

Axis of Hope

Venezuela and the Bolivarian Dream

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In the Muslim world religious groups that are militarily effective, but politically limited dominate resistance to the American Empire. Asia is infatuated with capital. Europe lies buried deep in neo-liberal torpor, and the Left and social movements in the EU (Italy is the most recent example) are in an advanced state of decomposition. But in South America an axis of hope has emerged that challenges imperial domination on every level. Democracy, hollowed-out and offering no alternatives in the North, is being used to revive hope in the South.

The likely re-election of Hugo Chavez this weekend in Venezuela will mark a new stage in the process. His opponent, Manuel Rosales, described in the Financial Times (November 30) as a "centre-left" candidate was heavily implicated in the defeated coup attempt to topple Chavez in 2004. Rosales claims that "I will not sit on anyone's lap" but it is hardly a secret that he is firmly attached to the White House.

The wave of revolts and social movements spreading unevenly across the South American continent today are the inevitable result of the Washington Consensus, the economic enslavement of the world. Latin America was the first laboratory for the Hayekian experiments that finally produced the Consensus. The Chicago boys led by the late Milton Friedman, who pioneered neo-liberal economics, used Chile after the Pinochet coup of 1973 as a laboratory. It was a good situation for them. The Chilean working class and its two principal parties had been crushed, their leading cadres killed or "disappeared". Six years later, the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua was crushed by a US-backed Contra counter-revolution.

Earlier this month, the Sandinista leader, Daniel Ortega won the Presidency in his country. Blessed by the church, flanked by a former Contra as his vice-president and still loathed by the US ambassador, Ortega may be a sickly shadow of his former self, but his victory undoubtedly reflects the desire of Nicaraguans for change. Will Managua follow the radically redistributive policies of anti-imperialist Caracas or confine itself to rhetoric and remain a client of the International Monetary Fund?

There was even better recent news from Quito. The substantial electoral triumph of Rafael Correa, a dynamic, young, US-educated economist and former finance minister, who pledged in his election campaign to reverse Ecuador's participation in the US-backed free trade area for the Americas, to ask the US military to vacate its base at Manta, and to join Opec and the growing Bolivarian movement that seeks to unite South America against imperialism.

Correa's victory comes at a time when Latin America is on the march again. There have been some spectacular demonstrations of the popular will in Porto Alegre, Caracas, Buenos Aires, Cochabamba and Cuzco, to name but a few cities.

This has offered a new hope to a world either deep in neoliberal torpor (the EU, the US, the Far East) or suffering from the military and economic depredations of the new order (Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, Afghanistan, south Asia). The struggle spearheaded by the Bolivarian Republic of

Venezuela against the Washington consensus has attracted the fury of the White House. Three attempts (including a military coup backed by the US and the EU) were made to topple Hugo Chávez.

Chávez was first elected president of Venezuela in February 1999, 10 years after a popular insurrection against the IMF readjustment programme had been brutally crushed by Carlos Andrés Pérez, whose party was once the largest affiliate of the Socialist International. In his election campaign Pérez had denounced the economists on the World Bank's payroll as "genocide workers in the pay of economic totalitarianism" and the IMF as "a neutron bomb that killed people, but left buildings standing".

Afterwards he caved in to the demands of both institutions, suspended the constitution, declared a state of emergency and ordered the army to mow down the protesters. More than 2,000 poor people were shot dead by troops. This was the founding moment of the Bolivarian upheaval in Venezuela.

Chávez and other junior officers organized to protest against the misuse and corruption of the army. In 1992 the radical officers organised a rebellion against those who had authorized the butchery. It failed because it was soon after the traumas of 1989, but people did not forget. That is how the new Bolivarians came to power and began to slowly and cautiously implement social-democratic reforms, reminiscent of Roosevelt's New Deal and the policies of the 1945 Labour government. In a world dominated by the Washington consensus this was unacceptable. Hence the drive to topple him. Hence the demand by Pat Robertson, the leader of political Christianity in the US, that Washington should organise the immediate assassination of Chávez. Venezuela, till now an obscure country as far as the rest of the world was concerned, suddenly became a beacon.

The majority of the people who elected Chávez were angry and determined. They had felt unrepresented for 10 years; they had been betrayed by the traditional parties; they disapproved of the neoliberal policies then in force, which consisted of an assault on the poor in order to shore up a parasitical oligarchy and a corrupt civilian and trade-union bureaucracy. They disapproved of the use that was made of the country's oil reserves. They disapproved of the arrogance of the Venezuelan elite, which utilised wealth and a lighter skin colour to sustain itself at the expense of the dark-skinned and poor majority. Electing Chávez was their revenge.

When it became clear that Chávez was determined to make modest changes to the country's social structure, Washington sounded the tocsin. Nowhere has the embittered bigotry emanating from this quarter been more evident than in its actions and propaganda against Venezuela, with the Financial Times and the Economist in the forefront of a massive disinformation campaign.

They are united by their prejudices against Chávez, whose advent to power was viewed as an insane aberration because the social reforms funded by oil revenues - free health, education and housing for the poor - were regarded as a regression to the bad old days, a first step on the road to totalitarianism.

Chávez never concealed his politics. The two 18th-century Simóns - Bolívar and Rodríguez - had taught him a simple lesson: do not serve the interests of others; make your own political and economic revolution; and unite South America against all empires. This was the core of his program, which is unacceptable to the supporters of the Washington Consensus.

The key to a serious Latin American challenge to the US lies in regional cohesion. This is crucial. When the cable channel Telesur was launched in Caracas nearly two years ago, one of their first programs revealed a shocking level of ignorance amongst South Americans. In virtually every capital city vox pop interviews revealed that people knew the name of their own capital and that of the

United States. Very few could name even two or three capital cities in their own continent!

So regional unity---the Bolivarian Federation of sovereign states of which Chavez speaks incessantly---is necessary to move forward. Washington will do everything to prevent this since its own interests dictate dealing with countries unilaterally rather than as regional entities (this is even true of the European Union). Regional unity in South America could have a surprising impact in el Norte as well where the Hispanic population of the United States is growing rapidly to the great consternation of state ideologues like Samuel Huntington.

P.S.

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* Tariq Ali's new book, "Pirates of the Caribbean: Axis of Hope", is published by Verso.