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Beyond Maduro

Why Latin American left-wing populism is much more complex than the failing government of Venezuela

This article is a counterpoint to Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser's 'The siren song of left-wing populism'.

Anyone in Europe thinking about the potential of left-wing populism would do well to first take stock of the Latin American experience. That is, simply put, the message behind a recent article by Cristobál Rovira Kaltwasser. In contrast, however, to his genuinely interesting academic work, his article does little more than sketch out a sorely one-dimensional polemic. Focussing primarily on the situation in Venezuela, he all of a sudden turns Maduro's government into little more than a overdone catch-all stand-in for the performance of all left-wing populist governments, whose performance he generalises as 'nothing short of disastrous'. He goes on to tell his readers that academic literature has demonstrated that these kinds of left-wing populist movements 'have laid waste to their countries' democracies since the turn of the century.'

This caricature contributes little to a discussion about what left-wing populist administrations in other parts of the world can teach us – a debate that is indeed a very necessary in Europe. To be fair, Rovira Kaltwasser mentions the governments of Rafael Correa in Ecuador (2007-2017) and Evo Morales in Bolivia (since 2006) alongside Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela. Yet besides a few common traits, these 'left-wing populist governments' in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela are, in fact, highly divergent, as even a brief look at Bolivia sufficiently proves. It should also be mentioned that the record of the Correa administration in Ecuador is also far more complex than Rovira Kaltwasser depicts it.

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For a start, the economic situations of Bolivia and Venezuela are almost diametrically opposed: while the UN Econonic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL) is forecasting a contraction of 12 per cent for the Venezuelan economy in 2018, Bolivia has,

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for several years now, been in the top group of Latin America's fastest-growing economy, with an expansion of over four per cent annually. More importantly, however, the two are not comparable politically. When it comes to democracy and the rule of law, scholarly research does not paint a uniquely catastrophic picture; Bolivia is rather a more ambivalent case when it comes to left-wing populism and democracy. It cannot be written off as a failure – as Rovira Kaltwasser himself has so convincingly shown elsewhere. If the aim is to use the Latin American experience with left-wing populism to draw lessons for Europe, it is precisely this ambivalence which should be subject to serious examination.

The Bolivian example

Even the most cursory of glances at established indices for measuring the strength of democracies shoes that there can be no talk of Evo Morales having destroyed democracy in Bolivia. The latest Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI), for instance, attests the country 'moderately positive development' and categorises the Andean state as a 'defective democracy': this is the category in which the BTI situates most Latin American countries, and it which it placed Bolivia prior to Morales' inauguration, too.

There are a range of other assessments to take account of, however, and while some do indeed see Bolivia on a course to a situation in which democracy gives way to 'competitive authoritarianism', others argue equally well that Morale's administration has enacted a contradictory transformation of Bolivian democracy. While some problems with judicial independence and the rule of law have made the regime less liberal, other measures have deepened democracy in a range of ways.

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In particular, Bolivia's political system today is markedly more inclusive and representative than it has ever been. Prior to 2006, the majority of the poverty-plagued indigenous population were allowed to vote but held no sway in the country's political institutions. Evo Morales' *Movimiento al Socialismo* (Movement to Socialism, MAS) has made dramatic changes to this state of affairs: whether parliament, the

government, the judiciary, or state administration, the presence of groups traditionally discriminated against has risen sharply. Those who have benefitted the most are the indigenous population, the working classes, and those in unofficial employment, as well as women more generally.

The increase in the ability of previously disadvantaged sections of society to participate in political life has by no means been shared out equally. Generally, groups organised by or in leagues with MAS have received privileged access to political power. Moreover, the rights to comprehensive political participation and self-rule for indigenous groups – which was written into the constitution of 2009 – are all too frequently ignored, even deliberately disregarded, in political practice. Yet this definitely not a destruction of democracy.

There is certainly no shortage of good reasons to be concerned about the state of and future for democracy in Bolivia. However, this cannot be seen as an issue specifically affecting those Latin American countries who have been ruled by presidents referred to as 'radical', 'populist', and 'hard left'. Democracy in Brazil, after all, is certainly not doing much better than it is in Bolivia. In 2006, public intellectual Jorge Castañeda famously forecasted that Brazil's Lula was a promising instance of social democratic progress against a failing populist left in Venezuela. But the record of left-wing governments in Latin America is far more complex. With both the Brazilian Workers' Party and Venezuela Chavismo, it is mostly the poster-boy projects of the social democrats and the radical left respectively which are now lying in pieces. If the European left wants to learn from Latin America, generalisations and polemics are of little help.



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