

# Latin America : Problems and Promises

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More than a millennium ago, long before the European conquest, a lost civilization flourished in a region people know today as Bolivia.

Archeologists are discovering that Bolivia had a very sophisticated and complex society; or to use their words, one of the largest, strangest and ecologically richest artificial environments on the planet.... Its populations and cities were large and formal, and that created a panorama that was one of humanity's greatest works of art.

Now Bolivia has reemerged, together with a good part of the region, from Venezuela to Argentina. The conquest and its echo of imperialist domination in the United States is giving way to the independence and interdependence that are marking a new dynamic in relations between North and South. And all of that has as a backdrop the economic crisis in the United States and in the world.

Over the last decade, Latin America has become the most progressive region in the world. Initiatives throughout the subcontinent have had a significant impact on countries and on the slow emergence of regional institutions.

These include the Banco del Sur (Bank of the South), endorsed in 2007 by economist and Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz, in Caracas, Venezuela; and the ALBA, (meaning DAWN) the Bolivian Alternative for Latin America and the Caribbean, which could demonstrate its being a veritable dawn if its initial promise can be made concrete.

The ALBA is usually described as an alternative to the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas sponsored by the United States, but the terms are deceptive. It should be understood as an independent form of development, not as an alternative. And moreover, the so-called free trade agreements have only a limited relationship with free trade, or even with trade in any serious sense of the word.

And they are certainly not agreements, at least if people are part of their countries. A more precise term would be agreements for defending the rights of investors, designed by multinational corporations and banks and powerful states to satisfy their interests, established in secret to a good extent, without the participation of the public, or without them being aware of what is going on.

Another promising regional organization is UNASUR, the Union of Nations of South America. Modeled on the European Union, UNASUR proposes to establish a South American Parliament in Cochabamba, Bolivia. It is an appropriate place. In the year 2000, the people of Cochabamba initiated a valiant and successful struggle against the privatization of water. That sparked international solidarity, because it demonstrated what can be achieved through committed activism.

The dynamic of the Southern Cone comes in part from Venezuela, with the election of Hugo Chavez, a leftist president whose intention is to use the rich resources of Venezuela for the benefit of the Venezuelan people instead of handing them over for the wealth and privileges of those in his country and abroad. He also intends to promote regional integration, which is desperately needed as a prerequisite for independence, for democracy and for positive development.

Chavez is not alone in those objectives. Bolivia, the poorest country on the continent, is perhaps the most dramatic example. Bolivia has charted an important course for the true democratization of the hemisphere. In 2005, its indigenous majority, the population that has suffered the most repression in the hemisphere, entered the political arena and elected someone from among its own ranks, Evo Morales, to promote programs that stemmed from popular organizations.

The election was just one stage of the struggles under way. The topics were well-known and serious: control over resources, cultural rights and justice in a complex, multiethnic society, and the major economic and social breach between the great majority and the wealthy elite, the traditional rulers.

In consequence, Bolivia is also now the scenario of the most dangerous confrontation between popular democracy and the Europeanized privileged elites who are resisting the loss of their political privileges and thus opposing democracy and social justice, sometimes violently. Routinely, they enjoy the firm backing of the United States.

Last September, during an emergency meeting of UNASUR in Santiago, Chile, South American leaders declared their firm and full support for the constitutional government of President Evo Morales, whose mandate was ratified by a large majority, by alluding to his victory in the recent referendum.

Morales thanked UNASUR, saying that for the first time in the history of South America, the countries of the region are deciding how to solve their problems without the presence of the United States.

The United States has dominated Bolivia's economy for a long time, especially via the processing of its tin exports.

As international affairs expert Stephen Zunes says, in the early 1950s, at a critical moment during the nation's efforts to become self-sufficient, the United States government forced Bolivia to use its scant capital not for its own development, but to compensate former mine owners and pay its foreign debt.

The economic policy that was imposed on Bolivia during that time was a precursor of the structural adjustment programs implemented on the continent 30 years later, under the terms of the neoliberal Washington Consensus, which has generally had disastrous effects.

Now, the victims of neoliberal market fundamentalism also include the rich countries, where the curse of financial liberalization has brought about the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression.

The traditional methods of imperialist control - violence and economic warfare - have become weakened. Latin America has real options. Washington understands very well that those options are threatening not only its domination in the hemisphere, but also its global domination. Control of Latin America has been the objective of US foreign policy since the early days of the republic.

If the United States cannot control Latin America, it cannot expect to concretize a successful order in other parts of the world, the National Security Council concluded in 1971, during the time of Richard Nixon. It also believed it of primordial importance to destroy Chilean democracy, something that it did.

Experts from the traditional current admit that Washington has only supported democracy when it contributed to its economic and strategic interests. That policy has continued without change to the present day.

Those anti-democratic concerns are the rational form of the domino theory, sometimes qualified, in a precise manner, as the threat of good example. For those reasons, even the slightest deviation from the strictest obedience is considered an existential threat which is harshly answered. That goes from the organizations of campesinos in remote communities in northern Laos to the creation of fishermen's cooperatives in Grenada.

In a Latin America with a new self-confidence, integration has at least three aspects. One is regional, a crucial prerequisite for independence, which makes it difficult for the master of the hemisphere to pick off countries one after the other. Another is global, in establishing South-South relations and diversifying markets and investments.

China has become an increasingly important partner in hemispheric affairs. And the last is internal, perhaps the most vital aspect of all.

Latin America is famous for its extreme concentration of wealth and power, and for the irresponsibility of its privileged elite concerning the well-being of their countries.

Latin America has great problems, but there are also promising developments that could announce a period of genuine globalization. That would be international integration for the interests of the people, not investors and other concentrations of power. □□□

*[Courtesy : Granma Internatioanl, Havana]*