

Latin America: Unasur, Mercosur, ALBA and integrationist initiatives after Chavez

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Hugo Chavez was, even with his errors and deficiencies as large as his historical figure, by far the most radical and steadfast among all the so-called “progressive” governments of Latin America and of all the politicians of this sector on our continent. He was able to evolve, to feel the popular influence, to respond to adversities with fight and tenacity and, although he rested on an apparatus — in particular, in the armed forces — he did not depend on it either to elaborate nor carry out policies. In a continent of caudillos, although himself a caudillo who measured everything with reference to his person and saw the organization of the workers as own emanation (for that reason he said that “the unions are counter-revolutionary”), he was not only a caudillo.

Unlike Rafael Correa, Cristina Fernandez, Dilma Rousseff or Jose Mujica, he was anti-capitalist and tried, from a position of power, to produce — and to control — a still vague “popular power” (which the armed forces and the apparatus tried to asphyxiate). Unlike Evo Morales, he was not a builder of a more modern, developmentalist and extractivist capitalist State, so although he applied a policy in which everything was based on the export of oil to the United States and although he promoted industrialization, he sought, without however obtaining it, a non-capitalist state, structured on more democratic bases, the vaguely denominated “21st century socialism” that was different simultaneously from neo-developmentalistic politics and from the Soviet, Cuban, Chinese and Vietnamese bureaucratic systems. For that reason his death will be felt not only in Venezuela but across Latin America and, in particular, in the organizations he impelled.

Mercosur, semi-halted by the rival interests of a big country — Brazil — which sees a much weaker one — Argentina — as a market and not a partner and also by the vain efforts of Buenos Aires to resist this, could emerge from this quagmire if Venezuela with its oil surpluses played an important role inside it in spite of the Brazilian reluctance before the Chavista project of BancoSur that Brasilia sees as competitor to its own Banco de Desarrollo.

If, in order to cling to power, the new group, which depends on the nationalistic and conservative Chavismo of the armed forces, chooses to reinforce clientelism and total dependency on the oil rent (which are ballasts of the Venezuelan economy that Chavez fought) to follow a policy of subsidies, welfarism and indiscriminate imports, it is possible that this sector would manage to maintain a popularity that Chavez sought through measures of renewal, but it will fortify the Boli-bourgeoisie and corruption and will put a damper on efforts at integration at the Latin American level.

That danger also threatens the ALBA, relations with the Caribbean countries, and support for Cuba so that it has cheaper fuel and it can buy foods. Mainly because in the ALBA no country can replace Venezuela in its locomotive role and no political leader has the stature or prestige necessary to replace Chavez as political leader of that organization.

As for UNASUR, it is based on the Brazil-Argentina-Venezuela trio which, and would be reduced almost to bilateral agreements if a leg of the tripod was lost. In UNASUR, Rafael Correa, and above all Dilma Rousseff, are the strongest from the political point of view. But the first has a very weak and, in addition, dollarized economy and the second depends too much on a strong bourgeoisie

which it satisfies continuously (which causes some to speak, stupidly, of a Brazilian sub-imperialism although Brazil has constant friction with Washington to preserve, precisely, its own margin of capitalist action).

As for Cristina Fernandez, most likely she will not be able to obtain the modification of the Constitution that authorizes a third consecutive term. Her government already seems a lame duck and any possible successor is likely to be more rightist than her. In addition, a right wing but constitutional Paraguayan government would be readmitted to the organization, Chile is in political crisis but without great changes, and with a political crisis in Colombia causing problems for president Juan Manuel Santos, who opted for detente with Venezuela, in his fight against the return of the ultra-reactionary Álvaro Uribe, the panorama of UNASUR will change much with respect to what it was when Chavez was a driving force.

Everything therefore depends very largely on the outcome of official postchavismo in Venezuela and, above all, on the popular reaction to defend every inch of the achievements and participation of workers and the poor and to create and expand the so-called popular power giving strength and ideas to self-management, the struggle for trade union unity, the organization of municipalities to administer the territory and thus rid it of the pro-imperialist and oligarchic right, now quiet because it fears a hostile reaction but reappearing in the light as top-down and bureaucratic sectors of official Chavismo make concessions to that right and the Boli-bourgeoisie.

After the great mourning has finished, the best of Chavez's legacy - daring, insubordination - will be on the agenda as well as a discussion-balance sheet about what needs to change and what should be the strategy for the foreseeable future. Only the preparation of the foundations of socialism can maintain the national independence and material progress made in the time of Hugo Chavez.

Guillermo Almeyra

P.S.

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* Guillermo Almeyra writes regularly in the daily newspaper "La Jornada". An Argentinian-born academic he is also Professor of Social Relations at UAM-Xochimilco University and Professor of Contemporary Politics at UNAM University. He is a member of the editorial council of Sin Permiso.