

THE SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE ELECTORAL PROCESS IN LATIN AMERICA IN 2006

During the 2006 two hundred and forty million people in Latin America will be electing new presidents in Chile, Costa Rica, Mexico, Peru, Colombia, Brazil, Ecuador and Nicaragua. As the old astrologists say that when we approach such an astral event of this dimensions our political analysts and voters start predict that the strange conjunction of electoral processes will attract hunger, inundations and the possible arriving of the new Messiah.

The point is that this particular year is characterized by two phenomena that I would like to link together in my analysis. On one side the majority of the Latin American societies have consolidated the validity of their electoral systems in such a way that you even can talk about a democratic wave. But at the same time the region has also experienced another wave: the new social movements. It is unquestionable that both phenomena have influenced and improved the future democracy in Latin America. I will analyse how the growing social mobilisation is related to the construction of the democracy in the region, and with special focus on the electoral system.

During my exposition I refer to region when I'm talking about Latin America as a whole while I refer to zones when it's minor areas as states for example the state of Chiapas in Mexico.

The questions we try to answer then are: What role do the social movements play in the Latin American democracies? And what do they represent en terms of advantages/possibilities and disadvantages for the democracies in the region? These questions are of particular importance this year, 2006. In order to fully understand the role of the social movements in the actual elections I am afraid that we cannot skip over and make short cuts but need first to understand who the social movements are, and what their characteristics are in order to comprehend how they are capable of influencing the elections.

As we all know during the last two decades the region has lived serious economic crisis. The international development organisations recommended that the implementation of economic restrictions and specific public policies generally known as neo liberal policy. The people voted for the right-wing governments because they believed the right-wing could do well in injecting this hard economic medicine cure. Nevertheless it had very different outcomes and success in the region. Now twenty years later we realise that the expectations to the neo liberal politics haven't been fulfilled at all.

In the last couple of years the elections clearly indicate that the people are looking for other alternatives. We see it well reflected in what we would call “a turn to the left” in Latin America. The existing presidents of Brazil (Lula Da Silva), of Venezuela (Hugo Chávez), of Uruguay (Tabaré Vázquez), of Chile (Michelle Bachelet) and the most recently elected Evo Morales in Bolivia all come from left-wing parties or centre-left wing parties.

Now, what does all this have to do with the social movements? That’s exactly the point because most of these presidents have participated in or are part/forming part of a social movement which in some cases means that they themselves suffered and felt in their own flesh and blood the persecutions, the torture and arrests during the dictatorships. For example Tabaré Vázquez swore before the Senate’s president which he himself was part of a political party that had supported or tolerated torture during the dictatorship. Evo Morales is the first elected indigenous president in South America and Michelle Bachelette also suffered torture as did her family during the dictatorship. Only some years ago these political processes would have seemed unthinkable.

In the late seventies Chile implemented the neo liberal economy strategies as suggested from the Chicago School economists, the countries have opened their markets, cut down the size of the government and made tax reforms and outsold the transnational companies. In the eighties Latin America suffered a severe crisis that was promised to take an end if they just injecting the bitter medicine. Nevertheless at the end of the nineties the region still had huge problems with disparity and the economic stagnation. In stead this medicine cure was killing the people. The clearest example is Argentina where they implemented the majority of IMF’s (International Monetary Fund) recommendations, however Argentina only just survived after having suffered one of the most severe economic crisis. In 1994 Mexico also suffered a crisis but only because of the United States’ intervention it didn’t go even worse.

The increased critics of the neo liberal strategies you see the most explicit example in 1994 when the Zapatist Movement (EZLN) was established. The Zapatist Movement wasn’t just a paradigmatic movement from the forgotten people in a particular zone, the indigenous people, but it was a sort of important and vital reminder to explore alternative ways of living. If we continue with the medicine metaphor the patient wasn’t too sure anymore to follow only the doctor’s receipt without also paying attention and even a visit to the acupuncturist or said more accurate the healer or medicine man.

That means that we can explain a series of victories that the left-wing parties have had in Latin America because of the thin/meagre results during the right-wing governments, where they cannot present a convincing reduction in the poverty rates, the disparity increased in the region, the different governments had a number of scandals of corruption and there isn't a general economic growth in the region.

Nevertheless even though there exist left-wing governments you should pay close attention, as in other parts of the world the differences between the left and the right-wing has diminished to the point of just being a question of public expenses. I won't say that there doesn't exist differences just the fact that with time the limits has sort of blurred. For example the left-wing governments preserve the macro economic balances and the public policy expenses recommended by the international organisations, and they implement a series of legal reforms that are very similar to the right-wing governments'. For example the Brazilian president Loula approved reforms that changed the systems of pensions which results seem very close to neo liberal thinking. Furthermore Hugo Chávez doesn't take steps to restrict foreign capital investments or limit the presence of international companies in Venezuela, quite the opposite he keeps intensifying its possibilities. That's part of the reason why researchers in Latin America are looking with a sceptical eye on naming some of the new governments as left-wing presidents.

Because of the theme of the social movements I would like to emphasise two differences between the left and right-wing governments; one is the construction of international alliances, and the other is the change in the discourses.

Regarding the construction of alliances the presence of several left-wing governments certainly has opened the possibility for creating much stronger collaborations between the countries. This has several purposes. First of all to construct a powerful block in order to negotiate with foreigners, second to take advantage of the potential that the region's market represents en terms of economy and culture. One of most interesting dimensions of these alliances is the political dimension. The left-wing of course wants to create a new powerful block which isn't just controlled by the United States. Even though there don't existed a general opinion about how they can and why they will form these new alliances there is certainly a tendency towards it. You find opposite poles as Hugo Chávez and Fidel Castro (the president of Cuba) on one side, and on the other more realistic parts as the Argentina and Brazilian

way. It hasn't come to confrontations yet but we see the increasing conflict in the way that North America try to manipulate Latin America, and which more important to say is opposed to what the Latin American governments wants for the region. This you can see concretised in the total absence of treaties in the Cumbre de las Ameritas in 2005.

On the other side -and this is one of the themes that the Medias has been occupied with – that some of these new leaders have explicitly taken distance from the United States, their discourses are clearly anti-American and they are harsh in their critics of the consequences of the North American neo liberal model. The most outstanding examples are Hugo Chávez' against Bush and the Argentine president Kirschner who in 2005 paid the country's debts to the International Monetary Fund simply in order to avoid implementing their recommendations. Another example is the hard critics that Evo Morales has made against the rich people in his own country and against the transnational companies.

In the following part we will take a closer look on 1) what the actual characteristics are in the Latin American societies? 2) What kind of new groups have emerged in the region? 3) What is the purpose of the social movements and what are their characteristics? 4) The social movements and the democracies.

The Latin American societies

First we will analyse carefully the actual situation in Latin America. Of course we can only look at the Latin America en general outlines because of the region's size.

The last twenty years Latin America has experienced profound changes. The region has established economic blocks as MERCOSUR and NAFTA or TLC, and countries as Mexico and Brazil have some of the major economies in the world. Nevertheless the principal problem in the region is still the poverty. In the majority of the countries more than half of its populations live below the poverty limit established by the UN. It's the region with the highest levels of disparity in the world even higher than Africa and Asia. Even though that in the developed countries as Mexico the levels of quality of life is identical with European cities at the same time there are zones in Mexico where the poverty is identical to Africa.

The economic block's structure has provoked changes in the relationships between the countries which make researchers divide the region in "three Americas". One is the Northern America: that consists of

Canada, United States and Mexico, the second is the Central America and the third is South America. The different interests between these three become clearer each day as we see it for example during the last year, 2005, conferences and intercontinental meetings that there is a lack of treaties and constant confrontations that are played out in the public scene.

The Latin American societies reflect in their values, knowledge and ways of living huge economic differences. On one side exists cities as Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo, Santiago de Chile or Mexico City that participate in the cultural expressions, knowledge or entertainment at a world level. In these cities the cultural and technological changes coming from United States or Europe are assimilated immediately. On the other side, in several zones at the continent the population is isolated when we talk of the technological progress or knowledge that could permit a certain level for their life conditions. Here I'm thinking of the indigenous people that in the majority of the cases are excluded from these opportunities. The indigenous culture is perceived as marginal and only as the folkloric part of the nation.

The last two decades Latin America has experienced a democratic wave within the politics. The pressure from the social movements, unions, political parties, religious groups, the Medias and foreign governments obligated the governments to reorganise different environments. Some of the most important and essential changes were in the law system, the opening towards the Medias and the recognition of that new political parties should operate and have same conditions as the well established political parties during the elections.

The emergence of new groups

A change related to the political opening is the consolidation of new groups; I refer to the civil society. During various decades the Latin American societies had a series of actors that normally were accepted as principal actors in these societies: the Army, the church, the political parties, the intellectuals, the peasants, include almost all groups. We will come back to the social movements later on.

If the civil organisations had been present since the Colonial period then they had never succeeded in having a social position that determent. Since the eighties this group was capable of making changes in the political system, propose themes to discuss in the public debate without mentioning the enormous amount of money they administrated as a social group. The environmental organisations, the feminist

and gay and indigenous organisations became an important source of social organisation and a source of proposing solutions to local and national problems.

The emergence and consolidation of the civil society have a direct relation to the processes of democratisation in the region. The social organisations are at the same time the motive power and one of the results of the democratic opening. Several of these groups are directly involved in the conflict concerning human rights, liberty of expression, the opening for political participation and clean democratic processes (elections). The civil organisations are unquestionable one of the necessary actors for an well functioning society. Now the social organisations participate in a very direct way in how the operation and structure should be of the public policy.

Latin America has experienced the development of whole new array of social organisations that have consolidated their presence in the region as an important and essential actor. These groups are one of the elements that help to consolidate the necessary institutions to make democracy work as Alexis Tocqueville said. Even though the presence of these groups is essential they aren't enough. Another of the groups that has experienced an important transformation in Latin America is the social movements.

The social movements and the civil organisations

In Latin America the history of the civil organisations is closely/intimately related to the history of the social movements. The two groups share objectives/purposes and participants in several of the cases. Because of the essential role the civil organisations plays we will now look at some of the characteristics that the civil organisations and the social movements share.

A crucial point they share is that both of them is considered as necessary wheels for the democratisation and the cultural transformation, and therefore necessary in the transformation in the everyday practices and politics. In the third world countries both groups have as main purpose to solve some of the most severe problems in the region as the poverty question, the pollution and the violence. Another characteristic that they share is their origin. The majority of the persons that participated in the students' movements, unions and religious groups have created social organisations.

The movements and the organisations also share the constant struggle?? in order to obtain resources. Both groups have had the experience of operating with low incomes and resources. This lack of

resources have to do with internal as well as external questions: Deficits in the internal organisation, lack of the leader's and administrator's education, restrictions in the law, suppressing acts from the government, and in general a lack of interest from the population or a political unfavourable context. This is one of the interesting things about this "left-wing-turn" in Latin America. The leftwing movements and the organisations seem to have had access to a series of resources that they have never imagined. Here I'm not only referring to economic resources as money but resources understood also as political support, stop for persecutions and new spaces to obtain their goals. For example in Venezuela they have converted in the anfitrión for different occasions against the globalisation or the neo liberalism. In Argentina when they realised the Cumbre of the Americas Kischner's government tolerated the multitude of demonstrations against the United States.

There exist organisational, operational differences and resources and strategies between the movement and the organisations. Some of them are: 1) the type of purposes, in the former case they are more concrete and specific while the latter seems to be more general 2) the "**time of survival**" or duration, in the case of the movements they are usually short term compared to the civil organisations which furthermore have as one of their basic purposes to stay present for a long period. 3) the level of institutionalising, because of the short term purposes and characteristics and the type of confrontations the movements don't seek their legalisation in the institutions

The social movements and the democracies

What is the social movement's purpose in Latin America? This kind of collective action seeks to provoke change(s) in some parts of the society – they act whenever they believe or consider that there are committed an injustice towards a certain group or sector of the society. You cannot identify the social movements with strikes or manifestations. They have certain duration in time and certain levels of organisation and realise various actions.

In theory the presence of the social movements permits the society to be aware of or at least pay attention to the areas that require changes because they present problems. That means that a lot of times the social movements have been perceived as spaces of escape for social pressure. This perspective in this region is insufficient and incomplete because within this perspective the social movements only serve as a kind of red warning light that permits the society to take action or be conscientious about certain problems or liberate accumulated social tensions while in Latin America the

social movements are also about forms of survival; defensive acts of groups that perceive their situation as coming to a limit where their forms of life will be in risk of changing that's why they try desperately to conserve it. We cannot forget the marvellous main sentence in one of the studies of the Mexican revolutionary hero Emiliano Zapata "this is the history of a movement that raised its weapons to prevent that anything changed".

As we have seen the poverty and the social disparity are structural problems in Latin America. While this continues the social movements in the region will continue to focus mainly on convert the poverty or defensive acts in order to avoid that the situation gets worse. The year 2000 is very illustrative: In Bolivia groups of peasants blocked the entrance to Cochabamba in order to preserve or insist in their right to the water supply. In Ecuador 12.000 (twelve thousand) indigenous people demonstrated in front of the Palace of Justice and the Congress insisting in the renunciation of Jamil Mahuad from the presidency because of a total lack of results for the poorest groups in the society. In Argentina the groups affected by the economic collapse started to organise demonstrations and mobilizing all over the country requiring the political class its renunciation. In Brazil the movement called the landless people took over the ranches/haciendas and mobilised thousands of people. In Bolivia, Guatemala, and Mexico the organisations realised demonstrations in order to gain access to and to get the right to have water. Some of them even tried to prevent the privatization of the water supply.

This present cyclical mobilisation because of the poverty conditions has direct consequences for the democracy: because this doesn't permit or prevent the consolidation of the institutions and which is an important factor of ingovernmentality. The construction of stable democracies requires not only a considerable reduction in the poverty rates for pure economic reasons but also it needs to reduce the mobilisations that generate ingovernmentality.

On the other hand the social movements can be a resource for political groups. During the elections the social movements can be a way of exercising pressure. The candidates that "pop-up" at the political scene because of his or her leadership in a social movement has the tendency to take advantage of it and repress the debated ideas in order to use the masses' argument. In Mexico the actual candidate for the left-wing party, PRD, Andrés Manuel López Obrador has felt into this tramp. He comes from a social movement and he has denied participating in more than one debate during the campaign because he prefers to concentrate in the acts of the masses. It means so to say that the concentration of the bodies as the principal argument comes before than the arguments themselves.

The expansion of social agents has created new groups, interests and ways of protests. As a beginning this is one of the basic components of any democracy but it can also be a risk in a society that has these huge levels of disparity as you see in Latin America. The number of organisations and movements hasn't only increased among the poor people but also among the middle class and the rich. In several countries the right-wing groups have shown that their interests can be different from the majority. For example we see it in relation to: birth control, culture and religious convictions. Here Mexico is very interesting. New cults as Luz del Mundo (The Light of the World) or "the Sacred Death" are not just different religious beliefs but should be seen as collective actions that criticise the traditional catholic hierarchy and the positions the poor people have within it. The Light of the World is a new church and is now well established in several countries in the region.

Another group of organisations which represents a high level of differences are the environmental movements. Even though each of the groups is concerned about the environment in concrete terms doesn't necessarily mean that they are identical. For example for the indigenous people the conservation of the nature is related to the protection of the group itself. Several of the groups live in zones where the existence of natural resources is very dense and these could be explored. For some of the indigenous groups a forest, a mountain or a river is part of their identity. While for others the interest in the environment are identical to use it in a sustainable way as a resource. This leads me to say that you have to look carefully at the environmental movements because they are very different: some struggle to survive, to preserve their culture, to conserve their past while others think of the technical in their projects and it's obvious that they don't have the same risks at stake.

Another point of shared interests between the social movements and the democracy is the governmentality. The problem with governmentality in Latin America is that it is associated with a tremendous challenge for the different nation states in the region: explicitly the presence of powers that are: the drug traffic, the para-military groups and the organised crime are very serious threats. But together with these groups the nation states also have very few resources to prevent the power which is represented in the international companies that actually can make a whole region economically unstable. For example if the Wal-mart (the largest North American supermarket chain) decided to close or stop consuming certain products from one zone it would mean thousands and thousands unemployed people. How do the social movements interfere here? First, as one of the resistance forms against the powerful agents the movements organise manifestations against crime and kidnappings. For

example: Peace in Columbia and Mexico. But not only that they also rise against the big transnational companies as the powerful Petrol Companies in Argentina

Another important shared point between the movements and the democratic system is the construction of social problems. If we think of a democracy not only as elections but also as a debate about the problems of public interest the social movements are an important actor in the Latin America context. The EZLN is a good example. Since their emergence the indigenous theme has entered the political cultural and social agenda at all levels in society and certainly not only in Mexico but in all the countries with indigenous people in the region.

In the nineties the social movements shift from a period characterized by being in constant confrontation with the governments and repressors because of the alternative forms of organisation, which means different from an organised political party for example to a period where the different governments look upon the movements and their actions with a lo bigger tolerance. Furthermore a lot of the social movements are recognised and accepted by a very broad spectre of the society. The nation states' change of attitude towards the movements is mainly because of the work that the movements themselves and the civil organisations have realised during the last decades

This resource transformation used by the movements is a space of action and struggle between the groups and the democracy which is very seldom taken into account: Here I refer to the legal space. A lot of the collective actions start because of a legal act. Furthermore one of the primary resources that the movements use is usually the court in order to solve conflicts/problems that they consider as being injustice. The legality is then one of the important shared points between the movements and the governments. Even though the law system should be a unique way to solve conflicts in a democracy it is a fact that the majority of the countries is suffering from the lack of immune institutions/bodies when we talk about corruption. This has two consequences: one is the constant appeal to institutionalise this as a part of the practices as a form of solving conflicts which unquestionable would benefit the governments. But on the other hand because of the constant mistakes/errors and corruption in the law practices it generates more dissatisfaction with the legal system and creates a culture we could call "informal" which operates more efficient than the legal way in solving conflicts. Unfortunately the movements' increased use of the legal resources is a direct consequence of and indicator for the legal part's failure or lack of efficiency and of legitimacy.

The risks in the relation between the social movements and the democracy

RIESGOS DE LA RELACIÓN ENTRE MOVIMIENTOS SOCIALES Y DEMOCRACIA

To sum up at the end: there exists a list of possible risks related to the movements direct participation in the elections:

1) The public interests and the social movements

The majority of the social movements persecute concrete cases. In all cases they present them as cases of public interest. Nevertheless in certain cases you could question if it actually is to public benefit if the movement succeed. This because of several reasons: 1) the movement's purposes only represent the interests of a minority. 2) the participants only have access to limited information. 3) the participants don't share a determined model of culture and politics with the opposition group.

2) Discourses

All the social movements construct a discourse. In the majority of the cases this includes strong critics towards the government and also questions their legitimacy. As we already mentioned the left-wing governments are creating a certain discourse and often very critical. These discourses are one of the reasons why a lot of people are attracted to a certain movement. When a social movement leader enters a political campaign the people expect that the leader maintains the principles and discourses. This generally generate good results in the electoral competition the people are expecting the leader to challenge the existing government, the United States and the promises of actions against the government. Nevertheless if the leader is elected the conditions changes and his or hers new position don't allow her or him to maintain the hard critics and the discourse is moderated towards more reasonable possibilities within the very restricted budget. This often provokes a deep frustration and disillusion among the people who supported the candidate which can lead to a not only frustration but treachery. The risk for the democracy is that this frustration isn't only placed at the candidate himself but provoke a disillusion with the democratic system itself and the system of how the candidates are elected. In other words, you cannot enter a party dressed like a clown and then in the moment of the photo to be taken ask for permission to dress up being the well dressed one. The Brazilian president is a very good

example how expensive it can be to promise too many reforms and being elected he hasn't been able to make all the promised changes.

3) The morality and democratic systems loss of legitimacy

The social movement's leader in general undertakes a discourse of respectable moral. As mentioned the social movements serve as the critical moral for the different acts of the government. This moral quality of the leaders is one of their advantages in the electoral processes. The political system in the region has severe legitimacy problems because of mistrust to the politicians. While the social movements leaders are looked upon as "new blood" that gives new oxygen/air to politics. Nevertheless when the social movements ex-leaders they change chair and become an authority and participate in corruption or other types of crimes they are creating a severe problem of legitimacy for the organisation or the movement where they belonged as well as for the democracy itself because the people lose their trust in the electoral processes and that there exist a way to elect leaders that do not commit crimes as corruption. This is one of the risks that is hidden behind the problems of corruption in which for example close collaborators in the staff of Lula in Brazil and Andres Manuel López Obrador in Mexico are suffering from right now.

4) Relations between movements and the public functionaries

The social movements have seen how their leader's purposes some times changes when they are elected as authorities. Some times because the actions of the new public functionaries don't correspond to the group's participants expectations. Inclusive the organisations that are very well consolidated as the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (Conaie) have had problems with elected leaders and during the short period in the year 2000 where they took power they registered an important fissure between the bases and the leaders that seemed to abandon the organisation's historic project.