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Right Wing Gains Ground in South America

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In a span of just three months, conservative forces long bent on discrediting the region’s leftist governments capitalized on victories in Argentina, Venezuela, and Bolivia to put the brakes on a continent-wide experiment in progressive politics that had taken hold, for the first time in two centuries of independence, in half of South America’s 12 nations.

The first of the triumphs came in Argentina’s presidential contest, in November (NotiSur, Dec. 4, 2015). A month later, Venezuela’s conservative opposition turned the tables in legislative elections (NotiSur, Jan. 8, 2016). And in February, the right won a plebiscite in Bolivia that could have allowed left-wing leader Evo Morales to stay in power beyond 2019 (NotiSur, March 11, 2016). In Uruguay and Ecuador, in the meantime, destabilization efforts are making headway, while in Brazil, as former Uruguayan leader José Mujica (2010-2015) recently said, conservative forces that want to overthrow President Dilma Rousseff “are blinded by rage, [which means] people should be wary, because when the right goes into a frenzy, it becomes fascist.”

The events come four years after conservatives used a parliamentary coup to topple another progressive leader, Fernando Lugo (2008-2012), the democratically elected president of Paraguay (NotiSur, July 13, 2012). “We’re looking here at a coordinated effort,” Mujica added. “It’s no coincidence that they’re hitting all of us at once, and in the same way.” In all of the countries affected, rightist forces, alarmed by the introduction of social policies and of regional integration mechanisms that challenge the historic hegemony of the United States, falsely accuse the governments of imposing revolutions.

Conspiring forces
In recent years, high prices for the region’s leading commodities exports provided the resources the progressive governments needed to implement policies that stress job creation and encourage greater consumption among traditionally marginalized sectors of the population. More recently, however, international commodity prices have plummeted. “The new international reality affected government policies and as a result, delivered a blow to the non-ideologized, non-politicized support base that benefited from those programs,” political scientist Juan Manuel Karg wrote in the Argentine daily Página 12.

But the loss of export revenue is only part of the problem. The embattled leftist governments face an even greater challenge, according to Karg and other analysts, from media monopolies that, acting in the absence of political leadership, have become mouthpieces for conservative ideology. “In every one of these countries, in each of the crises affecting the governments, private media outlets have acted as the leading protagonists, challenging the progressive governments in a brutal and domineering way,” Brazilian sociologist Emir Sader wrote Feb. 22 in an article for the news agency Agencia Latinoamericana de Información (ALAI).

At the same time, the governments have helped the right-wing media’s antidemocratic cause by providing easy fodder in the form of corruption cases. Evidence of corruption has surfaced in all six
countries, costing the left its reputation for absolute fiscal transparency and its claim to the ethical high ground in politics.

In 2005, when Uruguay inaugurated its first progressive government, even the political opposition praised the new leadership for its probity. “This Frente Amplio (FA) administration isn’t doing anything, but at least it’s a decent government. Nobody’s putting their hands in the cookie jar,” the conservative daily El País noted in its analysis of President Tabaré Vázquez’s first 100 days in office. Vázquez, who governed from 2005 to 2010, returned to power last year. No one is making such claims these days, given the serious corruption cases that surfaced in Uruguay in 2008, for example, regarding state casinos, and in 2014, in connection with the defunct state airline PLUNA.

The media aren’t alone in their crusade against South America’s progressive governments. Besides the political and social sectors they have managed to mobilize through their “antidemocratic manufacturing of the news,” as the Argentine journalist Stella Calloni described it in the Mexican daily La Jornada, conservative media outlets in Argentina and Brazil, for example, also have help from the judicial powers, which have contributed to the destabilization with a regular dose of bombshell rulings and announcements.

A case in point is the series of events that began in Brazil on March 4, when Sergio Moro, the judge handling a corruption case involving the state oil company Petrobras, informed the opposition paper Folha de S.Paulo of a procedure he had ordered against former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2010). Two of the daily’s journalists, Bruno Fávero and Renan Marra, followed with a story titled “Tension in the Early Morning,” in which they described arriving at the door of Lula’s private residence 30 minutes before the police did. Despite the paper’s indirect admission of complicity with Judge Moro, Brazil’s television networks and other major dailies ignored the matter.

Ruining reputations

The destabilization campaign is focused not only on bringing down the existing constitutional and democratic left-wing governments, but also on destroying the image of emerging figures in the various progressive parties. Such is the case of the vice presidents in Bolivia and Uruguay, Álvaro García Linera and Raúl Sendic, who have both been accused in the media (based on anonymous sources) of doctoring their resumes with phony university degrees.

Sendic—whose father (also named Raúl Sendic) was a famed anti-dictatorship guerrilla leader—is one of the FA’s top options for the 2019 presidential election. The other is Montevideo mayor Daniel Martínez. Both are relatively young (in their mid and late 50s respectively), which makes them especially attractive to a party desperately in need of a generational shift. The FA’s other notable figures continue to be well respected but are all around 80 years old. In Argentina, media outlets are taking aim at Axel Kicillof, the previous government’s young economy minister, whom they accuse of drawing a monthly salary of US$40,000 from the oil company YPF. “It must get boring, repeating the same old lies, attacks that are no more than reheated leftovers,” García Linera quipped.

On March 17, Uruguay’s Mujica was asked about the difficulties facing his friend Lula, about the large anti-government demonstrations taking place in Brazil, and about the current Uruguayan government’s low numbers in the polls. “The right is thinking about how it can rid itself of the specter of Lula and the FA, and is trying to capitalize on the demonstrations,” the former president said. “But to me, what’s most interesting aren’t the people who went out to protest, but the ones who stayed in their houses. And there are a lot more of those people.”
“We need to look at what’s happening with the people who didn’t take to the streets, because they’re the majority,” Mujica added. “And the truth is that the people who are suffering most from the crisis aren’t the ones shouting out against Dilma and Lula, but rather the poor people, who are also the ones losing out in Uruguay. The right has lost all sense of rationality. It refuses to see that even if it eats a bit less, it will still be eating a lot. It doesn’t like Lula or the FA because it won’t accept the need to share, even if it’s just a little bit.”

‘Dark side of politics’

Shortly afterward, Colombian hacker Andrés Fernando Sepúlveda—speaking from a Bogotá prison where he is serving a 10-year sentence—confirmed Mujica’s concerns regarding a coordinated campaign against the region’s progressive governments. Sepúlveda revealed that he not only spied in his own country, and against Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos, but also interfered in political processes in various other Latin American democracies.

Sepúlveda shared the information with journalists Jordan Robertson, Michael Riley and Andrew Willis of the US magazine Bloomberg Businessweek, which ran a cover story in its April 4-10 edition under the headline “Confessions of a Political Hacker.” The computer expert was jailed for spying on both sides in the ongoing peace talks between the Colombian government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) guerrillas. The parties have been meeting in Cuba since November 2012 and are close to signing a historic peace accord (NotiSur, Jan. 15, 2016).

Sepúlveda told Bloomberg Businessweek that he also worked on smear campaigns against leaders in Colombia, as well as in Nicaragua, Panama, Honduras, El Salvador, Mexico, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Venezuela. He specifically recalled working on a campaign in favor of Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto. Sepúlveda described the assignment, for which he had a budget of US$600,000, as the most complicated of his career. He said he headed a team of six hackers who stole campaign strategies, manipulated social media platforms to make false waves of enthusiasm and derision, and installed spyware (espionage software) in opposition campaign offices. “My job was to do actions of dirty war and psychological operations, black propaganda, rumors—the whole dark side of politics that nobody knows exists but everyone can see,” Sepúlveda said.

Given the smear tactics so prevalent right now in Latin America politics, “it may never be possible to corroborate what this hacker said,” the Colombian magazine Semana wrote in response to the Sepúlveda revelations. “What is clear is that his statements will serve as a missile in the region’s already volatile politics and has the potential of generating unexpected consequences.”

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