

Paraguay: The victory of Fernando Lugo and the new space of struggle for the Left

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he defeat of the Colorado Party in the 2008 presidential elections meant much more than a change of government in Paraguay. This defeat meant the fall of the last political party in Latin America that had been formed both politically and ideologically within the framework of the Cold War.

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The 36 years of the dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989) had in fact as a leitmotiv “the anti-communist struggle”. During the “Colorado reign”, US imperialism managed to build a solid alliance which for several decades enabled it to set up intelligence operations in the Latin-American region. From Operation Condor, in the 1970s, to the presence of US troops in the years known as the “transition” in order to conduct “training exercises” with members of the Paraguayan armed forces, these military campaigns and manœuvres were justified in all sorts of ways, from the fight against the “sleeping terrorist cells” on the “triple frontier” (the region where there are common borders between Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay), to the objective of ending “the cultivation, production and trafficking of drugs”.

After sixty years of an exercise of power marked by clientelism, corruption and the system of emoluments, as well as by the recourse to the fear and terror as a means of acting on the consciousness of the masses, the fall of the Colorado Party represents the end of an important cycle in the political history of the country. That is why it is necessary to recognize the progressive character of this event, both from a strictly democratic point of view and because of the contradictions that it gives rise to, particularly concerning the remarkable mobilization of the social and popular movements which took part in the campaign in support of the candidacy of Fe}}

The political emergence of this ex-bishop of the Catholic Church can be explained by three factors:

1. The running out of steam of a model of imperialist domination, led by the Colorado Party which, after the fall of the dictatorship, became converted to neo-liberalism, without however taking the risk of endangering the clientelist system on which it had built its political hegemony policy, based on the “state as an employer”. Thus, the Paraguayan state, populated by scarcely six million inhabitants, employs no less than 200,000 civil servants, 90 per cent of whom are members of the party. The economic stagnation of the 1980s and 1990s contributed to eroding this model, so much so that the party’s own social base has been weakened.
2. The crisis of the bourgeois opposition, in particular the Authentic Radical Liberal Party (PLRA), a party that like the Colorado Party has existed for a hundred years, and which proved to be incapable of working out a credible project in order to consolidate a two-party system, something that was

however very much supported by the United States. The economic accumulation of the oligarchy - latifundist, agricultural, commercial and financial - was carried out under the protection and thanks to the intervention, legal and illegal, of the state, controlled by the Colorados. In this context the weak liberal bourgeoisie had only very limited room for manoeuvre.

3. The crisis of political leadership among the popular masses, combined with the weakness and dispersion of the left parties. The left movements and parties had scarcely recovered from the savage persecution suffered by their principal leaders, who were assassinated, went "missing", were imprisoned or forced into exile during the dictatorship of Stroessner. However the last few years have been marked by the mobilization and the entry into struggle of some popular organizations, in particular peasant organisations, which have made increasingly clear the growing incapacity of the Colorado governments to respond to their aspirations.

Paraguay has at present approximately two million of its nationals living abroad, and the rate of emigration is increasing. Approximately two million people live in a situation of extreme poverty. 35 per cent of the population is unemployed or forced to work part-time. More than 300,000 landless peasants suffer from a structure of land ownership which today allows 3 per cent of the population to monopolize 90 per cent of cultivable land. In this context, social struggles reached several peaks of intensity during the transitional political period.

The inability of the traditional political leaderships to recover from the crisis that they were going through clearly allowed the figure of Fernando Lugo to impose itself within the progressive and popular camp. After having made public his decision to enter political life, Lugo openly defied the Catholic hierarchy by not recognizing the sanction that the Vatican had inflicted on him. Lugo was bishop in the region of San Pedro, one of the poorest in the country, which has become in the last few years a strategic zone for the development of peasant struggles in Paraguay. On several occasions, Lugo expressed his support for these struggles, and sometimes in fact took part in them. That is why his candidacy threw into a panic the most conservative political sectors, such as the corporations of latifundists, stockbreeders and agro-industrial entrepreneurs. In this context, it took Lugo hardly more than a year to inflict electoral defeat on a party which had exercised power for more than six decades.

The "third way" in the periphery of capitalism

The candidacy of Lugo benefited from the support of the majority of social organizations and left-wing political parties. However, when his candidacy was launched, these sectors alone appeared insufficient to overcome the electoral machine of the Colorado Party. This at first instilled doubt among his supporters. Finally a very broad alliance took shape behind Lugo, extending from social organizations and parties resolutely positioned on the left to certain conservative sectors. Heterogeneous, this alliance is based on a common centre-left project, with an important place given to social programmes.

The desire for change was expressed by three axes which constituted the points of agreement between the various sectors engaged in the campaign. First of all, the need to put a stop to "the unending reign of the Colorado Party", to corruption and to impunity - an objective which made it possible to bring together sectors coming from various social layers. Secondly, land reform, a historical demand of the workers, the peasants and all the popular sectors, which constituted the central point of a programme that was above all democratic, but which also comprised a series of measures announcing the intention of a great structural change in terms of the characteristics of Paraguay. Lastly, this programme took up the defence of national sovereignty, by putting forward

the need to renegotiate the unjust Treaties of Itaipú and Yacyreta, two big hydroelectric dam built jointly with, respectively, Brazil and Argentina.

The case which undoubtedly gives rise to the most tensions is the Itaipú dam - a symbol of the kind of relations that Brazil maintains with Paraguay. For several decades, in fact, the country has whetted the appetites of the big Brazilian bourgeoisie, which has systematically taken over big latifundia and vast tracts of land devoted to the cultivation of soya, in the process having a strong impact on traditional Paraguayan agriculture, affecting its structure. Thus, thousands of peasants have been driven off the land in recent years, which has led to a whole series of negative consequences on the social, environmental and cultural levels.

The emergence of centre-left governments allied with conservative forces is not an innovation in the region, as the Lula government in Brazil illustrates. These experiences are characterized by a discourse announcing a double rupture with “the neo-liberal Right defending above all its own privileges” and the “traditional Left”, but also by a political practice which does not in reality break significantly with the neo-liberal capitalism which has been applied in the region in recent years. We are seeing, in a certain sense, the installation of a “third way” within peripheral capitalism!

A new space for struggle and the re-launch of the transition

It has been becoming obvious for several years now that the transition which began in 1989 was confined to an exacerbated conservatism: the political and economic mafia had managed to reorganize and re-establish themselves in all the spheres of power. Far from consolidating a bourgeois democracy, the new process that is underway makes it possible to revitalize a space of political and public freedoms. The fall of the Colorado Party opens up the possibility of the existence of a new space of struggle and contradictions, and liberates social forces that were historically placed under the yoke of the Colorado Party.

It is not a process which solves the political crisis of the dominant classes. On the contrary, it could make it possible to deepen the crisis of the Colorados, unflinching supporters of imperialist policies in Paraguay. It is a process which requires a change of social forces at the top of the state. This bourgeoisie looks with distrust on the Authentic Radical Liberal party (PLRA) which comprises the most conservative sectors supporting Lugo, not because of ideological divergences, but because it is afraid the PLRA will not be effective enough if it has to face a rise of social struggles, principally in the countryside.

The left organizations and the social organizations have the possibility of re-launching a process of organization and mobilization. In fact, immediately after the electoral victory of April 20, 2008, and before the government had even taken office, occupations of latifundia and social mobilizations aiming at blocking the advance of the agro-industrial sectors began again with renewed vigour. The Marxist Left, however, is prey to division, and that is how it presented itself to the voters at the last elections. Some groups concluded alliances with the conservative parties which supported Lugo. Others gave their “critical support”, but did not join the Patriotic Alliance for Change (APC, the electoral alliance regrouping legally all the support for Lugo). Another current called for a “protest vote”, but without explicitly committing itself to support Lugo. The same tendencies took shape within the social organizations, even though those which decided to join the APC constitute the majority.

The total of the votes obtained by the Left is not negligible. Nevertheless, this Left could only get two members of the National Congress elected, because of the dispersion and the lack of unity. In order to overcome this problem and to build a unified leadership - as far as it is possible to do so - ,

the Left must face up to a tactical dilemma which could determine the limits of its own possibilities, supposing that the objective is the building of an alternative political project. This is the possibility that a majority of those political and social forces that are members of the APC chooses an accumulation of forces from within the government, as well as the maintenance of its alliances with conservative sectors, in order to guarantee the possibility for Fernando Lugo and his team to govern.

Lugo's own supporters represent a weak force within a Congress that is dominated by the conservative forces, and he will necessarily have to play the card of mobilizations and popular struggles in order to respect some of his engagements. Lugo knows the limits of the support of the PLRA, in particular with regard to social policies and programmes. He also knows that other left organizations and other social sectors are maintaining their critical support, in particular concerning some of the points of his electoral programme. So there exists in fact a re-launching of the transition, a new space for struggle and a crisis of political leadership. To advance towards a new project of radical social change: that is the challenge for the Paraguayan left forces and social sectors, which now have a clear opportunity before them.

P.S.

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* Hugo Richer is a Paraguayan political analyst who lives in Asunción. He is active within the Party of Popular Socialist Convergence (PCPS), which supported the candidacy of Fernando Lugo in the recent general elections.