



The World Today

Latin America 2006-- Changing times in our neighbourhood

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Last December marked the end of the election season in Latin America and it can be said that undoubtedly, 2006 has been a significant year for the region, with several events which have gained regional and international attention. In the process, major issues have emerged, including whether Latin America has turned fully to the left or is tilting back to the right and whether a new twenty-first century socialism has been born or new development models have been produced in the region. Equally important, the question of the implications of these changes, especially for CARICOM and the hemisphere has arisen in some quarters.

We have seen the electoral process in Latin America bring new leadership to several states in the region. In late December last year, Bolivia's first indigenous President, Evo Morales, was elected in the wake of a rapidly emerging militant indigenous movement in the region. In January 2006, Michelle Bachelet, viewed by many as 'centre-left', became the first woman to be elected President of Chile. In Peru, in June this year, Alan Garcia, also considered 'centre-left' was elected President sixteen years after the end of his first term which was characterized by high levels of inflation and guerilla violence. Presidential elections in Ecuador in October saw the leftist Rafael Correa, who opposes a free trade agreement with the USA, voted into office. In Nicaragua, in November, Daniel Ortega, former Sandinista leader, was elected President again, after being defeated in similar elections sixteen years ago. In Brazil, President Lula Da Silva was reelected in the midst of public concerns about corruption in his government and state successes in the economic and social sectors. Most recently, the reelection of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela in the midst of that country's Bolivarian Revolution, has also brought increased attention to the region.

If the election results in these countries were seen as a triumph for the ideological 'left', the electoral process also produced conservative governments beginning as early as January 2006 when Miguel Zelaya took office as President of Honduras. In February this year, in Costa Rica, Oscar Arias, a Nobel Peace Prize winner with a history of even-handedness and a commitment to the strengthening of the democratic process and human rights in the region, was elected. In Columbia, in May 2006, President Alvaro Uribe, considered a close USA ally, was reelected. Further, in July 2006, conservative Felipe Calderon was elected President of Mexico, in a close race with left-wing Lopez Obrador.

An assessment of these shifts in Latin America reveals that, in the first place, there is a rising level of maturity in the electoral process in the region and that efforts at democratic consolidation have been increasingly successful in most countries. Public

confidence in the electoral process has grown and the citizenry is participating freely in an open and transparent process, in direct contrast to the authoritarian era of the 1970s and 1980s. Further, there appears to be growing public opposition to the experience of neo-liberalism, and there are indications of significant frustration about the USA, driven economic prescription, unfettered trade and privatization. Indeed, in most of the region's elections, disillusioned voters have successfully removed political directorates which have failed to provide improvements in their economic well-being and have elected candidates who have campaigned against market reform. In fact, issues such as access to basic needs food, housing, water, and education- have become 'front burner' issues on the Latin American political agenda once again. Additionally, some analysts posit that the combination of deepening democracy and widening inequality have served to induce a shift to the left in most Latin American states and the voting population seems to be willing to support the democratic revival of the populist leadership in the region. Another interesting development is that there have been a significant number of re-elected governments. Presidents Lula Da Silva and Hugo Chavez have been reelected for second terms in Brazil and Venezuela and Alan Garcia of Peru, Oscar Arias of Costa Rica and Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua are also serving second stints as President after some periods outside of government.

There are undoubtedly some concerns in the hemisphere, especially in the United States, with respect to the perceived shift towards the left in Latin America. The growing influence of President Chavez in the region and his consistent anti-USA postures, his petro-dollar diplomacy, concerns about a 'populist revival', and the increasing presence of the 'new left' in the region have seemed to generate a new interest in the region. There is also a new configuration of the region's political directorate with the conservatives operating in the same regional space with the anti-globalization, radical populist leadership and the market-friendly left and, at the same time, there also seems to be a common pursuit of an extensive regional agenda, which cannot be assessed solely on ideological considerations.

There now appears to be a genuine interest on the part of a majority of Latin American states to involve CARICOM states in stronger regional arrangements. CARICOM's chairmanship of the Rio Group in 2006, its negotiations with MERCOSUR, the participation of two CARICOM member states (Guyana and Suriname) in the South American Community of Nations and the Treaty for Amazonian Cooperation Organization, and its involvement in the Latin America-Africa initiative, indicate that in the changing regional configurations, CARICOM is also willing to develop mutually beneficial links with its Latin American neighbours. If therefore, these actions indicate that in the current international environment, one of the options for CARICOM is increased collaboration with Latin America, then, this year the region must be committed to accelerating the process and in so doing, devise a strategy for the emergence of a genuine and sustainable partnership.
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