The Swing to the Left in Latin America

by Barry Cannon

Latin America is experiencing a resurgence of the left in recent years – the so-called 'pink tide'. Starting in Venezuela, with the election of Hugo Chávez as president in 1998, currently there are left-wing governments in Brazil, (Lula), Argentina (Nestor Kirchner, and now wife Cristina), Bolivia (Evo Morales), Tabaré Vazquez (Uruguay), Michelle Bachelet (Chile), Rafael Correa (Ecuador), Daniel Ortega (Nicaragua), and including the recent election of Fernando Lugo in Paraguay. But why has there been a resurgence of interest in the Left in Latin America? What are the characteristics of these governments? And what future lies in store for them?

The resurgence of the left is due to a number of factors. Firstly, the end of the Cold War alleviated US fear of communism, leaving space for left-wing parties to emerge. Secondly, these parties abandoned guerrilla strategies to embrace electoral politics. Thirdly two decades of neo-liberal pro-market policies failed to deliver on growth, inequality and poverty. From 1980-2006, per capita GDP grew only about 15 percent, as compared to 82 percent from 1960-1980. Inequality remains astonishingly high – in Argentina for example the richest 10% earn 40.9 times more than the poorest 10%, whereas in Sweden the ratio is 6:1. Poverty also remains high. In 2002, poverty was at 44% of the population of the region as opposed to 40% in 1980. Only recently have these figures begun to improve due to increased public spending.

With democracy establishing itself in the region, the emergence of electoral left-wing parties, and related social movements encouraging participation, many of these poor Latin Americans are now turning out to vote. Corruption, weak justice systems, ineffective governance, elite power concentration, and the aforementioned poverty and inequality drove people away from right-wing parties to left alternatives. The neglect by Washington of the region as it turned its attention to the Middle East, and the one-dimensional nature of its Latin American policy, based solely on highly unequal free trade agreements, further strengthened the left's appeal.

There are two schools of thought as to the nature of these left-wing governments. One school, central to current US policy in the region, is led by Jorge Castañeda, ex-leftist and former foreign minister of Mexico. Castañeda claims that there are two lefts: the 'Good' Left which is institutionalised, social democratic, and market oriented, and the 'Bad' Left, populist, power hungry, and high spending.[1] The 'Good Left' are the heirs of communist, socialist and Castroist parties, now reconstructed, institutionalised and armed with social-democratic policies. The 'Bad' Left on the other hand are the heirs of the old national-populist left, but unreconstructed – the most 'notorious' example is of course Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, with Morales in Bolivia, Correa in Ecuador and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua other possible candidates. Ramirez Gallegos claims that there are 'much more than two lefts,'[2] with specific forms of the left in each country depending on the institutional effects of neoliberalism, the strength of social movements and the historical paths of progressive parties within them. Hence, in Bolivia, the left of Morales emerged as a result of mass popular struggles, led by the indigenous peoples of Bolivia. There is a distinct equilibrium therefore between these social movements and the MAS leadership. On the other hand, the left-leaning government of Kirchner, provided a progressive discourse with nationalist and anti-neoliberal tints, and a top-down reform programme, including the renationalisation of important privatised services. This has served to isolate, demobilise and weaken the many left-wing social movements that emerged in the wake of the economic collapse in 2001. And so on for the other left-wing governments – each is the product of its own internal national dynamics and trajectories.

Despite these differences they all are united by the search for equality through a return to State-led development, increased sovereignty, regionalism, economic experimentation, and participative democracy. In sum there is a new emphasis on the social allied to some form of state intervention, and to political participation within a regionalist context.[3]

What is the future for the new Left in Latin America? On the positive side, the increased role of India and China in the global economy and the strengthening of South/South links both help the Left to remain in power. Current high commodities prices are providing high growth rates and so allowing the implementation of social policies for the reduction of poverty. However Cleary sees a number of threats, such as corruption (as in Brazil), security (as in Colombia), and policy radicalism which may encourage internal and/or external disruption (as in the coup against Chávez in Venezuela in 2002).[4] A lack of radicalism may jeopardise popular support, and a failure to consolidate regionalism may also have negative consequences. The increased engagement by the poor in electoral politics means that the Left should continue and grow in influence but it must deliver positive change for the poor in order to do so, as Chavez's lost referendum in 2007 indicates.

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[1] Castañeda, Jorge G., (2006) 'Latin America's Left Turn', in *Foreign Affairs* Vol.85, No.3, pp.28-43.

[2] Franklin Ramirez Gallegos, 2006. 'Mucho más que dos izquierdas', in Spanish in Nueva Sociedad No. 205 'America Latina en los tiempos de Chávez' www.nuso.org

[3] For other opinions see: Grandin, Greg (2006) 'Latin America's New Consensus'. Available from: www.thenation.com.; Solowicz, Beatriz, 2004. 'The Latin American Left: Between Governability and Change'. Available from: www.tni.org.; Weisbrot, Mark (2006) 'Latin America: The End of an Era'. Available from: www.cepr.net.

[4] Cleary, Matthew, R. (2006) 'Explaining the Left's Resurgence'. In *Journal of Democracy* Vol 17, No. 4. (Entire issue devoted to Latin America's left turn).