

CanadaWatch

PRACTICAL AND AUTHORITATIVE ANALYSIS OF KEY NATIONAL ISSUES

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EDITORIAL

The remarkable turning point

THE NEW DYNAMISM

The emergence of Latin America as a bristling, confident regional power is most remarkable. With growth averaging a robust 5.5 percent, this has been the best year since the 1960s. Inflation, once the scourge of the continent, is in single-digit territory. The picture looks bright with economic growth forecast at over 5 percent for the entire region for 2011, compared with 1.8 percent in the United States.

The bigger story behind the numbers is that no Latin American country is in

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hock to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The era of neoliberal policies that were punitive and harmful to millions is now a closed chapter. The loans are all repaid, and this has given the region, as Pablo Trucco and Diana Tussie underline in this special issue, new breathing space to experiment with innovative social initiatives and political programs.

The shift in power dynamics is still an unfolding story. The old order that kept Latin America solidly in Washington's backyard was unipolar—centred on the United States with the European Union a junior partner, and Latin America with neither voice nor influence globally. All this has changed. The present order is multipolar with Asia and Latin America no longer relegated to secondary positions. At the Cancun meetings of the WTO in 2003, the G20 marked its “coming of age,” in the apt words of Brazil's

The remarkable turning point, page 3

THE RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF FUNDAMENTAL POLITICAL CHANGE

Obama, Canada, and civil society South and North

THE OBAMA CHALLENGE: PROMISE AND CONTRADICTION

Many civil society networks in the southern hemisphere, like many others around the world, positively anticipated the impact of a Barack Obama victory on US policy, including foreign and security dimensions, given some hints in his campaign promise for “A New Partnership for the Americas.” It was apparent to North Americans that Obama should respond to his base in the so-called rust belt with some sort of revision to US international trade policy, possibly even a revision of NAFTA. His

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appearance, however brief, at the Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago in 2009 offered a key opportunity to initiate something new in terms of listening to leaders in change processes in the hemisphere, including civil society. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez presented Obama with Eduardo Galeano's *Open Veins of Latin America*.

But Obama quickly swept illusions aside, particularly for those interested in a real change in US trade and investment policies. He announced that he would proceed with the US agenda of bilateral negotiations with several Latin American countries, and he appointed Ron Kirk, a

Obama, Canada, and civil society, page 5

The contents of this issue are listed in the Features box on page 2.

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redefine THE POSSIBLE.

strong and articulate ally of the pro-agreement forces, as the US Trade Representative. His appointment of his erstwhile rival Hillary Clinton to the position of Secretary of State signalled what would emerge as close ties to Clinton administration personnel and policy, and more continuity than change in approach to the hemisphere. Nor have the positions taken by the Obama administration differed markedly from those outlined in Bush's 2008 "Pathways to Prosperity" initiative.

THE CHALLENGES WITHIN CHANGE

Latin America's "pink tide" governments face diverse challenges. Some governments, like those of Bolivia and Ecuador, face tensions between their desire to improve social policy—seeking poverty reduction and greater equity—and their dependence on resource export revenues. While Bolivian President Evo Morales has stepped carefully, Ecuador's Rafael Correa has come into conflict, seeking prior informed consent on projects that would fulfill the promise of Ecuador's new constitution, with indigenous peoples threatened by resource exploitation.

Venezuela, threatened with US-funded "de-stabilization" from within, has to deal with the effect of external economic crises on petroleum prices and revenues, ongoing tensions with neighbour Colombia, and US military bases in the latter.

Central American governments seeking change in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala find themselves dealing with a Honduras in which progressive leadership was decapitated, the social movement frustrated—all abetted by forces in the US administration if not by President Obama himself. The Honduran experience has led many to speculate that the reform government in Paraguay may be next in a counter-pink strategy on the part of the United States and rightist allies. An attempted coup in Ecuador in September 2010 demon-

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strates that these fears are not unfounded.

Brazil's Lula has represented an important counterforce, but the upcoming Brazilian federal elections could alter the balance. The recent election of a progressive coalition in Trinidad and Tobago, while of limited strategic weight, demonstrates the positive potential of a committed multisectoral civil society organizing for change.

Progressive governments are faced with the challenge of US militarization, above and beyond the continuation of the "war" on drugs via Plan Colombia and Plan Merida. The US decision, made prior to Obama's accession but not rescinded by his administration, to reactivate the Fourth Fleet to patrol Caribbean and Latin American waters provides a further vivid demonstration of current US ambition as well as a reminder of past history.

There is the ongoing extension of US military presence on land, the recently confirmed 7 bases in Colombia, as well as 11 more agreed to by Panama. Further, the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA) reports that US defence department documents testify to the preparedness of the United States for "full-spectrum operations" throughout South America. Most recently, the agreement of the Costa Rican government to accept the arrival of up to 46 US warships and 7,000 troops in the neighbourhood, with the excuse of the "war on drugs," has led to increased apprehension about US plans.

CIVIL SOCIETY: NEW FACES, NEW CONCERNS

Given the continuing challenges of poverty, resource exploitation, threats to human rights, regional coherence, and national sovereignty, hemispheric civil society networks have continued their critical response to trade and investment

negotiations, but new players and new emphases have joined the scene. Perhaps the most significant is the strengthened organizational presence and clout of indigenous groups nationally and hemispherically.

Two factors—one positive, one destructive—characterize this development. Indigenous groups have benefited from the Morales victory in Bolivia and the continued moral and political leadership his government has offered. This is particularly salient as environmental issues come to preoccupy progressive forces worldwide. A recent conference in Cochabamba, Bolivia focusing on climate change and the environment—"from the ground up"—provided a new model of governmental/non-governmental collaboration with the participation of more than 35,000 individuals (many of them from indigenous communities).

However, environmental destruction and community displacement in favour of resource extraction has also provoked militant indigenous responses in Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, and Peru with challenges to mining companies (many of them Canadian-based) up and down the hemisphere.

These sorts of confrontations are one factor at work in altering the purview of pre-existing civil society networks and in creating new ones. A continental campaign against the US military bases brings together forces within the United States and far beyond. As demonstrated in Cochabamba, environmental concerns, different philosophies, and critiques regarding the treatment of "mother earth" and the growth for growth's sake agenda have been strongly voiced. Trade- and investment-oriented networks, like those united in the Hemispheric Social Alliance, have enlarged their agendas to include extractive indus-

tries, militarization, investment treaties, agriculture and GMOs (genetically modified organisms), and human rights issues, among others. Given the importance of employment, the labour movement can only go so far in challenging resource exploitation and growth strategies. Indigenous communities may take the challenge much further.

Those networks that attempt to maintain overall unity and coherence among its civil society groups are faced with an ongoing challenge given the diversity of national-level politics and economic situations. Regional political initiatives that focus on South American or Latin American governments leave sympathetic social forces in Canada, Quebec, or the United States to concentrate on their own contexts. Nevertheless, Latin American initiatives like the World Social Forum have been taken up in Toronto, Quebec, the United States, Guatemala, and many other locales, providing “greenhouses” where new formations and alliances may sprout and prosper.

CANADA'S ROLE: MINING IN A BANKER'S SUIT

In Canada, the Stephen Harper government, having been an acolyte of the Bush administration, has continued policies that are coherent with US strategy, while supporting the expansion of Canadian-based companies in resource extraction up and down the hemisphere. These policies include the bilateral trade agreement with Colombia, contributing to the failure to restore Manuel Zelaya to the presidency of Honduras, virtual hostility to the Chavez government in Venezuela, and emphasizing military responses to the challenge of the drug trade in the hemisphere.

What does this approach have to offer those Canadians who seek full rights for indigenous peoples, environmental sustainability, and human rights for all, including the eradication of poverty and gross inequality? Canadian foreign policy in the region often appears to be little more than mining in a banker's suit. The


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possibility that Canada might have something to offer and that there might be something to learn from progressive Latin American governments seeking social policies to reduce inequality and increase social participation and dignity is lost. The potential offered to Canadian First Nations by the continuing innovations of the indigenous-led government in Bolivia remain largely unexplored.

The fact that Canadians, like many of their Latin American neighbours, are challenged by environmental destruction, whether in petroleum and mining or, more broadly, by climate change, and that they urgently require policies to reduce or reverse negative impacts seems not to interest the Canadian political leadership, at least not the two parties that currently dominate Parliament. Canadian civil society has its own challenges; not the least are those originating from a government that seems hostile to their concerns. Civil society's ability to monitor is essential. Groups taking up the mining challenge, like Mining Watch Canada and Common Frontiers as well as various local coalitions, are playing a vital role, and often work in close alliance with environmental, labour, and indigenous people in affected areas further south. The ability to resist is equally important.

A coalition of labour, ecumenical, environmental, and other civil society networks, motivated by a primary concern for human and labour rights, opposed the Canada-Colombia Free Trade Agreement. Gaining strong parliamentary leadership from the NDP's Peter

Julian and sympathetic support from the Bloc, the coalition held up the Harper government's project for 18 months. The Liberal amendment to garner an annual governmental review of human rights in each country responded to sustained public pressure over the agreement. It is, however, likely little more than a paper tiger. Liberal John MacKay has launched a Bill (C-300) to establish some measure of accountability on Canada's overseas corporate actors, gaining widespread civil society support, but support from his own leader and the caucus foreign policy critic may not be forthcoming.

Canada's profile in the hemisphere is increasingly negative, as local communities are shoved aside and environmental advocates murdered to make way for Canadian resource companies. A key NAFTA partner, Mexico, suffers the imposition of visas as apprehension grows about its descent into drug-fuelled violence. Canada falls into step with US strategic priorities instead of offering a creative northern alternative. An observer might wonder if there is any Canadian role in the region apart from extracting its resources. 

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