted with an endorsement of the concept of plurinationality. Of particular interest to the isthmus, the document demanded that the governments of El Salvador and Guatemala comply with the provisions of the peace accords that ended their civil wars. Both countries are woefully behind schedule in implementing these provisions. El Salvador last hosted the FSP in 1996. Daniel Ortega and Lula da Silva were there as party leaders, not as presidents. The issues were very much the same, but there were hints of the progress to come.

Local reporter Juan Jose Dalton wrote at the time, "In its sixth meeting, the forum aims to move from the stage of rhetorical criticism of neoliberalism to the formulation of concrete responses to it and proposals on specific questions such as migration, the environment, and discrimination against women." Progress has been made regarding neoliberalism with the advent of the *Alternativa Bolivariana para las Americas (ALBA)* from President Chavez's Venezuela and the formidable resistance throughout the region to hegemonic trade agreements. On the other issues Dalton wrote about, there has been little.

Perhaps the greatest progress has been in the conduct and follow-through of the FSP itself. It has come a long way since, for instance, the 1999 meeting in Mexico, when German academic and researcher Heinz Dietrich pronounced the forum "disappointing throughout the decade," having "failed to live up to its aim of becoming a vehicle for effective integration." Dietrich derided hopes of forming a confederation of leftist parties along the lines of Simon Bolivar, charging the forum had "no program, no project." He said then that the forum members simply "talk and argue, without having a hold at the grassroots level in Latin America." The program and project may have been hard to discern in 1999, but a greater problem was the ongoing lack of solidarity among the disparate leftist groups.

The cohesiveness that eventually formed had its roots in Lula's speech to the forum in El Salvador in 1966. He told them, "We need to convince society that we have the competence to govern. People still think we only know how to march, strike, and protest, so we need to show them that we can also exercise power through realistic programs adapted to the conditions of each country." He pressed on, "We must place much less importance on our ideological differences and much greater emphasis on united action. We must abandon the sectoral spirit that so often has dominated and divided us. That means ending the traditional arrogance that has characterized the left." A decade later, the Latin American left has taken those admonitions to heart (see *NotiSur*, 1996-08-23).

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