

Having Power, Without Being In Government

By Antonio Martins

The disillusion with Lula Administration is causing contradictory reactions among Brazilian social movements. After years of struggle to make the left get into the power in Planalto Palace, this left maintains, in several cases, the same policies that created such an unequal society and such a dependent country. What to do? Some people are disillusioned; some people are discovering that building a new country is much more complex – and more interesting – than winning an election. They deserve to know one of the many relevant stories that “main” Brazilian press has hidden for years to its readers. A story about the victories won by Mexican farmers over President Vicente Fox neoliberal policies, since 2002.

The Mexican political scientist Victor Quintana, told this tale last Monday (June 14th), in Sao Paulo. Together with the Brazilian sociologist Chico de Oliveira, he participated in a panel of one of the seminars of the so-called Post-Neoliberal Agenda – an ensemble of seminars organized by Ibase and Rosa Luxemburg Foundation as a contribution to World Social Forum (WSF).

Quintana’s lecture was rich in contents and it was a clever analysis. He revealed the story of a movement that gathered round some of the most current proposals and concepts of WSF (food sovereignty and multifunctional agriculture, among others), but that movement added the defense of indigenous farming methods; which mobilized a wide range of agrarian sectors (from familiar agriculture to mid-producers). They kept the radicalism of their proposals, not subordinating their demands to the action of political parties, but they dialogued with Parliament among other institutions, to achieve concrete results.

The story begins in November 2002, only few weeks before the last stage of the North America “Free” Trade Agreement (NAFTA), would come into force. After 1994, aliquots for imports of goods produced in USA and Canada were progressively reduced, and would finally be reduced to zero, and the definition of maximum limits (quotas) of some ranges of products would be prohibited. Ancient and bureaucratic, National Confederation of Peasants (CNC in Spanish) seemed to stand still.

A non-nourished country

Small, but active, other twelve peasant organizations are looking together for an alternative. First of all, they denounce the effects of two decades (1982-2002) of non-protection for Mexican products (trade ‘liberalization’), and how State is far apart from fields (reduction of credits and the shutdown of state research institutions and cuts in peasants’ support). Mexico started to import 95% of the soy consumed in the country, 49% of the

wheat, 40% of the meat, 52% of the rice, and even 23% of corn consumed in the country – the national grain. Mexico is world leader importer of powdered milk. The percentage of peasants that are starving rose from 35% to 52%. 50% of them don't have access to decent healthcare and education. From around 585 million dollars commercial surplus that Mexico had with USA, in 2005 Mexico regressed to a 2,15 billion deficit in 2001. El campo no aguanta mas (The countryside cannot take anymore) finished a manifesto launched by the twelve organizations together. This sentence baptized the movement.

The organizers know that it is necessary to propose an alternative program. It starts with six emergency measures, aimed to change the rougher consequences of neoliberalism. They want to suspend two chapters of Nafta about agricultural questions (to prevent the fall of those economic barriers that still preserve national production). Another point is the adoption of a program of state inversion in countryside, with special spending for 2003, but it would be extended until 2020. They also demand a reform of the financial aid for rural production, due to benefit small producers (that are harassed by banks, as well as in Brazil). Another demand is to be guaranteed that an amount equal to 1% GDP investments would be directed to increase production and 1,5% for social and environmental development. They want rules that assure quality and innocuousness of Mexican agricultural products (it shows a clear intention to have consumers as allies). And finally, they demand respect San Andres Agreements (that guarantee autonomy for indigenous peoples and that are the main banner of zapatista communities).

They are proposing a new world. They are winning Mexico's trust

El campo no aguanta mas is inspiring because it has wide horizons. Beside urgent measures, the movement is suggesting new directions for Mexican countryside, expressed in a ten-points-program. Three of them stand out: 1. Mexico must reach food sovereignty. In other words, the main goal of agriculture can't be the profit of big producers, but to guarantee decent food for all citizens. 2. to achieve that goal, this country must establish an alliance with millions of small and mid-peasants – and not with agribusiness, which's grow is based in unemployment and devastation. 3. Agrarian national policy must be guided by the principle of multifunctionality . Opposite to productivity this principle values farmers as social actors, not as labor force. Society must assure them, decent life conditions . Their role, is not only to offer products in the market, but to preserve nature (avoiding devastating farming conditions), to maintain the diversity of food culture (farming the requested food for multiple regional cooking), to preserve natural landscape.

This program means a decisive step forward. El campo no aguanta mas, due to this program, is seen by Mexicans, as a movement that is not limited to the defense of farmer' interests, but it is seen as a movement that is proposing

new horizons for the whole society. They can conquest urban world. The scenarios of the major peasant demonstration aren't the hidden corners, but the main metropolis – especially El Zócalo in Mexico City, where thousands of people met. On January 1st 2003 – two months after it started – the movement had enough support to launch an ensemble of extraordinary measures. They occupied the bridge that connects the states of Chihuahua (México) and Texas (USA), and some roadways. Unions, bishops, artists and intellectuals supported them.

El campo no aguanta mas won the trust of public opinion. For the first time since 1994, opinion polls showed that most of Mexicans are for the suspension of Nafta. The huge farmers mobilization and society support, force institutions – and even Fox Administration – to open the dialogue. After the occupation of the capital city, on January 30th 2003, there were created 8 “dialogue tables” about agrarian issues. The alternative program demanded by the movement is in Mexican agenda of debates. More than 8 thousand audits are carried out, to debate all around the country.

A victory that will remain

The process is going fast. On April 24th the so-called Proposal of National Agreement for Food Sovereignty with Farmers was ready. Victor Quintana thinks that it is “peasant project for 21st Century”. It is identified with a withdrawal of neoliberal policies for the land. The proposal unites organizations that represent not only indigenous communities but also mid-producers – that are also affected by the advance of financial system on rural field.

On April 28th, El campo no aguanta mas, signed an agreement of 242 points with the government. For Quintana, after that, the situation is quite complex. Some victories are visible. The Congress approved a Law of Rural Sustainable Development, and a Law of Energy, that recognizes that peasants need subsidized energy. For the first time after many years, national budget remarkably increased countryside investment. Government reintroduced guaranteed purchase of corn produced by farmers, and a variety of this grain is excluded from Nafta. There were adopted (limited) pension programs for elder farmers.

But the complex process of negotiation cools down peasants' mobilization. The lack of mobilization of other social sectors is also affecting them. The government takes advantage of this fact to break their compromises about food sovereignty and multifunctionality. Today, El campo no aguanta mas, is going through an ebbing period. For major victories, it is necessary another force correlation, in society and State.

As a general balance of this first stage, Quintana says: “ It is clear that

Mexico could stop the adoption of neoliberal policies for countryside”. He knows that this advance remained in the middle of the road. New battles are coming. The major conquest seems to be a change in the perception of society on agriculture. Some months of firm and politicized mobilization, were enough to show that capitalist “modernization” devastates social rights and nature – and that there is another possible way. Right during Fox Administration, peasants showed that social movement is powerful, when it combines struggling with dispute of hegemony.

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