AFTER CANCUN: Reflections on Apocalyptic Multilateralism
(written in collaboration with Hilal Elver)

The thousands of delegates and many civic activists have retreated from the climate change wars waged on the battlefields of Cancun. The intergovernmental battles were fought in the resort setting of the Moon Palace Hotel, situated beyond the easy reach of activists, while the NGO happenings were staged on the streets of the urban poor of Cancun. The overwhelming majority of the delegates went home content, feeling that they did all that was possible for their governments and rescued the reputation of the multilateral approach that had been so darkened by the failures of Copenhagen that were magnified by the brutal ineptitudes of the Danish hosts. Cancun, at the very least, was a triumph for Mexican hospitality and diplomacy, with Latin American women running the show with panache, tact, and a credible commitment to inclusiveness of participation and transparency of negotiations. Of course, there were glitches in the process, and moments of tension, but overall, and certainly by comparison with Copenhagen, there were good feelings generated in most governmental circles by the end of the proceedings. I suppose that the best summary of these atmospherics was ‘Onward to Durban’ where next year’s climate change gathering will convene.

If we put aside these diversionary atmospherics to one side, it dawns on us that this meeting of governments, most represented at the ministerial level, was supposed to address urgent concerns relating to climate change, which usually means doing what is necessary to keep global warming from rising above 2 degrees Celsius, the absolute highest tolerable average earth temperature as measured since the onset of the industrial age. The scientific consensus seems generally to believe that this ceiling is too high, having at most a 50% chance of avoiding severe harm to the quality of life throughout the world, and that a 1.5 degree increase, although seemingly too ambitious a target, is the most average increase in heat that is prudent to allow. If this is the case that means a reduction of the current 390 ppm of greenhouse gasses to a utopian upper limit of 350 ppm. Even if these lower levels were somehow achieved over time, great problems would remain as the heating of the earth is uneven, with Africa getting a much higher than average heating, causing dreadful droughts and fires already. At Cancun these realities were essentially ignored except by Bolivia as they were correctly understood to bring the whole negotiating process to a grinding halt, uncovering all the unresolved battles about the distribution of responsibilities for reducing carbon emissions, the developing world is united in refusing to slow their development when the problems of global warming were a result of the buildup of GHGs during the centuries of industrialization in the developed world. The developed world, led by the United States, insists that present contributions to emissions should be the primary basis for assessing levels of responsibilities, making the developing countries, led by China, share the burden. This standoff is fundamental, and seems unlikely to be resolved by multilateral diplomacy or by enlightened leadership on either side of the divide.
This state of affairs puts the spotlight on the pluri-national democratic state of Bolivia that stood bravely and resolutely on principle, insisting that the moves away from controlling emissions meant dooming the future of humanity and violating the integrity of Mother Earth. At the final dramatic session when there existed near unanimity in the great hall the Bolivian chief negotiator, Pablo Colon, with eloquence and indisputably, played the role of spoiler refusing to go along with a final text, called “The Copenhagen Agreements: A New Era of International Cooperation on Climate Change,” that he described as a virtual death warrant for the human species and the surrounding reality of a habitable earth, precisely because it failed to address the central issue of global warming in a prudent and responsible fashion. That Colon stood alone, was shouted down, and invoked the notion of ‘consensus’ to contend that no negotiated text could be adopted without unanimity.

In the end, the President of the Conference, the Mexican Foreign Minister, Patricia Espinosa, declared the agreed text adopted, receiving thunderous applause that was also meant an angry response to the Bolivian efforts to block the process. It is a nice technical question as to whether or not in UN circles ‘consensus’ should be understood to mean ‘unanimity’ or just an expression of the overwhelming political will, a kind of super-majority plurality. The Bolivian voice was wonderfully expressive and determined, a courageously prophetic intoning of the underlying failure of the conference to come to grips with the challenges of climate change.

Should we conclude that Cancun was a small step forward, restoring some hope to multilateral cooperation, achieving some help for the most vulnerable countries, and illustrating the willingness of 195 or so governments to work together for the sake of achieving what was attainable given the political realities of the moment? Or should we condemn Cancun as one more demonstration of the incapacity of the world of states to rise above national interests and geopolitical ambitions, to see ahead to the terrible consequences of inaction at present, and to administer a sedative to the peoples of the world when what is desperately needed is a strong stimulant?

As has been so well said, my friends, “the answer is blowing in the wind.”