

Published on Thursday, October 23, 2003 by the Globe and Mail/Canada
Latino Politics, Miami Beached
by Naomi Klein

When massive political protests forced Bolivia's president to resign last week, Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada fled to a place where he knew he would find a sympathetic ear. "I'm here in Miami trying to recover from the shock and shame," the ex-president told reporters on Saturday, after being unseated by a revolt against his plan to sell the country's gas to the United States.

Fortunately for Mr. Sanchez de Lozada, there are plenty of other Miami residents who know just how shameful it feels to lose power to a left-wing resurgence in Latin America. So many, in fact, that he could form a local support group for sufferers of post-revolutionary stress disorder.

Possible members: Venezuela's ex-president Carlos Andres Perez, who started living part-time in Miami after his 1993 impeachment on corruption charges; fellow Venezuelan-Miamista Carlos Fernandez, a leader of the failed coup against President Hugo Chavez; Ecuador's ex-president Gustavo Noboa, who tried to flee to Miami in August to avoid a corruption investigation at home; and even Francisco Hernandez, who took part in the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, and, as president of the Cuban American National Foundation, has been plotting to overthrow Fidel Castro ever since.

For decades, Miami has been the preferred retirement community for Latin America's regurgitated right wing. So powerful is the Florida Factor in Latin American politics that Joao Pedro Stedile, one of the founders of Brazil's powerful Landless People's Movement (MST), half-jokingly told an audience in Toronto on Monday that if Brazil's elites continue to undermine reforms promised by President Inacio "Lula" da Silva, they could find themselves looking for a South Beach condo.

But Florida is also home to exiles of another sort, people who left their home countries in Latin America and the Caribbean to escape the policies imposed by many of these same disgraced politicians.

On Nov. 20, the two Miamis will come crashing together when the city hosts a major summit for the proposed Free-Trade Area of the Americas, a plan to create the world's largest, most far-reaching free-trade zone. When the 34 trade ministers of the Americas meet, chances are good that it will be a Nicaraguan who cleans the trade ministers' hotel rooms while they debate whether "services" should be included in the agreement; that a Mexican will have picked the Florida oranges in their juice as they debate agricultural subsidies; and that a Guatemalan manicures the golf course when their deals are done.

Sixty-one per cent of the people living in the City of Miami are immigrants; 92 per cent of those living in its suburb of Hialeah speak Spanish. The poorest city in the United States, Miami is, in many ways, a miniature version of the hemisphere covered by the FTAA (it even includes Canadian seniors and drunken U.S. college kids).

There is no better way to understand how free-trade policies have ravaged Latin America and the Caribbean than through Florida's successive waves of immigrants. Most recently, when privatization and deregulation of the financial sector sparked an economic crash in Argentina two years ago, as many as 180,000 Argentines moved to Miami seeking work. When Mexico joined the North American free-trade agreement 10 years ago, maquiladora export factories were held up as Mexico's escape from poverty. But in the past three years, more than 215,000 maquiladora workers have lost jobs as contracts have gone to China. Many workers have headed north, to join Florida's 700,000 undocumented immigrants.

Testifying before members of Congress in June, Lucas Benitez of the Coalition for Immokalee Workers, explained, "Thousands of us . . . have been obligated to leave our countries because of the consequences of the free-trade agreements that have flooded our countries with cheap agricultural products from the United States and Canada, making it impossible for us to sell the crops we have grown for generations."

During the FTAA Summit next month, the streets of Miami will be teeming with similar stories. "We're going to show the true diversity of Miami and chip away at the myth that it's just right-wing Cubans," says Kameelah Benjamin-Fuller, one of the anti-FTAA protest organizers.

There will be another myth dispelled: the one claiming that Latin America is clamoring for this free-trade deal. Much has changed since the last major FTAA summit in April, 2001, in Quebec City. There, dissent was confined to the streets, with the 34 heads of state seemingly in favor of the agreement. Since the Quebec Summit, free-trade policies have come under heavy fire in Latin America, and the political map has been dramatically redrawn.

Center-left candidates have come to power in Brazil and Ecuador, promising to govern in the interest of the poor. In Argentina, popular protests pushed out the neo-liberal government of Fernando de La Rúa, and blocked Carlos Menem, who brought mass privatization and deregulation to Argentina, from staging a comeback. The latest polls suggest that Uruguay and Peru could be next.

Voters have been unequivocal in their rejection of further concessions to foreign multinationals and lenders. Yet despite this, the politicians who rode to power promising change keep losing their nerve once in office. This timidity is taking a serious political toll. In Brazil, Lula's support is slipping in the face of his ineffectual "zero hunger" program. In Ecuador, Lucio Gutierrez's numbers plummeted after he agreed to weaken labor laws to please the International Monetary Fund.

And in Bolivia, the farmers and workers who forced their president to flee to Miami last week have made it clear that if the new president breaks his promises, he won't last long either. "If we did it once. we can do it again," Elio Argullo, a former miner turned street vendor, told the New York Times.

On Monday, Joao Pedro Stedile of the Landless People's Movement described Latin America as "a volcano." Even the left-wing politicians had better be careful about what they agree to at the November's FTAA summit. They could find themselves back in Miami. For good.

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