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The perspectives of the Frente Social y Politico

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Description:

The processes of construction of the new mass political projects developed in Latin America at the end of the 20th century were characterised by their diversity of origin, structure and functioning. Their experiences involved a break with the classical schemas of construction of working class parties, that can be characterised as ideologically closed and in many cases sectarian, invariably oscillating between vanguardism and adaptation.

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Projects such as the Frente Amplio (FA) of Uruguay, the Workers Party (PT) of Brazil and the FMLN of El Salvador represented, on the political terrain of the masses, the action, resistance and insurgence of the people, faced with the exhaustion of the Keynesian model and the forced passage towards neo-liberal transnational capitalism.

The workers' and popular movement sought to create adequate strategies and political organisations to meet the challenge of the epoch

The Frente Social y Politico (FSP, Political and Social Front), which is beginning this process of construction in Colombia, wishes to present a historic alternative for the construction of a unitary politics of the excluded, but it was born surrounded by enemies and great dangers. Through these circumstances it grew and became, in the words of Orlando Fals Borda, a new force which can resolve "the tasks hanging over us", of the popular struggle and the Colombian Revolution, an attempt to gather all the previous experiences of construction of the popular political projects of the masses, that began with the United Front of Camilo Torres passing through the Patriotic Union, A Luchar Frente Popular and the AD-M19 to name only the most significant.

We find that there are very few documents that deal seriously with the Latin American and national experiences of political construction, with these and other similar experiences. But that is not to say they do not exist. They are confined to internal debates with little systematisation and are therefore difficult to access. To motivate reflection in all the sectors of the FSP we will refer to some of the most important experiences.

While the FA of Uruguay was born out of the unity of components of a "broad" left, going from radical to Social Democratic positions, the FMLN emerged from a guerrilla demobilisation articulated with a social movement and the PT was the political initiative of the unions, our FSP has to an extent a little of each one of these ingredients. There are left parties inside it, but not only such parties. It was born in a country at war but with an autonomy in relation to the insurgents. The decision to build it came from the fourth congress of the CUT (a trade union federation). The CTC (a peasant confederation) then joined the project. Nonetheless, this does not mean there was a definite trade union hegemony or a project exclusively of the workers.

The FSP was born out of necessity from the situation in the mid 1980s, a situation that was sharpened with the crisis of the "socialist" camp. There was always the difficulty that when the socio-political context was favourable, the possibilities never coincided with a leadership team with the authority and the maturity to lead. Or things happened in reverse and teams that were capable of building were displaced through a national and global context that favoured the forces of opportunism, vanguardism and adaptation.

The closest antecedents were the last frustrated attempts like that of the Frente Social Amplio formed in 1999 after the assassination of Eduardo Umaña Mendoza. However a new initiative was only possible to the extent that the workers as a class rediscovered the necessary confidence to assume responsibility for a refoundation. For those who had buried the working class and its historical function following the productive changes in the world of work, this experience must be worth reflecting upon. Something must remain of that historical function if the trade unions, who

know very well the difficulties and corporatist tendencies, have decided to take on the construction of a mass anti-neo-liberal project of the left, in the name of all the exploited, oppressed, excluded and marginalised.

Certainly, the origins of this movement should be studied more deeply. Still from the beginning this initiative originating from the workers did not exclude the popular sectors, middle layers and sectors of the national bourgeoisie linked to production. There is still a lack of programmatic clarity in the matter and this clarity is the most important task before us. However elements of consensus exist allowing us to sketch an orientation for the FSP. It is a project against neo-liberalism, opposed to "Plan Colombia" and thus an anti-imperialist project of defence of sovereignty and the self-determination of peoples. It is opposed to the speculative transnational financial system of capital. It is a national and popular project, at the service of the productive sectors, which considers sub-regional and Latin-American integration necessary on the basis of democratic, horizontal, equitable principles and tries to grasp the importance of intervening on new international terrains. It advocates a negotiated solution to the armed conflict in a framework of social transformations and dignity, denounces forcefully the context of degradation created by the war, the violation of human rights and crimes against humanity; demands respect for the autonomy of the social organisations and affirms unambiguously its programmatic independence vis-à-vis the state and the capitalist system and its organic autonomy in relation to bipartyism and the insurrectional forces.

What can be noted in Latin America today is a substantial presence of social movements which simultaneously fight for immediate demands and provide a cement, a continuity, to political projects. Beyond the political vicissitudes they have undergone, their identity consists in representing the popular sectors.

All these movements have experienced significant growth as national political forces. Nonetheless, they are appreciated above all thanks to their management of local governments. Montevideo, Porto Alegre and San Salvador currently represent examples on the global scale of the participation of citizens in the drawing up of the budget and a more human model of urban development. This local and regional basis has allowed a rapid strengthening of political influence and a growth in membership, aiding access to the media.

Nonetheless, the forced coexistence with the enemy, the central government, and the traps of the legislation of a national state integrated in the strategies of the IMF, have led to a certain erosion and weakness which, although limited, can distance the forces in question from their initial project of radical struggle.

Tendencies in the same direction emerged following the formation of parliamentary groups, representing in the case of El Salvador and Uruguay relative majorities. The possibility, newly acquired, of debating with those who had previously excluded them, of having an impact in the important votes, the need for a policy of alliances in the framework of potentially winnable presidential campaigns, carries with it the danger of losing sight of the needs of the social sectors one represents. That is what happened, in the final analysis, with the AD-M19 parliamentary group in Colombia in the course of the last decade.

Growth on the parliamentary front has happened without the forces involved having made the necessary preparation, above all from the point of view of functioning and political relations with their base, which constitute the irreplaceable antidote to the seductions of state power. Thus the parties tend to become exclusively parliamentary as much in their political vision as in their hierarchical structure. The parliamentary groups play the role of leadership in the big political questions, with a recurrent tendency to underestimate the structures of social movements and parties at the national and regional level. These latter are then led to only concern themselves with particular problems, immediate demands or their organisational survival.

In the case of the FSP, the test of participation in local government is already underway whereas the problem of the eventual formation of a parliamentary group will be faced following the legislative elections of 2002. In the local elections of October 2000 the FSP supported five candidates for governor and some candidates for mayor in some

towns. The surprise was that three of the candidates for governor, two of them very close to the FSP project, were elected.

This was not by chance. The readjustment plans imposed by the IMF in the area of budget allocations to the regions and communes led to a rebellion from most elected mayors and governors, notably those from the region where the measures of "Plan Colombia" are being applied against the insurrectionary organisations in the name of the war on drugs. The progressive bloc of three governors elected in October has been increased by two other governors, those of Huila and Putumayo, where "Plan Colombia" is being applied, and more still will join them. Moreover, all these governors have made a declaration that they will help build an alternative presidential candidature. The candidate in question will be the FSP's public spokesperson, Luis Eduardo ("Lucho") Garzon.

The most important case is that of the government of the Cuaca region, won by the indigenous activist Floro Tumubalà. The election of the latter is the result of a broad unity resulting from important indigenous general strikes, of peasants, workers and popular layers, which finally won the support also of the middle and bourgeois layers of the capital, Popayan.

Thus the most traditional department of the oligarchy, the zone where "Plan Colombia" is being applied, has an indigenous governor. What is at stake is of great importance: building an alternative to this plan of regional and continental domination starting from a model of democratic development and participation and more concretely from an opposition to the strategy of fumigation of crops. For their part, the indigenous peoples have taken the decision, which they are already applying, to manually extirpate coca plantations. The alternative social bloc, and thus the FSP, which leads the combat on the political level, opposes US intervention, which will lead to an escalation of the armed conflict.

The Latin American parties and fronts of the new type have the most diverse organisational structures: rank and file committees, tendencies, working groups. As for the FSP, there is a lot to do on this level: herein lies its principal weakness. It has a national presence, especially in the media, thanks to the authority that the members of the Front's national committee have won, as leaders of the workers' movement, social movements and political struggles. In this body the national political forces (Communist Party, Unidad democratica, Convergencia ciudadana and Presentes por el socialismo), the social organisations (ecologists, women, unions, municipal leaders, pensioners, truck drivers and intellectuals), personalities known in their areas and even progressive retired military figures are all represented.

Next March the FSP is to approve its political platform and the rules which fix the duties of members, the composition and functioning of the regional and national bodies and the selection of its candidates. This last point is particularly important in that there are different conceptions: some argue for a simple electoral co-ordination, others for a front in which each component keeps its autonomy, others like us seek to build a broad collective organic autonomy. The future of the FSP and its tactical and/or strategic project will be determined by the structure adopted.

What role is there for the hundreds of thousands of citizens who want to fight for change, but do not identify with any political force and are not part of the leadership of a social organisation? And where will they find a useful space for their participation in the activities of the FSP? It is obvious that it is precisely at the territorial or sectoral level that such people can be integrated. There should also be a democratic and representative space allowing them to participate in regional and national decisions. The new feature of the FSP, compared with the Brazilian PT, the Uruguayan FA and the Salvadoran FMLN is that some social organisations as such share leadership with political organisations.

These political forces had to face the mistrust of the social organisations and intellectuals towards the conception of the "transmission belt", according to which it was up to the parties to decide the political line and the social organisations to apply it. It has, then, been essential that the parties respect the autonomy of the social

organisations. That does not imply that they abandon the right to influence them, from inside and outside, in the elaboration of their independent and class-based programme. Whatever, we should not pass from one extreme to the other, as sometimes happens after the conception of the "transmission belt" has been rejected.

Everyone now accepts a functioning with internal currents and tendencies. There is no doubt that the PIT-CNT trade union federation is the spinal column supporting the Uruguayan FA, composed of left, centre-left and centre parties. In the case of the FLMN of El Salvador renewers and orthodox elements coexist, while there are different tendencies which characterise themselves as revolutionary in the Brazilian PT.

This situation is not without serious difficulties (which are more important in the case of the FSP where the internal regroupments are still taking place). However, the organisations mentioned have progressively succeeded in groping towards centralised political structures where the majority decides by the application of a newly conceived democratic centralism. They wish to build an organic force that is capable of challenging the governments and posing, at least theoretically, the problem of the seizure of power. They function with collective leaderships: in the case of the PT and FA they combine such a functioning with the marked personal role of their presidential candidates, Lula and Tabaré Vasquez.

The leadership committees of the FSP have functioned up until now on the basis of a majority consensus, a formula which is not very clear but has been enough to stop paralysis resulting from temporary divergences. The functioning of the FSP leadership is specific to the extent that, from the beginning, it has been based on its external image and on the authority and credibility of president Lucho Garzon, who is also president of the CUT and until now the sole spokesperson of the Comando nacional unitario (CNU). It is obvious that such a personal role carries a danger of caudillismo, not necessarily because of personal factors but rather the inability of others to make collective functioning work.

In the functioning of the FSP the elements of novelty also constitute the greatest complication. The basic idea is that the social movements reach the political terrain and give themselves their own political expression. However, this idea is not completely clear and it is not easy to apply. For the centralised political organisations without a lot of members, it is relatively easy to take decisions on conjunctural problems and questions of perspective. Such an approach is less obvious in the trade unions and mass social organisations which have to take their decisions in periodic national meetings, where sectoral problems and concrete struggles make it more difficult for leaders to analyse the conjuncture and grasp political and social tasks. Within such a logic, there is the risk of a double deformation of the initial spirit of the FSP:

1. Inasmuch as the social leaders are obliged to express themselves without consulting their members;
2. Inasmuch as they decide to keep quiet and leave the political elaboration to the "specialists" of the parties.

We should concern ourselves from now on with setting rules which counterbalance this intrinsic weakness of the social organisations.

However, another problem is posed in relation to the trade union organisations. Many of them, like the CUT primarily, decided at their congresses to promote the foundation of the FSP as a political project of the workers and the people. It's one thing to contribute to such a foundation, another to transform the trade union into a political current which, moreover, will not be the only one inside the trade union itself. The historic necessity of the working class having its own political expression, a necessity that nobody can challenge, is one thing; that this political representation is held to represent all the members of a trade union organisation is another. In principle, the best solution would be building a single organisation of workers and people including and respecting the expressions and multiple tendencies that

exist.

However, the reality we have inherited is more complex. A solution is needed which, on the basis of a political unification project, guarantees the political autonomy of the social organisations and their distinct non-programmatic traits, structural and functional. Thus, if the majority of an organisation sympathises with the FSP, those who composed it would act as militants of the FSP, while respecting differences on the trade union or social terrain. In cases where militants of the FSP are in the minority in their mass organisations, they should have the possibility of organising themselves internally as a socio-political current.

In a context of war such as exists in Colombia, the construction of a political force exploiting the narrow democratic space that remains differs from all previous experiences in Latin America. In Brazil the PT emerged from the context of a dictatorship that had crushed the armed revolt; in Uruguay, there was a process of consolidation of forces after the decline of the urban guerrilla movement and the clandestine survival throughout the dictatorship; in El Salvador, the new situation was the product of a political negotiation putting an end to an armed conflict. In Colombia, there was a strong tradition of "combination of all forms of struggle", which included, on the political and military terrain, parallel constructions on the basis of the same political project. For us, such a strategy is exhausted, as is shown in practice. Following the massacres which put an end to the project of the Union Patriótica, the forces of armed rebellion no longer seek to build legal political arms and the left political forces do not consider such a strategy valid in this phase of the war, because of the existence of paramilitary forces doing what was previously the state's dirty work.

That is why the FSP affirms its organic autonomy in relation to the projects of armed rebellion, advancing critiques and noting that there are mutually recognised programmatic and methodological divergences. Such an approach is not the product of a political manoeuvre. It expresses a real differentiation between the left which leads the armed struggle and the left which exploits the social spaces and the very limited democratic conquests that remain. None of the two parties rules out possible convergences in a post-conflict framework.

The problem for the FSP is how to build itself as an intransigent defender of political democracy, social transformations and human rights, in the midst of a war, whereas any criticism of the system, its accords with the IMF and "Plan Colombia" is considered subversive by the militarists and the right. It remains to be seen to what extent the system will accept this civic option of the left affirming itself without considering it as a military objective. On the other hand, the armed rebellion should respect the autonomy of the left represented by the FSP and approach divergences in a political debate, such as can be developed in the regions under the control of the FARC and in view of a national convention of the ELN.

The question is whether the social framework that "Plan Colombia" seeks to impose will lead to the suppression of the political spaces in the framework of neo-liberal legality; if international and national pressure obliges the government to break the links between the Army and the paramilitary forces and if attacks on political and trade union leaders, like that recently against trade union leader Wilson Borja will cease; if the criminalisation of social and political protest will stop and if the government will radically oppose the dirty war against the left; if a humanitarian accord can be reached leading to a resumption of dialogue with the FARC and if the convention of the ELN can take place in a demilitarised zone.

It will, nonetheless, be decisive that the FSP is capable of systematically defining orientations which respond to the demands and partial struggles of the people; that it can draw up a programme and platform of struggles which contributes to the reconstruction of the popular social organisations and that it is prepared to act as a political leadership at the level of the masses both in the course of the peace negotiations and in the framework that follows the conflict. Wars are won politically and the social benefits are drawn when they are over.