US forced to back down on OAS presidency

Bill Van Auken
4 May 2005

For the first time in its 57-year history, the Organization of American States Monday elected a secretary general whose candidacy had initially been opposed by Washington.

The Bush administration found itself compelled to back down from a standoff over the election and accept the installation of Chilean Interior Minister Jose Miguel Insulza.

The vote was indicative of Washington's waning power and influence in Latin America, where US capitalism has faced increasing competition from its global economic rivals in Europe and Asia.

Both the US State Department and the majority of the Latin American governments tried to put the best face on the decision, describing Insulza as a "consensus" candidate and insisting that there had been no "winners or losers."

Insulza himself embraced this view. After meeting with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, the Chilean minister declared, "Secretary Rice has supported a consensus, and therefore the candidate of the United States is now me. For that reason, no one should feel defeated."

This pretense of consensus, however, was marred by the failure of three of the organization's 34 member states to cast ballots for Insulza. Bolivia explained that it could not back a Chilean because of a 130-year-old border dispute involving the land-locked country's access to the sea. Peru cast a blank ballot. President AlejandroToledo took the vote as an opportunity to engage in a bit of nationalist demagogy, hoping to generate popular support for his crisis-ridden government. He claimed that denying the Chilean Peru's vote was a matter of "national honor" because of Chile's alleged sale of arms to Ecuador during a 1995 border war.

Also abstaining was Mexico, whose Foreign Minister Luis Ernesto Derbez had Washington's backing to become OAS president until it became apparent that he would not be approved. Mexican officials expressed bitterness over the outcome and insisted that Insulza was not a consensus candidate, merely the "only candidate."

The real humiliation, however, was that of the Bush administration, which had dispatched first Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and then Secretary of State Rice to Latin America in an attempt to bring the region's governments into line.

When the OAS top office became vacant—former Costa Rican president Miguel Angel Rodríguez was forced to resign over corruption charges that led to his imprisonment in his own country—the Bush administration sought to reward one of its most faithful stooges with the post. It tapped El Salvador's former President Francisco Flores, who headed the only Latin American government currently participating in the US occupation of Iraq, having sent 380 troops.

In the face of overwhelming opposition to placing such an open stooge of the State Department in the post, however, Washington shifted its backing to Derbez. Then, on April 11, the OAS deadlocked during five rounds of voting, with the Chilean and the Mexican candidate each getting 17 votes.

In previous contested elections at the OAS—1975 and 1991—Washington was able to bribe or strong-arm smaller countries to get its candidate elected. This time, however, its efforts proved counter-productive, and it became clear that it would lose the vote.

The Bush administration's concern was not over Insulza. While the prospect of a "socialist" taking the reins at the OAS undoubtedly disturbed some of the administration's right-wing ideologues, the Chilean minister is hardly a threatening figure from Washington's standpoint. A Christian Democrat in his youth, he supported the presidency of Salvador Allende and then spent the years of the dictatorship in exile.

He returned to Chile to take part in the "democratic transition" that saw the imposition of the Washington model of free market policies, while the military retained much of its power and autonomy. As part of the so-called "renovationist" wing of the Socialist Party, he firmly supported the perspective that made Chile a showcase for neoliberalism.

In 1998, as Chile's foreign minister, he gained worldwide notoriety for going to Britain to plead for the release of the former dictator Augusto Pinochet, then facing extradition to Spain to face charges of crimes against humanity. In the present Socialist Party-led government, he has served as interior minister, responsible for brutally repressing left-wing protests, which he has dismissed as "delinquent activity."

Washington's problem with Insulza's candidacy arose because the Bush administration was determined to use the OAS election as another means of promoting its policy of isolating and punishing Fidel Castro's Cuba and the government of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. As Chavez—together with left-of-center governments in Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay—was backing Insulza, the US opposed him.

Also, Insulza and the Chilean Socialist Party had voiced support for bringing Cuba back into the OAS. Thus, the candidacy ran counter to Washington's overriding aims in the region.

The frenzied and myopic US policy was spelled out last month by Otto Reich, a right-wing Cuban exile who, until recently, was Bush's senior State Department official on Latin America. Speaking before an audience of 300 officials and businessmen at a conference of the right-wing Atlas Foundation in Miami, Reich called for the smashing of what he termed a "Cuban-Venezuelan axis."

Reich warned, "The combination of the evil genius of Castro, with his experience in political battles and his economic desperation plus the unlimited stream of money that Chavez and his immense imprudence possess threaten the stability and security of the region." He added, "Defeating this axis is an urgent necessity."

"Now is the moment to solve the problems arising in our neighborhood, where Chavez has subjugated Venezuelan sovereignty

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to Cuba and a series of leftist governments have been elected," Reich said.

Referring to Chavez, who has repeatedly won popular elections, the ex-State Department official declared "It is not enough to be a democratically elected president...you must behave yourself as such and not attack democratic institutions or the separation of powers." In Latin America, this "separation" has generally been between civilian governments and the military, which Washington has frequently called upon to overthrow them.

Reich also chided the OAS for doing too little to promote "democracy" in the region, and demanded that it enforce the Inter-American Democratic Charter. This document was passed in 2001, barely a year before Reich and other Bush administration officials collaborated with right-wing politicians and a section of the Venezuelan armed forces in an abortive April 2002 military coup against Chavez.

He concluded by declaring the use of US military force to effect regime change "a last resort," and ridiculing the governments of Cuba and Venezuela for "manipulating public opinion in their countries with 'the threat of imperialism.'"

The Rumsfeld tour in March and Condoleezza Rice's five-day diplomatic foray into Latin America were essentially aimed at promoting the same perspective, though in slightly more diplomatic terms. Both seized upon recent arms deals between Venezuela and Russia in an unsuccessful bid to initiate a Cold War-style scare campaign.

Adopting Bush's new doctrine affirming American imperialism's right to intervene unilaterally anywhere in the world to combat "tyranny," Rice declared last Wednesday in Brazil, "President Bush has outlined the charge of our times. Those of us who are on the right side of freedom's divide have an obligation to those who are still on the wrong side of that divide."

In Latin America this thesis translates into the crusade against the "Cuba-Venezuela axis." This orientation unites Washington's long-standing campaign against the Castro regime—fueled by Cold War ideology and petty political calculations involving the Republican Party and the Cuban exiles in Miami—and the newer efforts to bring down the Chavez regime, part of the global strategy of monopolizing control over the world's major oil-producing regions.

The campaign met a hostile response from most Latin American governments. This is testimony both to the extensive trade deals that Venezuela has concluded throughout the continent, many of them involving oil sales at favorable prices, as well as the unwillingness of the region's ruling classes to identify themselves unconditionally with US interests.

There has been a significant shift over the past several years from economic dependence on the United States and a corresponding growth in trade and investment involving the European Union and Asia as well as increased economic integration within Latin America itself. The attraction of the US-proposed Free Trade Agreement of the Americas has faded in the meantime.

Last year, Latin American exports to Asia climbed by 34 percent to $14 billion, and played a significant role in raising the region's economic growth rate to 5.5 percent, the highest in two decades.

China in particular has concluded trade and investment agreements throughout the continent, concentrating in particular on Venezuela, which it sees as a source of supply for its ballooning energy demands.

The European Union, meanwhile, has already concluded free trade agreements with Mexico and Chile and is well along in reaching a similar deal with Mercosur, the embryonic common market forged between Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay.

This shift in economic relations has been accompanied by the bringing to power of governments like that of Lula in Brazil, Kirchner in Argentina and Vasquez in Uruguay. These governments, as the Paris daily *Le Monde* noted recently, "denounce the methods of the IMF, but scrupulously follow their precepts." This mix of populism, nationalism and promotion of capitalism serves the interests of ruling elites that no longer wish to subordinate themselves so unconditionally to US capitalism when other alternatives are available.

This by no means represents a break with US imperialism, however. In the end, an agreement was patched up that allowed Insulza's near-unanimous election. The Chilean minister obediently echoed the line of the State Department on Venezuela, declaring that governments elected democratically must behave democratically. He also declared that there could be no move to invite Cuba back into the OAS without a "consensus."

While Insulza's election does not bode any sweeping changes within the Organization of American States itself, the organization's future is a question mark.

Washington set up the OAS in 1948 as instrument for securing its hegemony in the Western Hemisphere, facilitating the exploitation of the region's resources and the suppression of revolutionary movements in the name of defending the hemisphere from "communist aggression."

For most of its history, the body has acted as a pliant tool of US foreign policy—referred to in its early years by Latin American nationalists as the "ministry of the colonies." It rubber-stamped the US intervention in Guatemala in 1954, expelled Cuba and backed the blockade of that country in 1962 and supported the US invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1965. While it "deeply deplored" Washington's unilateral invasion of Panama in 1989, its condemnation came only after it had helped the US politically prepare the intervention.

Given the shifts in global political relations, the demise of the Soviet Union and the increasing turn by Latin America's capitalists towards other markets and sources of investment, the viability of such a US-dominated hemispheric body is clearly in question.

In his first speech, the new secretary general summed up the challenge facing the OAS in a single word: "irrelevance."

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