

Latin America: Looking Left?

by Vinay Jawahar

Not since the late 1970s and the early '80s, when Latin America was at the forefront of the "Third Wave" of democratization, has the region witnessed such intense political activity and change. In 2006, citizens of at least ten countries go to the polls to elect their presidents. Together with the three presidential elections at the end of 2005, the large number of elections is noteworthy in itself, almost as if the continent were testifying en masse to the success of its democratization some 30 years ago.

In the context of the widely accepted--yet overly simplistic--wisdom that Latin America is "moving to the left," its Year of Elections has acquired even greater significance. It is clear that the region is at a watershed. The upcoming elections could have far-reaching implications that will determine not so much the ideological coloration of the continent, but, and more importantly, the extent of its progress on critical social, economic, and political issues in the years to come.

On December 18, 2005, Bolivians overwhelmingly voted for Evo Morales, an indigenous former llama herder who remains the poster child of change in Latin America. An Aymara Indian from the Chapare region--one of two main coca-cultivation zones in Bolivia--he rose to prominence as the head of the country's coca-growers union before being elected to Congress. In 2002, Morales was the presidential candidate from the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS), a conglomeration of social movements and labor unions, and lost by the smallest of margins. His victory this time around makes Morales Bolivia's first indigenous president in the country's 180-year history. Clearly, there is much to celebrate about his decisive victory.

It would be a mistake, however, to view Morales as little more than a rags-to-riches vindication of democracy and to see the election results simply as long-denied justice for Bolivia's majority indigenous population. As much as his election is undeniable evidence of the deepening of Bolivian democracy in recent decades, it is also reflects rage and frustration with the status quo, and the failure of an entrenched and unresponsive political system that for many Bolivians seemed divorced from their reality. Campaigning on a platform that promised greater state control over Bolivia's important hydrocarbons sector and decriminalization of coca for traditional uses, Morales won an astounding 54 percent of the vote, more than any other presidential candidate since Bolivia's return to democracy in 1982 and far more than anyone, including perhaps Morales himself, had anticipated. His campaign skillfully tapped into the resentment of those Bolivians who felt that they had been deprived of their rightful share of the wealth from successive commodity booms--silver, tin, and now, natural gas--and of the ability to influence decision-making through the political process.

Such discontent is not unique to Bolivia. The much commented-upon turn to the left is, in reality, the yearning for alternatives to address the deep-seated social problems that characterize the region. In a region that was, in many ways, the most willing reformer, too many feel like economic liberalization has had little effect on their quality of life. Instead, there is a perception (not wholly unfounded) among many Latin Americans that they, and their countries, are now at the mercy of the amorphous forces of globalization over which they have no control. Economic reform has led to improvements, no doubt, but these seem to be the exclusive domain of a privileged few

in what is still the world's most unequal region. The mismanagement of national wealth by corrupt governments in the face of poverty and pervasive inequality has contributed to a large-scale rejection of the "Washington Consensus," as inflation-busting, market-friendly reforms are referred to in Latin America.

At the same time, democratic reforms have led to the opening of political space and to greater participation by hitherto marginalized groups. This has brought on a sharp increase in the demands placed on governments across the region, and most of them have been unable to respond adequately. Latin America is deeply unsettled, confronting a potent combination of social and political ferment. In South America, the Andean region-Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia-stands out as particularly troubled. Its citizens are clearly unhappy with what they see as feckless and irresponsible governments, and trust in political institutions is perilously low, often barely in double digits.

Two months before the April elections in Peru, national attention has focused on the man who, five years ago, led a doomed military uprising against Alberto Fujimori. Ollanta Humala is a former military officer who has catapulted from a negligible three percent in September 2005 to the head of the race, ahead of conservative former congresswoman Lourdes Flores, from the Popular Christian Party (PPC). As in Bolivia, there is an overwhelming sense of discontent and exclusion among a number of Peruvians, despite that, from a purely macroeconomic perspective, the country has done well. Under current president Alejandro Toledo-another rags-to-riches story, given that he once shined shoes for a living-the economy has grown at a fairly respectable pace, and the government has even made some progress in reducing extreme poverty. Still, plagued as his administration has been by chronic corruption and constant cabinet changes, Toledo has failed to earn the confidence of the majority of Peruvians who are predictably tired of politicians and politics. Against such a backdrop, a vote for Humala is equal parts protest and hope, and he has successfully employed a distinctly populist, nationalist, and anti-politics rhetoric. Although opinion polls give Flores the edge in an eventual second round, the contest is wide open, and Peru's history invites caution. In 1990, Fujimori, another outsider, became president after coming from way behind to defeat the overwhelming favorite (and winner of the first round), novelist Mario Vargas Llosa, in a second round runoff.

The situation in Ecuador is hardly more encouraging. Even by the low standards of the Andean region, the country's political outlook is notoriously uncertain. None of its last three presidents has finished their term, and national politics is totally discredited. The outcome of Ecuador's October 2006 election is probably the most uncertain of all. So uncertain, in fact, that it is hard to even identify the main candidates! Whoever wins, restoring citizens' trust in their government will be essential if the country is to move beyond the crisis in which it is mired. Depending on how the situation in Bolivia develops, Ecuador's well-organized but politically marginal indigenous movement may end up playing an important role in national politics. Ultimately, in Ecuador as in Peru, the issue is not whether the left or the right will win the next election, but-as respected Peruvian political analyst Carlos Basombrío notes-that "the almost total collapse of the political system makes elections unpredictable".

In stark contrast to Peru and Ecuador, the outcome of Colombia's May presidential election is far easier to predict with some degree of certainty. Last year, Colombia's constitutional court approved a constitutional amendment that allowed the hugely popular conservative president, Álvaro Uribe, to run for reelection, and the election is his to lose. Washington's closest ally in Latin America, Uribe has made important progress in dealing with Colombia's armed conflict, even as critics charge that his

administration has been less successful in addressing the country's social issues, including over two million people internally displaced as a result of the violence. In a possible second term, Uribe's main challenge will be to consolidate the gains, move beyond the progress made in his first term, and secure the demobilization of Colombia's 20,000-strong paramilitary armies, with whom his administration began negotiations two years ago.

Given their size and influence, the presidential contests in Brazil and Mexico-Latin America's largest economies-are being closely watched. When Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, a former metalworker (a third rags-to-riches story, in case anyone is keeping track) from Brazil's Workers' Party (PT), was elected president in 2002, he embodied the hope and concern of a leftist alternative in Latin America, with many in the international financial community worried about what his election would mean for Brazil. In power, however, Lula has governed as a committed centrist, allaying fears among investors and the rest of the international community that his election heralded the revival of economic policies that had been responsible for rampant inflation in Brazil. At the same time, his administration has projected a concern for Brazil's urgent social agenda. Despite criticism from some quarters for not doing enough on social issues, Lula's has been considered a fairly successful presidency, and he had looked well positioned to be reelected in October this year. In the past year, however, the PT has suffered serious setbacks. It has been mired in political scandals that have sucked oxygen from the legislative agenda, making urgently-needed reforms all but impossible. Though Lula has not been personally incriminated in these scandals, they have cast doubts on whether he will be reelected, if he even runs. The other leading candidate is São Paulo mayor José Serra, whom latest polls show is the current favorite. But October is a long way off.

Whereas a Serra victory in Brazil would belie the dominant narrative of a continent moving left, the July 2006 Mexican elections could well result in an outcome that does precisely the opposite. For much of last year, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the left-leaning former mayor of Mexico City, led opinion polls by a considerable margin. By the end of the year, however, AMLO, as López Obrador is known, had lost considerable ground to two other candidates: Felipe Calderón from the ruling National Action Party (PAN) and Roberto Madrazo, from the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). The PRI, of course, is the party that had a strangle hold on Mexican politics for over seven decades, in a regime that Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa described as "the perfect dictatorship." A Madrazo victory could, therefore, reverse the minimal progress that was achieved by the July 2000 election of President Vicente Fox.

But AMLO and his populist, leftist proclivities continue to be the big story. It is hard to predict where in the rest of the continent's presumably leftist line-up he would fit, were he to win in July. Mexico's proximity to the United States and the close ties between the two countries (especially through the North American Free Trade Agreement) would probably discourage any sharp departure from existing policies, but that will certainly not stop observers and analysts from insisting, gleefully or otherwise, that an AMLO victory is more irrefutable evidence that, indeed, Latin America is moving left.

Whatever the merits of the argument that the region is turning to the left, it is without a doubt reinforced by the frenetic activity and fiery rhetoric of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. He has more than willingly filled the vacuum created by a lack of effective U.S. engagement in Latin America. Easily the most influential leader in the hemisphere today, Chávez has acquired immense political success by his unrelenting indictment of the old order, of conventional economic and political models, and by dramatically increasing social spending. He has cultivated a close alliance with Fidel

Castro and has sought tirelessly to propagate the idea of a continent moving left, in opposition to the United States and the "Washington Consensus."

Chávez made no secret of his preference in Bolivia's elections, and rejoiced at Morales' victory. More recently, at a press conference with Morales, Chávez applauded Humala for "joining in the battle" against hemispheric free trade, which might well be the Peruvian candidate's only "leftist" inclination. Finally, in Nicaragua, Chávez has supported Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega's presidential bid. Whereas Lula, by his pragmatism and moderation is vulnerable to charges of having reneged on his commitment to leftist ideals, Chávez's blustery anti-Americanism and pro-social-justice rhetoric and actions have made him a hero among the region's dispossessed and discontented. That record-high oil prices (Venezuela is the world's fifth-largest oil producer) have led to windfall profits into which he is willing to tap helps Chávez win over many-even if only for pragmatic reasons-who might otherwise be uncomfortable with his confrontational style.

Since coming to power in 1998, Chávez has relentlessly excoriated the country's "rancid oligarchy" for its corrupt and elitist ways and all but excluded them from government institutions. Following an August 2004 recall referendum that ratified his presidency, he has moved swiftly to consolidate his domestic position and will almost certainly be reelected, for a third term, in elections at the end of 2006. His resounding triumph in the December 2005 legislative elections, in which his coalition won all 167 seats in the National Assembly (due, in part, to an ill-advised opposition boycott) raises the troubling prospect of amendments to the constitution to allow Chávez to stay in power even longer-perhaps indefinitely. According to Chávez, the need to address the country's urgent social agenda and the unresponsiveness of previous governments justify dismantling Venezuela's democratic institutions and overriding the checks and balances that should characterize a modern democracy. But, despite what Chávez seems to believe, there is simply no evidence that compromise is inimical to the crucial tasks of furthering social justice and improving the lot of average Latin Americans.

Chile should know. Since the end of General Augusto Pinochet's regime in 1989, Chile has experienced sustained economic growth. Every subsequent government made addressing the country's social agenda a priority, resulting in a significant reduction in overall and extreme poverty. None of this has been accomplished at the expense of democracy; in fact, there has been notable progress towards dismantling the remaining vestiges of Pinochet's authoritarian rule. In recognition of the accomplishments of the Concertación, the ruling center-left coalition, on January 15 Chileans elected its candidate, Socialist Michelle Bachelet, president. That her economic policies, like her predecessor's, will be decidedly orthodox-neo-liberal, even-will not deter observers from noting that Bachelet's win is yet another victory for the left.

But beyond the question of whether Latin America is moving leftward, and what this means, the inescapable reality is that debates over political orientation will not address the continent's most urgent problems. Voters confronting unemployment, poverty, crime, and dislocation, to name but a few of the most important concerns, want solutions-not slogans, not labels. Finding solutions will require skillful and effective governance, not ideological conformity. Latin American democracy will be incapable of weathering social unrest and conflict unless winners and losers alike accept that, in a democracy, the exercise of power implies compromise.

Rather than celebrate-or lament-the rise of an ill-defined "left" in Latin America, we should view with real concern the disrepute into which politics has fallen, and the continued inability of the political establishment-actors and institutions of all stripes-to

deal with the region's most urgent challenges. Unless the new crop of leaders can reverse this trend, undertake meaningful reforms, and respond to the demands of their restive populations, the consequences for Latin America will be greater poverty, spreading criminality, continued insecurity, and rising instability. The question then would not be the ascendancy of the left or the decline of the right, but the viability of democracy itself.