Region Faces Ongoing Threat from New Style of Coup

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Paraguay has just witnessed an event that marks the expansion of neogolpismo (neocoupism, a new style of coup) in 21st century Latin America. That is how various political analysts in Latin America, using almost the same words, described the June 22 institutional rupture that ended with the removal of democratic President Fernando Lugo (NotiSur, July 13, 2012).

"Traditional coups were carried out violently by the armed forces (backed by social sectors), with foreign impetus or tolerance (basically from the US government); they were aimed at reorganizing the branches of power and founding a new order," explained Argentine Juan Gabriel Tokatlian, a professor of international relations at the private Universidad Di Tella.

"Neogolpismo is formally less virulent, it is led directly by civilians (with the implicit support or explicit complicity of the armed forces), it maintains an institutional façade, it doesn't necessarily involve a power (the US), and it holds itself up as a solution to problems that, it says, the overthrown government did not know how to handle," said Brazilian academic and diplomat Samuel Pinheiro Guimarães.

Even before the coup in Paraguay, political scientists Luiz Alberto Moniz Bandeira (from Brazil) and Julián González Guyet (from Uruguay) had warned about this new model applied by the de facto powers to shatter democracy.

Analysts say more coups likely

None of the analysts assumes that the cycle of the new style of coup has ended, but only Pinheiro Guimarães lists the countries where neogolpismo forces "are lurking, preparing the terrain for the final assault." Venezuelan, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Argentina head the list.

Among those countries' commonalities, the Brazilian diplomat cites three in particular: 1) neogolpismo recognizes that the governments that it will try to overthrow were democratically elected, but it says that they do not govern democratically; 2) when those constitutional and democratic governments initiate social-reform programs that might minimally modify income distribution, they are labeled "populist," with a pejorative connotation; 3) the governments are accused of not respecting freedom of the press and of speech, when those two essential freedoms have probably never had more adherence regionally.

On July 12, in Washington, a reporter from the Argentine daily Clarín—openly opposition and with blatantly destabilizing positions toward the government of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner—tried to draw Roberta Jacobson, assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, into this perspective. After the journalist asked two questions on the same issue, Jacobson said categorically, according to a journalist from the daily Tiempo Argentino who attended the same press conference with international media, "Now, I think you would probably agree that in Argentina we certainly could not say that there is not an opposing view in the press to that of the government. There is certainly a healthy, open, exchange in the press."
Political analysts agree that, in South America, which has the highest income and wealth concentration levels in the world and democratic presidentialist regimes, those elected tend to adopt popular programs that take aim at income distribution and occasionally at property distribution. Presidential candidates, they say, are elected by the majority of the population, which is poor. However, traditional hegemonic forces are represented in the legislatures.

Pinheiro examines the case of Brazil, where in a Congress made up of 513 deputies and 81 senators, more than 10% "represent the interests of large landowners, when rural workers have barely a half dozen legislators concerned about them."

**Convergence of interests sets stage for coups**

The diplomat notes that an alliance has been forged between traditional agrarian sectors—producers of agricultural commodities and food—and agroindustry in every county of the region. And he adds an essential piece of information, evident in the case of Paraguay. "I think that the situation became more complex with the flight of international capital toward the countryside, expressed in rising land values, which the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) says has increased sevenfold in countries like Uruguay and Brazil," said Pinheiro. "Now foreign capital has very concrete reasons to join the legislative blocs of large landowners and 'train for the coup'; their money is at stake."

The FAO says that the Southern Cone is experiencing land grabbing, the process of buying lands for food production in which foreign governments participate *(NotiSur, Jan. 20, 2012).*

Pinheiro Guimarães, Tokatlian, Moniz Bandeira, and González Guyer also agree when they emphasize that the convergence of interests (of agrarian producers and agroindustry) is a catalyst of neogolpismo.

An analysis of the coup that ousted Lugo in Paraguay in the August 2012 edition of the Angola magazine África 21 quoted experts and said, "It cannot be denied that the multinationals that produce the transgenic seeds that have converted the country into the fourth-largest soy exporter are on the same team as export agroindustry. Thus, the first to call for Lugo's ouster were the associations of rural producers and the soy growers. After the coup, the multinational Monsanto also obtained the right to experiment with a new genetically modified cotton seed, which has not been field tested to verify, or even surmise, what the results of its being planted in Paraguayan soil will be."

**US still backing continental integration**

On July 23, Pinheiro Guimarães, who designed foreign-policy strategy during the first term of former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2002-2010) and until last June was secretary-general of the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR), gave a presentation to the Conférencia Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil (CNBB). He said, "While the US was not behind the coup in Paraguay, there is no doubt that it coincides with US foreign policy and that, at the same time, it erodes the power and unity of MERCOSUR and [further weakens] the progressive governments of Uruguay, Brazil, and Argentina," which, together with Paraguay, created the customs union. "We must keep in mind that the US project for South America is not to take place through MERCOSUR but rather through signing many mini bilateral FTAs"—the unsuccessful Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA) project *(NotiSur, June 13, 2003).*
Pinheiro Guimarães says that "to understand this new reality in which neogolpismo is consolidated, it is necessary to understand US policy toward the region and toward the world." In his perspective, "in South America, the central strategic objective of the US...is to incorporate all the countries of the region into its economy."

"One of the first manifestations of that," Pinheiro said, "came at the end of the 19th century, at the First International American Conference in Washington, DC, in 1889, when the US proposed the negotiation of a free-trade agreement from the north to the south of the Americas and the adoption, by all the countries of the region, of a common currency: the US dollar."

"It was a perfect project: on one side, the greatest industrial power in the world; on the other, a group of agricultural and mineral-producing countries, very impoverished and with a high concentration of income," said the Brazilian diplomat.

The FTAA project, to which Tokatlian also refers, ended definitively in 2005 at the Summit of the Americas in Mar de Plata, Argentina (NotiSur, Dec. 2, 2005). The Argentine academic fully agrees with the Brazilian diplomat and describes the overthrow of Lugo as one of the "benevolent coups," in which its authors "were compelled to save democracy."

Tokatlian says that, since 2000, 24 coups have occurred in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean, some successful and others thwarted. Six have taken place in Latin America and the Caribbean: the "legal" removal (NotiSur, Jan. 28, 2000) of Jamil Mahuad (Ecuador, 2000); the fleeting "institutional" overthrow (NotiSur, April 19, 2002) of President Hugo Chávez (Venezuela, 2002); the "forced departure" (NotiCen, March 4, 2004) of Jean-Bertrand Aristide (Haiti, 2004); the "constitutional" replacement (NotiCen, July 2, 2009) of Manuel Zelaya (Honduras, 2009), and the police "putsch" (NotiSur, Oct. 15, 2010) against Rafael Correa (Ecuador, 2010). Not included is the attempt by the Bolivian right in 2008 to promote a revocatory referendum (NotiSur, Aug. 15, 2008) on the mandate of President Evo Morales, which was overwhelmingly rejected by voters (67.43%).

Latin America is permanently at risk, Tokatlian says, adding, "These six new-style coups respond to specific national situations, but they have points in common. The coup leaders use identical false claims to justify their anti-democratic actions: a worrisome power vacuum, presidents with authoritarian tendencies, unbridled presidential ambition, an attempt to stay in office, violation of freedoms of speech and the press. Tokatlian concludes by saying that the region needs to be alert because neogolpismo is being consolidated.

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