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The authoritarian temptation

In the shadow of the coronavirus, democratic principles are thrown overboard in Latin America

Read this article in German.

The video was indeed a bit embarrassing for Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro. In a rarely seen manner, he sheepishly asked that the investigators refrain from releasing it out of consideration. So far they have done so, but the written transcription of the cabinet meeting on 22 April leaves little doubt as to what the right-wing populist leader thinks of the separation of powers and independent institutions: 'I already tried to replace our police person in Rio de Janeiro, but I wasn't able to. But this is it. I will not wait until my entire family or my friends are fucked. [Another expletive follows.] If one cannot change the law enforcement official, one changes the boss. If not his boss, then the minister.'

This confirms what Justice Minister Sergio Moro, who has resigned over the dispute, stated: Bolsonaro was trying to subvert investigations of his family for doing business with the paramilitary mafia militias and for building a network of fake news and hatred.

Bolsonaro is the most strident, but certainly not the only head of state in Latin America who is throwing democratic principles overboard these days as if they were annoying ballast. Under the pretext of the coronavirus and embedded in measures to protect public health, authoritarian tendencies are spreading from the Rio Grande to Tierra del Fuego. Three trends are emerging.

No respect for fundamental rights

First, the role of the security forces, especially the military, is being strengthened. Everywhere images of the streets include patrolling, heavily armed security forces. They are arresting quarantine-breakers, often on legally shaky ground, in El Salvador, Peru, the Dominican Republic and Guatemala. Or they're putting down hunger protests like those in Chile and Honduras, where more than 100 such demonstrations have been

brutally suppressed in recent weeks.

Moreover, the scope of responsibilities is being expanded, often far into civil areas. Examples include Mexico, where President Andrés Manuel López Obrador placed the administration of new Covid-19 hospitals under the control of the military, and Brazil, where Bolsonaro entrusted a technically inexperienced general with the ministerial office after conflicts with his health ministers. In Brazil, the military was also tasked with enforcing environmental laws in the Amazon during the pandemic. Officially, in order to stop the record-level deforestation, environmentalists actually see this step as a gradual disempowerment of the environmental agency Ibama, which Bolsonaro and his agricultural lobby considered far too strict. In Ecuador, the Guayas province – a hotspot of infections – was placed under military rule.

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A second trend is the often drastic restriction of fundamental and civil rights. Amnesty International has documented 60 violations of fundamental rights across Latin America in the past seven weeks. The organisation writes of arbitrary and repressive measures. 'It is a fallacy to believe that repression protects against the coronavirus,' appealed Amnesty's director for America, Erika Guevara-Rosas.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights also has her hands full these days in urging governments to respect fundamental rights. In Honduras and Bolivia, for example, freedom of the press was restricted by decree and journalists who disseminate information that is false or puts public health at risk have received prison sentences. In Bolivia, at least, the protest by the UN and press law organisations was able to prevent the adoption of the supreme decree. Since the beginning of May, 27,000 quarantine-breakers and pedestrians without face masks have been arrested and detained in the Dominican Republic; and 50,000 in Peru.

Decrees, decrees and more decrees

Data protection is also being relaxed; from Mexico to Brazil, the authorities are evaluating the movement profiles made available by mobile phone companies. Under the pretext of the virus, Bolsonaro even postponed the entry into force of a data protection law until 2021 – and hid it within a provisional measure to pay out corona emergency aid. In El Salvador, President Nayib Bukele intervened after the murder rate in his country had skyrocketed despite a quarantine. He blamed a gang war as being responsible and had the imprisoned gang members

photographed half-naked and in degrading poses.

Bukele is also the best example of the third trend: strengthening the executive, while often disregarding the separation of powers. The Supreme Court had ruled three times that the compulsory detention of quarantine criminals he ordered was illegal – and each time Bukele instructed the police via Twitter to proceed even harder and to conduct house searches and arrests without a court order. 'Five people are not going to decide the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans,' he tweeted. On 18 May, the parliament actually wanted to debate whether the quarantine should continue – but Bukele was faster than the MPs and declared a state of emergency at the weekend, which only parliament is allowed to do.

In Colombia, NGOs counted no fewer than 46 decrees and guidelines related to Covid-19. But the executive is not only resorting to decrees to deal with the crisis quickly – completely different decisions are being made through the back door of 'emergency laws', 'provisional measures' and 'extraordinary guidelines'. Mexico stopped the expansion of renewable energies that have been a thorn in the president's side; Brazil tried to legalise land grabbing after the fact; and Ecuador's president is also trying to push a gasoline price hike through the back door.

Democracy proves to be unpopular

These trends are alarming. There is hardly any resistance. On the contrary, the interventions are proving popular. Calling for a strong man is a common reflex in crisis situations. In Latin America, this goes hand in hand with the political tradition of *caudillismo* – strong, charismatic leadership figures are more important than institutions or a convincing program. An authoritarian offer meets the corresponding demand: Bukele, for example, enjoys an 80 per cent approval rating, as does Martín Vizcarra in Peru; in Colombia, Iván Duque's support rose from 29 to 60 per cent. And despite the humanitarian crisis and criticism of their lax handling of Covid-19, even López Obrador in Mexico (44 per cent) and Bolsonaro in Brazil (33 per cent) are still getting decent scores. It is difficult to predict how long the popularity will last. But the trend towards a strongman precedes a gradual loss of legitimacy for democracy.

The liberal countermodel has faltered. In its relations with its neighbours, the US

The Latinobarometro public opinion project has been measuring approval for democracy in Latin America since 1995. In 2018 the index reached a low of 48 per cent in favour of democracy, 28 per cent were indifferent about the government system and 18 per cent

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preferred an authoritarian system. Parliaments perform particularly badly. An economic downturn, which started in 2014 in countries like Brazil and Venezuela and expanded to Mexico in 2019, further diminished hopes for the future and dreams of advancement. 49 per cent of those surveyed said that their country was no longer developing further, but rather stagnating. The horror of the military dictatorships of the 1980s has apparently faded in the minds of younger generations and democracy has lost its splendour in the face of corruption scandals, rising levels of violent crime and continuing social inequality.

Last year this frustration already erupted in protests. From Haiti to Colombia, from Ecuador to Chile, people took to the streets against their governments, against austerity plans, against corruption and injustice. The pandemic has given many of the troubled governments the means to stall protests and delay institutional solutions. The plebiscite about a new constitution in Chile was postponed, as was the presidential election in Bolivia. But this also eliminates the possibility of institutional, democratic solutions. The temptation has grown to draw on the authoritarian mechanisms tested during the pandemic as a means to solve social and political conflicts. All the more so, since Latin America is predicted to slide into a severe recession and the economies are too weak to cushion the social consequences.

US and China vying for influence

Moreover, there is also the problematic geopolitical environment. China and the United States are also carrying on their conflict over domination in Latin America as well. China is granting loans, sending face masks and investing in infrastructure, but largely refrains from democratic requirements, the protection of human rights or transparency. Chinese projects are usually wrapped in a veil of mystery and journalists often do not even have access to their locations or those responsible. According to Eric Farnsworth, Vice President of the Council of the Americas and Americas Society, China is ‘concerned with influencing the narrative and portraying the Chinese system as superior to liberal democracy.’ And therefore democracy in Latin America poses more of a hindrance than a benefit to China.

The liberal countermodel has faltered. In its relations with its neighbours, the US government under Donald Trump relies on military

strength and unilateralism. This is made clear, not only by the never-ending dispute with Mexico over the construction of the border wall, but also the deployment of the US battle fleet to the Caribbean during the pandemic. Drug trafficking should officially be combated. But on several occasions Craig Faller, commander of the US Southern Command, and security adviser John Bolton made it clear who they were after: the troika of the (socialist) tyrants, Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua.

Contrary to the US government's claims, this has little if anything to do with democracy. Rather, anyone who serves US interests can count on Washington's leniency, even if they are involved in drug trafficking at the highest level, came to power through election manipulation or encourage corruption and torpedoed the UN's rule of law efforts. US foreign policy towards Latin America is reminiscent of Theodore Roosevelt's gunboat policy at the beginning of the 20th century or Franklin D. Roosevelt's famous quote about Nicaragua's right-wing dictator Anastasio Somoza in 1939: 'He may be a son of a bitch, but he's our son of a bitch.'



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