
Can the Left Deliver?

It has become almost trite to say that 'Revolution is no longer around the corner'. What then are the alternatives for the activists and NGOs in the field to work towards?

The Left has gradually been coming to power in Latin American countries, Uruguay being the latest to join the band. Does this bring about radical change? Do we expect too much too soon? Do we judge these governments by a more rigorous yardstick?

There are lessons for us in this analysis. In India the unexpected victory of the Congress-led front has also been interpreted to be a backlash from the 'common-man' against the elitist 'India Shining' thrust of the previous government. The Left has been in power in West Bengal for decades, and is a major force in Kerala, forming governments there intermittently. Can we hope for much from these sometimes-unexpected radical shifts?

Arundhati Roy in a radio interview warns us against expecting too much from the new government in Delhi.

Plinio Arruda Sampaio, on the other hand, analyses the first two years of Lula in power to understand whether he has been able to deliver, and what are the implications of his presidency for the masses, in general, and for the left, in particular.

We bring you a perspective on the Left in Bengal and Kerala in a later issue.

Indian Elections and Resistance : Arundhati Roy on the Indian Election, Her support for the Iraqi Resistance and the Privatisation of war, Amy Goodman interviews

Arundhati Roy, Znet, May 19, 2004.

<http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=32&ItemID=5553>

[C.ELDOC.6009320]

What has changed after Lula? *Plinio Arruda Sampaio*, Zmag, January 11, 2005.

<http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=48&ItemID=7003>

[C.ELDOC.6009324]

Indian Elections and Resistance

Arundhati Roy on the Indian Election, Her support for the Iraqi Resistance and the Privatisation of war

Amy Goodman interviews Arundhati Roy

Welcome to Democracy Now!, Arundhati.

Thank you, Amy

It's very good to have you with us. Can you explain what is happening right now in India? Were you surprised by the victory of the Congress party, and then the rejection by Sonia Gandhi of the prime ministership?

I think many people were surprised by the victory of the Congress, because it was really hard to see beyond the sort of haze of hatred that the Hindu nationalists had been spreading. One wasn't sure whether the people would be blinded by that – and they had been just a few months ago in a local assembly elections in Gujarat – or whether the real issues of absolute poverty and absolute [separation] from the land and water resources would be the big issues. A lot of us, when the results came out were – leaving aside one's cynicism about mainstream politics – thought it couldn't have been a better result.

The Congress party sort of shackled to the left parties in a coalition which would make them a pretty formidable opposition to the B.J.P. But subsequently, what has happened has been actually fascinating because you can just see the forces at play, both internationally and nationally, so blatantly, just so blatantly that, you know, just in order to understand what's going on, it's been a fascinating few days.

Can you talk about the differences between the B.J.P., which has been defeated, and the Congress party? I understand that you have just returned from the house of the man who we believe will replace Sonia Gandhi since she has turned down the prime

ministership.

No, no, no, not returned, but I was in the market and to come back home I had to drive past all of the politicians' houses, and I could see all the crowds outside and the television cameras and so on. I have no access to them in that sense, but, well the fundamental difference between the Congress and the BJP is that one is an overtly fascist party, proudly fascist. It doesn't feel bad if you call it that. The culture which the BJP's big leaders subscribe to, which is the RSS, openly admires Hitler.

The Congress – I mean, obviously, the way it has happened is that the Congress has historically played covert communal politics in order to create what in India we call vote banks where you pit one community against another and so on in order to secure votes. So, somehow the BJP is the horrible specter that has emerged from the legacy of the Congress party. You know, you begin to realize that hypocrisy is not a terrible thing when you see what overt fascism is compared to sort of covert, you know, communal politics which the Congress has never been shy of indulging in.



Economically, again, it's the same thing. You know, the Congress really was the party that opened India up to the whole neo-liberal regime. But the BJP has come in and taken it much further, to absurd levels. Today, we have a situation in which 40% of rural India has food absorption levels lower than sub-Saharan Africa. You have the biggest rural income divide ever seen in history. You have millions of tons of food grain rotting in government programs while starvation deaths are announced all over.

You have the W.T.O. regime making it possible for the government to import food grain and milk and sugar and all of these things while Indian farmers are committing suicide not in the hundreds now, but the figures have moved into the thousands. And you have a middle class which is glittering, which is happy... I just wrote a piece about how corporate globalization and this kind of Hindu nationalism, communal fascism are so linked. If you see what has happened after the elections, after the people of India made it clear that their mandate was against communalism, their mandate was against economic reforms. Even in state governments where the Congress party had instituted these reforms, the Congress was also overthrown. It wasn't a vote for Sonia Gandhi or a vote for the congress, it was a vote against very serious issues.

What has happened is that as soon as the election results were announced, the BJP, the hard-right wing members of the BJP and its goon squads started saying we'll shave our heads. We'll eat green gram and make a revolution in this country against this foreign woman on the one hand, and on the other hand, equally hard core corporate groups were acting – they were out on the streets. They were yelling like fundamentalists would, and all of these corporate television channels had split screens where on the one hand, you saw what is happening in Sonia Gandhi's house and on the other half, you just had what the stockbrokers are saying. And the whole of the one billion people who had voted had just been forgotten. They had been given their photo opportunity, their journeys on elephant back and camel and whatever it was to the election booth. Now they were just forgotten. The only comments you get are what the industrialists think... and what the centrists think about Sonia Gandhi. It is an absolutely absurd kind of blackmail by fascists on the one hand and corporate fascists on the other.

We're talking to Arundhati Roy, speaking to us from Delhi. She recently wrote a piece in The Guardian of Britain, Let Us Hope that the Darkness has Passed and the Veil of the Virtual Worlds has Collided in a Humiliation of Power. On the issue of Sonia Gandhi

and why she is stepping down, what this means, do you think it is significant at all?

I think there was a real dilemma there. All of us are so used to being cynical and reading meaning into meanings. But she was faced with a party and with a climate and people at the helm of the BJP, who we know now are capable of going to any extreme – as we saw what happened in Gujarat two years ago when they openly supported a pogrom in which 2,000 Muslims were massacred on the streets, and not a single person has been brought to book or punished.



I think she was aware of the fact that this kind of vilification and this kind of chauvinism is in the air. It could have resulted in a situation where a new government comes in and all it's doing is firefighting on a non-issue, on whether Sonia Gandhi is a foreigner or whether she should be there or not there. Whereas, in fact, there are so many really pressing issues that need to be looked at. So, I think that there was a real dilemma there, and perhaps strategically it has taken the wind out of the BJP's sails and has exposed them for being absolutely uncaring for a massive mandate. If you look at all of the secular and left parties together, it's 320 seats, which is a huge majority.

As we return to Arundhati Roy in India, as she reports on what's happening there with the elections that have routed out the B.J.P. party. Arundhati, as you listen to this report of the Israeli helicopter gun ships firing into the crowd of thousands [in Rafah in

Gaza], a number of people are dead, and it's certainly an issue you have followed as well as what you're hearing about what's happening in Iraq, could you share your response?

It's just that you have to sometimes, you have come to a stage where you almost have to work on yourself. You know, on finding some tranquility with which to respond to these things, because I realize that the biggest risk that many of us run is beginning to get inured to the horrors. Next time around, only if it is ratcheted up, will it get our attention? I have always maintained that it's very, very important to understand that war is the result of a flawed peace, and we must understand

the systems that are at work here. You know, we must understand that the resistance movement in Iraq is a resistance movement that all of us have to support, because it's our war, too. And it will



not do for them to call people terrorists and thugs and all of that. That time is over now. The fact is that America's weapons systems have made it impossible for anybody to confront it militarily. So, all you have is your wits and your cunning, and your ability to fight in the way the Iraqis are fighting. You see that system. You see Iraq as the culmination of a system, and you see how hard that system is pushing even here. You can see the clear links between what's happening in the Indian elections and this whole global economy and how it's suffocating the breath out of the body of poor people.

We're talking with Arundhati Roy in India. We have also gotten these reports of some Indian workers who were working for a western contractor in Iraq, who alleged that they were kept there against their will, hardly being paid. It was a report that was first reported in the Hindu and then followed up in this country, a group

of 20 Indians who ran away from a U.S. Military camp in Iraq where they worked in the kitchen claiming they had been abused for nine months. Is this a story that you have been following? They have returned, I believe, now, to India.

They are all people from Kerala which is where I come from, you know, and apparently, these kind of job contractors took them to Kuwait, pretending that they had got them work there. A lot of people from Kerala work in the Middle East. And then they were put on a bus basically and they realized they were in Baghdad before they knew it. So, I think, you know, this is the bottom end of the privatization of war. Torture has been privatized now, so you have obviously the whole scandal in America about the abuse of prisoners and the fact that army people might be made to pay a price. But who are the privatized torturers accountable to? Eventually, you have a situation also in which – as it becomes more and more obvious to the American government



that when American soldiers die on the battlefield, pressure goes up at home. So they're going to try to hire other soldiers to do their work for them. You know, they're going to try to hire poor people from poor countries who would be willing to do it. I'm sure they're going to try that. They're trying that already, trying to get, of course, the Indian army and so on in – we know Hamid Karzai's securities are all privatized. I think it's a nightmare and ultimately, terrorism, in way, is a privatization of

war. It's the belief that it's not only states that can wage war, why not private people? Why not have your nuclear bombs in your briefcase? All of these policies that America upholds, nuclear weapons, privatization, all of these things are going to mutate and metamorphose into these dangerous things.

I want to thank you for joining us from New Delhi, India.

NOTES

What has changed after Lula?

Plinio Arruda Sampaio

To evaluate is to compare facts and values. In this evaluation of the first two years of Lula's government, we chose as a term of comparison, the project for national construction. Using a synthetic and precise formula from Caio Prado Jr. (*to what extent these two years of government have contributed to accelerate the transition between the "Brazil-Colony from yesterday into the Brazil-Nation of tomorrow"*), three aspects of this transition will be examined: reduction of inequality; increase in autonomy; and political organization of the people.

As for the reduction of social inequality, it should be mentioned that for the two year period, the growth of the Gross National Product (GNP) was mediocre and did not even manage to affect the GNP per capita. There was an improvement in 2004, but without a larger impact in terms of jobs (there was a small increase in comparison to the size of the work force) or salaries (in fact, the average salary decreased in the two year period).

The government made an effort to demand the formalization of job relations – which would be reflected in better salaries. In spite of that, the number of registered workers is still lower than those working under informal contracts. That might help to explain the shocking fact that the income of almost a fourth (23.8% according to Ipea [Institute of Applied Economic Research]) of Brazilian workers is below the minimum wage. Having inherited a centennial situation of inequality, the government could claim the impossibility to reverse this scenario in only two years. This argument would be acceptable if, in those two years, efficient measures had been taken to alter the corrupt structures that create inequality. That is not what we have seen.



The agrarian reform did not come out of the paper. The goal of settling one million families in four years, which in itself would be enough to generate the virtuous dynamic of wealth redistribution in the countryside, was cut to half, and that half is not being executed.

There was no mention of urban reform – another structural measure for the reduction of social inequality. Even a traditional housing programme for the construction of popular houses did not get off the ground.

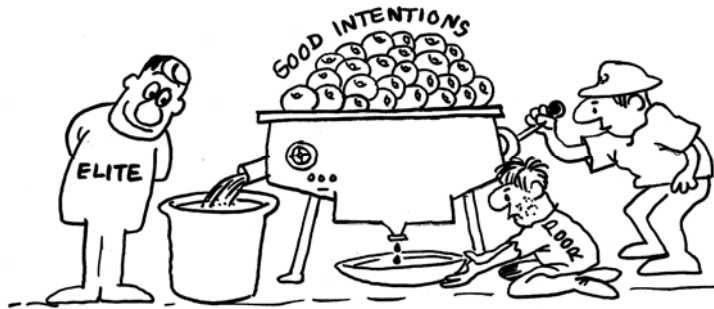
The use of taxation for wealth redistribution -an instrument used by developed countries in Europe and North America- was not even contemplated. What we have seen was a tax collection fury, completely indifferent to the fact that the current tributary system places a disproportional burden on the poorest layers of the population.

Good intentions but insufficient programmes

In the absence of structural reforms, the battle against social inequalities was limited to the *assistentialist* expenditure of the State. What we have seen there is that after two years of the Hunger Zero programme, Bolsa Escola (School Incentive), Minimum Income, and so many other programmes under good sounding titles, the government did not entirely manage to get rid of the neo-liberal concept of “focused social expenditure”. The announced “structuring” vector of those income

transferences to the poorest sectors did not go beyond the level of good intention. The disproportion between the amount of resources allocated (even if they were superior in relation to the previous government) and the scale of the demands of the immense mass of poor has frustrated the objectives.

Miniscule transferences of wealth do not generate a favorable social dynamic for the political and social protagonism of marginalized people. In other words: in spite of their good intentions, it is not possible to come out of the traditional *assistentialist* line practiced by the dominant elite, which is merely destined to lessen the explosive poverty situation.



The big argument from the conservatives with regards to wealth redistribution is that we first need to have wealth. The government boasts that the economy is growing (only in 2004) at a rate nearing 5% - the best result in nine years. The growth rate is exhibited as evidence that the economic policy is correct. However to put it into perspective, it is appropriate to compare it with economies such as Venezuela (18%); Uruguay (12%); Argentina (8.2%); Ecuador (6%); Panama (6%); Chile (5.8%), in the same period.

In this broader context we should question if the announced 5% in Brazil would actually be the result of a keen management of the economy or the expansionist situation of the international market, considering the

performance of the US and China. Where is the guarantee that economic growth will continue at this rate?

Yet, that is not the central point of the redistributive controversy. The 2004 rate may remain for five, ten years, or even longer (which no economist dares to predict). However, if the structural scheme of sharing wealth is not altered, the situation of social inequality will be substantially the same, even if the total income level might be a bit higher.

The conclusion of this analysis is that, in the first two years of Lula's government, there were no significant results in terms of the reduction of social inequalities.

The Neo-liberal adjustment continues

To measure the performance of Lula's government in reducing dependency – a second dimension in this evaluation – the analysis must include two aspects: political and economic. In the economic aspect, the basic and shocking facts verify the continuity of the structural adjustment process of the Brazilian economy to the canon of the neoliberal model: the Pension Reform; the removal of any constitutional hindrance to the autonomy of the Central Bank; the Judiciary Reform; and the Bankruptcy Bill. This structuring legislation, sponsored by all means in hand by the PT government fits rigorously with the prescription of the Washington Consensus – weak state and free market.

All economic policy was subordinated to the same motto: *"Confidence Building"* (as we read in the manuals that instructed the economic team) from the centers of financial capitalism in the government of Brazil. *To reach this confidence, unjustifiable concessions to the energy and communication multinationals were made; speculators and*



investors received undue exemptions; we turned a blind eye to the transgressions of the norms of forest protection by foreign logging companies; and a retrocession to the environmental legislation was sanctioned in order to favor GMO transnational companies. Not to mention the maintenance of a primary superávit that is incompatible with meeting the minimum social demands and the urgent needs to recover the economic infrastructure of the country.

This inventory of structural and circumstantial measures brings us to the conclusion that, after two years of Lula's government, the Brazilian state has become feeble and less equipped to execute economic policies, since a large number of relevant decisions have been transferred to external centers of decision.

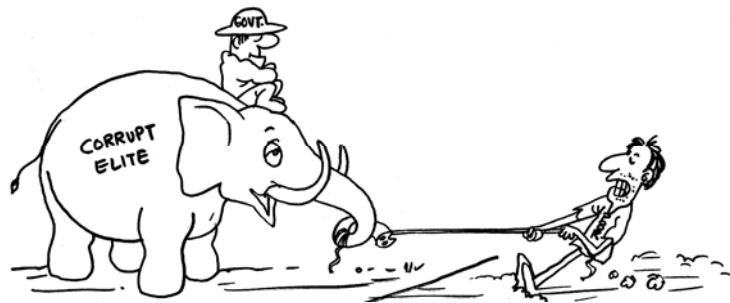
As for the political dimension and the issue of dependency, the government and Itamaraty tried to push forward FTAA without bending too much to US pressure. They managed to torpedo the assignment of the Alcântara base; to create the G-22; and to defeat, for the first time in the history of trade negotiations, proposals supported by both the US and Europe. These "achievements", though questionable, completely fade in light of the inexplicable deployment of Brazilian troops in Haiti, serving the obscure needs of US and French diplomacy.

Fragmentation of the Left

We can now start examining the third axle of analysis: the political organization of the people – an essential aspect, since we all know that the reduction of inequalities and autonomy are not generous gifts from the rich and the foreign powers. Quite the opposite, they are conquests that must be plucked from the powerful through great struggle and sacrifice. Therefore, they require people aware, organized and mobilized.

There is no doubt here that these have been the worst results of Lula's government in these two years. For a start, the government conducted

its politics according to the traditional patterns of the corrupt Brazilian elite: collusion, give and take, bogus alliances and obscure financing of the electoral campaign – nothing different from the reprehensible practices of Fernando Henrique Cardoso's government in its relationship with the parliamentary and supporting base.



This behavior only helped to confirm the skepticism of a large part of the population with anything that has to do with politics (“they all come from the same place”) and to demoralize the popular vanguard which, for decades, struggled to convince the people that PT was different. The disappointment with their ethical behavior was followed by total astonishment at the lack of measures that were always part of the party programme and of Lula's speech during his political life.

The indigenous people, for example, could not understand why the government did not demarcate the reserve *Raposa Serra do Sol*. The two hundred thousand families that ran to the countryside when they heard about Lula's election cannot accept that they must remain on roadsides or in occupied areas, under the target of gunmen. Environmentalists saw their hopes for a decisive repressive action against deforestation and the penetration of GMOs being frustrated. Those affected by dams have not received the compensations that they are entitled to. The true trade unionists complain about the value of the minimum wage and against a proposal for a trade union structure. Not

to mention the elderly, who were hit by a new pension legislation. A rosary of disappointments.

Having in sight that all those demands were the banners of the struggle of the popular vanguards, we can conclude that, today, popular movements are weaker, more confused, and more divided than two years ago. To give a clear picture of that, we should only observe the fact that all the internal tendencies of PT “cracked” and that the various important trade unions are in the process of or have already cut links with CUT [Central Única dos Trabalhadores]. The other left wing parties and popular movements from the countryside and the city also did not escape the process. They find themselves everyday with the dilemma: “break up” with “their government” or retreat, in order not to directly confront it. Lula’s government does not repress the left or popular movements, However, it provokes its dilution and fragmentation.

This evaluation apparently does not fit with the feeling of the people; opinion polls show a 70% approval for the performance of President Lula and 45% for the government. Why such harsh criticism if the “masses” are happy? It is too early to draw definite conclusions from those polls. Would they indicate that Lula is replacing his supporting base – PT and combative popular movements – and bending towards a new kind of “populism”, founded in his personal charisma and in the transformation of PT into an amazing electoral machine? Or would the polls only show a situation which could quickly fall apart if 2005 does not bring the benefits that the masses are still waiting for?

Whatever the answers are, one thing is certain: Lula’s failures are forcing everyone who struggles to push forward the transition from “the Brazil-Colony of yesterday into the Brazil – Nation of tomorrow” to make a profound effort to revise the strategies of their discourse and their practices.

About the Author

Plinio Arruda Sampaio is the director Correio da Cidadania, founder of PT, and leader of the party in the Constituinte (1987/1988).

NOTES

