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Region: Troubling Signs For Political, Economic Future

by LADB Staff
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At first glance, the wave of elections in South America in 2009 would indicate the consolidation of a democratic system despite multiple bilateral conflicts and the freezing of the integration process in South America, a region that only two decades ago was largely under the heel of military dictators. And the region seemed to be overcoming the controversies between neighboring countries while integration was taking its first sure steps. From a political perspective, however, and encouraged by the inaction of the international community that allowed an anachronistic coup to stand in Honduras, the right moved to take over, and it either consolidated where it already had a structured presence or developed where false progressivism failed to initiate the minimal changes that would allow it to change the correlation of forces in its favor. Against this backdrop, the Economic Commission for Latin American and the Caribbean (ECLAC) recently released a report in which, despite predicting a certain growth, it portrays a distressing social picture for 2009 with more unemployment, more poverty, and more hunger and it estimates that a desolate future will be the reality for coming years. "Something strange is happening in Latin America. The Latin American right forces are poised to do better during the US presidency of Barack Obama than they did during the eight years of [President] George W. Bush. Bush led a far-right regime that was totally out of sympathy with popular forces in Latin America. Obama, on the other hand, is leading a centrist regime that is trying to replicate the 'good-neighbor policy' which [President] Franklin Roosevelt proclaimed as a way of signaling the end of direct US military intervention in Latin America," wrote US sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein, former director of social studies at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes in Paris, in an article reprinted in the Argentine daily Pagina 12. Roberto Garcia Moritan, former Argentine deputy minister for foreign affairs, complements Wallenstein's reasoning in saying that, when a man arrived at the White House who offered to treat Latin America with respect, popular reaction in all countries was identical, and Obama became a great source of Latin American optimism. Nevertheless, when governments saw that, as time passed and the Obama administration did not even offer a more friendly relationship with its neighbors to the south, only Bolivia and Venezuela raised voices of criticism and warning. The right, said the diplomat, "clearly saw how progressives wasted time while Obama failed to fulfill his auspicious promises, and it made the most of that, creating new forms of action and growing. Seeing what had happened in Honduras and the inaction of the US government, which ended up validating the coup, the right felt it had 'permission' for everything." Right makes gains across the continent In Argentina, the government of President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner lost its legislative majority to the right, which will make the remaining 23 months until her term ends in December 2011 decidedly difficult (see NotiSur, 2009-07-10). In Chile, the right grew until it captured the government from the sputtering Concertacion coalition (see NotiSur, 2010-01-22). In March the Palacio de la Moneda will be occupied by President-elect Sebastian Pinera, a powerful businessman with neoliberal ideas and strong ties to the Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) dictatorship, part-owner of LAN airlines and Colo-Colo soccer club the most popular team in the country and head of an important group of leading companies. In Uruguay, the right lost to the Frente Amplio (FA), but it gained two percentage points compared with the 2004 elections (see NotiSur, 2009-12-11) and is studying the possibility a merger of the two traditional conservative parties the Partido
Nacional (PN or Blanco) and the Partido Colorado (PC) giving up symbolism and a rich identity for the sake of trying to overturn the progressive government in the 2014 elections. Only in Bolivia, where there is not a progressive government but rather a revolutionary process, did the right lose votes and prospects for the future (see NotiSur, 2009-12-18). For the immediate future, everything indicates that, in the May 30 Colombian presidential election, the right will keep the prizes won with President Alvaro Uribe (see NotiSur, 2010-01-22); that in Venezuela on Sept. 26, it will win enough seats in Congress to strip President Hugo Chavez of the legislative majority he now enjoys (see NotiSur, 2010-01-15); and that in the Oct. 3 Brazilian elections, it will reinstate one of its own in the government (see NotiSur, 2009-12-04). In early December, the state-run Argentine TV station debuted a series of interviews with all South American presidents. In charge of the project is governing party Sen. Daniel Filmus, former minister of education and perhaps the best national authority on the Latin American leaders. Filmus said he conceived of the idea in 2008, when he was a member of the Argentine delegation to one of the South American summits, where he saw a "mosaic of leaders that was the most vivid image of what democracy is. Given what we were used to, the group was decidedly rare." He continued: "First, the traditional white lawyers who historically have governed us did not predominate. Second, two were women Chile's Michele Bachelet and Argentina's Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner. Regarding backgrounds, there was a coca-growing campesino, Bolivia's Evo Morales; a machinist, Brazil's Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva; a third-world bishop, Paraguay's Fernando Lugo; a leftist soldier, Venezuela's Hugo Chavez; two doctors Bachelet and Uruguay's Tabare Vazquez; a lawyer, Colombia's Alvaro Uribe; an anti-neoliberal economist, Ecuador's Rafael Correa. Ethnically, there was a descendent of native peoples, Morales; three mestizos Chavez, Peru's Alan Garcia, and Lula; and from Guyana and Surinam, an Indo-American economist (Bharrat Jagdeo) and a mathematician of African ancestry (Ronald Venetiaan)." Filmus says anyone who studies South American history will see that such a mosaic had never existed before and that, if it exists today, it is because popular mobilizations during recent years have brought a breath of democracy to the region. Troubling future The growth of the right is worrisome. Although the vigilant attitude of popular sectors shows that the majorities are not defenseless, governments do not seem to be in tune with their citizens. The integration process has stalled. Two years ago, the founding members of MERCOSUR (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay) agreed to admit Venezuela, but the Brazilian Congress only ratified that decision last November and Paraguay's Congress has refused to even consider it, within the context of a strategy of pressure and blackmail against President Lugo (see NotiSur, 2009-09-18). Consequently, Venezuela, with all its potential, can neither participate in the development of the group nor benefit or receive benefits from the common market's possibilities. Although this is not a classic dispute, Venezuela's exclusion from MERCOSUR could enter into the complex set of conflicts that afflict old neighbors and friends. The citizens of an Argentine city who feel threatened by pollution from a cellulose plant on the Uruguayan side of the river separating the two countries have, for the past 38 months, impeded the transit of people and goods across a binational bridge that is vital for MERCOSUR trade and communications between two populations with common roots and a shared history (see NotiSur, 2009-10-09). Since official inaction is absolute, the legal solution to the conflict will come from a decision by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague. The same court will decide litigation between Peru and Chile regarding maritime sovereignty in the oldest conflict between the two countries, which are also embroiled in mutual accusations of espionage and arms buildups (see NotiSur, 2008-02-08). Peru goes through cyclical violent verbal confrontation with Venezuela and Bolivia, with the former for political reasons and the latter for the recurring assistance that the Garcia administration offers Bolivian opposition leaders wanted by the Bolivian
judiciary. A more serious matter, because it involves all 12 countries in the region, is the crisis that began in mid-2009, when Colombia gave the US access to seven military bases (see NotiSur, 2009-11-20). Venezuela and Ecuador, whose diplomatic relations with Colombia are frozen, feel threatened by the presence of extraregional troops, and the rest of the South American countries share that fear because planes from one of the bases (Palanquero) can depart with flight autonomy that allows them to survey the entire continent. In its most recent yearly report Social Panorama of Latin America 2009 ECLAC traced a frightening picture of the Latin American situation. Some 145 million people live in substandard housing, and the countries where this is most prevalent are Brazil, Argentina, Peru, Bolivia, and Paraguay. By 2020, the number of extremely poor will have increased to 163 million. In 2009, more than 9 million people fell into poverty, bringing the total to 189 million, 34.1% of the population. The newly indigent numbered 5 million, with those living in extreme poverty now standing at 76 million, 13.7% of all Latin Americans. Although some private-sector estimates predict that 2010 will see a slight economic reactivation, social development will continue in the red. ECLAC executive secretary Alicia Barcena warned that employment, poverty, and health indices not only worsened in 2009 but lost the ground gained between 2002 and 2008. For the future, projections do not speak of an improvement in the indicators.

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