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President Rafael Correa of Ecuador at a campaign rally.

TRENDS

Pink Tide Rising

by Benjamin S. Allen

The tide has turned in Latin America. To cite some recent events: In November 2006, Nicaraguans returned Sandinista candidate and former Marxist, Daniel Ortega, to the presidency in defiance of U.S. pressure to elect his opponent. In August 2008, ex-bishop Fernando Lugo became Paraguay's first leftist president in 61 years. In El Salvador, which has been dominated by the right wing National Republican Alliance (ARENA) party since 1989, polls for the 2009 election give the edge to Mauricio Funes, the candidate of the leftist Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN).

These events are just the latest manifestations of a broader Latin American shift to the left labeled the "Pink Tide" to contrast the more moderate policies of current governments with Latin America's historically hard-line or "red" leftist movements. To put this shift in context, CLAS Visiting Scholar Barry Carr analyzed the Pink Tide governments and placed them on a center-left to left spectrum. He argued

that despite similar ideological leanings and a shared dislike of U.S. hegemony, Latin America's leftist governments have not yet developed a cohesive alternative political and economic project.

Professor Carr began his talk by characterizing the Pink Tide governments as representatives of an *izquierda permitida* or permitted left. This term stresses two points: the reluctant acceptance of the new left's legitimacy by both domestic elites and the United States and its acquiescence to elements of the neoliberal paradigm. All the Pink Tide governments seek either to reform the neoliberal policy agenda or abolish it altogether, argued Carr, but so far they have stopped short of upsetting the capitalist underpinnings of their economies. The Pink Tide countries also differ in the extent to which they embrace or reject capitalism, making it difficult to characterize the movement cohesively.

Nonetheless, Carr maintained that the Tide may be crudely divided into center-left and left. The center-left

countries include Chile, Brazil and Argentina. Michelle Bachelet, Chile's Socialist president, has maintained free trade ties and good relations with the U.S. while promoting progressive reforms. In Brazil, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has continued several of the pro-market policies of his centrist predecessor while promoting new anti-poverty programs, modest income redistribution and free trade, although not always on the United States' terms. In contrast, Argentina's Peronist power couple, former president Nestor Kirchner and current president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, have emerged as staunch opponents of U.S. hegemony in Latin America. However, to date they have done little to threaten dominant capitalist relations in the region.

Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador are close allies and form the left wing of the Pink Tide. In all three countries, leftist candidates garnered support from historically disadvantaged indigenous and mixed-race sectors of society and employed anti-elite rhetoric in their campaigns. Hugo Chávez, elected president of Venezuela in 1998, has undertaken land reform, placed price controls on staple food items, renegotiated oil exploration contracts with multinational petroleum companies and, upon his reelection in 2006, declared that Venezuela was on the road to socialism. Bolivia's Evo Morales, a former peasant and labor leader who became that country's first indigenous president in 2005, has renegotiated energy contracts with international firms and used some of the proceeds to increase health and social spending. A long-time opponent of the United States' coca eradication policy, Morales indefinitely suspended U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency operations in his country on November 1, 2008. Rafael Correa, who characterizes himself as a "Christian of the left," was elected president of Ecuador in 2006 by a nation fed-up with years of instability. He has opposed World Bank and IMF oversight, expelling the World Bank country manager in April 2007. He has also worked to renegotiate Ecuador's external debt and called a Constituent Assembly to rewrite the constitution in order to expand state control of the economy.

As for the more recently elected Pink Tide governments in Nicaragua, Paraguay and possibly El Salvador, it remains to be seen how moderate or radical they will turn out to be. While there are significant differences between Latin American left and center-left projects, Carr highlighted several characteristics shared by Pink Tide governments. First, they have all, without exception, come to power through the ballot box and, in some cases, have reaffirmed their legitimacy through reelections and popular referenda. This represents a break with the left's militant past and has conferred greater legitimacy upon Pink Tide governments. In

turn, electoral legitimacy gives them more maneuverability with respect to Washington, as it is now almost impossible for the United States to argue that it is facing undemocratic governance in the region.

Electoral legitimacy has also undermined the traditional military veto on the left taking power. Shifts in popular opinion away from support for military involvement in national politics have followed the left's adoption of elections as the only legitimate path to power. The rapid reinstatement of Hugo Chávez after the disastrous 2002 coup further delegitimized military intervention in the eyes of many Latin Americans. According to Carr, this change has two significant consequences: military saber-rattling has diminished, and there is general agreement that U.S. military intervention would be greeted with widespread opposition throughout the region.

Intraregional cooperation also seems to be increasing among Pink Tide governments, both in trade and defense. In April 2007, da Silva and Bachelet signed a biofuels cooperation agreement between Brazil and Chile. In October of that year, representatives of Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela pledged \$7 billion toward the establishment of a regional bank intended to serve as an alternative to the Inter-American Development Bank, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The Bank of the South was officially launched a few weeks later. Pink Tide countries have also supported each other in times of stress: Earlier this year Venezuela came to Ecuador's aid following a Colombian military incursion into Ecuadorian territory. In September, Chávez ejected the U.S. ambassador to Venezuela in solidarity with a comparable move by Morales in Bolivia.

Given these similarities, can Pink Tide countries be considered to form a cohesive regional bloc? On the one hand, they are united in their efforts to loosen Washington's grip on the region by embracing what Carr calls the "centrifugal forces of globalization." All have sought to take advantage of the rise of China, India and Russia and the alternative sources of investment they provide. To date, China has negotiated more than 400 investment and trade deals in Latin America and invested over \$50 billion in the region.

On the other hand, it remains an open question whether this new left is capable of developing a groundbreaking progressive development model. Carr argued that, so far, the Latin American left has failed to break the boundaries of the *izquierda permitida* and map out a coherent alternative political or economic project. Instead, the nations of the Pink Tide continue to rely on a strange brew of neoliberal policies mixed with recycled statist and cooperativist initiatives.

In sum, the United States' backyard has shifted left, and U.S. influence in the region has diminished. However, the future of the izquierda permitida is uncertain. Pink Tide governments are coming under increasing pressure from their left wings for greater redistributive change, and presidents are realizing that their continuation in power depends on how well they fulfill their promises on that front. After all, the same electoral process that swept them to power can usher them out. Nonetheless, the Pink Tide shows no sign of ebbing any time soon.

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President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil greeted by President Michelle Bachelet of Chile.



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