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Latin America, Obama and the Year Ahead

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Progressive movements and leftist countries in Latin America face a new threat; a U.S. administration openly challenging the left in Latin America in order to reclaim the political and economic hegemony lost during the Bush era.

In much the same manner as the Kennedy administration promised a new era in relations with Latin America, the Obama government started 2009 by pledging to recast relations with Latin America at the Summit of the Americas in Trinidad. Despite the rhetoric, after one year in office the record of the Obama administration in Latin America highlights the continuing use of force to reassert U.S. control over the region.

Might as Policy

It is now obvious that the initial mild policy changes regarding travel to Cuba, and the rhetoric at Trinidad was taken to deflect attention while the Obama administration decided on a course of action in the region. Even while Obama was announcing “a new era” officials in his administration were reviving prospects for a free trade agreement with Colombia, pursuing Bush era military bases in the region, and beginning to outline policies that would bring the U.S. into conflict with the progressive governments in Latin America.

At every turn, the so-called liberal Obama administration has opted to pursue a course of action that aligns it with the most retrograde, corrupt and undemocratic political forces in Latin America.

The promise of change has evaporated; replaced by the exercise of military power to reclaim U.S. influence over a territory Washington still considers its “proverbial backyard.” In the midst of an unparalleled economic crisis, the U.S. is unable to propose any new bold or grandiose policy initiatives for the region. As has been the case with most of Obama’s campaign rhetoric, gone is the new Kennedy era Alliance for Progress for Latin America proposed on the campaign. Instead the promise of change has been replaced with the use of military might to reassert U.S. presence in the region.

The Obama administration reaffirmed Bush’s decision to reactivate the World War II era Fourth Fleet to patrol the Caribbean and northern South America. It has moved to strengthen what the Pentagon refers to as “forward operating bases” by signing an agreement with the government of Alvaro Uribe to establish seven new military bases in Colombia deepening the U.S. presence in northern South America. According to the Air Force’s own budget proposal to Congress the new bases will give the U.S. the capacity to patrol most of South America and gain intelligence on governments considered “unfriendly” by the United States. It has stepped up arms sales and training to Mexico’s government and U.S. unnamed aerial drones are conducting flights in Mexico. In total the U.S. now has “forward operating” and traditional military bases in Cuba, El Salvador, Honduras, Colombia, Curacao and Bonaire. In response to U.S. actions, the countries of the Union of South America (UNASUR) have called on South America to be established as zone of peace without foreign military bases.

Venezuela claims that the U.S. is using its forward operating positions in Curacao, to conduct over flights of its territory to gather intelligence and test the country’s defenses. The mainstream

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opposition dominated media portrayed the Venezuela accusations as one more rant from Chávez. The Venezuela opposition ridiculed the president claiming he was trying to obscure internal problems by promoting conflicts with the United States. After repeated denials by the U.S. and Dutch government and military authorities, Venezuelan authorities released the audio tapes of a conversation in English between the Maiquetia control tower and a U.S. pilot flying over the Venezuelan base at La Orchilla. On the tape the pilot is heard acknowledging he had entered Venezuela airspace, claiming it was a mistake. According to the Venezuelan government, this so-called mistake has now been repeated several times and Venezuela authorities claim the U.S. is not only testing their defenses, but also seeking to provoke a confrontation.

The use of the U.S. military to reclaim influence speaks to the weakened position of the United States as a world power and the limitations of the Obama administration. Though in the short run it might be able to intimidate smaller countries and achieve short term objectives, in the long run it will earn the enmity of most of Latin America. More importantly, the U.S. will have squandered an opportunity to reposition itself with the new political forces emerging in the region. This bellicose attitude will reinforce the view that the U.S. continues to be an imperial power, and will undoubtedly accelerate Latin America's growing relations with Asia, Europe and South Asia. United States actions in Latin America should not come as a surprise; this was precisely what Obama promised during his campaign; reassert U.S. power in areas where it had lost influence.

A review of Obama administration policy towards Latin America support the thesis that the U.S. has opted to use political and military force to reasserts its traditional role in the region.

Honduras

The coup in Honduras became the litmus test of the Obama administrations relations with Latin America. What the U.S. did in Honduras sent it a clear signal to the region. Through its action, the U.S. supported an illegal coup in Honduras that unseated Manuel Zelaya, the democratically elected president. The response from Latin America was unanimous; every multilateral body in the region, the Union of South America (UNASUR), ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for Latin America,) the RIO Group, and even the Organization of American States condemned the coup in Honduras.

In the coup's aftermath, the U.S. officially vacillated on labeling events in Honduras a coup and then repeatedly blocked regional attempts to escalate pressure on the coup leaders, promoting instead a mediation process lead by its ally Oscar Arias of Costa Rica that allowed 1) the coup leaders to consolidate their rule, 2) repress opposition forces, 3) hold tainted elections to legitimate their actions and 4) on January 24th it supported the swearing in of a new "president" claiming that is important to turn the page and allow new forces to take control of the country.

I would submit that this was the U.S. strategy all along. There was no intent to negotiate a settlement or ever allow Zelaya back to power. Rather in Honduras the U.S. saw the weakest link within the broad coalition of progressive, social democratic and socialist governments in Latin America and, with its local conservative allies, took advantage of limitation evident in the Honduran political process.

Honduras should be interpreted as a direct challenge by the U.S. and its conservative allies in the region to the left political process underway in Latin America.

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Despite the unprecedented number of social democratic and socialist governments and the unity that existed within the region's multilateral bodies, the reality is that the democratic political forces in Latin America proved unable to overturn the events in Honduras. Likewise, despite unprecedented levels of mobilization and new levels of unity by the progressive political forces in Honduras, they could not reverse the military coup. With support from the United States, the traditional oligarchy reasserted its power; it is doubtful, however, that they will be able to govern the country without increasingly relying on military power and repression. The political forces that have been unleashed in Honduras will not go away; they will reorganize and continue to pressure for the social reforms initiated under Zelaya, a constitutional convention to change the political structures of power and the return of democratic rule.

In the short run, however, under significant pressure, Honduras' Central American neighbors, Guatemala, El Salvador and Costa Rica who initially did not recognize the coup are now either leaning towards recognition or have already indicated they will recognize the government of Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo who took office on January 27^h.

As many had feared, this outcome will undoubtedly embolden conservative and undemocratic political forces throughout Latin America. Likewise it elevates the specter of the military coup as part of the arsenal that undemocratic forces will use to unseat democratically elected government. This is not idle speculation, with mixed results, coups, were used by opposition political forces in Haiti and Venezuela in the early 2000s, and efforts at political destabilization have been tactics employed against elected governments in Argentina and Bolivia. The "Honduran option" has now entered the political vernacular of Latin American politics.

The Politics of Empire

On the political front, at every turn, the Obama administration has failed to develop new initiatives, instead opting to reaffirm Clinton and Bush era policies. Obama has steadfastly supported Plan Colombia, emboldening political forces in Colombia that insists on seeking a military solution to the age old socioeconomic problems that exist in the country. Following the blueprint outlined by Plan Colombia, Plan Merida has become a pillar of U.S. policy in Mexico where a so-called war on the drug cartels has already claimed over 17,000 deaths, where thousands have disappeared and large swaths of the country are under military control. As they have been drawn into the conflict, fissures have appeared in the military apparatus and command unity. In the recent action that produced the death of drug pin Beltran Leyva in Cuernavaca, the government purposely excluded the army and relied exclusively on the navy for the operation. The message is clear the government fears that the drug lords have already infiltrated the army. The actions against Beltran Leyva also relied extensively on U.S. intelligence and operatives, highlighting the new military nexus between both governments. In a more dangerous precedent, the military has begun supplanting civilian authority in many areas of the country.

The pursuit of a military option allows Colombia's Uribe and Mexico's Calderón to pursue largely unpopular economic policies that, absent the conflict, would confront stiffer resistance. In both countries human rights have been trampled and reporters who have delved into the roots of the conflict or government complicity have been killed or disappeared.

Within the context of the current "war on the cartels," the Calderón government continues efforts to dismantle social and economic policies that benefit labor or other organized sectors and which stand in their way of completely implementing neoliberal economic policies. The continued opening of Petroleos de Mexico, (PEMEX) to foreign capital, passed under the guise of "reforms"

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occurred at a time of collapsing oil prices. The Calderón government is now preparing a second round of so-called “reforms” that will continue to open the oil sector to foreign capital. The reality, however, is that Mexico’s oil prospects are bleak, overproduction and mismanagement have depleted reserves and the country faces the prospect of having to increase imports of refined products to meet internal need. Besides declining oil profits, remittances from immigrants in the U.S, central to the Mexican economy, have also declined precipitously. Tourism was also devastated by the governments mishandling of the H1NI virus and the chilling images of death and dismemberment that have been generated by Calderón’s war with the cartels. Unemployment and underemployment continue to be a major issue in Mexico. Absent the much-orchestrated war on the cartels, it is doubtful that the current government would enjoy any legitimacy.

The Mexican government continues to dismantle state owned industries and traditional relations with labor. In October of 2009 the government sent in the military to take over of Luz y Fuerza del Centro, central Mexico’s major electrical supplier. As the nation watched the national team qualify for the world cup, Mexican troops moved into the facilities and forcibly removed workers. The publicity campaign that followed attempted to portray Luz y Fuerza as an inefficient operation, with a bloated bureaucracy and corrupt union leaders. Despite wide spread mobilizations, civil disobedience, and court action, the government succeeded in taking over the operations. Luz y Fuerza will eventually be privatized and its fiber optics network, one of its most important assets, will undoubtedly go to one of Mexico telecommunication giants.

Little has changed in relations with Cuba. The initial move that allowed Cuban residents to visit family members and send remittances was followed; despite wide spread condemnation, by a reassertion of the five-decade long U.S. embargo of the island. In addition, using recycled evidence, Washington reaffirmed Cuba’s inclusion on its list of so-called state sponsors of terrorism. Cold War era prerogative continue to determine Washington’s policies toward the island. Despite the rhetoric, Cuba will not be forgiven for standing up to Washington and opposing U.S. policies for the past half century.

In Bolivia, where it had an opportunity to chart a new course, Obama once again reaffirmed Bush era policy, closing U.S. markets to textiles from that country for supposedly not cooperating with Washington’s war on drugs. For Bolivia and the countries of Latin America the political message was clear; Washington would use its heavy hand to punish countries that are not aligned with the United States.

On the diplomatic front, the Obama administration has largely also recycled Clinton era officials. The appointment of Arturo Valenzuela, to the role of Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs was a clear sign that little would change. Shortly after his confirmation, Valenzuela blundered his way through a press conference on Honduras highlighting his lack of knowledge of events in that country. He then launched a personal mission visiting Mexico, Argentina, Brazil and recently Chile (1-12-10). The thought of Valenzuela, a Chilean by birth, representing the U.S. before his former country might strike some as ironic. Commenting on Valenzuela’s role, Emir Sader pointed out that the worst U.S. representatives are no the “white, rich men that defend the interests and values in which they were educated...the worst are those that adhere with renewed zeal to their newly acquired U.S. citizenship” (*La Jornada*, 12-28-09) This was evident in Valenzuela’s visit to Argentina, when in a clear affront to the government of Cristina Fernández he met with opposition forces in Buenos Aires something that not even Bush era diplomats had considered. In Brazil he did not win any converts; shortly after his visit, Brazil’s Secretary of Defense reasserted that the U.S. should reconsider its policies toward Latin America.

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Beyond recycling diplomats, the Obama administration has recycled Bush era approaches towards the region. The Obama government has emulated Bush era efforts to divide the Latin American left into a radical “bad” left (Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador) and moderate “good” or “responsible” left (Brazil, Uruguay, Chile). Despite real differences, based on objective and subjective conditions in each country, the reality is that there is significant unity on matters of regional integration, efforts to diminish inequality and a multipolar world in which the U.S. is not the only dominant power.

A recent visit by Iran’s Mahmud Ahmadineyad to the region confounded U.S. proponents of the good and bad left argument in Latin America. Before arriving in Caracas, Ahmadineyad has been hosted by President Lula in Brazil. The Obama administration sent a letter to Lula urging him to be more critical of Iran’s nuclear intentions, which the president disregarded. Washington think tanks quickly began to question Lula’s motives arguing that he has squandering Brazil’s and his role as the so-called leader of Latin America. Simplistic and self-serving arguments framed by cold war imperatives fail to capture the full set of complex factors that gave rise to the social-democratic, progressive and socialist government in the region.

Changing Political Landscape

Despite not generating new political initiatives, Washington is nonetheless hoping to gain ground as the region faces a new round of election that might redraw the political map of the region.

In Chile, the failure of the Concertación political forces to tap social discontent among younger voters and mobilize political forces opened the door for a right wing candidate to win the second round of the presidential elections. Sebastián Piñera, a candidate best described as Pinochet light, (some members of his inner circle served in Pinochet the government) outdistanced Eduardo Frei (1994-2000) who has ran a lackluster campaign relying on his family’s political pedigree to win support.

The most interesting development in Chile was the remarkable support that Marcos Enriquez Ominami generated (about 20%) by running as an independent candidate. Though not a leftists, Enriquez’s is the son of Miguel Enriquez a student founder of the MIR who was assassinated during the Pinochet coup. Likewise, the Communist Party ran its own slate of candidates managing to win seats in the congress. Its presidential candidate Jorge Arrate drew approximately 8% of the vote. Though Enriquez Ominami eventually threw his support behind Frei, it was still not be enough to assure a Concertación victory.

For most Chileans there is very little difference between the economic policies supported by Frei (and previous Concertación governments) and those advocated by Piñera. With little to distinguish them, the youth and other new voters did not participate in the political process. The Concertación political forces including the so-called Socialist and the Christian Democrats have been the most ardent promoters of neo-liberal economic policy, eroding the power of organized labor and clashing with students and the Mapuche indigenous. While employing a democratic rhetoric, they eagerly implemented the economic policies inherit from the dictatorship. In the short run, a Piñera victory will mean further deepening of the neoliberal economic project pursued by the Concertación in the last twenty years.

The outcome is not a matter of Chilean voters becoming pragmatic as some mainstream or even leftists analysts have suggested, but rather it represents the failure of the Concertación political forces to propose an alternative form of development and produce change in the lives of Chileans.

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A Piñera victory does, however, represent an important setback for regional integration and Latin America's efforts at promoting a multipolar world. It will reinforce right wing forces and create a new pro-U.S. block that will now be led by Mexico, Colombia and Chile allied with Peru, Panama, Honduras and Costa Rica.

In Brazil, unable to stand for reelection, Lula will have to relinquish political power in 2011. Though Lula has thrown his support behind his chief of staff, Dilma Rousseff it is unclear that she can survive the deal making between political parties that has characterized Brazilian politics during much of the Lula era. In addition, it is not clear that Brazil's powerful social movements will simply through their support behind Lula's appointed successor. His relations with the social movements have been rocky at best clashing at times with the Landless Movement and his own former trade union. Despite the shortcomings of his administration, and there are many, in Lula's absence, Latin America will lose an important internationally recognized political voice.

In Argentina, the embattled government of Cristina Fernández continues to confront attacks from traditional agricultural interests, business elites, and factions in her own Peronist party. The recent open struggle with the judiciary over the director of the central bank is a reflection of this ongoing conflict. Though they have recovered some political ground since the embarrassing defeat sustained during regional elections, in which Nestor Kirchner was roundly defeated, the political future of the Kirchner / Fernández faction in the Peronist party remains tenuous. Within the Peronist party, Eduardo Duhalde is already jockeying to be the Peronist presidential candidate.

After revelations of a series of personal indiscretions, accused of fathering several children, and a series of political missteps, (former bishop) the current president of Paraguay Fernando Lugo has experienced a dramatic drop in popularity. There is increased speculation that he might face a political trial seeking his removal or worse a coup. His government has already issued several alerts about possible undemocratic efforts to unseat him. As important, Lugo's political coalition does not control congress. As an affront to Lugo, opposition forces continue to block Venezuela's entrance into MERCOSUR even though it has been approved by the legislatures of Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina. Like Honduras before it, Paraguay is increasingly becoming the weakest link among the leftist governments of the region.

In Venezuela, after a year of relative calm (by Venezuelan standards) the political climate is once again heating up. Parliamentary elections are scheduled for September 26 and the opposition is hoping to make inroads in the assembly. Previously, fearing a total defeat, they opted to boycott the elections giving the government a decisive majority in the national assembly. Laying the groundwork for elections, national polls closely associated with the opposition were released in November and December 2009 claiming that between 60% and 70% of the population wanted a change in the assembly and in the presidency. These latest polls are highly suspect, one concluded that Venezuelans no longer favored social equality and were willing to accept pronounced class differences.

This does not mean that there are not serious problems in Venezuela. Crime remains probably the most important issue exacting a toll on all sectors of society. An unresponsive bureaucracy and wide spread corruption continue to represent serious challenges to Chávez's efforts to implement 21st century socialism. Despite a dramatic expansion in the number of government ministries, there is still a gap between official rhetoric and the actual condition faced by most Venezuelans. Some of the flagship social programs such as Barrio Adentro, established to provide health care to the majority of the population is facing problems, many centers are

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understaffed or closed.

Though inflation has been reduced, it still hovers at close to 25%, the highest in Latin America. Venezuela still imports most of what it consumes. On other fronts, unemployment remains in single digits and, according to government statistics, poverty levels have been reduced.

Venezuela is facing a dramatic environmental crisis produced by the effects of El Niño.

It has not rained in several months, and most dams are emptying at record levels, the Guri, the nation's largest dam is reportedly losing over 10 centimeters a day. As an oil rich country, electrical shortages clash with the national ethos and represent a serious political problem for the current government. Despite ample supplies of natural gas and oil, Venezuela depends in hydroelectric power for over 70% of its electricity. As a result cities throughout the country are experiencing debilitating power outages that create havoc with economic and other regular activity. Caracas, the largest urban center has been largely spared from the outages. Efforts to impose rolling blackouts in Caracas produced such an outcry that the government quickly rescinded the measure. The government is attempting to import and install generators units throughout the country; however, these are only temporary stopgap measures. Until Venezuela moves to diversify from hydroelectric to gas generated or other natural power sources it will not be able to resolve this dilemma.

The opposition refuses to acknowledge that the country faces an environmental crisis and instead seeks to exploit this problem for political gain. The reality is that on the matter of energy policy there is enough blame to go around. The country's dependence on hydroelectric power dates from the 1960s and it is not a recent phenomenon.

Hugo Chávez began the New Year announcing major changes in monetary policy. The Bolívar, which had been fixed at 2,15, will now have two different rates; 2,60 for essential imports, and a new petro-dollar will be available at 4,30 for non-essential imports and travel. The announcement produced a wave of speculative buying with middle and upper classes cleaning out electronics and appliance stores throughout the country. The government's monetary policy harkens back to the policies of ISI, aimed at privileging local production over imports and reduced the grip of the "importing bourgeoisie" that remains powerful in Venezuela. Against this mixed backdrop, Venezuelans will go the polls on September 26th to elect a new assembly. The election will provide a preview of presidential elections scheduled for 2012, and in which Chavez will once again seek a new term as president.

Bolivia held elections in December 2009 producing an overwhelming victory for the government of Evo Morales who gained an absolute majority in the congress. The government and the social movements now face the challenge of creating the structures and empowering the population to fully implement the Bolivian constitution that was approved earlier in the year. Part of the victory can be attributed to the state of the Bolivian economy. As a recent report from the Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) highlighted that despite falling remittances, U.S. textiles restrictions, drop in export products, and instability promoted by opposition sectors, "Bolivia's economic growth over the last four years has been higher than at any time in the last 30 years..." In part this has been due to government fiscal stimulus and efforts to regain control over natural resources that began when the government nationalized Bolivia's vast natural gas reserves. After years of portraying Bolivia as a simple appendage of Venezuela some in the mainstream media have taken to promoting the country as a "good" leftist government.

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After debating a new constitution for most of 2008, Ecuadorians approved the new Carta Magna in September 2008. As a result, Ecuador held presidential elections in 2009 in which Rafael Correa running under the banner of Alianza País handily won reelection to a new term. In June of 2009, Ecuador became the ninth country to join the Bolivarian Alternative for Latin America (ALBA) joining Venezuela, Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua, Grenadines, Barbuda, Antigua and Saint Vincent. It is important to mention that during January 2010 ALBA nations will begin using a new electronic currency, the Sucre which replaces the dollars in transactions between member states.

Despite his victory Correa has been at odds with some traditional social movements including labor, environmentalists and indigenous groups and efforts promote large scale mining have brought him into direct conflict with several these organizations. In light of recent discussions of carbon emissions and global warming, and in the wake of the extensive pollution caused by U.S. companies such as Texaco, the country has made innovative proposals regarding its oil reserves in tropical rainforests. Reliant on oil revenues for the lion's share of its budget, Ecuador is proposing not to develop the Yasuni-ITT oil fields if European countries agree to provide the government with a substantial subsidy over the next ten years. To date, no agreement has been reached. No matter what the outcome of the Yasuni-ITT talks, it is obvious that the Correa government needs to repair relations with the various social movements in Ecuador in order to strengthen the process of change in that country.

Elections in El Salvador in March of 2009 brought to power Mauricio Funes candidate of the Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional (FMLN) confirming the tendency of social-democratic and leftist governments assuming office in Latin America. Funes, a highly respected journalist is the first non-combatant to run as the FMLN's presidential candidate since the signing of the Peace Accords in 1992. The presidential campaign was one of the most polarizing and dirtiest in the country's history. Rightist groups from throughout Latin American, and especially Venezuela, ran a parallel campaign that sought to identify Funes with Chávez and suggest that with his election El Salvador would become a Venezuelan satellite. Arena and its allies ran ads depicting Dan Restrepo, now Obama's National Security Advisor on Latin America, expressing concern over a Funes victory.

Though his election marks an important turning point in the country and the region, since assuming power Funes has charted a largely centrist course. El Salvador's constitution, drafted by traditional political forces, like that of its neighbor Honduras, severely limits popular participation. Any change must first be approved by the sitting congress, and subsequently approved by a new congress several years later. Pressure for fundamental political reform will have to come from below, raised by social movements, trade unions and other activists. Conditions in the country still remain highly polarized and there is some discontent among forces that supported Funes. In recent months there has been several politically motivated murders and repression of anti-mining activists who are opposed to the huge El Dorado mine in Cabañas run by the Vancouver based Pacific Rim mining company. Despite initial opposition to Funes, right and centrist in Washington and elsewhere in Latin America, including the Venezuelan opposition, now praise him as a moderating force and example of a "responsible" leftist president.

In nearby Guatemala, conditions remain tense. For most of 2009, the country faced a grave environmental crisis, with little precipitation, crops were lost and conditions of famine gripped some areas. Politically, the social democratic government of Alvaro Colom, who pursued mild reforms at best, has been under siege from traditional political forces since taking office. One incident in May demonstrates the level of polarization, if not desperation, that has gripped some

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opposition political forces in Latin America. In May 2009 a tape surfaced after the death lawyer Rodrigo Rosenberg, an opponent of the Colom government. In the tape, Rosenberg blamed his death on Colom; and in the ensuing days opposition forces took to the streets nearly toppling his government. Supporters of Colom organized counter marches and managed to stabilize somewhat the political situation. An independent U.N. commission that investigated the Rosenberg's death concluded (1-12-10) that the lawyer had intentionally committed suicide and left the tape behind in order to undermine the Colom government. With developments in Guatemala, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's notion of magical realism has now reached a new level.

Haiti

Washington's response to the earthquake in Haiti underscores growing concerns over the expanding role of the United State's military in Latin America. In a show of force that appeared to prioritize security over assistance, leading to criticisms from international aid agencies, the U.S. military quickly moved in to fill the political vacuum in Haiti. The media portrayed the U.S. role in much the same paternalistic fashion as it did when the U.S. last occupied the country between 1915 and 1934. Undoubtedly, the tremendous outpouring of assistance speaks to the generosity of the U.S. people who have donated millions to relief efforts. Beyond any humanitarian assistance, however, central to the U.S. government's mission in Haiti is that events do not subvert existing political arrangements, or permit the forces that support former president Jean Beltran Aristide from stepping into the political void. In addition, they do not want events to spill over into the Dominican Republic or permit thousands of Haitians from trying to reach the coasts of South Florida.

Since the U.S. supported coup that ousted President Aristide in 2004, Haiti has functioned largely as a protectorate. The current president Rene Preval owes his position to the U.N. who filled the political void after Aristide's ouster. The political arrangement is enforced by the Brazilian troops that operate in the country, and that are viewed by many as an occupying army. In addition to the U.N. troops, hundreds of NGO's and U.S. missionaries operated in the country before the quake.

The countries of Latin America responded to the crisis in Haiti almost immediately. Venezuela doctors and aid workers were among the first to arrive. Cuban doctors had already been on the island for the past decade training Haitians medical students and providing assistance. The U.S. media has largely ignored the multinational aid assistance provided by other countries, especially Latin America. Instead U.S. news outlets, from national to local networks, have sent their anchors and reporters to Haiti in an effort to display their compassion. Absent from all these representations is the valor of the Haitian people who in the end will have to reconstruct their own country.

Conclusion

This will be a challenging year for progressive governments and social movements in Latin America. The process of change in Latin America has been dependent on the mobilization of organized social movements, formerly excluded sectors of society and new political forces. Once in office leftist or progressive governments have to deliver on the promise of change or face voter's wrath. Throughout Latin America the records on this issue remains mixed. Voters undoubtedly continue to be supportive of leaders and movements that are able to deliver improved conditions and change in their lives.

Emboldened by their presumed success in Honduras, rightist and undemocratic forces might

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employ similar actions elsewhere in the continent. Efforts to destabilize elected governments could increase; the Honduran option is now part of the political vocabulary. The U.S. will undoubtedly increase pressure on those countries it considers “moderate” or “responsible” leftist, attempting to exploit differences among progressive political forces in the region. The outcome of elections in Chile and possibly Brazil could certainly redraw the political map of the region in 2010 and embolden the right.

The United States will continue to cast its shadow over the region. Through its actions the Obama administration has opted for continuity with Bush era policies. With a weakened economy and diminished political influence it is increasingly reliant on a military posture to reestablish its preeminence in the region. Promoting a military solution in Colombia and Mexico will only continue to exacerbate conflict in these countries. Likewise, its insistence on punishing government it considers unfriendly, such as the case of import restrictions in Bolivia, over flights in Venezuela, and an embargo in Cuba underscores its continued unwillingness to accept changes that have occurred in the region.

The countries of the region will also face another important challenge, the dramatically changing environment. Though according to some estimates Latin America only produces approximately 5% of the world’s carbon emissions, it is suffering and disproportionate share of environmental calamities. Drought is affecting wide areas of Mexico, Guatemala, Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador having a direct impact on agricultural production and reducing the capacity to generate hydroelectric energy. Peru and Bolivia on the other hands are receiving torrential rains. How the countries of the region respond to these dramatic changes may prove as important as the challenges they confront from undemocratic forces or from the United States.