Campaigns Against Progressive Governments Peak

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South American democracies that in the last decade have been dismantling complex infrastructure imposed by neoliberal policies applied during the 1990s now face strong destabilizing campaigns from parties on the right allied with mainstream domestic media and accompanied by the powerful international press (NotiSur, July 29, 1993, and Dec. 2, 2005).

Just as the wave of seriously detrimental rumors about the presidents of Chile, Argentina, Brazil and Peru appear to reach their peak, The WikiLeaks Files: The World According to US Empire, a book in which thousands of cables sent from US diplomatic missions in the region are analyzed, hit local bookstores. Two of the authors on the chapters on Latin America—Alexander Main and Dan Beeton, one an analyst and the other the communications director of the Washington, DC-based Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR)—try to expose efforts by the administrations of Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama to contain and reverse Latin American progressivism (NotiSur, May 6, 2011). They write that, in the case of Brazil, this was expressed by an effort to bring down the constitutional government of President Dilma Rousseff.

Malicious rumors effective

The rumors, which as social psychology manuals explain are such because they are believable though unfounded, have long lifespans. In some instances, such as in Argentina, they go back to 2006. In others, such as in Chile and Peru, they are more recent. Last September marked the height of the campaign. Several regional political players see that perhaps behind debilitating accusations against Presidents Rousseff, Michelle Bachelet (Chile), and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (Argentina) hides "the worst machismo," as Chile’s Secretary General of Government Marcelo Díaz pointed out on Aug. 27.

Another factor is shared by the countries affected by the destabilization wave. As a columnist on the Brazilian Web site Carta Maior wrote on Oct. 8, though the rumors are often quickly contradicted by reality, the governments nevertheless have no choice but to adopt defensive positions and must continually take time to refute them. On Sept. 16, Argentina’s Chief of Staff Aníbal Fernández said, "They have to stop governing to respond to the daily lie."

Sen. Isabel Allende protests lies and macho attitudes in Chile

This Sept. 16 was a particularly difficult day for the region’s young democracies. In Santiago, Chile, Interior Minister Jorge Burgos took time out to refute rumors circulating for the previous two weeks but which on that particular day exploded in tales of Bachelet’s supposed resignation. "This type of campaign from the right, above all a media campaign, is anti-democratic," Burgos said in reply to Deputy José Antonio Kast, the son of Nazi official Michael Kast Schindler and president of the ultraright Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI), the party that provided political support to the bloody dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990). Kast, whose two older brothers were agents of the secret police during the dictatorship, had written on his Facebook page, "With 20% approval and dropping, rumors that Bachelet is resigning increase day by day."
Sen. Isabel Allende, daughter of democratically elected President Salvador Allende (1970-1973) who was overthrown by the dictatorship on Sept. 11, 1973, pointing at the press, called for "an end to the dismissiveness, machismo, and intolerable lies that have installed themselves in the country. … We have always respected press freedom and independent media, but there are ethical and respectful limits that should not be crossed."

In addition to Kast, Sen. Allende was also referring to the Web site El Mostrador, the oldest and most prestigious Web site in Chile with the largest number of followers. On Aug. 27 it had used a journalist who had allowed her byline to go on, in Allende's words, "the most deplorable, vile, and indecent article of the series."

That day, without citing any source, the Web site published an article headed "General Staff of the ruling party or the strategy to counter the power vacuum," which said that "all members of Congress, political leaders, and government advisors are aware that Bachelet drinks more alcohol than she should and is under the influence of prescription medicine," which could cause her to lose self-control.

**Peru’s president under fire**

Also on Sept. 16, and at the end of a 10-day campaign focusing on criticism of President Ollanta Humala for accusations of presumed corruption that hung over his wife, Peruvian Minister of Defense Jakke Valakivi had to refute rumors of an impending coup. Humala asked the media to "act responsibility."

The situation stemmed from a publication in the newspaper Perú 21, which reported "three conflicting military plans all directed at ending this constitutional order." Denials would not have been necessary because "in time, it was shown that this and other similar publications were not warning of a possible coup but rather promoting one," Chief of Staff Pedro Cateriano told the German news agency Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA).

**Campaign in Argentina predates current president**

In Argentina, the destabilization campaign created by the political right, business corporations, and mainstream media dates back to 2006 before President Fernández de Kirchner was elected. It became permanent in April 2008, just five months after she was elected by more than 45% of the vote. Just as in Brazil, the campaign had the open support of vast sectors of the judiciary.

Last Sept. 16—always Sept. 16—for example, a Cámara de lo Contencioso Administrativo (administrative appeals court) assumed power it does not have and annulled elections in which a candidate from the ruling party had won the governorship of in the northern province of Tucumán by 12 percentage points (NotiSur, Oct. 2, 2015). This was the first time since the return of democracy (in 1983) that an attempt was made to ignore the popular will. The Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) annulled the decision.

Between 2008 and Sept. 16, 2015, the president, her family, and other officials were accused of numerous alleged acts of corruption. The magazine Noticias went as far as to call her "a sick person suffering from bipolar disorder who is under psychiatric treatment." Another day, it said that the sickness could cause her to have psychotic episodes "in which she might order a military attack on a neighboring country, impose a state of siege, and on occasion have suicidal ideas." In June
2012, a Noticias reporter wrote that "she frequently exhibits dangerous emotional instability." The owner and publisher of the magazine, Jorge Fontevecchia, wrote that she exhibits "gestures that are completely abnormal." The magazine reached the height of its accusations on Sept. 8, 2012, when it published a cover with a very realistic drawing of the president apparently masturbating (NotiSur, Nov. 2, 2012). The cutline read, "Each day she comes across as more laid-back, sensual, and even indecent."

That same day, Eduardo van der Kooy, the main columnist at the newspaper Clarín, wrote, "The president can’t be understood from a political perspective; psychiatry is a better way to get your bearings."

**IAPA issues report on press freedom**

The assembly of the Inter American Press Association (IAPA), which also goes by its Spanish acronym SIP, issued its annual report on press freedom at its Oct. 5 meeting in Charleston, South Carolina. Surprisingly, it said that, just as in Brazil, Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela, Nicaragua and Bolivia, in Argentina the press "has undergone its most adverse time since the restoration of democracy." Other problems include "enactment of specific laws to break up critical media and favor pro-government voices." The statement was reproduced in more than 1,300 member newspapers and magazines, including 36 in Argentina.

Almost as the end of this news surge, last Oct. 10, the Court of Appeals in Rome, Italy, condemned the daily Corriere della Sera for criminal "defamation with actual malice" for the 2008 publication of an article that reported the Argentine president had gone on a frivolous shopping spree in the middle of a conference on world hunger and spent US$159,000 on jewelry created by the designer Gianni Bulgari and US$32,000 on Pratesi bedding. The newspaper La Nación, Argentina’s biggest IAPA member, did not publish the court ruling, although at the time it fully reproduced the Italian news report and published an editorial on the subject.

In Brazil, the government of President Dilma Rousseff has been beleaguered since March 2013 when it was proven that some of its members had engaged in corruption. On Sept. 29, six days before the IAPA conference, all Brazilian media and international news agencies based in the country picked up the content of a bulletin broadcast simultaneously on radio and television by the opposition Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB), which announced that a coup was being planned. It said "Rousseff should step aside" and "the PSDB is now ready to take control of the government and it has prepared leaders ready to do so."

Writer Eric Nepomuceno commented that in his seventy years it was the first time that he ever saw a coup announced on radio and television.

Finally, on Oct. 8, people read Main and Beeton’s analysis of the role of the US in the region and its relations with the groups on the right and coup promoters. The authors maintain that, in the past 15 years, the US tried to destroy the governments of Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, Ecuador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Paraguay (where it succeeded in 2012). They maintain that what Bush and Obama wanted—and what the South American right now seeks—is to reverse the results of elections held between 1997 and 2008 in which progressive presidents who oppose neoliberal policies were elected.