

Regionalization in New Scenarios: Democratic Deficit and Civil Society Participation in South American Regionalism Coordinadora Regional de Investigaciones Económicas y Sociales (CRIES) 9 January 2011

In the past decade, Latin America's geopolitical map underwent some significant changes. After September 11, 2001, (...) United States foreign policy shifted its strategic focus to other regions of the world, showing an increasing neglect towards the region. At the same time, the election of a broad spectrum of progressive and center-left governments in most of the Latin American and Caribbean countries did not materialize in a new impetus for an effective agenda for regional integration, nor did it create the conditions for active involvement of Latin America and Caribbean citizens in this process.

Within this framework, while currently the FTAA does not longer represent an ambitious goal for most Latin American and Caribbean nations, the bilateral free trade agreements signed by the US and some other countries such as Peru, Colombia, Panama and possibly Ecuador and Uruguay; and the signing of the Dominican Republic —Central America Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA) reflect some states' sustained interest in endorsing agreements with the US, particularly in the sub-regions in close proximity and in the nations along the Pacific coast. Among the Andean countries, with the withdrawal of Venezuela, those agreements have, in turn, contributed to the weakening and fragmentation of the Andean Community of Nations —CAN, and the restructuring of MER-COSUR with Venezuela's admission still pending. (...)

(...)The emergent leading role of Venezuela in the region during the past decade, supported by its oil-based revenues, has not only contributed to the restructuring of the Latin American geopolitical map, but also to the establishment and development of a new integration paradigm through the creation of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Peoples of our America (ALBA). (...)

(...) At the same time, despite its increasing global player role, Brazil has not fully succeeded in becoming a regional leader regarding issues other than its trade and economic interests, while fostering regional policies based on soft power, prudent and cautious-profile decisions and global aspirations which are basically marked, however, by its economic agenda.

Within this context, the region has at times been torn between the traditional American hegemony, which has severely worn off and has not shown, during the first two years of the Obama administration any substantial change and what some analysts call 'the new Venezuelan hegemony' based on the high international prices of oil, the country's energy and financial resources, and the assertive ideological crusade fostered by its current president. Also, as we have pointed out in other papers, regional tensions translate into an open competition between the sprouting leaderships of Venezuela and Brazil, with differentiated conceptual frames, strategies and objectives.

Additionally, beyond the wreckage of the FTAA project, bilateral agreements persist with the US; MERCOSUR (and especially Brazil) have insisted on promoting, since the beginning of this century, the creation of a South American Community of Nations (CSN) with different degrees of commitment by the South American countries in the process of transition into becoming the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and the support of several international financial institutions (particularly, the Inter-American Development Bank —IDB— and the Andean Development Corporation —CAF—); while Chavez's radical Bolivarianism has prompted the creation of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA). These three paradigms of integration, to varied extent and with different scopes, contribute to a greater fragmentation of the hemisphere. (...)

(...) Within this context, the region tends to be increasingly fragmented and is torn apart by multiple centrifugal forces.

However, the difficult consolidation of democracy over the past twenty years has also given rise to a wide range of discourses on the need to overcome, through a more active involvement of citizens, the clear democratic gaps shown by the integration processes in the region. (...)

(...) The development of a civil society that makes greater demands to the State and of a citizenry demanding transparency, information, and accountability, clashes with the political tradition in the countries of the region of ascribing the decision-making power to the executive branch, if not specifically to the president, in particular with regard to foreign policies and external affairs.

Even more worrying is the fact that integration initiatives, of a clear inter-governmental nature, leave little room for the construction of a bottom-up regional integration project with strong support by organized citizens and the inclusion of a relevant social dimension. (...)

(...) In light of this general overview of the prevailing trends in the region, this document aims at analyzing both the present dynamics of the regionalism processes in Latin America and the Caribbean and the rise of new inter-governmental initiatives to promote regional approaches different from those developed under the "Washington Consensus" in the 1990s, taking into account its most outstanding traits and trends, and the evolution of civil society organizations and networks' capacity to influence, in this new context, the regional agendas. (...)

(...) In this regard, we argue that there are pending questions associated with distinctive features of coordination between these actors in the process of formulating and implementing a regional agenda and that, in the context of new regional integration initiatives, the interaction between citizens and social movements, on one side, and of governments and political parties on the other, currently show serious shortcomings. (...)

(...) Within this context, it is essential to highlight the transition that also affects the spaces for citizen participation in regional agendas and in the de-velopment of this new stage of regionalism. The gradual reduction of Social Summits held in par-allel or in coordination with inter-governmental Summits is a symptom of the displacement of CSOs from a relevant role in the regionalism process. (...)

(...) we aim at examining the introduction of social agendas in the regional integration processes and the initiatives to ap-prove, in different political and organizational contexts, Social Charters that will formalize their implementation. Within this context, we analyze the distinctive features of the evolution of civil society in the new regional political scenario, its weaknesses, drawbacks and strengths; the emerging social actors in the process of build-ing citizenship in the region, and the obstacles they face. Finally, we analyze the scope of citizen participation in the regional agenda through the existing participation mechanisms and their limitations in order to address the key question to be addressed by this chapter: at the present stage of the regionalism process, is there an ef-fective citizen participation in the formulation of the different issues of the regional agenda which can contribute to overcome the existing democratic deficit? (...)

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