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Latin American Underdevelopment Tied to Land Ownership

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The system of land-ownership—its poor distribution—has affected the life of South American countries since their struggle for independence from colonial powers Spain and Portugal in the early 19th century. In this region, historically, land has been power. During the last century, progressive and popular political parties in various countries denounced land grabbing—which resulted in the latifundio—as the major cause of the underdevelopment that condemned the region to become a supplier of primary products, raw material going to industries in developed countries and processed with their own labor (NotiSur, Jan. 20, 2012). It was suggested at the time that the solution to underdevelopment would come about by implementing an agrarian-reform program to end the latifundio system and turn land over to those who worked it.

Recently, the idea has resurfaced, but no longer promoted exclusively by progressive sectors. Now, some governments are expressing the need to again put the issue at the center of public debate. And other concepts have appeared on the stage. New agroindustry-driven technologies for working the land—based on mechanization and the abusive use of agrochemicals denounced as being highly toxic—defend the latifundio and have brought into everyday vocabulary such terms as "sustainable development" and "food sovereignty." Some governments, and the sectors tied to campesinos, even talk of agrarian reform.

Brazil's Land-Reform Promise Largely Unfulfilled

In Brazil, where the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) has governed since January 2003—a party that originated in the ranks of labor and included agrarian reform in its platform—the government quit talking about land distribution in the mid-2000s (NotiSur, April 15, 2011), and it broke relations with an old and active ally, the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST).

However, along with campesinos, entities with strong social roots are now advocating for the application of an agrarian-reform program. The Seminário Nacional de Organizações Sociais do Campo took place the last three days of February in Brasilia, the capital. Participants included campesinos, the Catholic Church’s Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT), Caritas, the multinational agency Via Campesina, and representatives of the mainline Protestant churches as well as newer evangelical and Pentecostal denominations, the latter very powerful in the country with a congressional bloc of nearly 40 members (NotiSur, Oct. 22, 2010, and July 1, 2011).

"We are unhappy, because in recent years no resources have been available for family agriculture but they have been available for agribusiness and exports of primary products," said Rosângela Piovizani when the meeting’s final document was released.

"Brazil is going through a process of reprimarization, a return to the primary sector, an economy based on the production and export of agricultural and nonagricultural [mining] commodities. This economy in unable to finance and promote sustainable development and satisfy the needs of the Brazilian people," the document said.
The discussions in Brasilia led to an alliance of more than 30 participating organizations, which pledged to initiate a struggle that will have four central planks: "1) a profound agrarian reform that guarantees the land rights of the indigenous and Quilombola peoples and the traditional communities; 2) rural development with income and wealth distribution and an end to inequalities; 3) production of and access to healthy food and conservation of the environment, establishing processes that ensure the transition to ecological agriculture; 4) the guarantee and broadening of social and cultural rights that foster quality of life, continuity of rural life, and the ability for young people to remain in rural areas." (Quilombolas are descendants of former slaves who fled the sugarcane plantations to gain their freedom and live in small jungle communities called Quilombos. Estimates put the number of Quilombos throughout Brazil today at 2,000.)

**Paraguay looks at property titles to redistribute land**

In Paraguay, President Fernando Lugo took office in 2010, elected on a platform with agrarian reform as a top priority. Two years later, the president faces almost daily demonstrations by campesino groups that call him a traitor for not keeping his promise.

"The government was not and will not be able to comply, because Lugo is held captive by the legislative and judicial branches, two conservative bodies where corruption reigns," explained sociologist Ramón Fogel to a Radio Nederland reporter. "Thus, since land distribution is not possible, the solution must come through legalizing ownership (NotiSur, Feb. 17, 2012), especially in cases of large tracts where many doubts exist about the validity of the property titles."

The doubts Fogel referred to result from several programs during the 35-year dictatorship of Gen. Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989) that gave state lands to military officers, business owners, and leaders of Stroessner's Partido Colorado.

A report of the state Comisión de Verdad y Justicia (CVJ) established that, in the 49 years between 1954 and 2003 (which includes 14 post-dictatorship years in which corruption continued unabated), ill-gotten lands totaled 64.1% of the 8 million hectares adjudicated by the state. To better understand the importance of the petitions for legalization, the 64.1% represents 32.7% of the country's arable land and 19.3% of national territory.

On March 26, for the first time in many years, the issue reached the world of academia, through the Universidad Católica's student association. All participants in the debate that day agreed in criticizing how members of the judiciary and Congress had prevented Lugo from initiating his agrarian-reform program.

"The interests at play are very powerful. The latest available data show that 2% of the population holds 85% of arable land, leaving 98% of Paraguayans with only 15% of the land," read the main report of the meeting. As in Argentina, Bolivia, southern Brazil, and Uruguay, the best lands in Paraguay are dedicated to soy cultivation, owing to strong demand from China, which uses soy for pig feed.

**Colombia and Venezuela try unique approaches**

Colombia and Venezuela do not escape this reality, which the governments in both countries, although with distinct visions and methods, are trying to change. In Colombia, to hand over lands is, in reality, to return the parcels that campesinos were forced to sell for next to nothing to drug-
trafficking mafias and paramilitary groups. Under threat of death, they had to turn over their lands to those groups.

On Jan. 1, 2012, the Ley de Víctimas y Restitución de Tierras went into effect, which allows those expelled from their lands—from the lands sold under threat—to come forward and claim them and, following a summary process, have their property rights restored (NotiSur, July 8, 2011). Under the law, the burden of proof that a campesino's claim is not legitimate rests with the party opposing the claim. The "good-faith" principle applies to the campesino.

Nevertheless, and in violation of the law's text, the government decided to set up a bureaucratic network throughout the country—the Unidades de Restitución de Tierras—so that lawyers in those offices can investigate and gather evidence (which should be unnecessary) that will then be presented to special judges, the Jueces de Restitución. The law deals only with the return of lands lost after 1991, which is estimated to total between 4 million ha and 6 million ha (between 40,000 sq km and 60,000 sq km). While President Juan Manuel Santos has called this an "authentic agrarian reform," in truth it is only an act of justice enabling campesinos to recover the lands that were forcibly taken from them.

In Venezuela, the government has opted for the most expeditious route for expropriating lands that are abandoned or, in the judgment of a special agency, not cultivated or cultivated at less than 100%.

"The country has 17 million ha suitable for developing cattle raising or dairy farming, but only 800,000 ha [less than 5%] are controlled by the state," said President Hugo Chávez in late 2011.

For that reason, the government instructed the appropriate authorities "to make a complete map, to find out what land is idle, uncultivated, or underutilized, because we have to go there, to set a fair compensation, buy the lands, and then distribute them among the campesinos who need them to live on and fully work them with their families."

Since February 1999, when Chávez first took office, the state has expropriated more than 3.6 million ha (NotiSur, July 23, 2010). Most of these lands have been used for cattle raising, and the government has imported livestock from Argentina and Uruguay—the two South American countries most involved in animal genetics—looking for the best quality animals for producing beef and dairy products.

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