

ALBA Before Its Greatest Challenge: Survive

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The crisis in Venezuela has not only given way to regional tensions with a serious humanitarian impact, it has also managed to weaken the efforts of consensus and regional integration. This in itself is a contradiction with the very essence of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA),[1] whose foundational ideal is inspired by the struggles of military and political leader Simón Bolívar to create Latin American and Caribbean unity.

ALBA emerged as an integration project proposed by the then Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. In essence, ALBA sought to reinforce the self-determination and sovereignty of the peoples by proposing an alternate project of integration that would counteract the economic policies proposed and implemented by the U.S., and by some international organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund at the end of the twentieth century. This integration project became the antithesis of the so-called Washington Consensus. In 2004, presidents Fidel Castro of Cuba and Hugo Chávez of Venezuela signed the founding treaty of ALBA, and in 2005 they held their first meeting. In 2006 Bolivia was incorporated and in 2007 Nicaragua and Dominica joined ALBA. In 2008 Honduras also joined[2] and in 2009 Antigua and Barbuda, San Vicente and the Grenadines and Ecuador did too.[3] Saint Lucia, Saint Kitts and Nevis and Granada were the last countries to join ALBA in 2010.

With projects such as Petrocaribe in the energy sector and other social initiatives, ALBA managed to distance itself from other integration schemes. At the economic level, it developed several attempts to create an economic space such as the ALBA Bank, the Unitary System of Regional Payments Compensation (SUCRE), and the implementation of the Peoples' Trade Treaty (TCP).[4] However none of those initiatives ever consolidated. Currently, the effectiveness of ALBA as an integration project and its future sustainability are being questioned.

However, despite the challenges mentioned above, ALBA faces, to a greater or lesser degree, the same structural problems that most of the regional integration mechanisms suffer today in Latin America. To seek effective multilateralism in the context of globalization requires the possibility for States to establish direct links between international processes of interrelation with national processes. Latin American multilateralism concentrates decisions and consensus on the wills of the governments of the member states. ALBA responds to a model of multilateralism that is State-centric, not societal. [5]

This "intergovernmental" multilateralism responds to the political will of the current Presidents of the member states, which in turn makes any integration project vulnerable to the political cycles of the countries. This is even clearer with the end of the cycle of the so-called "pink tide" that, between 2015 and 2016, would subtract regional allies from Venezuela, which had important repercussions on ALBA. The changes of government in several countries of South America, especially in Argentina and Brazil, would begin to isolate Venezuela at the regional level.[6] This process was further deepened with the withdrawal of Ecuador from ALBA in August 2018, [7] a move that impacted a weakened Venezuela with the loss of another of its major allies in the region. Furthermore the current situation lived in Cuba with its internal changes in the presidency[8] and the constituent process, [9] and in Nicaragua (ALBA's only ally in Central America) with its ongoing crisis, further complicates ALBA's future.

ALBA has also signed too many agreements raised at the various regional Presidential Summits in the last years. The fact that these summits take place quite often, it is literally impossible to consolidate all the agreements that are subscribed in each of them. Many of the decisions taken within the framework of ALBA meetings derive from short-term aspects, which evidence little continuity and little institutional capacity. In the end, many initiatives of the mechanism have an important ideological component and an "anti-imperialist" agenda.

ALBA's position regarding the strengthening of regional multilateralism and integration is a paradox. At times ALBA has made important advances, but other times it has also hindered them. This situation is largely due to the lack of institutionalization of ALBA and its vulnerability subject to political changes within the member countries. Venezuela has approached the project from a realistic perspective of international relations. Since its inception, Venezuela promoted ALBA as a way to strengthen and guarantee national interests through oil revenues, which in the long term has weakened the possibility of promoting an alternative,[10] post-liberal, or post-hegemonic integration project, as some would call it. [11]

The end of the cycle of high prices of commodities –between 2003 and 2013- as well as the end of the so-called progressive governments, have caused ALBA to enter its lowest cycle. The loss of members on the one hand, and the current weakness of its members on the other, has made the financial sustainability of the international cooperation programs framed in the ALBA, especially its main proposal, Petrocaribe, doubtful.

At present there are no strong leaderships around the principles that organized the ALBA. Of the presidents who founded the mechanism, only presidents Evo Morales and Daniel Ortega remain in power. However, Evo Morales will face an election process in Bolivia in 2019. From the results of these elections we will be able to know if this country will continue to be Venezuela's main ally.

Furthermore, Nicaragua is immersed in a series of social protests since April 2018 against the government of President Ortega. These have been repressed with a high degree of violence by the government, causing deaths and disappearances of civilians, especially students, and the departure of thousands of people to neighboring countries.[12] Ortega's term is set to end in 2021, although there are requests to call early elections for 2019.[13] If so, and if there is a

political change in this nation, it is worth wondering if Venezuela would lose another of its allies and if ALBA would also lose another member.

The Latin American region is going through a complex cycle. Protectionism, reduction in investments, low economic growth, constant violence, citizen dissatisfaction and anger along with insecurity and the binomial corruption and impunity, governance crises, and the political changes and trends generated by recent electoral processes are factors that lead us to consider that ALBA, as other regional integration mechanisms such as CELAC and UNASUR,[14] has entered the lowest integration period since its establishment.

As a final reflection it is difficult to conceive in the current regional climate an alternative that could strengthen the already weakened ALBA. Although it is difficult to conceive the end of this integration project in Latin America and the Caribbean, the truth is that this scenario would seem imminent.

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[1] FLACSO. ALBA Dossier Notebooks of Integration in Latin America. FLACSO- General Secretariat. 2007. Available at www.flacso.org Also at www.alternativabolivariana.org

[2] After the coup d'état in Honduras in 2009, the de facto government sent to Congress a complaint against ALBA to stop Honduras from being a member of this initiative. President-elect Porfirio Lobo said that it was not among his plans to re-incorporate Honduras into ALBA. The National Congress of Honduras ratified the exit of ALBA on January 12, 2010.

[3] The government of Ecuador makes the decision to leave the ALBA in August 2018.

[4] Daniele Benzi. "El exitoso ocaso del ALBA. Réquiem para el último vals tercermundista". Revista *Nueva Sociedad* N°261. Enero-febrero de 2016, ISSN: 0251-3552.

[5] José Antonio Sanahuja. "Regionalismo e integración en América Latina: de la fractura Atlántico-Pacífico a los retos de una globalización en crisis". En José Antonio Sanahuja. *América Latina: De la bonanza a la crisis de la globalización*. Revista *Pensamiento Propio*, julio-diciembre 2016, año 21. ISSN: 1016-9628.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Infobae. "Ecuador se retira del ALBA", *Alianza Latinoamericana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América*. August 23, 2018. Available online: <https://www.infobae.com/america/america-latina/2018/08/23/ecuador-se-retira-del-alba-la-alianza-bolivariana-para-los-pueblos-de-nuestra-america/>

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[9] El País (Uruguay). *La nueva constitución de Cuba elimina la palabra comunismo*. July 22, 2018. Available online: <https://www.elpais.com.uy/mundo/nueva-constitucion-cuba-elimina-palabra-comunismo.html>

[10] Sanahuja, op cit.

[11] Daniele Benzi y Marco Narea. *El regionalismo latinoamericano, más allá de los pos. El fin de ciclo y los fantasmas globales*. *Revista Nueva Década*, mayo-junio 2018, ISSN: 0251-3552.

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[14] In this sense, from what Sanahuja (2016) establishes, the Pacific Alliance, a new standard of open regionalism, seems not to be free of problems, especially considering that it is an integration project that also possesses elements of little institutionalization, and dependence on the political positions of the governments of its member countries, so the election of Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico, one of the main engines of the alliance together with Chile, can cause the weakening of the project.