

VOICES FROM THE SOUTH

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Challenges for democracy and communication in Latin America

After a long period of social and economic progress in Latin America, new neo-liberal, right-wing governments have begun overturning a number of social and democratic protections in the region. In this month's "Voices from the South," Sally Burch of the Latin America Information Agency (ALAI) in Quito, Ecuador presents a picture of the current challenges facing the region and its continual struggle for sovereignty. Sally highlights in particular the importance of alternative media outlets as means to connect and integrate peoples and social movements across the region, and as a counter-force to big business media monopolies in the region that discredit and undermine progressive processes and policies.

By Sally Burch, Latin America Information Agency (ALAI)

The world has been facing a situation of increasing instability and uncertainty in this century, particularly since the onset of the economic crisis in 2008. Yet much of Latin America (in particular South America) seemed relatively unscathed by this context.

Many of the region's governments that came to power in the first decade of the century under an anti-neoliberal platform were successful in promoting greater economic and social equality. They considerably improved public services (in particular education and health), made way for broader participation in democratic process and implemented some of the social demands that people's organizations have been putting forward in recent decades (such as human rights, democratization of communication, environmental measures, etc.).

The governments have often remained

short of expectations, but there is no doubt that they have brought about a significant and positive change in comparison with the neo-liberal projects applied across the whole region during previous decades that exacerbated inequalities.

At the same time, new more sovereign and autonomous initiatives of integration have been put in place (Unasur, Celac, Alba) that have encouraged greater intra-regional cooperation in different areas, a stronger group position to defend Latin American interests in global affairs and less dependency on the major world powers.

In the past few months, however, this situation is deteriorating. The global economic crisis is hitting the region (particularly due to the drop in commodity prices and reduced export markets), leading to a loss in popularity of the governments in place.

Right-wing groups have seized on this opportunity to push their agenda, with



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The Latin American Information Agency (ALAI, for its Spanish acronym) is a communications organization committed to human rights, gender equality, and citizen participation in the development and public affairs of Latin America.

ALAI's work is dedicated to the democratization of communication as a basic condition of democratic life and social justice.

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some notable successes, such as winning the presidential elections in Argentina, the parliamentary elections in Venezuela and now, with an illegitimate parliamentary coup recently consummated in Brazil; and being three of the most influential countries in the region, the impact has been much wider.

In the countries that were not experiencing these progressive changes, the neo-liberal governments in place are likely to be strengthened regionally by these recent events (ex: Mexico, several central American governments).

Steps to overturn the social measures adopted by the previous progressive governments (particularly in Argentina and Brazil) have been one of the immediate outcomes. Moreover, the momentum of the integration initiatives is seriously affected. The neo-liberal project is back on the agenda.

Particularly worrying is that these regressive forces seem to be willing to go to any length to obtain their goals, with little regard for legality or democratic process. In Argentina, for example, a communications law which was designed to limit the dominance of big media corporations and create space for smaller outlets and alternative voices was overturned by presidential decree. The coup underway in Brazil, as well as much of what has been undertaken by the interim government, is another violation of democratic norms.

Conservative forces are also well aware that to enforce the pro-capital policies they pursue while keeping social protest under control, they need to control the media. The role of the big business media monopolies has been to consistently attempt to discredit the progressive gov-

ernments and undermine their support (taking advantage of the disillusionment resulting from the economic crisis), while seeking either to disparage or ignore the advances in regional integration.

In this context, it is crucial to strengthen alternatives to the big business media monopolies. Democratic communications, including media diversity and plurality, play a critical role in building of this healthy democracy.

ALAI is one of the actors, together with the Forum on Communication for Integration of Our America (FCINA), working in this direction. FCINA brings together both media networks or outlets and social movement coordinating bodies.

The individual impact each entity can make on the power balance vis-a-vis the mainstream media is minimal; but by building networks of community and popular media and organizations, and prioritizing common agendas, such as the defence of regional integration as a social demand or communication rights as a fundamental condition for democracy, the impact is multiplied.

While conditions are difficult and the movements have lost much of their strength and unity, the Web of relations built up over the past two decades has not been lost, and that makes it much easier to reconnect and mobilize. The coming months are likely to require more intense efforts regionally and more international solidarity. ■

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Page 2. Forum on Communication for the Integration of Our America (FCINA) presented a letter to the President of the Latin American Parliament. Credit: ALAI



Page 1. Mass protest outside Buenos Aires congress over media censorship fears. Credit: Reuters, via @IFTimesUK

Photos:

