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The U.S. and its unruly Latin American 'backyard'

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U.S. aggressiveness towards the Venezuelan, Bolivian, and Ecuadorian governments has increased in response to diminishing U.S. influence over the Latin American and Caribbean area, which Washington has been blaming on Hugo Chávez, in particular, and also on Cuba ... but Cuba is a much older story.

Several examples illustrate the United States' waning control

During the negotiations that followed Colombia's attack on Ecuador on 1 March 2008, [1] instead of appealing to the Organization of American States (OAS) of which the United States is a member and which is headquartered in Washington, the Latin American presidents held a meeting in Santo Domingo, within the framework of the Rio [2] without inviting their great neighbour from the North, and clearly laid the blame on Colombia, a U.S. ally.

In 2008, Honduras — traditionally and wholly subordinated to U.S. policy— joined Petrocaribe, which was created on the initiative of Venezuela to provide oil to the non-exporting countries in the region at a lower price than that practised on the world market. Honduras also joined the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA), another initiative for regional integration launched by Venezuela and Cuba.

In December 2008, another important summit took place bringing together most of the Latin American presidents in Salvador de Bahía, with the noteworthy presence of the Cuban Head of State, Raúl Castro, next to whom was seated the Mexican president, Felipe Calderón, who until recently had adopted a hostile attitude towards Cuba, to keep in line with the directives from Washington. A few months later, the OAS decided, in spite of U.S. opposition, to reintegrate

Cuba, which had been excluded in 1964. In 2009, Ecuador also joined ALBA, and terminated the U.S. army's lease of the Manta air base.

Washington has systematically attempted to thwart the shift towards the left

As the following examples illustrate, since the beginning of the 2000s Washington has systematically attempted to thwart the shift towards the left made by the peoples of Latin America: supporting the coup d'Etat against Chávez in April 2002, offering massive financial support to the anti-Chávez opposition movement, supporting the Venezuelan bosses' strike from December 2002 to January 2003, the active intervention of the U.S. ambassador in Bolivia to prevent the election of Evo Morales, the World Bank's remote control intervention in Ecuador in 2005 to obtain the resignation of Rafael Correa, who was then the Minister of Economy and Finance, the organization of joint military operations in the Southern Cone, [3] the resurrection of the Fourth Fleet, [4] and a very significant increase in military aid to its Colombian ally, which serves as a bridgehead in the Andean region.

In addition, to overcome the failure of the FTAA (Free Trade Area of the Americas) in November 2005, Washington has been negotiating and/or signing as many bilateral free trade agreements as possible (with Chile, Uruguay, Peru, Colombia, Nicaragua, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Costa Rica).

Coup d'Etat in Honduras

U.S. aggressiveness towards what it sees as a dangerous "Chavist contagion" in Latin America went up another notch in June-July 2009 with the military coup d'Etat in Honduras, which overthrew the liberal president Manuel Zelaya just as he was calling for a referendum on the election of a constituent assembly by universal suffrage.

The Pentagon had resented this shift to the left by a president it thought would behave obediently because Honduras is one of its subordinate countries in the region. If a constituent assembly had been elected by universal suffrage, it would have inevitably had to rule on the demand for agrarian reform, which would have called into question the enormous privileges of the major landowners and foreign agri-business transnationals present in the country.

It is mainly for this reason that the local capitalist class, a significant number of whom come from the agrarian sector, supported the coup. It is also important to take account of the fact that this capitalist class is a class of compradors who are completely turned towards import-export business and dependent on good relations with the United States. This explains why it supported the signing of a free trade agreement with Washington and was opposed to ALBA. Zelaya's order for an increase in the minimum wage is also one of the factors that pushed the bosses to plot his overthrow. [5]

In addition, we know that Zelaya intended to ask Washington to leave the Soto Cano air base located less than 65 miles from the capital so that it could be converted into a civilian airport. Even imagining – which is highly improbable – that the Honduran generals acted on their own initiative in collaboration with the local capitalist class, it is inconceivable that Roberto

Micheletti, the puppet president designated by the military and by corporate and liberal party leaders, could have stayed in power if the U.S. government had vigorously opposed it.

The U.S. has been training Honduran generals for decades, and has an important military base in Soto Cano (with 500 American soldiers stationed there on a permanent basis); moreover, as Hillary Clinton admitted after the coup, the U.S. has massively funded the opposition to President Zelaya. [6] In addition, U.S. transnational companies, particularly in the agri-business sector, are well-established in this country, which they consider to be a banana republic.

The seven U.S. military bases in Colombia

In order to further increase the threat against Venezuela and Ecuador, Washington got President Álvaro Uribe to announce in July 2009 that seven Colombian bases would be handed over to the American army, thereby enabling their fighter aircraft to reach all regions of the South American continent (except Cape Horn). [7]

It is no coincidence that only a short time separated the military coup in Honduras and the Colombian President's announcement: Washington was clearly indicating that it wanted to immediately halt the extension of ALBA and nip this 21st century socialism in the bud. It would be irresponsible to underestimate Washington's capacity to do damage, or the continuity characterizing U.S. foreign policy in spite of the election of Barack Obama and a softer rhetoric.

While President Manuel Zelaya, who returned to his country secretly on 21 September 2009, was taking refuge in the Brazilian embassy in Tegucigalpa and the putschists were violently repressing demonstrations by partisans of the constitutional President, closing down opposition media, and on September 27 declaring a 45-day state of siege, all that Lewis Amselem, n°2 representative of Washington at the OAS, had to say was: "Zelaya's return is irresponsible and foolish." Meanwhile, for several days Hillary Clinton failed to condemn the extended curfew imposed by Micheletti to prevent people from gathering in front of the Brazilian embassy.

The agreement reached on 30 October under the auspices of Washington between representatives of Manuel Zelaya and those of Roberto Micheletti expressly stipulated that the parties undertake not to call either directly or indirectly for the convocation of a constituent assembly or for any consultation of the people (point 2 of the agreement). In addition, it did not explicitly allow for the return of Manuel Zelaya to the presidency of Honduras in order to finish his term (which is due to end in January 2010). Roberto Micheletti and his partisans then decided not to restore the presidency to Zelaya, who then appealed to the population not to participate in the general elections called for 28 November 2009. The main left-wing candidate for the presidency, Carlos Reyes, together with a hundred or so candidates from different parties (including a sector of the liberal party), withdrew his candidature. On 10 November 2009, an embarrassed Washington announced at a meeting of the OAS that it would recognize the results of the elections of 29 November 2009.

On the eve of the elections, human rights organizations had recorded the assassination of more than twenty political opposition activists since the coup d'Etat, 211 people injured during the repression, close to 2,000 cases of illegal detention, two attempted kidnappings and 114 political

prisoners accused of sedition. Media opposing the coup were either shut down or harassed. The UN, the OAS, the European Union, UNASUR, the member countries of the Rio Group and ALBA had decided not to send observers.

Estimates of the number of citizens who did not vote vary, depending on the source. According to the pro-putschist electoral Supreme Tribunal, the percentage of non-voters was 39%, while several independent organizations advance figures between 53% and 78%. In spite of this, State Department spokesman Ian Kelly considered these illegal and fraudulent elections “a necessary and important step forward.” [8]

Washington recognized the election to the presidency of Porfirio Lobo of the National Party, a hardline representative of the property barons and the political right who organized the coup d’Etat. The U.S. Ambassador in Tegucigalpa declared that the elections were “a great celebration of democracy” and said the U.S. would work with Porfirio Lobo, whose nickname is Pepe. “Pepe Lobo is a man of great political experience”, Ambassador Llorens told HRN radio. “I wish him luck, and the United States will work with him for the good of both our countries. [...] Our relations will be very strong.” While the Honduran parliament decided on 2 December 2009 not to restore President Zelaya to office up to the end of his term on 27 January 2010, Washington continues to support the process put in motion by the putschist government. [9] This creates an extremely serious precedent because Washington has repeatedly stated that the ousting of Zelaya definitely constituted a coup d’Etat. [10]

Supporting an electoral process stemming from a coup d’Etat and working to promote international recognition of both the authorities that perpetrated the coup and those benefiting from it gives clear encouragement to putschist aspirants who choose to rally to the Washington camp. This clearly applies to a large number of right-wing people in Paraguay.

Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo could be overthrown

In December 2009 the liberal senator Alfredo Luís Jaeggli, chair of the domestic commission and of the budget commission, called President Fernando Lugo to be overthrown, whom he charged with wishing to enforce the Chavist model of 21st century socialism, like Manuel Zelaya.

Alfredo Jaeggli, whose party belongs to the current government and represents its main ‘support’ in parliament, claims that the coup in Honduras was not really a coup. He sees the overthrow of Manuel Zelaya, and what has been done by the de facto regime since, as perfectly legal. [11]

He would like the Paraguayan parliament to initiate a political trial against Fernando Lugo, so as to remove him from his function and replace him with the Republic’s Vice-president, namely the right-wing liberal Federico Franco. Senator Jaeggli’s complaint has nothing to do with Lugo’s moral behaviour, his attack is focused on his political options. He complains that he does not follow the lead of countries that carried out a successful economic reform, such as Chile under Pinochet and Argentina under Carlos Menem. [12]

Clearly, Honduras can easily become a dangerous precedent as it opens the door to military coups condoned by some state institutions, such as the parliament or the Supreme Court.

Conclusion

In the light of this experience, we can see that the Obama administration is in no hurry to break with the methods used by its predecessors: witness the massive funding of different opposition movements within the context of its policy to “strengthen democracy”, [13] the launching of media campaigns to discredit governments that do not share its political agenda (Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Manuel Zelaya’s Honduras and so on), maintaining the blockade of Cuba, the support for separatist movements in Bolivia (the media luna and the regional capital, Santa Cruz), in Ecuador (the city of Guayaquil and its province), and in Venezuela (the petroleum state of Zulia, the capital of which is Maracaibo), [14] the support for military attacks, like the one perpetrated by Colombia in Ecuador in March 2008, as well as actions by Colombian or other paramilitary forces in Venezuela.

The recent dispatch of 10,000 soldiers to Haiti in the wake of the January 2010 earthquake, as well as the potential support for a constitutional coup d’Etat planned by some sectors of the Paraguayan right to overthrow President Fernando Lugo in 2010, are among other threats posed by the U.S. policy in Latin America and the Caribbean that should be paid attention to in the coming weeks.

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[1] The Colombian army bombed and captured FARC rebels in a guerrilla camp in Ecuadorian territory, killing some twenty people, including civilians. It is important to know that although the Colombian army is extremely strong, it has very little presence on the Colombian-Ecuadorian border, a fact that has allowed FARC guerrillas to set up camps there, including one in which Raúl Reyes, one of its main leaders in charge of international relations, was present at the time. Ecuador has regularly criticized Colombia for not providing adequate border control between these two countries

[2] GroupCreated in 1986, the Rio Group comprises 19 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean: Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Chile, Ecuador, Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, Dominican Republic, Venezuela, plus, on a rotating basis, one representative of the Caribbean Community (Caricom).

[3] Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile

[4] A structure created in 1943 to protect ships in the South Atlantic, and abolished in 1950. It officially resumed operations on 1 July 2008.

[5] For an in-depth description of the sectors that backed the coup d'Etat, read Decio Machado's study (in Spanish), which provides a list of the companies and their CEOs that encouraged or actively supported the putschists: Quiénes apoyan al gobierno ilegítimo de Roberto Micheletti

[6] Washington had paved the way for a putsch by massively financing the various opposition movements in the context of its policy to "strengthen democracy". A month before the coup, different organizations, business groups, political parties, high officials of the Catholic church and private media, all opposed to Manuel Zelaya's policies, grouped together in the coalition called "Democratic Civil Union of Honduras" in order to "reflect on how to put an end to it". (www.lefigaro.fr/international...) - The majority of these groups received over US\$ 50 million annually from USAID (the US Agency for International Development) and from NED (the National Endowment for Democracy) to "promote democracy" in Honduras. Read Washington behind the Honduras coup: Here is the evidence, by Eva Golinger.

[7] Eva Golinger on the website www.centrodealerta.org published two original documents produced by the U.S. Air Force regarding the agreements on the 7 bases concerned. The first document dates from May 2009 (i.e. before the agreement was publicly announced) and stresses the vital importance of one of the 7 bases, observing that it will, among other things, make possible the "full spectrum operations in a critical sub-region of our hemisphere where security and stability are under constant threat from narcotics-funded terrorist insurgencies, anti-U.S. governments, endemic poverty and recurring natural disasters." (<http://www.centrodealerta.org/docum...>). Eva Golinger adds the following comment: "It's not difficult to imagine which governments in South America are considered by Washington to be 'anti-U.S. governments'. The constant aggressive declarations and statements emitted by the State and Defense Departments and the U.S. Congress against Venezuela and Bolivia, and even to some extent Ecuador, are evidence that the ALBA nations are the ones perceived by Washington as a 'constant threat'. To classify a country as 'anti-U.S.' is to consider it an enemy of the United States. In this context, it's obvious that the military agreement with Colombia is a reaction to a region the U.S. now considers full of 'enemies'." (Official U.S. Air Force Document Reveals the True Intentions Behind the U.S.-Colombia Military Agreement).

[8] Quoted by AFP on 30 November 2009: a necessary and important step forward.

[9] The right-wing Latin American governments who are allies of Washington (Colombia, Peru, Panama and Costa Rica) do likewise.

[10] See also the press conference given by Arturo Valenzuela, n°2 of the State Department for the Western Hemisphere, on 30 November 2009: "...the election is a significant step in Honduras's return to the democratic and constitutional order after the 28 June coup..." "... these elections are not elections that were planned by a de facto government at the last minute in order to whitewash their actions." "We recognize that there are results in Honduras for this election. That's quite clear. We recognize those results, and we commend Mr. Lobo for having won these elections." - Arturo Valenzuela nevertheless sounded clearly embarrassed when he declared in the same press conference: "The issue is whether the legitimate president of Honduras, who was overthrown in a coup d'Etat, will be returned to office by the congress on December 2nd, as per

the San Jose-Tegucigalpa Accord. That was the accord that both sides signed at that time.” The fact is that 3 days later, the Honduran parliament voted by an overwhelming majority against Zelaya’s return to office, which did not deter Washington from continuing to support the de facto authorities.

[11] On 17 December 2009 Alfredo Luís Jaeggli said on the Argentinian public radio: “The Honduran president, assuming the presidency with a liberal model, thereafter betrayed this model and replaced it with the Socialism of the twenty-first century. What happened in Honduras (Jaeggli clearly refers to the 28 June 2009 coup), excuse me, for me it is completely legal. ” An audio version of the interview can be accessed [here](#).

[12] "Paraguay is the only country along with Haiti and Cuba that did not reform in order to modernize. You had your modernization; you know well with the Menem government, what I mean. Brazil also had it, as well as Uruguay, Bolivia, too, but unfortunately they had an involution. Paraguay does not, it is still as if in the 50s ..." "In Chile, (...) do you believe that the socialists in Chile are those who made the economy grow? They have not changed anything, not even the Chilean labour code. The Chilean labour code is still the code implemented by Pinochet!"

[13] Eva Golinger explained : “(...) Obama called for an additional \$320 million in “democracy promotion” funds for the 2010 budget just for use in Latin America. This is a substantially higher sum than the quantity requested and used in Latin America for “democracy promotion” by the Bush administration in its 8 years of government combined”!

[14] Because of the failure of the mobilizations in the media luna in Bolivia at the end of 2008 and of the right in Guayaquil, Ecuador, led by the city’s mayor Jaime Nebot in September 2008, Washington has put its support on hold but may reactivate it if the context requires and allows it. The same may be said for the right in the state of Zulia in Venezuela.