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The End of the Progressive Narrative in Latin America²

Are we witnessing the end of the progressive governments' cycle in Latin America? This question seems to come up after every electoral defeat or disappear whenever there is a victory. After more than a decade of continuous political successes in Venezuela, Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Ecuador, as well as other Central Americas countries, 2015 was the year that signaled adverse results and a drop in electoral support began. Without diminishing the importance of elections, whence the progressive governments derived their legitimacy, it is the time to evaluate the vitality of the political projects away from the narratives that constituted them in their peak moment. Beyond the polls, there looms an undetermined time of change. Due exhaustion of the model and to the internal transformation of the progressive, plurinational or Bolivarian political narrative (electoral defeats), we find a political language that was able to inscribe a new political time in Latin America, which comes to an halt with leaders involved in charges of corruption and as well as accompanied by the lowest indexes of popular support.

Since progressive governments occupy the center of the political spectrum, there has

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² A first version of this article was published in Spanish in June 2015 in the Bolivian newspaper La Razón. Vice-president, Álvaro García Linera declared in national TV that it was impossible to speak of an end of the progressive cycle in Latin America, was one of the first to react to this piece. A few months after, the electoral results in Bolivia made visible the need to rethink the internal political crisis of the MAS government. This is a revised and updated version of the original article with new statistics and bibliographic references for the publication in this special issue. Open Democracy translated an early English version of the Bolivian original, and Gerardo Muñoz substantially modified the English translation for the purposes of this dossier. In Alternautas the article was published in: <http://www.alternautas.net/blog/2016/5/24/the-end-of-the-progressive-narrative-in-latin-america> on May 24th, 2016.

been a reshuffling of forces and mounting mobilization on both the left and the right. The map of the political situation is not homogeneous and cannot be generalized, but *governistas* (governists) — the term used in Brazil to refer to militant government supporters with strong participation in social networks and characterized for not accepting the slightest criticism, combined with a rhetoric of pragmatic politics — expressed some degree of concern. After taking the first policy measures in the aftermath of its close win in the October 2014 elections, *governismo* in Brazil showed remarkable difficulties in holding on to its own narrative. Brazil was probably the country where the end of the political cycle was visible for the first time. In part, due to the fact that it was the country that did not experience a strong systemic transformation of the political system, obliging the PT to govern with political allies that did not necessarily shared their same ideals. The defeat of *kirchnerismo* in Argentina and *chavismo* in Venezuela tragically demonstrated the political fragility of the situation. A few years ago it would have been difficult to imagine losing broad popular support or achieving victory by thin margins.³

The political climate is not very different from the one in Bolivia and Ecuador, where the opposition has won important cities, leading up to Rafael Correa's refusal of his candidacy for the next national elections, as well as the recent defeat of Evo Morales' in referendum for presidential reelection. In 2016, too, Dilma Rousseff lost the support of allies, which opened an impeachment process in the parliament.

Although it is true that contemporary electoral campaigns are confined to political marketing and to the languages of commercial advertising, it is imperative to analyze the nature of the progressive political projects at a greater depth; that is, beyond the electoral moments and against rhetorical arguments that sustain the progressive narratives. In this analytical register, we find that the social movements that ignited

³ This is evident in Ernesto Laclau's words a few months before passing away regarding current President Mauricio Macri: "[Macri] tiene tantas posibilidades de ser presidente constitucional en la Argentina como yo de ser emperador de Japón". (*La Nación* 16/11/2013). <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1680549-la-ultima-entrevista-de-ernesto-laclau-con-la-nacion>

new political agendas that in turn paved the way for the emergence of the progressive governments have lost most of their creative energy and potential for effective transformation. The disappearance of the social movements and urban protests from the political scene reintroduced the discourses and insistent practices favoring governmental administration.⁴ It is from this space whence conservative positions, led by corporate lobbies, could in fact win spaces that are far removed from the political vision that initially supported the governments.

The arrival of a neoliberalism foisted by taking minimal decisions or renouncing other alternatives, has delimited the space of the narrative of social inclusion, the battle against inequality, the sovereignty and privilege of the social space; in short, all the elements to which these governments committed themselves following the election of Hugo Chavez in 1999. After leading an electoral campaign that exalted these principles, Dilma Rousseff appointed conservative ministers and opened the doors for austerity policies and fiscal adjustment that ran counter to her promises during the campaign. This resulted in the end of the grand narrative that functioned to legitimize the government. In this way, according to polls (April and May 2015), Dilma Rousseff's approval rate lies between 7 and 10 percent. And her once extremely popular predecessor Lula da Silva, a likely candidate for 2018, is starting to be affected by current discontent.⁵

In addition to an indignant opposition, government criticism has quickly reached the mass of its own voters. To the most cynical governists, however, neoliberalism is a

⁴ Joao Pedro Stedile, leader of the largest social movement in Latin America, MST (Movimento Sem Terra) explained the Dilma Government to BBC Brasil in these terms: "O governo Dilma paralisou o processo de reforma agrária, sobretudo nos últimos dois anos. As únicas famílias que aparecem como assentadas foram na verdade colocadas em lotes vagos de assentamentos antigos. [...] Estamos completamente insatisfeitos com o governo Dilma. No final do ano, com a troca do ministro da Fazenda, quando parecia que ela poderia recuperar seus compromissos de campanha, nos assustamos ao vê-la retornando à política neoliberal, com a reforma da Previdência. Depois fez acordo com (José) Serra (PSDB-SP) para encaminhar as reservas do pré-sal [oil reserves] a empresas e levou ao Congresso uma lei antiterrorismo que nem na Europa se atreveram a levar. Fez cortes que atingiram fundamentalmente educação, saúde, moradia e reforma agrária. É burrice, é um governo que não se deu conta que, com a agenda neoliberal, perde a base social que o **elegeu**." http://www.bbc.com/portuguese/noticias/2016/03/160304_stedile_rs

⁵ In December 2015, the opposition taking advantage of the lack of popular support, translated the crisis into a process of impeachment that began in May 2016 leading to Rousseff deposition of her executive position and the temporal taking command of ex-vice-president Michel Temer.

stage left behind, and the current drop in popularity is due to a crisis in the making for which they hold no responsibility, and to the influence of the mainstream media. There is still talk about the “Revolución Ciudadana” in Ecuador or “proceso de cambio” in Bolivia, when in fact what we are witnessing is the decline of the effectiveness of those enunciations. In fact, Dilma Rousseff’s popularity was already very low during the clashes of June 2013, and later during the FIFA world cup in 2014. On these two occasions, the Workers’ Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores – PT), corporate power, the allied conservative parties, and the opposition became indistinctive political actors.

A perception of a conservative front being joined by progressivism is precisely what triggered the breaking of the progressive narrative. In the opposite direction, the presidential election of 2014 allowed the PT to recover its historic voters thanks to a remarkable polarization of the electorate. It did away with both Marina Silva, perceived as an associate of neoliberalism, and Aetius Neves, outplayed by the focus on social issues during the campaign. It would not be too strange to compare this situation to other national realities. During times of election there is always polarization, in contrast to the time of governing, when there tends to be a unified conservative front.⁶

But the disenchanting majority vote for Dilma was followed by real outrage at the appointments to the cabinet and the first government measures. Together with austerity, in sharp contrast to the campaign promises still ringing in people’s ears, Lula and Rousseff’s PT (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*) accepted the inclusion of the economic advisor from the opposition, and to undertake spending cuts weighing on the working classes and on education. Another shocking appointment (as Minister of Agriculture) was that of Katia Abreu, director of the corporate agricultural association, who some time before had been awarded by the indigenous peoples a symbolic prize for her role defending environmental crimes and promoting the expansion of agribusiness in indigenous lands. These gestures to the markets did

⁶ In opposition to the movement from the streets lived in Brazil in 2013; the polarization that was imposed in 2014 was again the frame of the political situation when the impeachment, presented by the government as a coup d’Etat, was proposed.

nothing to neutralize the demonstrations of hundreds of thousands of citizens calling for Dilma's impeachment. Stressing an anti-corruption platform, they hinted at the possibility of a closing of the cycle in a most conservative way. The voices that were first heard in the streets are now also being expressed in Congress. There, the influence of *la Bala, el Buey y la Biblia* (the Bullet, the Ox and the Bible – also known as BBB) has grown significantly as they control the House of Representatives and exert much more influence in the government than social movements. These political forces on the far right have recently united in favor of the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, in spite of having received allocated key political ministries and support from the PT.

Conservative sectors both in government and within the opposition managed to curb ongoing anti-homophobic educational initiatives (such as the lack of printed material on anti-homophobic education in public schools, called “kit-gay” by the conservative forces) to pass a constitutional amendment reducing age of criminal responsibility (to sixteen years of age), and to allow outsourcing in all sectors of the economy. The end of the cycle is happening in Brazil through the abandonment of the project of change that brought *progresismo* (left) to power and the inability to mobilize the citizenry and stop conservative reforms, with the progressives' direct involvement in these reforms in some cases (i.e. the deterioration of labor rights, an initiative from Rousseff's government after raising the age for retirement). Nevertheless, *progresismo* is still in command, and in Brazil could very well come out on top again by campaigning against the same sectors with which it actually runs the country.

The worship of technocracy

The end of the cycle entails the acceptance of a conservative model considered to be a necessary condition for stability and political continuity. Opinion polls and electoral calculation therefore determine the *gobernista* political project, leaning towards the cult of institutions and technocracy while maintaining a discourse that, by focusing on social issues, caters to its original constituency. In Argentina, Kirchnerism lost the presidential election fielding a candidate, Daniel Scioli, who was first launched into to political sphere by Carlos Menem. He never enjoyed Néstor

Kirchner's and Cristina Fernández's confidence, but was accepted thanks to his strong performance in the polls. Scioli's candidacy attests to two things: that Peronism is still more than Kirchnerism, and that it holds political positions very similar to those of its rivals' in the conservative arena. Another generic trend seems to be that the progressive *governists* want to defend their governmental position vis-a-vis a metamorphosing of right-wing discourses. By abandoning the route that would allow for antagonism between the government and the rural entrepreneurs (Argentina), or taxation of net wealth (in Brazil and other countries), there is a return to explicit policies of security and nationalist discourses that displace the struggle for social rights and a Latin Americanist integrationist effort.

Old politics are also creeping into the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (Movement towards Socialism — MAS) in Bolivia. MAS' hegemonic tendencies have led to co-opt media and recycled opposition figures, as if decisions on candidates and election agreements had no consequences on the grounds of the political project. Any objectives other than occupying institutions are thus being dismissed, and popular mobilization is being replaced by the assumption of the adversary's positions, views, and demands. Any attempts to put forward stronger reforms and to question both the shape and operation of the 'colonial' State — as promised in the wake of Evo Morales's re-election in 2014 — are being abandoned.

On the other hand, the dynamics of the political system have made it impossible for renewal of the movements that led the left and progressive presidents to power. Indeed, political campaigns are financed by the corporate sector, and State revenue depends on some of the worst development and extractivist activities. They are also the basis for spurious alliances with both local chieftains and multinational capital with no other aim than to cash in as fast as possible on investment. Most social policies depend on this source of financing. Both the brand and the popularity of the progressive governments are now closely associated with an economic model that is highly dependent on international prices, which also has catastrophic ecological consequences.

An assessment of the Latin American progressive governments should include

important criteria such as: progress in regional coordination; the declaration of unconstitutionality of the laws of impunity for dictatorship related crimes; the universal child allowance ('Asignación Universal Por Hijo') in Argentina; some elements of the constitutional 'plurinational' reforms in Bolivia and Ecuador; sovereign debt negotiations; poverty reduction, social intervention and infrastructure building in poor neighborhoods. The end of the cycle is related to the disruption of these agendas, an increase in poverty in Argentina and unemployment in Brazil, and to the constraint on the rights and the guarantees of urban dwellers and indigenous peoples facing eviction from their territories. The negotiation of bilateral agreements in Ecuador and the imprisonment of opponents in Venezuela have broken some taboos too; in particular, the thought that a political program could be defined against national political status quo still haunted by the colonial and dictatorship wounds. The balance sheet is equally negative in regards to industrialization and the phasing out of the primary economy model, now wholly dependent on the international commodity prices. The fall of the price of the commodities, on the other hand, fuels the political crisis from an economic dimension and adds more weight to the coming of the end of the progressive cycle.

The new ideological framework

When talking about structural changes in the inequality and economic model, progressive governments seem to have been transformed by power and institutions, rather than the other way around. The force by which the progressive governments took place in the early 2000s merely contested the executive (presidentialist) role with their agenda, but that at the same time accepted the structural limits – instead of transforming the tools of the State – in exchange for political stability and clientelist advantages of many of its political leaders. While orthodox recipes are announcing a comeback, the possibility of strengthening processes arising from the principle of *Buen Vivir* (Good Living) and aiming at another type of development, vanishes from

the scene.⁷ At the same time, the new ideological framework of *progresismo* ensures popularity and keeps the governments in power, but abandoning the principles and the anti-capitalist demands that inaugurated the progressive political cycle riding on a wave of popular demonstrations that was able to depose unpopular presidents in Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina, and Brazil. This is made quite clear by the progress of three elements: consumerist ideology,⁸ consensus on development, and the political agenda brought in by religious sectors.

Governist propaganda presents consumption growth as the access of millions of people to the middle class. In addition to abandoning the peasant, indigenous, and workers' agendas, the revision of economic priorities and the redistribution of wealth, is being shelved. On top of it, access to consumption does not include access to healthcare, education, and quality transportation, all of which remain beyond the reach of the majority. Pope Francis' accession to the Vatican, just a few days after Hugo Chávez's death, has already resulted in some setbacks for progressive legislation. It halted changes in the Argentine Civil Code, and legitimized the collapse of the bond between governments and minority struggles historically embraced by the left, thus stopping incipient progress in some countries.

Jorge Mario Bergoglio's transformation went from being the Archbishop of Buenos Aires that censored art shows (such as a León Ferrari's exhibition) and did not assume a critical position during the Argentine dictatorship, into a progressive world leader cannot be reduced to a marketing or media invention.⁹ It marks the end of progressivism as we know it. Consumption growth and a conservative agenda are now entwined with a statist and hyper-presidential perspective linked to nationalist political identities — with their *Batllista* variant in Uruguay (José Batlle, president of

⁷ On the concept of "Buen Vivir" (Good Living), and different works that tries to think beyond development, connected with the fights against fracking, extractivism and violation of indigenous territories see Schavelzon (2015) Svampa & Viale (2014), Gudynas & Alaiza (2011) Acosta & Martinez (2009), Escobar (2010).

⁸ The idea of the democratic expansion of the consumer sector prospers by including the popular sector into the middle class. This project does not only entail economic inclusion, which has been questioned, but more importantly it seeks to democratize through the Western capitalist way of life, associated with consumerism, debt, and individualism, rather than collective association.

⁹ "La Iglesia advirtió que la muestra de Ferrari "es una blasfemia" (*La Nación*, 2004). <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/659247-la-iglesia-advirtio-que-la-muestra-de-ferrari-es-una-blasfemia>

Uruguay, 1899–1903 and 1911–1915), *Peronista* in Argentina (Juan Domingo Peron, president of Argentina, 1946–1955 and 1973–1974), *Emenerrista* in Bolivia (Revolutionary Nationalist Movement, MNR, founded by President Víctor Paz Estenssoro (1941-1952) and the big coalition that governs Brazil with parties from the right — if not to supporters of the dictatorship themselves, if we are to judge by the development model that is being adopted.

Maybe one should take seriously the proposal to found a new International led by the Pope, which was called for by Italian philosopher and politician Gianni Vattimo and hailed by some of the main *gubernista* players who attended the Forum for Emancipation and Equality (*Foro por la emancipación y la igualdad*) in Buenos Aires, in March 2015.¹⁰ Rafael Correa staged in a sudden and rather overplayed attack against what he called the "abortion agenda" with the aim of preventing legal regulation on this issue, and against "gender ideology" on minority rights — which adds to Correa's already classic diatribes against environmentalists and indigenous peoples.

Thus, a politics in the name of social, racial and decolonized antagonisms is being replaced today by conservative values conveyed through a sense of brotherhood and reconciliation that leaves aside the fight against class and ethnic inequality. Popular sectors are being framed and demobilized through the establishment of State and religious paternalistic welfarism. The new perspective comes with a new consideration of dissidence as radicalism — that is, contrary to the interests of the nation. In geopolitical terms, the increased repression and criminalization of dissenters is conducted with an eye to the East — that is, with a discourse and an economic vision close to that of authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China, devoid of any anti-capitalist emancipatory horizon.

Progressivism and the left in power, substituting working class and social and indigenous movements for 'family' and 'middle class' values, cease to be what they were. They take the path of security and consumption that defines the new

¹⁰ For a full recording of Gianni Vattimo's intervention in the *Foro por la Emancipación* see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UXVixgBeXfA>

developmentalist nationalism. This is quite obvious in Nicaragua, where Daniel Ortega and the Sandinistas returned to power in 2007. The reconciliation with the church, which they fought in the 70s, is now a fact: a law has been passed prohibiting abortion under any circumstance. In 2014, moreover, the Nicaraguan Congress, with no debate and no previous information, passed another law giving the green light to the construction of an inter-ocean canal. It grants sovereign rights for fifty years to a Chinese company, and suppresses and criminalizes farmers and populations who will be displaced by the new canal. The political cycle founders also when development policies draw progressive or leftist Bolivarian governments close to the nationalist-liberal efforts currently undertaken in Peru, Colombia and Mexico: they are all manipulating State power to guarantee a model that is anything but progressive.

Instead of an anti- or post-extractive outlook as an alternative for a new political cycle, what we are witnessing today is the emergence of a new Right with a revamped, “post-ideological” and “for the people” discourse. It raises an “ethical” and “anti-corruption” flag that the Left has lost. Lacking citizenship engagement and no policies linking territorial struggles with the struggles in the cities, the new cycle is giving way to a system of political restoration, combining social nationalism, religious discourse, and individualistic republicanism, all conveyed through a fuming anti-State discourse.

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