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Leftist Forces Three-For-Three In 2014’s Southern Cone Elections

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A string of elections in South America’s Southern Cone, where voters in Bolivia, Brazil, and Uruguay again opted for progressive governments, capped off a year in which Latin America as a whole demonstrated its unwillingness, at least for the time being, to cede ground to the same neoliberal ideas that failed at the end of the last century and mortgaged the future of several of the region’s countries.

Opposition groups, in contrast, came up short despite employing a strategy of permanent confrontation. Some analysts in the region, nevertheless, expect the political right, as it did this year, to continue taking extreme actions, some institutional (advancing new multinational organizations that challenge the process of economic and political integration) and others meant to simply destabilize (promoting violence, as in Venezuela, and sabotaging the auspicious peace talks between the government and guerrillas in Colombia).

"In addition to moving ahead with processes that have allowed for better income distribution, increased employment, and reduced poverty, the region needs to be ready to challenge sectors bent on reinstating neoliberal policies at whatever cost," analyst Guzmán Castro wrote Nov. 14 in the Uruguayan daily La República.

One day later, Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa said in Quito, "We need to pay attention, because, despite the extraordinary changes in recent years, we haven’t yet reached the point where the power of the people enjoys irreversible prevalence over the power of the elites."

Outside the region, developments in Europe and above all in the US continue to have a profound impact and heighten the state of alert. Everything that occurs, is planned, or decided in Washington has an immediate effect on the nations of Latin America, which the superpower has defined since the mid-19th century as its "backyard." US Secretary of State John Kerry ratified the concept in April 2013 during an appearance before his government’s House Committee on Foreign Affairs (NotiSur, June 14, 2013).

In November, one month after progressive forces consolidated their hold on power in the South, the elites—for whom the "the backyard" is merely a source for raw materials—were once again elected in the North. For Latin America, it matters little which of the two US political parties, the Democrats or the Republicans, holds power. As far as the countries here are concerned, both parties have, throughout history, represented the same interests and related to the region in similar ways. Still, the severe blow suffered by US President Barack Obama in last month’s congressional elections revived the old and repeatedly debunked belief that the Democrats are more respectful of national sovereignty and democracy in the nations of its "backyard."

Reaping the rewards of growth, improved equality

The progressive movement that holds sway in the Southern Cone countries had its first and most resounding validation in Bolivia on Oct. 12. Far from experiencing the natural erosion of support
that normally comes with a long stay in power, President Evo Morales, who has led the country since 2006, was easily elected to a third term (NotiSur, Oct. 24, 2014). The new term runs until 2020.

The successful re-election bid was fueled by a series of economic accomplishments that, according to Morales, are the result of his efforts to renationalize Bolivia’s energy resources and distribute income more equally. Various UN system agencies backed the president’s claims and noted, for example, that under Morales’ leadership the incidence of malnutrition has been cut by half while incomes for the poorest 40% of the population rose three times the national average.

Two weeks after the Bolivian election, a runoff in Brazil ratified the leadership of the leftist Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) and gave President Dilma Rousseff a second four-year term (NotiSur, Nov. 7, 2014). The result marked the fourth consecutive time the opposition Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB)—neoliberal despite its name—has lost to the PT, founded by the popular ex-President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2011). This election differed, however, in that the governing party faced not only the PSDB but also an alliance that included the Partido Socialista Brasileiro (PSB), the major media corporations, and the main polling firms.

Prior to the first round of the Brazilian elections, held Oct. 5, the PT’s opponents created the image of an "overwhelming candidate," Marina Silva. Until a week before the contest, polls continued to hail Silva as the likely victor. But on election day, the proverbial moment of truth, the "overwhelming candidate" finished third, failing even to qualify for the runoff (NotiSur, Oct. 17, 2014). The result discredited the pollsters and confirmed claims by Lula, who had accused the firms of "operating on behalf of the establishment and inventing a candidate who serves their interests."

The PT pulled off the victory despite being rocked in recent years by serious corruption scandals. The governing party was able to overcome the damage to its reputation thanks to its various social and economic achievements: the consolidation of Brazil as one of the world’s six leading economies, the reduction of poverty to minimal levels, and ongoing job creation, which has pushed unemployment down to an enviable rate of slightly more than 4%.

The third victor in the left’s Southern Cone sweep was Tabaré Vázquez of Uruguay’s governing Frente Amplio (FA). Vázquez won a Nov. 30 runoff that he was obliged to compete in despite finishing 17 percentage points ahead of the runner-up in the first round of the election, held Oct. 26 (NotiSur, Nov. 14, 2014). Just as they did in Brazil, polling firms in Uruguay "invented" a candidate who was predicted to win but instead suffered a crushing defeat. Like in Bolivia and Brazil, the results—which nearly destroyed the traditional Blanco and Colorado parties, formed in 1836 during a post-independence civil war—were in large part the result of the progressive government’s economic and social achievements.

**Difficult days in Venezuela and Colombia**

On the other end of South America, in Venezuela and Colombia, political developments made 2014 a particularly complicated year. Venezuela’s past achievements were challenged by a wave of violence that destabilized the government and took the lives of 43 people (NotiSur, April 4, 2014). Rampant inflation and corruption scandals, like in Brazil, also took their toll on Venezuela’s leadership.

President Nicolás Maduro’s principal opponents, in the meantime, are struggling to survive a debilitating battle of personal ambitions that threatens to tear apart the Mesa de Unidad
Democrática (MUD), the political structure they created to challenge the original leader of the Revolución Bolivariana, former President Hugo Chávez (1999-2013), prior to his death from cancer in 2013 (NotiSur, April 5, 2013).

In the coming year, Venezuela will hold legislative elections that will confirm whether the government has run its course, as analysts suggest, and whether the fragmented opposition and its precarious coalition, which includes more than 20 small factions, is able to present itself as a viable democratic option.

Of all the countries in South America, the worst and most persistent attacks by anti-democratic forces take place in Colombia. In this, the second year of laborious talks through which the government and guerrillas are hoping to end an internal war that has dragged on for more than a half century, killed hundreds of thousands of people, and displaced millions more, the far right did all it could to prevent the long-sought peace from becoming a reality. Their efforts proved once again that, for many, war is the best business (NotiSur, April 26, 2013).

On at least two occasions, figures who support ex-President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010) and are allied to minority but powerful sectors within the armed forces used espionage to undermine the peace talks and challenge the country’s democracy (NotiSur, June 6, 2014). Those failed efforts set the stage for an even more shocking episode in the destabilization campaign: on Nov. 16, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) guerrilla army detained the Colombian military’s leading counterinsurgency expert, Gen. Rubén Darío Álzate.

Dressed as a civilian, unguarded, and violating all the security protocols he himself had written, the five-star general and graduate of the US Army Command and General Staff College in the US state of Kansas practically handed himself over to the guerrillas by showing up, with just a boat pilot and a lawyer, in an area controlled by the FARC for more than a decade.

Álzate has since been freed. So far, however, neither he, nor the Army, nor the governent of President Juan Manuel Santos has offered the Colombian people any explanation as to why—exactly one day after Santos announced plans to sign the peace deal by mid 2015—the counterinsurgency "star" would be traveling along a river in the jungle and happen to end up precisely in a guerrilla encampment.

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