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Mind the representation gap

In Latin America, most citizens don't feel represented by the political class. Now, their dissatisfaction has turned into unrest

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While Argentina, Bolivia and Uruguay have all recently held elections, it was the social uprisings in neighbouring Chile and Ecuador that have made the news in Latin America. Frustration in those countries has built up over a long time – and is now erupting publicly. As different as the public unrest and the election results in the region may be, they do allow for some common observations.

The stark social inequality of Latin American societies remains the central problem in the region. Latin America is not the poorest, but it is the most unequal region in the world. The social divide is stark. Many people live in poor housing, under conditions that, set against the chic skyscrapers of capitalist postmodernism in Latin American megacities, seem simply obscene.

The separation between those who have and those who never will is unimaginable. Most citizens don't benefit from economic growth (if the economy grows at all). They are literally outside the social pact of their societies, without good education, without the prospect of permanent, decently paid work and a minimum level of social security.

And in the midst of this enormous social divide, the middle class panics about the possibility of falling into the hole itself. The majority is extremely dissatisfied and convinced that their democracies' regular institutional and representative channels don't allow them to effectively exert pressure. This dissatisfaction with the performance of elected presidents and parliamentarians becomes bitterness and deep aversion.

Democracies disintegrate

Elected politicians don't seem to understand the changes in society and

the pressure from below. Their reactions show helplessness – 'But we did everything right, we just need more time,' argued Argentina's former president Mauricio Macri, who has just been voted out of office – or authoritarianism, as in the case of Chile's president Sebastián Piñera, who for the first time since the country's return to democracy has put the military on the streets. Then there is Bolivia's freshly re-elected president, Evo Morales, who insists on his own truth.

According to Latinobarómetro – an annual public opinion survey that involves some 20,000 interviews in 18 Latin American countries – 75 per cent of citizens believe their governments don't defend the interests of the majority. This representative gap is enormous. And it's extremely alarming. When people no longer feel their needs and concerns are being listened to, democracies disintegrate from within.

Speaking of the IMF: the example of Latin America shows that it has learned nothing – the recipes are the same old ones.

Social mobilisation is part of the democratic culture of the region. It's both an outlet and a source of stability. The democratic constitution of most countries, however, doesn't seem to be able to guarantee the security, rights and dignity of many people. That explains the current frustration.

The mass demonstrations and the democratic dedication to fight for women's self-determination, especially over their own bodies, testify to the desire to have a say in such matters – instead of being determined by them. Elected representatives can no longer afford *not* to listen.

A desire for alternatives

Dissatisfaction with the political class goes beyond the political camps. The election results do not indicate any clear trend towards a shift to the right on the continent; rather, the elections were marked by a desire for political change. In Argentina, with its massive economic crisis and an inflation rate of over 50 per cent, the opposition candidate Alberto Fernández, a Peronist centre-left politician, won the elections with 48 per cent of the vote – in tandem with former president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, who ruled until 2015.

In Bolivia, the economic performance of recent years has been positive, but voters rejected a fourth re-election of Morales in a referendum in 2016 – and he ignored it. Now, in the first round of the presidential elections, he won a majority but it is doubtful whether he would have prevailed in a second ballot. The population shows its discontent with Morales' grip on power.

In Uruguay, the centre-left coalition Frente Amplio, which has ruled for 15 years, lost its absolute majority in parliament and a conservative could soon be elected president. Instead of signalling a shift to the right, this is a consequence of wear and tear in the current government and a desire for an alternative.

The IMF's same old recipes

Latin America's governments, regardless of their politics, continue to depend on the exports of raw materials. Whether Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador or Uruguay, whether gas, oil, lithium or soy, the countries are all excessively dependent on commodity exports and fluctuating prices on the world market. No country in the region has yet made the leap into a diversified economy. Consequently, the overexploitation of nature is an ecological catastrophe. On top of that, the labour markets are not prepared for digitalisation.

In times of high commodity prices, progressive governments were able to finance social transfers and somewhat alleviate poverty and social inequality. In the face of falling commodity prices, political leeway is now limited, which affects progressive governments in particular – left-wing politics is much more difficult without a commodity boom. In Bolivia, Morales has managed in the last two years to maintain economic growth despite falling commodity prices, albeit at the price of high debt. The new government in Argentina is burdened with a huge mountain of IMF debt. It will probably not be able to avoid painful cuts and reforms.

Speaking of the IMF: the example of Latin America shows that it has learned nothing – the recipes are the same old ones. In recent years, there's been much to read about the IMF's alleged change of heart. Looking at the region, however, it's sobering to see that countries that have borrowed from the IMF continue to be slapped with structural adjustment programmes, market liberalisation and privatisation. Chile, Ecuador and Argentina are obvious examples of discontent with liberal-conservative governments fiddling with the IMF.

The problems of the left

But the legitimacy of left-wing projects in Latin America is suffering as well. In Bolivia, Morales clings to power. He believes he won the elections on 26 October by almost 10 per cent compared to the runner-up, so that no second round is necessary under Bolivian electoral law. Due to irregularities during the counting of votes, however, the opposition

insists on the second ballot or even on cancelling the election.

Good news, however, has arrived from Colombia – in Bogotá a woman from the progressive camp has been elected mayor.

For several days, protesters haven taken to the streets of Bolivian cities. The government has invited the Organization of American States to check the ballots in the first round but reserves the right to recognise the result. Morales' behaviour is detrimental not only to his country but also generally to the left in Latin America, which is already under pressure from the kleptomaniac and authoritarian governments in Nicaragua and Venezuela to justify its course of action, and is debating an appropriate attitude internally.

The societies of Latin America are politically extremely polarised, with candidates from right-wing extremists on the upswing. Surveys confirmed in 2018 that the citizens of the region are extremely dissatisfied. Support for democracy as the best form of government has fallen from 61 per cent in 2010 to 48 per cent in 2018. At the same time, the proportion of those who are indifferent to the choice between a democratic and an undemocratic regime has risen by nine points. Today, it's a quarter of the population. This is also one reason for the victory of right-wing extremist Jair Bolsonaro in the last presidential election in Brazil.

A close race in Uruguay

In Bolivia, a self-confessed Evangelical with reactionary positions has taken third place in the presidential elections as a total newcomer. Even in Uruguay, known in the region for its culture of compromise, an extreme right-wing party has now been elected to the Senate and House of Representatives. With only 39 per cent of the votes, the social-democratic presidential candidate Daniel Martínez achieved a much lower result than in recent years and must go to a run-off election in November. The conservatives will need the support of the new right-wing extremist party Cabildo Abierto to win. The race will be very close.

Despite a stronger feminist movement, women are currently excluded from high-ranking political offices. There was no woman among the promising presidential candidates in the three countries. Good news, however, has arrived from Colombia – in Bogotá a woman from the progressive camp has been elected mayor. The victory of Claudia López marks a turning point in the arch-conservative country: she's the first woman to hold this politically important post and also the first openly

lesbian mayor in Latin America. Throughout the region, liberal progress coexists predominantly in urban centres alongside Catholic political conservatism in rural areas. This coexistence provides food for further polarisation of society along cultural lines.

Europe and Latin America emphasise their interest in democracy, multilateralism and sustainability and their common approach to promoting these values. Alarm bells should therefore be ringing loudly among European and Latin American governments. Statistics and macroeconomic figures don't explain social discontent of this magnitude. When even Chile, the allegedly prosperous and stable market economy and model country of the region, explodes due to a price increase of the equivalent of four cents, it should be clear that old recipes no longer work.



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