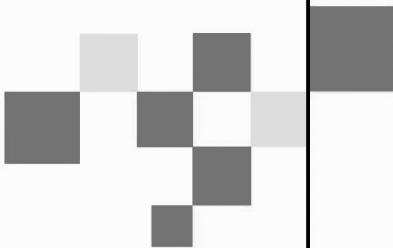


# Political Change in Latin America: Limits and opportunities for social-ecological transformation

ÁLVARO CÁLIX

- Although there is certainly a case to be had for objecting to many of the decisions handed down by Latin America's ostensibly progressive governments, it would be a mistake to ignore the palpable reduction in poverty, domestic market inducements, rising wages, and improved access to public assets, all of which were eroded under the neoliberal policies of yore.
- Nevertheless, it is also true that these same governments have failed to capitalize on these tailwinds to lay the groundwork for transforming their productive models. Instead, Latin American economies have only fallen further down the primary sector rabbit hole, amidst the burgeoning social and environmental conflicts that arise in territories subject to the pressures of extraction.
- Now is the right time to reflect, in the tradition of wholehearted self-criticism, on the merits, missteps, and challenges sown in the heterogeneous progressive field and, as a result, overhaul and undertake a social-ecological transformation project. Yet the spark to do so will never ignite spontaneously, much less by the good will of powerful interest groups. It can only come about as the result of a heterogeneous grassroots platform with the ability to organize, assert its position, and take political action, joining forces to forge unprecedented social agreements in Latin America.
- Such is the task of politics, and where better to do it than in a democracy, in a democracy not only able to overcome the failings of the merely electoral and the fallacies of representation without participation, but also to spring free from the trap of participation-cum-clientelism.



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for social-ecological  
transformation**

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## 1. Introduction

The social-ecological transformation of Latin America is not an aspiration that can happen by spontaneous generation; it requires conditions of political viability at national, subregional, and regional level. Transitions towards a virtuous change in production specialization and social and environmental justice necessitate, as a *sine qua non*, broad societal agreements and the institutional capacity to process them. The democratization the region has experienced starting from the last two decades of the 20th century has, as a rule, brought about greater political stability, but without having established the bases for overcoming historical inequalities and exclusion.

During this century, the so-called “progressive cycle,” with all the contrasts, tensions, and ambiguities that this implies, has enabled progress in certain social, economic, and political areas, thanks to the combination of external and internal factors that facilitated notable achievements benefitting broad swathes of the population. Nevertheless, when external economic conditions changed, it did not take long for the limitations and contradictions of the cycle to surface. Now is a good time to rethink the pros and cons of progressive administrations, also known as post-neoliberal. We are facing a new context that together with the successes and mistakes of the past, warrants a turning point that minimizes the risk of social regressions, such as those we are starting to see in Brazil and Argentina, but that, above all, adjusts and amends where the current cycle of governments shows its main weaknesses.

Based on a general analysis of the progressive cycle, this essay aims to contribute to the reflection on and discussion of the political conditions for the transformation of Latin American societies. It consists of four main sections. The first section reviews certain aspects of the global geopolitical situation and its relationship with the region’s performance. The second deals with the political evolution of Latin America, with emphasis on the social conditions and electoral milestones that permitted the emergence and permanence of governments that have, to a greater or lesser extent, confronted the rationality of neoliberalism. The third section covers the po-

litical strategies and focuses of the aforementioned governments. Lastly, the fourth section outlines five strategic reflections based on a synthesis of the prior sections.

It is worth mentioning that this text is not intended to be a thorough analysis of national cases, let alone make value judgments on the administrations of the governments in question; rather, it seeks to give an overall view that groups together features and trends to provide a regional perspective, with all the limitations that this presupposes. The underlying premise of this paper is that sustainable bases for socio-metabolic equilibriums can only be achieved with certain democratic attributes that, more than other aims, make it generally possible for people to have decent lives.

## 2. Geopolitical aspects with global repercussions

From the bipolarity that characterized the Cold War period, we passed into a unipolar transitional stage under the hegemony of the United States. The second half of the 20th century saw a great deal of pressure to achieve a multipolar world, despite the resistance of the global status quo (Dierckxsens, 2015; Palacios, 2011). However, that trend has still not materialized into an institutionalization of a multilateral world that is better at processing the world’s new conflicts.

Of course, the creation in 1999 of the G20 as a meeting place between traditional and emerging powers is a notable sign of what could be the future courses of action of global governance in dynamic contexts involving hegemonic reconfiguration. The United States is still a superpower, although it faces an opponent with the potential to dispute this position: China. Moreover, Russia seems to be recovering its position as a significant world player - although not of the magnitude of the last century - after having suffered from the impact of the fragmentation of the old USSR.

It could be assumed that, in the current global juncture, the role of the European Union would make a



difference, as Europe has been recognized as a normative power. This recognition was highly relevant during the last 25 years of the last century, given the European Union's leadership in ideas, institutions, and norms tending towards multilateralism. Nowadays, in the second decade of the 21st century, the influence of the European Union has decreased, and its internal crisis has irrupted just when the world shows undeniable signs of a transition of global powers (Barbé, 2014). In any case, the reconfiguration experienced by Europe and, in particular, by the European Union, will be a key factor in choosing the direction of the new world order.

Meanwhile, a large part of the United States "establishment" still blindly believes in that country's exceptionality, the idea being that its planetary leadership is still indispensable and irreplaceable. This stance confronts the trends towards *primus inter pares* geopolitics that seek new equilibriums in terms of the present inter-capitalist conflicts. The relative decline experienced by the United States during the 21st century has forced its governments to rethink their strategies. One can clearly observe the interest the United States has shown in confronting Russia in Eastern Europe, while at the same time concentrating its forces in Asia to counteract the imminent progress of China as a regional power and a future global superpower. The election of Donald Trump in November 2016 has given rise to a sinuous and urgent debate about the best strategy for the United States to maintain its hegemony. His campaign speeches emphasized the intention of refusing to get involved in conflicts and wars that would imply huge costs for the U.S. government; nevertheless, the inertia of the preceding administrations has continued or even worsened during the first months of his presidency. In the absence of any reasonable agreements in the short term, the risk of regional conflicts escalating into global conflagrations is still quite plausible. The cases of North Korea and Syria are, for now, the strongest grounds for that risk.

Though shortly we shall know the stances that the new Government of the United States might uphold on the multilateral treaties on trade and investment—it has already withdrawn from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)—and the type of

diplomatic relations that it will maintain with Russia and China, at the moment it is clear that Trump will be an obstacle to any progress on global agreements on human rights, climate change, and migration.

The 2008 economic crisis further weakened U.S. supremacy, while also affecting those who have been its strongest allies until now: the European Union and Japan. However, despite the crisis, we cannot ignore the fact that the United States is still the only world superpower. It still has the largest economy on the planet (in terms of GDP, without adjusting for purchasing power parity), concentrates the most patents for innovation in strategic cutting-edge technologies (because of the high potential of adding value and integrated production), and, as if this were not enough, is the most overwhelming military power, with a military budget far exceeding those of the countries that come next in line (Dierckxsens, 2015). When discussing the relative decline of the United States, we are referring to the fact of that it no longer has the power to impose its will, as occurred in the unipolar years of the 1990s; its global and regional adversaries have achieved a broader space for resistance and action. The non-resolution of its recent military campaigns in the Middle East and the economic expectations generated by China's "Belt and Road Initiative" are two reliable signs of the loss of U.S. centrality on the world stage.

The clash of interests between those who want to preserve unipolarity and the pressure from other states seeking a multipolar order largely explain the core conflicts of the geopolitical world (Kucharz, 2016). Nor is it a case of a simple zero-sum game; over and above national interests, the interests of transnational corporations entail complex economic interactions that tend, at times, to blur the importance of nation-states and subordinate them to the needs of global capitalism.

The overlap of national interests with the expansive dynamic of capital has been exacerbated by the current crisis economic. This phenomenon greatly explains the emergence, in Europe and the United States, of political parties and candidates with conservative proposals that are supposedly opposed to



open regionalism, question the mass relocation of factories away from industrialized countries and financial over speculation, and stigmatize the waves of migrants from the poorest countries who seek to enter the most developed regions.<sup>1</sup> Incidentally, the economic panorama does not look like it is going to significantly improve, at least during this decade, so the factors causing the new tensions and conflicts will remain latent.

In this context, we have to look at the sociopolitical performance of Latin America. The process of diplomatic negotiations between the United States and Cuba—that now seems to have been truncated by the Trump administration, as well as the ceasefire agreements between the Government of Colombia and FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia), show that the region is going through significant changes, in terms of both continental relations and national dynamics (Serbin, 2016). But what is most relevant in the 21st century is that a large part of the countries that make up this region took advantage of the greater room for maneuver to implement national, subregional, and regional political measures that allow them some degree of autonomy.

However, it is evident that the United States still considers the region to be a buffer zone that supplies strategic resources, so it is trying to reclaim the ground lost during the rise of the so-called post-neoliberal governments. In contrast, the relative loss of North American hegemony in the region has also been seen by other extracontinental powers, in particular China, as an opportunity to increase their economic influence through imports of raw

materials, investments, and lines of credit that favor the struggling South American economies that are highly dependent on the export of commodities and have been hit by the fall in prices.

These external restrictions and opportunities exercise pressure on the region's political context and partially explain the changes of direction in the political orientation that have recently occurred in multiple countries, particularly the social regressions that occurred in Argentina and Brazil in 2015 and 2016.<sup>2</sup> Despite certain initiatives, Latin America is still adrift in this time of worldwide agitation. The systems of regional and subregional integration that have been created in this century are weak in the face of both the inertia of extraregional factors and the changes in political orientation in Latin American countries. Despite evidence of efforts being made for greater regional autonomy, recent models of multilateral political cooperation and dialog—such as the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), in 2008, and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), in 2010—suffer from a considerable dependence on presidential summits in the face of the scant development of a robust supranational institutionality that is insulated from the changes of government in the member countries (Celi, 2016).

There are no states in Latin America with sufficient interest and capacity to provide leadership oriented towards more solid and less rhetorical schemes for regional and subregional integration or that, on the other extreme, are able to overcome the drop in cooperation on matters of trade. The weight of national and extraregional interests undermines more

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1. The rise of conservative and xenophobic expressions in Europe has been exacerbated by the very contradictions and repercussions of global capitalism. It is good news that, between 2016 and 2017, the far right parties have been detained at the ballot boxes of Austria, Holland, and France, and are also expected to be detained in the German parliamentary elections of September 2017. However, as long as the social conditions that gave rise to these political formations are still latent and the progressive bloc still has not articulated a credible proposal for significant change, it would be wrong to assume that the contemporary outbreaks of the far right have disappeared for good.

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2. The retrocessions in these countries refer to the fact that, in the wake of the adjustment measures implemented by the Macri and Temer governments in Argentina and Brazil, respectively, there has been considerable growth in poverty and inequality, and the transfer of wealth to the richest sectors has risen as a result of the political measures that they adopted. To overcome the economic stagnation of the country, the Brazilian government has privileged the relaxation of employment laws, the adjustment of the social spending budget, and a decreased budget for the pensions system (See Salvia, Bonfiglio, & Vera, 2017; Peres, 2017; Schuster, 2017).



solid multilateral schemes. The fragmentation of joint action on the part of Latin American countries helps them to be seen as a land to be conquered, instead of as equals who deserve more symmetric agreements.

This limitation of the region aggravates its economic dependence on other regions and makes it more susceptible to the geopolitical interference of the main world powers—both the traditional and emerging powers (Schnake, 2010). Without a doubt, Latin America should increase regional integration on strategic issues, while supporting global initiatives that promote a democratic multilateralism.

### 3. Political evolution in Latin America

The world economic crisis and the limitations of procedural democracy mean that it is necessary to rethink the interpretation frameworks in order to promote inclusive social change, above all in Latin American societies which, despite the wave of progressive governments, are still the world's most unequal societies in terms of wealth distribution (Cáliz, 2016; OXFAM, 2016).<sup>3</sup>

Half-way through the 1990s, the panorama for the left around the world looked desolate, and Latin America was no exception: the fall of “real socialism” in the USSR and Eastern Europe, the attacks on Social Democratic welfare states, the crisis that hit the Cuban Revolution, and the hasty end of

the Sandinista Revolution were all events that established the need to redefine the political action of the left. Without the clear crystallization of new approaches, in the 21st century Latin America has demonstrated ideas and practices that, with their ups and downs and successes and contradictions, have helped us to glimpse emancipatory projects in a world exhausted by the inertia of capitalism in its neoliberal phase.

Of course the exhaustion of the neoliberal project does not *per se* ensure the triumph of an alternative project. In the first place, accessing quotas of power in the states does not automatically mean going back to the power that the traditional elites have over the economic, social, legal, and cultural processes (Stolowicz, 2004). In Latin America, especially in the Southern Cone, a mixed spectrum of forces that self-identified as belonging to the left were elected into power during the first decade of this century, with a basic acceptance of the rules of liberal democracy. However, above all in the Andean region, there were objections to procedural democracy because of its limitations in terms of making progress towards a democracy that would be inclusive in the political, social, cultural, and economic spheres.

However, this criticism of liberal democracy did not imply unequivocal progress towards qualitatively superior forms. Countries with little tradition of democracy run the risk of complaints about minimalist democracy resulting in the creation of clientelist structures of participation with reduced fields of action for dissidence and questioning leadership. This warning does not deny the broadening or redefinition of the redistributive system that has happened in some countries or the greater politicization of the poorer sectors; nevertheless, the democratic ethos still seems to be scarce in Latin America.

Moreover, the neoliberal currents bet on economic deregulation, privatization, the extreme relaxation of employment laws, and waiving the principle of progressive taxation, and, no less important, took great care to mold the democratic regime to the rotation and alternation typical of competitive elitism, regardless of how many people were excluded from effective political participation. Progressive forces

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3. Inequality is usually referred to in terms of income and wealth distribution, but gaps in land distribution should also be considered. By both measurements, Latin America is the most unequal region on the planet. According to data provided by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) presented by OXFAM (2016, pp. 21-23), Latin America has the most unequal land distribution in the world. Its Gini coefficient applied to land tenure is 0.79, in contrast with the coefficients of Europe (0.57), Africa (0.56), and Asia (0.55). In South America, the figure exceeds the regional average, achieving a value of 0.85, while Central America has a value that is barely below the average (0.75). Likewise, it is estimated that one percent of the production units of Latin America possess half the agricultural lands.





faced (and still face) the dilemma of either temporarily managing the crisis of neoliberal capitalism or taking a step forward—without this implying a shot in the dark—to create proposals that are a turning point in the understanding and management of the challenges of Latin American societies.

Anti-establishment politics involves the denunciation of injustices and the mobilization of the excluded. Within political action, the correlation of forces has considerable weight. Nevertheless, we must emphasize that politics, from any perspective, is also the generation of ideas and skills in order to successfully adjust, change, and apply public policies. Maybe that is the main challenge of the left: how to advance in its ability to conceive and develop a proposal, indeed, an alternative, *vis-à-vis* the correlation of forces to be found on the chessboard of material and symbolic power. Overcoming that challenge is not exclusively incumbent on the old elites or the so-called left-wing vanguards. Although unfortunately isolated and insufficiently studied, it is necessary to look to the prior experiences of social networks, groups, and movements that have managed to generate creative schemes and answers to overcome certain conditions of subordination.

Now then, it is counterproductive to assess a left-wing project within the context of pure happenstance. Actually, the type of accumulation of forces being brought together for the long-term consolidation of the goals of a political project must be examined with a magnifying glass. This implies analyzing the historical performance of the context's variables, the correlation of forces, and the level of the peoples' maturity in order to progress towards more united societies. Unfortunately, there is not much time. If the progressive wave that now holds sway in the region does produce any results or convinces its citizens with visions of a fairer, more viable and sustainable future, the reactionary political forces that are crouching, ready to pounce in several countries, will enable a turnaround in the region's political scenario, as is already being seen, either by electoral means, as in Argentina, or by political maneuvers that serve to conceal real coups d'état, as occurred in Brazil with the overthrow of President Dilma Rousseff.

The decline of the “commodities boom” that had sustained the social policy of the progressive governments represents a threat to the effectiveness and legality of their mandates. The lesson to be learned from this is that the region should prioritize, diversify, and grade its sources of growth and gradually fine tune progressive tax systems, while at the same time strengthening and broadening the subregional and regional markets so as not to depend so much on the fluctuating prices of raw materials. Another lesson to be learned is that the increase of consumption of several million Latin Americans, mainly in Brazil and Argentina, is not an indicator that will guarantee the electoral loyalty of these new social segments. If governments do not face up to consumer alienation and the changes in the demands of the new middle classes, that same population may turn their political preferences towards those who seduce them with the promise of increasing their consumption ability and security, even at the cost of sacrificing the redistribution structures that were revived during the previous decade.

Now is not the time to idealize a single emancipating subject. Politics no longer has a single referent. No organized political movement, party, or space can aspire to vertically represent the complexity of all social subjectivities. But accepting the absence of that sole subject does not mean giving up any efforts to articulate the subjects that have been excluded. This is a good time to delineate democratic strategies to gather strength, horizontally process common demands, agree to respect secondary discrepancies, and encourage agreements to address the fundamental contradictions of the system. Left-wing politics are the politics of inclusion and ongoing debate as a prelude to transformative collective action.

At the height of neoliberalism, Latin America was a region that stood out for the opposition of social, urban, and rural movements to the more drastic measures of the neoliberal approach.<sup>4</sup> By the end of the 1990s, direct or indirect reverberations of

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4. The cycle of protests that challenged the neoliberal model includes, among its main episodes: the irruption of Zapatismo in Mexico (1994); the protests and uprisings led by the National Indigenous Confederation of Ecuador (Con-



these struggles resulted in the assumption of power by parties with candidates that questioned the impact on the majority of the population of extreme liberalization and the critical reduction of the role of the state.

The cycle of resistance of the progressive forces catapulted a group of parties into power that, once in government, benefitted significantly from a significant rise in the prices of strategic raw materials—minerals and metals, fossil fuels, and certain monocultures—mostly due to increased demand from China and other Asian countries. This advantage allowed these governments to implement public policy changes to improve social protection programs and enlarge public infrastructure. One may object to numerous decisions made by Latin America's so-called progressive governments, but it would be a mistake not to acknowledge the palpable decrease in poverty, the internal market incentives, the salary adjustments, and the improvement in access to public assets that had been depleted by neoliberal politicians (Sierra, 2011).

However, it is also true that these governments did not take advantage of this favorable situation to make progress in the transformation of the production base, but rather relied on the primarization of Latin American economies (Cypher, 2014; Gudyas, 2011). The region continued to resist the challenge of moving from economies based on the production of raw materials towards economies with greater and more sustainable added value in their goods and services. Moreover, mostly because of delicate political equilibriums, progressive governments generally could not or did not try to stop a part of the oligarchies from continuing to get rich by using rent-seeking strategies. Nor is it appropriate to think that changing the pattern of production

specialization depends on the mere desire of national governments, or that this is a change that can be achieved overnight. In fact, the process involves multiple variables that are internal and external to the region. This complexity is precisely the reason for the complaint that these governments have not put their weight behind policies that would lay the groundwork for a change in the production model.

Moreover, the strategy of growth based on raw materials has had serious negative impacts on society and nature. Proof of this can be seen in the proliferation of socio-environmental conflicts that, in the absence of an adequate democratic processing, have stripped small-scale farmers and indigenous communities of their livelihood throughout Latin America.

### 3.1. Recent changes on the regional political chessboard

The favorable electoral cycle for mixed progressive or leftist forces—also referred to as post-neoliberal governments—altered the political map of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Indeed, in 2008, the wave of governments elected at the ballot box that have, to a greater or lesser extent, tried to challenge the assumptions of the neoliberal canon reached eleven presidencies, forming a broad progressive alliance in the group of eighteen Latin American countries (Stokes, 2009). The intention here is not to rigorously assess the level of consistency and coherence of each one of the governments that has adopted, to different degrees, certain anti-neoliberal measures, but rather to call attention to their predisposition to set out policies—although not always exempt from contradictions—aimed at repositioning, among other aspects, the role of the state, Latin American integration, and increased social investment.

The boom of these so-called post-neoliberal governments started in 1998 with Hugo Chávez's assumption of the presidency in Venezuela (and his reelections in 2002, 2006, and 2012), followed by the victory of Lula da Silva in Brazil (presidential candidate of the Workers' Party [PT]) in 2002 and

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federación of Nacional Indígenas de Ecuador-CONAIE), between 1998 and 2000; the peoples' movement in Costa Rica against the *Combo Energético* (a package of laws that sought to privatize the Costa Rican Power Institute), in the 2000s; the *piqueteros* movement and other collective actions in Argentina (2001-2002); and the popular uprisings in Bolivia during the so-called "water war" and "gas war" (2000-2003).



his reelection in 2006, and then the succession of Lula da Silva by Dilma Rousseff, who was also elected for two terms. For its part, the election of Néstor Kirchner in 2003 saw the start of the Kirchner era in Argentina, followed by the two presidential terms served by his wife, Cristina Fernández (2006-2010 and 2011-2015). In Uruguay, after several attempts, the Broad Front (*Frente Amplio* [FA]) won three consecutive presidential elections, first in 2004, with Tabaré Vázquez, then with José Mujica in 2009, and later with the reelection of Tabaré Vázquez in 2015. In Bolivia, the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) won the 2005 presidential elections with the candidate Evo Morales, who has since been reelected to two further terms, in 2009 and 2014. In Ecuador, Rafael Correa, of the PAIS Alliance party (PAIS), assumed the presidency in 2006 and was reelected in 2009 and 2013. In 2017, PAIS won again in the second round of closely fought elections that put Lenín Moreno in the presidency. In 2006, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) won the presidential elections in Nicaragua with Daniel Ortega as its candidate, who was then reelected in 2011 and 2016. In Paraguay, the Catholic bishop Fernando Lugo, supported by a coalition of the left in alliance with the traditional Liberal Party, received an electoral majority that enabled him to become president, putting an end to six decades of government (between dictatorships and elected governments) of the Colorado Party. Meanwhile, in El Salvador, after four presidential elections dominated by the conservative Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA), the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) won the presidential elections in 2009 and 2014 with the candidates Mauricio Funes and Salvador Sánchez Cerén, respectively (Bringel & Falero, 2016; Rho, 2016; Stoessel, 2014; Stokes, 2009).

It is also worth mentioning the case of Chile, despite the difficulties in categorizing the political alliances that emerged against the Pinochet dictatorship and the rigid political and economic demarcation that his regime left. Nevertheless, it is worth noting the weight of the center-left parties in the Coalition of Parties for Democracy that, with the alternation of Christian democrat and socialist candidates, won four consecutive presidential elections, allowing these political forces to govern from 1990

to 2010. In 2010, the Coalition lost the elections in the second round to the center-right opposition, and Sebastián Piñera took office as president. After the defeat of 2010, the Coalition broadened its alliance with left-wing parties—including the Communist Party—and created the New Majority, which won the 2013 elections, electing Michelle Bachelet to the presidency for a second time. Now, the center-left coalition presents serious fissures that put its continuity at risk and opens up spaces for new progressive reconfigurations in Chile.

Democracy, among other attributes, implies the possibility of alternation of political power, and changes of the party in government are part of the rules of the game. The issue arises when the processes of change in societies as unequal as those in Latin America do not take root and concretize in more or less stable social pacts. When the inclusive changes are not institutionalized, the alternation in favor of the traditional elites quite obviously presents the threat of a backward step for the incipient transformation processes. Here lies one of the main challenges for Latin American democracies: achieving an alternation of governments without ruptures or regressions in the accumulation of citizen rights and guarantees.

It is clear that the weaknesses of the renewal of progressive parties and political cadres facilitates the weakening of the post-neoliberal projects, a situation that in recent years has been exacerbated by adverse economic contexts, the strategic renewal of the elites, and the backslide into certain management mistakes and deviations in the governments that sought to advance social change. In this vein, it should not be surprising that the favorable electoral cycle has run out of steam and is now facing considerable risks.<sup>5</sup>

The coups d'état in Honduras and Paraguay in 2009 and 2012, respectively, were the first visible symptoms of the conservative backlash in the Latin

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5. Some authors point out a weakness in the progressive cycle that reflects, above all, the debilitation of the elites in power, the impact of corruption, and the cessation or stagnation of favorable economic cycles (Marín & Muñoz, 2016).



American region. Certainly neither Manuel Zelaya (Honduras) nor Fernando Lugo (Paraguay) represented a decided turn to left-wing politics, but they promoted initiatives of inclusion that alarmed the oligarchies of both countries, which, in addition to the support of the continental right-wing, brought the two governments to an abrupt end. And there are other signs of the end of the progressive electoral cycle. In 2014, PAIS only managed to win in one of the ten most populated cities in Ecuador's regional elections, despite the fact that it continued to be the political force that won the highest number of city halls and prefectures, and improved, in general terms, its electoral presence in the country as a whole (Le Quang, 2015).

At the end of 2015, Mauricio Macri won the elections in Argentina, putting an end to a 12-year Kirchnerist-Peronist cycle (2003-2015). Almost simultaneously, in December of that year, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) lost by a wide margin in the Venezuelan parliamentary elections. Three months later, in February 2016, Evo Morales lost the referendum to decide if he could be reelected yet again.<sup>6</sup> Then, in 2016, by means of a contrived impeachment, the reactionary political forces of the Brazilian parliament managed to remove Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff from office at the end of August. Within this context, Lenín Moreno's 2017 election as president of Ecuador plays, for now, an important symbolic role, as an outlier in the apparent trend away from progressive governments in the region.

As previously noted, these political changes have generally implied an open or surreptitious return to a type of politics that endeavors to both decrease the redistributive role of the state, as well as the initiatives to create a more solidary Latin American integration. The challenge lies in the creations of coalitions

of political opposition that firmly correct the deviations of contemporary progressivism—if these do not want to correct themselves—while driving and improving the redistributive action observed during this period.

There are signs that this is not necessarily the end of the progressive political cycle, but we are seeing threats and backlashes that pose challenges for the review of actions taken to date. The economic complications resulting from, more than anything, the drastic drop in income from the export of raw materials have not only shown the limits of the potential for transformation of these governments' policies, but have also decreased their electoral base and the spectrum of interim alliances (Ospina, 2016).

Nor will it be easy for the conservative and neoliberal governments to manage the delicate social equilibriums that were achieved during the boom of self-proclaimed left-wing governments. The external economic conditions are still complicated, and certain citizen groups, despite the deficits in the formation of an emancipating social consciousness, will notice the differences between one and another type of political administration. Should the political parties now removed from government insist on blaming their defeats solely on factors exogenous to their administration, then the uncertainty that the citizenry has regarding the alternatives for change will only increase.

It is time to redefine strategies, especially those relating to: a) relations with social movements, grassroots organizations, and the citizenry in general; b) the transition of the production base; c) the formation of consciousness and critical and public opinion that shows solidarity; and d) the relationship with the environment, which has been so significantly deteriorated by the way people inhabit and occupy the territory.

One of the main reflections is that the left's field of action cannot be restricted to the electoral sphere (Stolowicz, 2004). Materializing electoral advances into processes of social-ecological transformative action involves, without exception, a permanent struggle in every part of social life where there are asymmetric power relations.

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6. In 2015, the first round of the presidential elections took place in Argentina. Macri won 51.34 percent of the votes in the second round; Daniel Scioli, the official candidate, won 48.66 percent. Moreover, the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) won 112 out of the 167 seats in the legislature, enough to give them a qualified majority in the National Assembly.



## 4. Political strategies and focuses of progressive administrations

Apart from describing how progressive or left-wing governments fared in the elections in the region, it is worth looking at the political strategies they used to win and stay in power during several consecutive administrations. It is also important to identify, in general terms, the political focuses that these governments have had during their predominance in the 21st century. Once again, here we must be cautious of the heterogeneity in the dynamics of accessing and exercising government.

### 4.1. Political strategies for winning and staying in power

The conditions of possibility and the imaginings of social struggle changed substantially in the last decades of the last century, to the point that armed insurrection became less feasible or desirable (Stoessel, 2014). The gradual fall of the reactionary military dictatorships in the region—culminating with the removal from power of Stroessner in Paraguay (1989) and Pinochet in Chile (1990)—gave way to governments that were elected under the basic rules of liberal democracy. Although this shift did not, in general, signify a substantial improvement of rights, let alone democracy, it at least began a period of more respect for certain civil or political rights that, in the following years, represented an area of opportunity for the forces of the left in the majority of Latin American countries.

It could be said that two apparently contradictory phenomena co-existed in the region. On the one hand, the promise of democratization altered the unfair distribution of political power and, on the other hand, the repercussions of the neoliberal approach led to a drop in social and economic rights and, accordingly, less action on the part of the state to try to correct social inequalities. The newly instated democracies, restricted to a competition between elites to hegemonize the process of domination, soon encountered limits and resistance efforts that, after multiple episodes of popular mobilization, destroyed the legitimacy of neoliberal govern-

ments towards the end of the 1990s. This combination of phenomena generated favorable conditions for parties that were critical of the economic and social focuses of the sitting governments to take over the reins of power through the ballot box.

Irrespective of their ideology, different, supposedly progressive political forces ascended to the national governments. It is worth noting a feature that is common to all of these new governments: *they won power through elections*, using the pre-established rules set by the traditional elites. This is true even for the political forces that had been initially formed as guerrilla fronts, as in the cases of the FMLN and the FSLN in El Salvador and Nicaragua, respectively. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that Dilma Rousseff, José Mujica, Salvador Sánchez Cerén, and Daniel Ortega had all been part of guerrilla armies at some point before being elected president of their countries.

The gamble on the electoral option revealed two concurrent circumstances: a) the existence of greater tolerance for the participation of left-wing parties in electoral processes, and b) a narrower horizon of change than that posed by the armed revolution processes, to the extent that the rules of electoral democracy—and the corresponding architecture that prevails in Latin American states—determine, *a priori*, the alternative political projects to a much greater extent.

Despite all having reached the presidency through elections, important differences exist between the progressive governments, primarily depending on the type of parties and political alliances that enabled their rise to power. Without attempting to provide an exhaustive description of each variant observed in the region, at least three methods used by progressivism to come to power can be observed:

1. *By means of political parties that are already established and have a certain accumulated strength:* This is the case of the PT in Brazil, the Justicialist Party (PJ) in Argentina, and the FA in Uruguay.
2. *By means of recently formed political parties that took advantage of the cracks in the traditional*



*party system to become a majority:* This is the case of the Fifth Republic Movement in Venezuela, which later became the PSUV; PAIS in Ecuador; and MAS in Bolivia.

3. *Through parties that came directly out of the guerrilla forces, which, after the peace agreements in their respective countries, went on to participate in the electoral process:* This is the case for the FSLN in Nicaragua and the FMLN in El Salvador.

In the first situation, the progressive parties of those countries, situated in the south of the continent, generally had less room for maneuver to introduce changes in public policy. This is due to the existence of a state apparatus that is generally more institutionalized with more consolidated rules of the game, combined with a complex equilibrium of parliamentary political forces, even in the years when progressive parties triumphed with more conclusive majorities. One outstanding example of the types of restrictions and political negotiations faced by these parties is the alliance the Brazilian PT made with the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB).<sup>7</sup> Although this relationship enabled the PT to govern, it ended up being a partnership that further neutralized the left-wing agenda of the PT and facilitated the development of the networks of corruption that are now damaging the reputation of the PT governments; worse still, the PMDB was the Trojan horse that unleashed the events that eventually led to Rousseff's impeachment. In contrast, the FA in Uruguay has been able to use the more solid institutional context and more symmetric balance of powers to channel a process of incremental progressive reforms.

In the second situation, seen in three Andean countries, the weaknesses of the state and the collapse of the traditional party system enabled the irruption of new political forces that, within a short time, became hegemonic in the face of a delegitimized and disperse opposition (Moreira, 2017). It is important to keep in mind the fact that although these parties had more decision-making leeway than their peers to the south, they always faced powerful economic and media interests that, for a variety of reasons, rejected the focus and praxis of the governments.

Out of these three countries, the ruling party that now faces the most problems is Venezuela's PSUV, which is facing an extremely serious economic and political crisis due to multiple internal and external factors. The adverse results of the 2015 legislative elections are one of the most significant demonstrations of the PSUV's weaknesses.

In terms of the third situation, although the FSLN and the FMLN share an immediate background of civil wars and peace agreements in their respective countries, the track record of their experiences in government differ substantially. On the one hand, the FSLN, as a guerrilla force, ruled in Nicaragua during the period from 1979 until 1990, when it lost the elections to the National Opposition Union. The FSLN subsequently became the opposition party until 2006, when it triumphed in the elections and placed Daniel Ortega in the presidency; Ortega was reelected in both 2011 and 2016. On the other hand, the FMLN participated in four presidential elections after the peace agreements of 1992, which the conservative party, the

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7. The PMDB is a center-right party in Brazil that originated from the Brazilian Democratic Movement (1966). Created in 1980, the PMDB played an important role in the struggle against the military dictatorship at that time. It has a broad territorial presence at regional and local level, based on notable clientist networks and local and regional *caciques* [TN: local political bosses]. It is considered to be the party with the highest membership in Brazil. However, the PMDB has never been able to win a presidential election; in fact, since its creation, it has only taken part in two presidential elections in 1989 and 1994 (with feeble results). Nevertheless, its territorial base has, since 1995, enabled it to form coalitions with all the parties that have triumphed in the presidential elections, permitting it to obtain functional majorities (Infobae, 2015; Mainwaring, 1996). As a result of these alliances, the PMDB has already had three vice presidents that, for a variety of reasons, have stood in for the elected presidents of other parties that were not able to finish their terms: Vice President José Sarney (president from 1985 to 1990) succeeded Tancredo Neves, who died before he took office; Vice President Itamar Franco (president from 1992 to 1994) succeeded Fernando Collor de Mello, who was forced to resign after notorious corruption scandals; and Vice President Michel Temer (president from 2016 to date) succeeded Dilma Rousseff after her removal from office.



Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA), always won. During that time, the FMLN accumulated an electoral base and consolidated important results in the municipal and legislative elections. Finally, the FMLN won the presidency in the elections of 2009 and 2014. While the FSLN, under the leadership of Daniel Ortega, managed to hegemonize the party system through a variety of strategies and control Nicaragua without any serious problems, the FMLN has had to operate in a more balanced party system with a state institutional design that is less propitious for the concentration of power than the governing Sandinistas experienced in Nicaragua. It is worth mentioning that the FSLN, despite its vast power, has not promoted a constituent process in the style of the Andean countries; it has, instead, opted to use both its parliamentary majority and presidential decrees in order to gradually adapt the laws and consolidate its political power.

Apart from these three modalities, the uniqueness of the Chilean case is also worth mentioning. In Chile, a coalition of Christian democrat and social democrat parties rose to power after the victory of the “No” vote in the plebiscite that put an end to Pinochet’s dictatorship, supported by the Coalition of Parties. In October 1988, the Coalition of Parties for Democracy was born, a group that brought together a broad spectrum of political opponents to the dictatorial regime. The Coalition went on to win the elections called in 1989. Since 1990, the Coalition has held four consecutive presidencies, the first two with a Christian democrat candidate (1990-1999) and the following two with center-left candidates (2000-2010). After the Coalition’s defeat in the 2009 elections that elected Sebastián Piñera (2010-2014) to the presidency, the group broadened its base to include other left-wing parties and changed its name to the New Majority. Under this new name, the party won in the second round of the 2013 elections, giving Michelle Bachelet her second presidential term (2014-2018).

Between 2006 and 2012, two atypical cases were also observed of presidents who, having been largely backed by the vote of traditional parties, exhibited stances that were close to the spectrum of progressive ideas of Latin America once in office. Both presidents had a social base that was too weak to

even attempt to challenge some of the privileges of the *status quo*. The first case is that of Manuel Zelaya, in Honduras, elected by the traditional Liberal Party for the period 2006-2010. The president, after a series of concurrent decisions and circumstances, sought to distance himself from the hegemonic leaders of his party; approaching the Petrocaribe initiative, promoted by the Government of Venezuela; entering the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA); strengthening various alliances with social movements; and, in a context of greater economic growth, substantially improving the minimum wage to lessen the gap between the minimum wage and the basic food basket. With a unique correlation of forces—very different from what had been in place at the start of his mandate—he promoted the idea that the country needed a national, pluralist constituent process that would redefine the institutional democratic framework.

The oligarchy, worried by the future outcome of these changes that would impact their privileges, decided to carry out a coup d’état in June 2009, seven months before Zelaya’s time in power was to come to an end. As of 2010, Honduras was governed by the conservative National Party, with an aggressive neoliberal agenda, in alliance with the much-diminished Liberal Party, which was weakened after the coup d’état. A significant number of Liberal Party members went on to form part of the Liberty and Refoundation party, created in 2012, which brought together the majority of the sectors that opposed the overthrow of Zelaya.

The other case is that of ex-bishop Fernando Lugo, who was elected president of Paraguay for the 2009-2013 term. Lugo participated in the elections as a candidate with the Patriotic Alliance for Change, a broad coalition of parties. Lugo represented a coalition of progressive parties that then allied itself with the traditional Authentic Radical Liberal Party (PLRA) in order to have any possibility of winning the election. In exchange for its support, the PLRA positioned Federico Franco as Vice President. In 2012, when Lugo was about to finish the fourth year of his five-year presidential term, the PLRA participated in a political maneuver in the Chamber of Deputies to open impeachment proceedings;



these proceedings culminated in Lugo's removal from office and his replacement by Vice President Franco.

In an analysis of the political strategies of the progressive parties that rose to rule the national governments, another otherwise relevant aspect is the relationship with the social movements that question the neoliberal order, the capitalist system, or even profoundly criticize the very rationality of modernity. As was already noted, the anti-neoliberal movements of the 1990s and the first years of the 21st century were a reaction that, with different levels of intensity, had repercussions throughout the region. Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela particularly stand out due to the intensity and length of the episodes of social protest. These protests severely weakened the governance agreements of the elites. This scenario of dissatisfaction and resistance created favorable conditions for the rise to power of political parties that were critical of neoliberalism (Fernández, 2016). It was not a matter of collective actions of protest corresponding to a single group of excluded players; in fact, heterogeneity and, often, spontaneity prevailed.

The diversity of players opposed to the logic of accumulation, speculation, and domination over people and territories had a high potential to make a process of transformation viable in the region. However, the electoral route prevailed that, as we know, places pressure on political forces to accumulate strengths and skills over time in order to obtain, in the short term, a satisfactory share of the vote; in other words, elections became the principal pathway for efforts aimed at challenging the power of the traditional elites. Of course, participating in elections when it is possible to win is not a negative thing, far from it; it was something that had to be done. However, not enough attention was paid to promoting political processes that honestly articulated the institutional party way with the huge job of continuing to strengthen the consciousness, organization, and empowerment of the grassroots.

The very relationship with social movements and grassroots organizations shows the limits of the progressive governments' perspective on change, not only of those that embarked on refoundation-

al projects but also those that were forced to opt for reforms and ongoing pacts with other political parties. As was to be expected, the main conflicts arise with those movements that question the continuity and entrenchment of the extractive model. Although this model provided massive funds for the governments, especially during the 2003-2013 period, it was untenable if the production base remained unchanged. Equally important is the fact that the expansion of the extractive frontier has meant the displacement, wrongful dispossession, and, consequently, greater vulnerability of mostly indigenous and rural settlements that find themselves impotent in front of state reason and the interests of multinational corporations.

As a general rule, current progressive efforts in Latin America have not adequately forged relationships with social movements that favor the conditions for change in the political balance of power. Bolivia, perhaps, presents the best example of the articulation of social movements, particularly grassroots indigenous and coca farmer movements, with the powerful political force that formed the MAS. However, with the gradual consolidation of Evo Morales' government, tensions started to arise—foreseeable up to a certain point—between the rationality of the government cadre and certain collectives within the social bloc that had permitted political change to happen in Bolivia.

The above does not mean that the point of view of the social movements should be considered to be the only valid perspective, as ignoring the pressures and challenges faced by governments is also counterproductive. What is worth emphasizing is that the foundation has not been laid for a social platform that would articulate the political bloc and facilitate agreements on the focus and praxis of the alternative projects.

#### **4.2. An approach to the policy focus of progressive governments**

Although the heterogeneity of progressive governments is an irrefutable fact, it is worth identifying some cross-cutting features that characterize their administrations. Bear in mind that these common





features differ in intensity, depending on the context of each country. *A priori*, an analysis of the praxis of these governments proposes more or less three lines of action: a) efforts to improve state funding through economic activities thought to be strategic, b) efforts to strengthen the role of the state in supporting social justice, and c) attempts to advance towards more autonomous political integration that is separate from the United States and more in line with the vision of a multipolar world.

These initiatives resulted in at least two types of political measures: a) a distancing from the hard-core policies demanded by international financial bodies, particularly the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and b) the creation of regional instances and forums for dialogue and the consolidation of an alternative integration—particularly, the creation of UNASUR and CELAC.

More specifically, progressive political action was concentrated on readapting the role of the state in the processes of social change being promoted in each country. This implied making decisions to increase the portion of available financial resources, adapting the institutional legal framework to broaden state powers—emphasizing the social sector—and adjusting international relations depending on how much room for maneuver was available.

The strategy to increase financial resources was based on guaranteeing the collection of higher revenues from primary export products and, with few exceptions, could not overcome the neoliberal inheritance of a tax structure based on indirect taxes. During the 2000-2011 period, it is particularly interesting that the majority of the countries in the region showed an increase in tax collection as a percentage of GDP within a context of higher growth and increased consumption on the part of the poorest quintile. In fact, during that period, the tax burden in the Latin American region went from 19.3 percent to 23.6 percent of the GDP, including social security contributions and excluding oil revenues. During that period, the countries with the highest increase in tax pressure were Argentina and Ecuador, while Mexico and Venezuela lowered taxes. It is worth noting that, in 2012, seven Latin

American countries, the majority governed by progressive governments, had a tax burden that was above the average for the region, including social security contributions: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Chile, Ecuador and Uruguay (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC], 2013).<sup>8</sup>

The advances in tax collection are a positive feature in Latin America, but it must be said that, except for Brazil and Argentina, the proportion of tax revenues based on GDP is very low when compared with the tax revenues of, for example, the countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Moreover, regressive tax collection is still a problem in the region, something that progressive political administrations have come nowhere near to resolving.<sup>9</sup> Since the 1990s, tax reform has concentrated on higher tax collection through indirect taxes, especially value added tax, to the point that this is the main contributor within the set of taxes considered in tax revenues. Despite some advances with an increased share of direct taxes, significant work still needs to be done, particularly in terms of levying capital gains taxes and reducing unjustified tax exemptions without ignoring the redistributive potential that a better collection of capital taxes could have (ECLAC, 2013; ECLAC, 2014; Gómez & Morán, 2016; Jiménez, 2015; Martner, 2016).

The region also suffers from a tax problem that is hard to solve unless a new correlation of forces is put together at the supranational level. The tax base

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8. Between 2005 and 2012, the increased tax pressure particularly stands out in Argentina (from 26.9 percent to 37.3 percent), Ecuador (from 11.7 percent to 20.2 percent) and Bolivia (from 19.1 percent to 26 percent) (Gómez & Morán, 2016; ECLAC, 2013).

9. One example of this regressive structure is given by Bárcena (2016), when she points out that the mean effective tax rate paid by the richest decile in Latin America is no more than five percent of their disposable income, and that the tax systems of Latin America are six times less effective than the European tax systems in terms of wealth redistribution and lowering inequality.



erosion caused by the subordinated insertion in the global economy is notable, giving rise, among other grievances, to mass capital flight that evaporates the basis for the funding that should be produced by the most dynamic activities of the economy. This has to do with excessive tax incentives for foreign direct investment, but also with the scant intra-firm trade regulations for transnational companies, and capital flight through both illegal activities and the placement of funds in tax havens (Nueva Sociedad, 2016).

Where progressive governments were better able to obtain funds was through state participation in revenues, either through direct control of the revenues or the collection of royalties; this was particularly lucrative in the case of non-renewable natural resources—hydrocarbons and, to a lesser extent, mining. The methods used to improve this participation ranged from the nationalization of strategic resources to joint shareholding to the renegotiation of concession agreements. The highest revenues can be seen when comparing the indicators for the 1990-2002 and 2003-2010 periods. For example, in Ecuador, between the 1999-2001 and 2009-2011 periods, the revenues obtained from the exploitation of primary products grew by 7.2 percent in proportion to GDP; a similar trend can be seen in Bolivia (3 percent), Argentina (2.9 percent), and Chile (2.2 percent) (Gómez, 2016; ECLAC, 2013).

The region had enjoyed the bonanza of the international prices of its raw materials at other points as well, but local governments did not always take advantage of the situation. A positive aspect of the last boom was the greater will and ability of the states to access the resulting surpluses for use in infrastructure and social services investment, with greater scope than that observed during the height of the neoliberal era of the 1990s.

However, the extractive approach causes negative effects that should be taken into account in progressive administrations in addition to the valuable revenues that states have received. The following repercussions are worth mentioning: a) the primary export sector, particularly hydrocarbons and mining, generates little or no integration with national and regional economies, does not induce industri-

alization processes *per se*, and is capital intensive, but not intensive in job creation (Gudynas, Guevara, & Roque, 2008); b) the extension of extractive frontiers has caused socio-environmental impacts and conflicts that make the livelihood of rural, especially indigenous, communities precarious and compromise the sustainability of natural environments; c) increased dependence on extractive exports makes domestic economies more vulnerable due to the high price volatility of these products; d) the revenues generated by extractive products tend to make states lax in their responsibility to design and consolidate progressive tax systems that are sufficient to sustainably provide tax revenues (ECLAC, 2013); and e) in the absence of corrective policies, the massive influx of foreign currency during periods when there is a commodity boom increases the risk of excess monetary liquidity (Dutch disease), with its consequent effects on inflation and the disincentives for the export supply of industrial goods.

It is now worth asking about the type of public policies that benefitted from the funds raised during the cycle of favorable prices for raw materials. Rather than an abrupt rupture with the policies of preceding governments, programs were created and strengthened to lower the gaps in social inclusion that market failures had widened. The notable advances in poverty reduction and in the improvement of access to certain public services of the most vulnerable groups have not been sufficient to counteract the determining factors of social exclusion. To address this issue, more structural interventions focused on the characteristics of the economic model are needed.

During the years when there was a greater predominance of progressive governments in the region, the most outstanding achievement was the reduction of poverty, which went from 43.8 percent in 2002 to 28.1 percent in 2013; in other words, a reduction of approximately 16 percentage points. In comparison, between 1990 and 2002, poverty levels only decreased by 4.6 percentage points: from 48.4 percent to 43.8 percent. This drop was not a product of mere economic growth, as the region had already enjoyed other favorable cycles that did not translate into social welfare for the poorest in society. The effort on the part of these governments to collect



higher revenues and increase social spending must be acknowledged. This increase in social spending can be seen in terms of macroeconomic priorities and budgetary priorities.<sup>10</sup> There were substantial increases in social spending, even in times of crisis or when the advantageous economic conditions of the first two decades of this century began to change.<sup>11</sup> Contrary to what happened during the years of neoliberal hegemony, these governments refused to opt for pro-cyclical social spending behavior, instead tending to maintain or reinforce poverty reduction programs (ECLAC, 2015).

It is important to point out that at the height of the global financial crisis in 2009, these governments prioritized measures to stabilize national demand by increasing public spending on non-social needs, investing in road infrastructure, education, public health, and housing that were linked to job creation programs, as well as in programs that provided credit to the microenterprises sector as a way to encourage production. However, in this area of policy—production infrastructure and promotion—the implementation capacity was less satisfactory than it was for social assistance and social protection programs (ECLAC, 2015).

It is indisputable that the progressive governments focused on trying to mitigate the more visible effects of social exclusion, which is why they deepened and extended the focalization policies they had inherited from the neoliberal governments. Hence the success in improving the level of coordination and achieving positive impacts for conditional transfer programs and, in general, for programs to reduce poverty, homelessness, malnutrition, and maternal

and infant mortality and programs to provide a basic income to senior citizens, among others (Mirza, 2014).

At the same time, depending on the context of each country, better equilibrium and articulation was achieved between the focalization of welfare and the universalization of access to social rights; there have been less conclusive advances in the latter, as the universalization of certain benefits requires not only more financial resources, but also better implementation capacity for public policies. This improved capacity depends on improving the allocation criteria for social spending and lowering the levels of ineffectiveness and corruption in public services.

Based on the above, and irrespective of the level of efficiency or depth that each government has achieved, one might agree with the observation of Christian Mirza (2014) that the majority of progressive governments have common features regarding how they conceive social policy and the type of efforts they deploy, to wit: a) positioning the idea of a state that protects and promotes rights; b) seeking to further integrate public policies; c) considering universality, not just focalization; d) increasing social investment (with a countercyclical tendency); e) applying social reforms, especially in health and education; and f) prioritizing intersectoral articulation and institutional innovations.

But despite the benefits seen in certain areas, on the whole, the interventions concentrated more on the symptoms of poverty than on the multiple causes. As Gudynas (2008) said, the programs implemented tended to concentrate on emergency measures for dealing with extreme poverty and poverty in general, which is why they focused on ensuring that the most vulnerable families had access to a basic income and improving access to health and education systems (particularly primary education, although with serious limitations in terms of improving the pertinence of the education, access to secondary education, and science and technology in general). The point is that these measures, though laudable, are far from sufficient. One example of their limitations is that there has been no substantial reduc-

10. Social spending as a percentage of total public spending increased from 60.9 percent in the 2001-2002 period to 66.4 percent in the 2013-2014 period (ECLAC, 2015).

11. This acyclical, or even anti-cyclical trend was observed, for example, with the increased prices of food and fuel in 2008 (especially in countries that do not have any oil fields), during the worst stage of the financial crisis (2009), and even during recent years with the slow-down of emerging economies and the main export markets on which Latin America depends (China, in particular, for South America; the United States and Europe for Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean).



tion of inequality in Latin America during the 21st century, which is why it is still considered to be the most unequal region on the planet.<sup>12</sup> Gudynas also mentions that the very programs considered to be successful must still face the challenges of overcoming the risks of electoral clientelism.

One of the main conclusions that can be taken from the public policy approaches of progressive governments is the recognition that significant levels of inclusion have been achieved for broad sections of the population; however, this inclusion is precarious, and has not been able to make much progress in two directions: a) in the reorientation of the present economic system of production, distribution, and consumption, which is based on maximizing private profits and externalizing the socio-environmental impacts and b) in the critical, autonomous, and socially-relevant empowering of the more vulnerable citizen and social groups in the region.

## 5. Final considerations

The previous sections of this essay attempt to connect the performance of the progressive governments in Latin America with global and regional trends. Although not a thorough country-by-country analysis, they at least provide an approach to

crucial characteristics in order to examine the administration of these governments and note their achievements, limits, and challenges. The question that now arises is how the behavior of these phenomena obstructs or enables a qualitative leap in public administration towards the social-ecological transformation of Latin America.

An assessment of the governments that were perceived as alternatives to those that had prevailed during recent decades requires empathy in order to better understand the specific pressures and challenges that they have faced. On the other hand, this assessment also requires a critical stance that allows the analysis to be conducted without any dogmatism or exaggerated defensiveness of one or another political experience. What is really in play is the possibility of enabling emancipatory projects that responsibly articulate the search for social wellbeing with the ecosystems' limits and possibilities.

Without losing sight of the difficulties involved in cataloging the parties that led the wave of political change, it is of particular note that the majority of these parties define themselves as left or progressive, thus allowing the citizenry to identify options that broadened the political spectrum that has prevailed in the region. However, self-identification is not enough to ensure that a particular party or government is progressive; it is necessary to analyze their track records, contextualize them, and learn the relevant lessons. A lot has been said about the regression implied by the new ascent of neoliberal or conservative parties, but it is also important to note that, in the absence of self-criticism and plurality, the experiences of progressive governments can themselves become a path towards regression.

The main considerations regarding the issues raised in this essay are summarized below:

1. *The changes that have occurred in Latin America during the 21st century are closely linked to the crisis in global capitalism and the new geopolitical tensions and articulations that said crisis has implied, but the room for maneuver that the region and its countries could take advantage of should not be underestimated.* The transfer of economic dynamism from the Atlantic Ameri-

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12. On this subject, Jiménez (2015) noted that:

“the institutions in the region have not managed to restrict (ex ante) the market dynamics that generate the concentration of income and their capacity to correct this (ex post) by means of monetary transfers and taxes is limited, above all when compared with the experiences of other countries or regions. This limited capacity is the result of the low levels of tax revenues and their diminished distributive impact, as well as the smaller and less progressive levels of transfers, including contributory ones. On the other hand, we must also acknowledge that the growing incorporation of non-contributory pensions, particularly conditional monetary transfers aimed at households with children, has considerably expanded the coverage of these types of benefits, which are highly progressive. Thus, secondary redistribution through social spending has improved considerably in the region. Taxes, however, have not followed the same route, and their redistributive function has hardly, in general terms, been broadened at all”. (pp. 26-27)



can–European axis to the Asian Pacific one is an undeniable fact that involves different interests and dynamics to reconfigure the balances of political and economic power. The global context has a massive influence, but it does not completely determine the paths to be followed by Latin American governments. There is always room for maneuver at the regional, subregional, and national level that responds to other factors, such as institutional capacities, the efforts to reorient the economic system, levels of cohesion and social justice, and the strengthening of democracy. In other words, the social pacts that tacitly or expressly exist in each country create a particular context that may result in better or worse conditions for the adaptation to global and hemispheric circumstances.

Recent events, such as the motivations behind Brexit; the electoral expansion of neo-fascist parties in Europe; the Trump presidency and others, show that the economic and ecological crisis will not necessarily result in multilateral equilibriums that redefine a more responsible globalization process. If nothing is done, a new enclosure of the world is also possible. Attempts to rebuild hegemony on the part of forces that have been much diminished by global dynamics could cause major problems to global co-existence and, no less importantly, to the efforts to overcome the planet's biophysical challenges.

Despite everything, Latin America could, in the middle of the crisis, take advantage of the opportunities to progress to a type of integration that would not only enable greater internal cohesion, but also consolidate increased autonomy—not isolation—in respect to other regions and continents. However, the internal landscape of the region is not very encouraging: private interests tend to prevail more often than not and progress towards the region's integration is slow and frequently interrupted.

Over and beyond the interim advantages offered by the emergence of new powers or markets, a more articulated and symmetric multi-

polar world would benefit the Latin American region more than unipolarity, asymmetric multipolarity, or even a renewal of the bipolar world. As an integrated region, Latin America could have important weight in a new world order; as long as it remains disintegrated, as has been the custom, it will always be a place to be conquered by the powers and interests of the moment, and its economic insertion will continue to depend on its specialization in primary production.

2. *The political change observed in Latin America during the 21st century is not something that can solely be explained by the concurrence of favorable conditions; we must acknowledge the merits of the progressive parties:* The region's traditional elites have never before had to surrender so much ground within the institutional public power. This did not, by a long shot, mean the death of neoliberalism, but it did represent a turnaround in the administration that opened up the possibility of new balances of power and alternative practices in public policy and government relations.

It is worth mentioning the presence of three factors that enabled the so-called progressive governments to win and remain in power: a) the intense social movements that protested against the repercussions of the neoliberal regimes of the 1990s and the first years of the 21st century; b) the high prices that were paid for the strategic raw materials exported by most of the countries in the region, particularly South America; and c) the concentration of all the energy of the United States on other regions of the planet in an attempt to control the Middle East, consolidate bastions in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and create the conditions necessary in the Asian Pacific region to contain China.

*A priori*, these factors are seemingly external to the political parties that took advantage of the environment to win elections, mainly during the 2003-2013 period. A deeper analysis, however, shows that this political boom cannot solely be explained by these favorable condi-



tions; it is also important to credit these parties with having had the sense to take advantage of and capitalize on these conditions in some way or other, inasmuch as they: a) managed to present themselves to the electorate as a credible option within an adverse context, represented, for example, by the concentration of the media in favor of the main economic groups; b) adjusted the legal-institutional framework to attract a greater part of the surpluses of the economic cycle and channel them to social protection and strategic infrastructure programs; and c) created conditions, regardless of how basic they seem, to articulate a national and regional position that is less subordinate to the United States and relatively more open to South-South relations.

3. *The progressive parties optimized electoral strategies to rise to power and repeat mandates, but neglected the opportunity to establish a historic political bloc with the social movements that had resisted the neoliberal governments:* Distancing themselves from the approaches of prior eras, the majority of the left-wing forces turned to the electoral process as the preferred way of gaining access to the government. The end of the military dictatorships and the unprecedented creation of a basic foundation of civil and political liberties strengthened the structure of political opportunities. Parties like the PT in Brazil, the MAS in Bolivia, the FA in Uruguay, the FMLN in El Salvador, the PAIS in Ecuador, and the PSUV in Venezuela, among others, knew how to adapt their strategies to stand out in the electoral field. Moreover, when some parties considered it necessary due to a lack of political majority, they entered into alliances with other parties to generate pre-electoral coalitions, or alliances and parliamentary agreements capable of breaking potential political blocs. But the strengthening of these parties' electoral political abilities was inversely proportional to their abilities to be horizontally articulated with social movements that demanded more substantive changes.

It is not surprising that there have been conflicts between the vision of the new bureaucra-

cies and the more radical demands of certain social movements. Actually, these types of tensions are inevitable and, in many cases, desirable for dialectic purposes. The problem lies in the way the conflicts are managed. On the one hand, political actors and public servants tend to ignore or stigmatize people who make demands that fall outside the range of policies established by their governments—branding them, *a priori*, as naive or collaborators with reactionary forces. This has happened, for example, with people who question the direction of the economic model, the deterioration of the environment, and autocratic practices and lack of transparency in the public administration.

On the other hand, the government's relationship with the citizenry and social collectives tends to be reduced to instances that, while popular, restrict areas for criticism and dissidence, becoming mere bastions of electoral support for the government. It is not inherently bad for progressive governments to have bastions of this type. Issues arrive, however, when such spaces replace or are confused with those that should be created for the purpose of forging pluralist agreements and broad alliances that, above all, permit the expansion of the historic bloc that makes transformation viable.<sup>13</sup>

The social actors that question the supposed limitations of progressive governments fre-

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13. The allusion to the historic bloc comes from the Gramscian clarification on the articulation of political society and civil society. This articulation would be capable of generating a new political consciousness and organization to replace the old hegemony and give rise to the new order and conception of society (see Portelli, 1977). In terms of social-ecological transformation, the challenge consists in putting together a set of mobilizing ideas capable of overcoming the reactive movement that results from fear and the loss of elemental certainties about the future of societies. This awareness and identification of transformational ideas—in accordance with the current challenges of the region—is a condition of possibility for the successful creation of a new historic bloc.



quently exhibit a basic lack of understanding of the pressures and adverse power relations faced by governments when dealing with certain public policy dilemmas. Worse still, some of these players do not hesitate to form alliances with national or international social and political forces whose main goal is to reverse measures that have erased some of their privileges or influence within the power structure.

Any viable means of resolving this dilemma of articulation are complex, but we must begin the search for and construction of these means. The current ways of channeling conflicts undermine the opportunity to create a social platform that will support social-ecological transformation in Latin America. The progressive camp is much more than its political parties and their most loyal electoral bases. Overcoming both the fragmentation and self-reference of the social movements and the bureaucratization of the progressive parties is one of the region's strategic challenges.

It is irresponsible to put faith in alliances between social movements and reactionary political players. To suppose that an alliance can be based on the simple fact of shared opposition to a particular government from both types of actors is a risky option. On the other hand, it is also questionable for governments to depend too much on pacts with certain traditional elites, thus decreasing the incentives for them to sabotage the progressive political balance of power. The disastrous consequences of these pacts have already been seen. Likewise, it is a mistake to rely too much on the benefits of parliamentary alliances with parties that are structurally pursuing other interests—even if they pact with the progressives because of a particular combination of factors and circumstances. These contingency agreements only make sense if they are well defined and based on a broad articulation of the grassroots. That platform would serve as an anchor or center of gravity to minimize contradictions and regressions in projects that have, at the time, been perceived as one of the best historic opportunities in the region.

4. *The administrations of progressive governments have advanced in: a) reconfiguring the functions of the state to collect a certain part of the economic surpluses, b) reorienting public revenues towards social inclusion, and c) trying out more autonomous and horizontal regional integration formats. On the other hand, it should be acknowledged that there have been mistakes and limitations in: a) strengthening democracy and the rule of law, b) confronting the determining factors in social exclusion, c) redirecting the economic insertion of the region, and d) reversing the degradation of natural ecosystems:* These achievements go to show that who holds the reins of government in a country does make a difference. The idea that “it doesn't matter who is in government, because they are all the same”—an idea, incidentally, that induces apathy—needs to be combated by meticulous analysis that evaluates the measures adopted by different types of governments. This is why it is a good idea to analyze the initiatives and results within the context where they were implemented and with a horizon of transformation as reference.

The three advances described above cannot be seen as isolated incidents, as they form the pillars of the strategy that, to a greater or lesser extent, progressive governments have used and are still using. This triad changed the regional redistribution pattern. Although it was not enough to truly find an in-depth solution for the deficits, it was enough to show that other forms of state administration are possible. In each one of these three areas, a qualitative leap is required to make the impact more profound. It is true that the new contextual conditions are far from encouraging, but the challenges are just as urgent as ever.

*State finances:* The challenges consist of concretizing a tax reform that addresses the volatility of public revenues and the regressive nature of taxes; tax avoidance and evasion, particularly on the part of big capital; and implements taxes for the environmental costs of the extractive economy and environmental degradation as a whole.



*The use and implementation of public revenues:*

Evidence shows that both the allocation criteria and the capacities of efficient and honest coordination and implementation of public spending urgently need to be improved. The challenge of decreasing the importance of welfare focalization and turning it into a complementary instrument of the universalization policy, seen as rights rather than privileges, is particularly relevant.

*Regional integration:* The creation of several regional and subregional entities is progress that needs to be consolidated with greater capacity for prioritization and fulfillment of multilateral agendas. If the idea is to offset economic fragmentation and the absence of a regional stance, when required, in the various world arenas, one of the crucial challenges that have been identified is the need to improve the alignment of plans for regional and subregional integration.

Resolving the above challenges could serve to optimize the present path of the progressive spectrum in the region. Nevertheless, it would still be insufficient to lay the foundations for social change projects that are sustainable over time. It is worth considering a more in-depth review of the progressive administrations to identify new dimensions that should be incorporated into the transformation agenda.

*Democracy and rule of law:* One of the main promises made at the start of the progressive cycle was the strengthening of democracy. The plan was for the participatory dimension to be reinforced and extended. What has been seen so far is an increased politicization of the grassroots and participation in some government initiatives and programs, which is, without doubt, a positive fact in the region. In countries such as Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela, mechanisms of direct participation, such as referendums and plebiscites, were also established and utilized, particularly at the start of the cycle. The problem is that very little progress has been made regarding the creation of opportunities for participation that provide people with greater levels of autonomy, delib-

eration, and influence on important decisions. The characteristics of the electoral cycles put more and more pressure on the governments to increase their use of the formal instances that have been created, exercising an excessive tutelage that reduces the creation of power from the grassroots. Although this modality seems to bring short-term benefit to the government in power, it weakens the construction of socially sustainable alternative projects in the medium and long-term, particularly if it relies on mechanisms that are more inclined to resort to clientelist relationships rather than consciousness-raising and the organization of social change.

The strengthening of the rule of law is yet another unfulfilled promise. However, we must distance ourselves from the limited concept of rule of law that focuses on protecting private property and contracts, as defended by the liberal approach, and that, in concrete terms, becomes a state of selective laws that defend the privileges of the powerful. The challenge lies in strengthening the weak and intermittent efforts to reconfigure state institutionalism in order to decrease the weight of private interests in government decisions. In other words, the advances made to decrease the asymmetries found in formal political representation have not gone hand-in-hand with the strengthening of a system of checks and balances capable of guaranteeing that these achievements will not be reverted by private interests. This assessment seems valid both in the “refounding” experiences of the Andean countries, as well as in the historically more institutionalized democracies and states of the Southern Cone.

We can also observe that, owing to the fragile makeup of more solid supports, together with the pressure from the economic and media powerhouses and even the state bodies controlled by the traditional elites, a good number of the progressive governments have been forced to use institutional maneuvers that do not help maintain the balance of power but rather, on the contrary, tend to concentrate power in the figure of the president. As pre-





viously noted with the instrumentalization of public participation, excessive discretion and impunity in the administration of the state apparatus can also lead to short-term “benefits,” but in the long term, the credibility of the governments is put at risk.

We cannot overlook the fact that it is complicated to advance alternative projects in states that were precisely created to block any substantial inclusion. The very architecture of globalization weakens states and reduces the room for maneuver for citizen involvement and the institutional system to deal with the primary challenges. However, what could end up delegitimizing progressive governments is not so much their difficulty overcoming these obstacles, but rather the accommodation and accentuation of the vices of state entities that favor corruption, promote the illicit enrichment of new groups of power, avoid accountability, and prevent the full participation of the citizenry and collective groups.

*Determining factors for social exclusion:* Progressive governments face grave difficulties in overcoming the social marginalization of the people. Their efforts, up until now, could be rated as typical of a precarious inclusion; although they did extend and reorient the focalized programs, an inheritance from the second generation of neoliberal reforms, they were insufficient for the social transformation of Latin American societies. The initiatives are limited in terms of moving towards the substantial inclusion that dissolves structural asymmetries. In Latin America, exclusion can be seen in two closely-linked dimensions: poverty and inequality. Without a political intervention that considers both dimensions, there is less likelihood of addressing them in any sustainable way.

With different degrees of magnitude, huge gaps between the social strata predominate in Latin America. These gaps do not just apply to social groups in the abstract. Rather, asymmetries are deepened according to the particular characteristics of a person or group, and it is

relevant to consider the interaction of gender, intergenerational, geographic, and ethnic gaps. The measures that are now being used to deal with these gaps cannot, of themselves, reverse the structural conditions that generated them to begin with, as their overly sectoral and temporary vision renders them unsustainable as long-term answers.

The challenge lies in reviewing and redefining the structure of the creation and distribution of opportunities, skills, and social benefits generated by Latin American societies. This implies examining the bases of: a) primary distribution (mainly the possession of means of production and the relationship between profits and salaries), b) secondary distribution (tax system), and c) tertiary distribution (the allocation criteria for social investment and the implementation capacities). Until now, it has been difficult for progressive governments to move beyond tertiary distribution, when it is well known that an alternative project does not have much of a chance unless the other two are properly considered.

As long as economic and social policies remain disconnected, it is not feasible to generate conditions of general welfare. The solution to this dilemma lies not only in technical capacities in the public policy process, but is also a matter of balancing forces, implementing social agreements that make it possible for the state to provide and guarantee public rights and goods while also being capable of stimulating and regulating the operation of the markets.

*Global economic insertion:* The debate about the deterioration of the terms of trade and its impact on the type of economic insertion was buried by the neoliberal approach. However, nor was it properly recuperated during the cycle of progressive governments. The comfort zone generated by the boom in commodity prices exported by the region contributed to this, as increased collection of the income generated from extractive activities was very useful for extending and strengthening public investments made by the governments. However, after the



drop in prices, the limitations of that boom could be clearly seen: a) the price volatility of these products is constant, with its immediate implications for the economic dynamism and the tax revenues of the states; b) the disincentives that the extractive economy directly or indirectly exerts over the development of more articulated national, subregional, and regional economies; and c) the pressure to extend the extractive frontier to increase in volume what is lost in price, causing more social and environmental repercussions.

Although almost all the progressive governments have declared the need to overcome the reprimarization of the economies, the initiatives that have been implemented are either minimal or limited by the innate inertia of an extractive economy. It should also be noted that the problem with the economic insertion of Latin American economies is not just due to their high levels of dependence on the export of raw materials; we cannot ignore the activities of certain type of industries attracted by the offer of cheap labor under the *maquiladora* system, more common in Mexico and Central America.<sup>14</sup> Both types of insertion are counterproductive because of their minimal integration with the rest of the productive sectors.

The answers to the challenges in overcoming the determining factors of social exclusion, as previously mentioned, do not consist solely of technical proposals for economic management. Quality is extremely important, but there must also be a social bloc of industrialists, workers, social movements, political parties, and governments that support and give direction to a transformation of the production base without falling into the temptation of recycling the vicious circle of captive markets and parasitic protectionism; among other objectives, this would redirect the insertion of Latin American economies.

*Environmental management:* The dynamics of production, consumption, and, in general, of occupation of land have exacerbated pressures on the natural systems, making the region more and more vulnerable. These harmful patterns do not respond to fortuitous circumstances, but are rather the result of an economic approach that stimulates the intensive use of natural assets while favoring the maintenance of structural heterogeneity. This phenomenon, as we know, is responsible for the degradation of livelihoods in the countryside and the consequent explosion of urban sprawl, without intelligent criteria for land use and social cohesion.

The economic emergencies alleviated by the income from extractive activities, the lack of administrative skills, and the attention paid to immediate political conflicts have, among other factors, played a role in the fact that progressive forces are still not paying due attention to environmental management. It is true that policies have been formulated and legal and institutional frameworks have been created to deal with the problem, but they have not been sufficiently adhered to. The task of incorporating the environmental dimension into the transformation projects is still a challenge of the first order in Latin America.

The degradation caused by the expansion of extractive frontiers, combined with the degradation caused by intensive monocultures rendering the soil infertile, as well as the very dynamics of urban settlements that increase pollution and risks, make a lethal cocktail that is not only increasing the ecological footprint, but also making the region more vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Deforestation, the loss of biodiversity and soil fertility as the result of changes in land use, the pollution of water sources (as well as their depletion), gas emissions from fossil-fuel-based transport systems, and inadequate waste management are only some of the serious threats that affect the Latin American environment. These damages cannot be treated in isolation; they can only be successfully addressed if the economic, social,

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14. Translator's note: A maquiladora is a factory that operates under preferential tariff programs established and administered by the United States and Mexico.



cultural, and environmental dimensions are integrated into a transformation strategy that is sensitive to the impact of human activities on ecosystems.

The need to apply measures to adapt to the reality of climate change and the situation of lower raw material prices should be seen as an opportunity to change patterns of land use, in general, and reconfigure the production base, in particular. Progressive forces cannot just ignore this dilemma.

On the other hand, these challenges still require intergovernmental collaboration, as these phenomena are not confined within national borders. Among other adjustments, the reorientation of regional and subregional integration requires the strengthening of transnational environmental management, including environmental sustainability criteria and the protection of the most vulnerable social groups.

5. *The current conservative backlash in the region does not necessarily mean the end of a long political cycle. Accepting the electoral route also means accepting the latent possibility of the alternation of governments. The problem lies in the fact that cultural and institutional bases have not been created to minimize the risks of regression:* It is easy to fall into the pessimism of saying that the most recent movements on the electoral chessboard have buried any possibilities that had been opened by the progressive cycle. It would be foolish to ignore the various adverse economic and political conditions in the Latin American environment. However, it is a mistake to equate the deceleration of a political electoral cycle with the end of a period marked more by less volatile conditions than the succession of triumphs of certain parties and political figures.

The following formula is no longer viable: *higher commodity prices + higher takings for state social programs = electoral victories.* With the margins for the redistribution of these surpluses narrowing, two foreseeable problems appear: a) the elites that at one point had to accept a

state that played a greater redistributive role are less inclined to tolerate governments of that nature now that their own income could drop even more due to the macroeconomic context; and b) the consumption expectations of the new middle classes—made possible by the progressive formula—are increasing, despite the unfavorable economic environment that the majority of countries in the region are experiencing; faced with the inability of the governments to meet these expectations, the middle class then becomes a potential area of discontent that can be taken advantage of by the political forces at the service of the traditional power groups.

The new arrival of the right in the governments of Argentina and Brazil and its electoral progress in Venezuela, among other signs of rediscovered protagonism in countries where they right's opportunities to govern had been drastically reduced, can be explained by both the problems faced and the mistakes made by the progressive governments and by changes in the strategies of the elites to recover the ground they had lost in previous years.

This strategy includes: a) the use of renewed devices to weaken or defeat elected governments; b) the emergence of political figures that seek to represent the image of a new right, with the appearance of being less ideological and conservative than the previous generation; and c) taking advantage of their success in the construction of social imaginaries in which society is prone to depoliticization in the face of discontent, fragmentation of the social fabric, refuge in the private sphere, and consumer alienation. It is likely that these political forces will continue to obtain favorable results, although it remains unclear if they will manage to completely sweep the progressive spectrum.

Furthermore, the new right-wing governments do not have everything on their side, as they have to wrestle with at least four factors that go against them: a) the lack of a consistent and attractive proposal that is perceived as a reliable alternative to the progressive administra-

tion they oppose; b) the global economic crisis, whose impact on the region will continue for at least the rest of the decade, complicating government performance; c) the potential mobilization of the grassroots of the progressive parties and social movements in opposition to the regressive measures; and d) the paradigm of the new structure, no matter how basic, of broader social benefits that has been strengthened since the early years of this century. As new governments seek to dismantle the advances that have been achieved, despite significant media and geopolitical support, their capacity for governance will be restricted, as we have already seen in Brazil and Argentina.

The magical return of the high raw material prices in order for the governments of the progressive ilk to be able to revitalize “the formula” is undesirable; nor is it advisable for the neoliberal parties to reinstate their vision of a highly exclusive society, or for the progressive parties, taking advantage of the fragmentation of the opposition, to ride the storm without changing and correcting their course. What is desirable is a fully self-critical reflection on the successes, mistakes, and challenges of the progressive camp, and, on that basis, to redefine and drive forward a project of social-ecological transformation. But that drive will never arrive by spontaneous generation, let alone through the good will of powerful groups. It can only be the result of a heterogeneous grassroots platform that, with planning, organization, and political action is able to build up the forces capable of forging unprecedented social agreements in Latin America. This is the job of politics, and what better environment for it than democracy—a democracy that overcomes the shortcomings of the purely electoral and the fallacies of representation without participation, but that also overcomes the pitfalls of participation turned into authoritarian tutelage.

The political backlash in the region is not leading to a new era with clearly defined characteristics. There is no return to the immediate past, nor any inexorable road to the restoration of neoliberalism; what can be seen is a field in dis-

pute where the strategic level of articulation of the players that promote alternative and emancipatory projects will be decisive. The electoral political option and the participation in the formal institutional processes make sense inasmuch as a new power bloc is built from the bottom-up, legitimizing new national agreements in which the privilege-based society that has, up until now, characterized the majority of countries in the region, moves towards a rights-based society with an institutionalized commitment to reducing asymmetries and stopping the destruction of the ecosystem. It is therefore necessary to lay the foundation for new functional states that operate based on social cohesion, intelligent and sustainable productive transformation, and that, just as importantly, foster respect for democratic freedom and guarantees.



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