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Long live democracy! (When it suits us.)

Leftists in Latin America must take a stand against Venezuela's abuses

Venezuela is a country in meltdown. Once the richest nation in Latin America, its economy is now in tatters thanks to economic mismanagement and a plunge in the price of oil – Venezuela's main source of revenue. Food and medicine are in short supply. Violence is endemic.

When Venezuelans chose a centre-right National Congress, President Nicolas Maduro's leftist government, by means of the Supreme Court, removed its powers. The government postponed regional elections. Civil servants and recipients of social benefits report being cajoled and blackmailed into voting for Venezuela's new 'constituent assembly', which has the power to rewrite the constitution.

Venezuela's rapid slide towards autocracy has been met with a feeble response from its neighbours. Latin American countries have shown themselves incapable of playing a mediating role.

Conservatives across the continent are critical of President Nicolas Maduro and support the Venezuelan opposition. However, their political affiliation means Maduro will not talk to them. Latin America's Left, meanwhile, is in a state of turmoil, having lost power in both Argentina and Brazil. Its own unwillingness to confront Maduro over his autocratic leadership might erode its credibility further.

Brothers in arms

More radical elements on the Left, such as some members of Uruguay's ruling Frente Amplio (FA) coalition, are continuing to give Venezuela's government their full backing. In early August the FA condemned a decision by Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Paraguay to suspend Venezuela's membership of the trade bloc Mercosur, arguing that the Left must show solidarity with 'the Great Homeland'. They warn

overthrowing Maduro and his cronies will lead to the kind of harsh austerity implemented by neo-liberals in Argentina and Brazil, and brand Maduro's critics 'traitors' against the anti-imperialist cause.

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When US president Donald Trump threatened possible military intervention in Venezuela, the radical Left felt vindicated: once again, Uncle Sam was trying to overthrow a socialist government in Latin America, as he had in decades past. Moderates on the Left felt pressure to respond. But their calls for a negotiated solution were interpreted by their more radical colleagues as collaboration with the imperialists.

When in March Venezuela's pro-government Supreme Court assumed the legislative powers of the opposition-controlled congress, democracy in the country took another hit. The rigged and gerrymandered referendum on a 'constituent assembly' in late July likewise showed contempt for Venezuela's electorate. Yet, despite these flagrant breaches of democratic norms, many Latin American leftists refuse to denounce 'Comrade Maduro'.

Both '21st century socialists' including (the late) Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and Evo Morales of Bolivia, as well as centre-left forces such as Lula da Silva of Brazil, strove to ensure Latin America's poor and marginalised would finally have a political and economic stake on the continent. The Left should not allow this vision to become corrupted beyond recognition.

Macri: the only true democrat?

The far-left is playing into the hands of the Right: Argentina's right-wing president Mauricio Macri has made much of Venezuela's downfall ahead of congressional elections in October. His assertion that a vote for the Left is a vote for Venezuelan-style chaos plays well with voters. Right-wing politicians are seeking to capitalise on Venezuela's misery by presenting themselves as the only true champions of democracy. The Left must not let them.

Not all those on Latin America's Left advocate such a one-sided view. Social democrats are uneasy about how Venezuela's government is trampling on democratic values. But any Latin American politician that criticises Maduro's attacks on free elections, freedom of speech and the separation of powers faces a barrage of criticism on social media. They

should not let this deter them.

They are in a privileged position, after all. The consequences for detractors living in Venezuela are far worse. The ousted Venezuelan chief prosecutor, Luisa Ortega, says she fears for her life. A former government ally, Ortega was fired from her job in March after she announced the Supreme Court ruling stripping the congress of its powers was unlawful. She claims to have received death threats, and was moving from safehouse to safehouse before fleeing the country in mid-August. Maduro is now seeking an international warrant for her arrest.

Those on the Left can only claim to be progressive if they are also democratic. That means more than just practising democracy in their own country. It means promoting it elsewhere, by endorsing the separation of powers, fair elections, the rule of law and the freedom to hold demonstrations.

Democracy 101

If opposition parties gain power in free and fair elections, the progressive Left must accept the result. They should, of course, still challenge conservatives on their policies, but not by flouting the very rules of democracy they used to promote. The austerity policies of conservative governments in Argentina and especially Brazil have been disastrous. Poverty and homelessness are rising rapidly; inequality is rampant. To restore its credibility, the Left must now propose alternative economic policies aimed at increasing social justice and fighting poverty.

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Those on the Left have not forgotten the lacklustre international response to the illegitimate removal of elected left-wing presidents in Honduras, Paraguay and Brazil over the past six years. Their claims of double standards are reasonable. But they, too, must avoid practising this kind of hypocrisy. Democracy will only remain credible in the future if the Left stands against those attacking it today. That means protesting against the systematic dismantling of democratic institutions by the Venezuelan government.

Leftist politicians in Latin America of all shades must uphold democratic values. They also need to protect social welfare and the labour market from the socially unjust policies of the Right. There is no ‘either-or’. Democracy is non-negotiable: it is not merely a luxury for better times.



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