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# The rise of Latin America's anti-politicians

While Latin America's centrist parties collapsed, people lost faith in democracy. Now, autocrats are rising across the continent

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro may well be Latin America's most prominent right-wing extremist, but he's certainly not the continent's only one.

There's Javier Milei from Argentina, for instance, with his unruly hair and radical, provocative programme. And with pithy morsels such as 'Taxes are robbery!' and 'Social benefits are antisocial because they drive people into dependency from politicians', the libertarian economist scored 17 per cent at recent elections and entered into Congress.

In Chile, far-right José Antonio Kast has made it into the second round of the country's presidential elections. He is a man who sees himself in line with the military dictatorship and whose campaign promises include being tough on crime, tough on migrants, and very tough on taxes.

## Governmental conspiracy theories

When, in 2019, three countries with conservative governments — Ecuador, Colombia, and Chile — were all facing mass protests, the neo-fascists were quick to offer a rather odd worldwide conspiracy theory: a 'diffuse-molecular communist revolution' were the words with which Colombian President Álvaro Uribe tried to discredit demonstrators.

On the other extreme of the ideological spectrum, we hear equally outrageous statements. In Nicaragua, for instance, hard-left Sandinista ruler Daniel Ortega calls anyone who dares to criticise him a 'terrorist' or 'traitor', while his wife (and co-president) Rosario Murillo sees none less than the antichrist at the door whenever someone voices demands for democracy and human rights.

In Mexico, meanwhile, President Andrés Manual López Obrador can be found branding universities, feminists, human rights organisations, scientists, and indigenous peoples as 'neoliberal', 'corrupt', and 'nouveau-riche' whenever they disagree with him; 'conservative' and 'social-climber' are the milder terms in his vocabulary.

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The 'diffuse-molecular revolution' conspiracy theory isn't just a right-wing delusion, either, as Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel proves: when the country's people take to the streets to demand freedom and an end to socialism's supply shortages, he starts talking about US imperialism and attempted coups. And in Bolivia, the socialist President Luis Arce suspected a putsch behind the protests against his government. Then there's Honduras, where Xiomara Castro from the left-wing Libre Party is calling for voters to overturn the National Party's narco-dictatorship. They, in turn, call her a 'communist' and 'child-killer'.

Yes, Latin America in 2021 is more deeply polarised than it has been at any point since the military dictatorships and civil wars of the 70s and 80s. While the extremists fight a war of words, the centre is discredited and disintegrating; voters — especially younger cohorts — are disorientated. In a survey conducted by Vanderbildt University, people in the 18-25 age bracket are especially affected by doubts about democracy and are particularly susceptible to conspiracy theories spread on social media. As such, they make easy prey for authoritarian movements — of which there is now no shortage.

While some of them are following the path beaten by religious movements such as Pro-Familia, others owe their genesis more to libertarian think-tanks emanating from the US Tea Party movement; others still trade on a reputation as anti-corruption forces — such as *Movimento Brasil Livre* (MBL), the driving force behind the protests that led to the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff.

## The collapse of centrist parties

Whether they are Social or Christian Democrats, centrist parties are barely being noticed in a polarised media landscape and public discourse — unless they are needed as kingmakers in parliaments. Their hopes of using this role as a way to prevent the worst excesses, however, mostly go unfulfilled — and come with the danger that, in showing a willingness to

negotiate, they start to appear less like a principled opposition than opportunists vying for ministerial posts. This discredits them in the eyes of many voters.

There are many reasons for this collapse of traditional centrists parties. Often, the parties themselves have been the architects of their own downfall: corruption and an inability to renew either their programmes or their personnel are two major stumbling blocks. Others, meanwhile, are failing because of voters' unrealistic expectations.

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Following the end of the dictatorships and civil wars in the 1990s, many hoped that the new era would bring more social justice and economic progress. Yet this expectation has only partially been fulfilled. Thanks to globalisation, almost all of the continent's economies did experience growth; some, such as Mexico and Chile, also went through rapid modernisations. Yet overall, the global economic framework did not change fast enough, and while the industrialised nations continued exporting high-value cars, machinery, and luxury goods, Latin America stayed stuck supplying the same agricultural products, raw materials, and cheaply made consumer goods as before.

When it came to social justice, the continent's governments made precious little progress. Wealth dripped slowly, if at all, from the top, as the neoliberal orthodoxy of trickle-down economics remained a mirage. Many Latin American workers remained too poorly educated and unproductive, yet at the same time, elites hampered attempts to modernise taxation, labour, and benefits systems to close a gap between rich and poor dating all the way back to colonial times. Doing so would, after all, have meant imposing fair taxation and reducing established privileges, something politicians consistently shied away from for fear of conflict with an elite from which they, by and large, emerged themselves. This conflict would, of course, have led to a media war and to shrinking campaign budgets.

For a time, this stasis was compensated by a boom in prices for raw materials such as oil and soya. Export taxes or higher profits from state-run concerns were, in the first decade of the new millennium, enough to keep governments' coffers full, and this period ran concurrently to the 'pink wave' of social-democratic governments across the continent. With higher state spending on benefits and investment programmes, these

administrations were temporarily able to disguise the lack in structural reforms: the poor, after all, were getting something out of it and the rich were left untouched — and so everyone was happy.

## How crisis fuels autocracy

Taken together with the approaching systemic crisis of capitalism in the face of scarcer resources, climate change, and population growth, the pandemic and the worldwide economic collapse have dispelled the illusion that this could ever be continued. So now there will be fights about who gets how big a slice of the cake — and the first victim of this battle appears to be democracy. As surveys by Latinobarómetro and Vanderbildt show, support for democracy has been sinking in Latin America for several years now, with Vanderbilt registering around 25 per cent support for the proposition that authoritarian regimes are the best form of government. In Peru and Guatemala, over half of those surveyed said that they would support a *coup d'état* if it brought an end to corruption.

*70 per cent of the region's population is dissatisfied with democracy.*

According to Latinobarómetro, 70 per cent of the region's population is dissatisfied with democracy. 49 per cent still believe it to be the best form of government, while only 13 per cent are openly in favour of an authoritarian regime. 27 per cent have no opinion. Yet although this may sound encouraging at first, in 2010 support for democracy was at 63 per cent. Frustration, the feeling of being ignored or having lost out, and fear of slipping down the social scale are building up, and the two valves for this pressure are demonstrations and ballot boxes.

This explains the increasingly frequent, often surprising electoral gains for extremists such as Milei and Kast. The Peruvian electorate, too, has recently elected a Marxist village schoolmaster as president (one who is now stumbling from cabinet reshuffle to cabinet reshuffle); the Guatemalans, too, have voted for an openly racist, classist impresario with a penchant for a dog-whistling soundbite and plenty of support from the military and organised crime. The elections that bring these people to power, however, are democratic.

The same is true of Nayib Bukele in El Salvador, whose ballot box victories are nothing short of landslides. Issued from a merchant family, he nevertheless began his political career with the *Farabundi Marti* national liberation front (FMLN); later, he fell out with the party's

leadership and is now governing with his own personalised movement called *Nuevas Ideas*. What these 'new ideas' might actually be remains wholly unclear: the Twitter-happy millennial Bukele can switch from progressive to authoritarian in a moment.

Where Bukele shows far more consistency, however, is his rapid pursuit of opponents and dismantling of institutional counterweights to his presidential power. He doesn't hesitate to force uncomfortable judges into early retirement, for instance, or indeed to storm congress with a military unit when it doesn't vote the way he wants it too or simply spends too long debating. 'Normally, autocrats who have come to power by popular vote need two terms in order to bury democracy', says Brazilian political scientists Oliver Stuenkel. Bukule may manage to do that in just one.

## Trapped by autocracy

Elsewhere, the advance of authoritarian populists isn't quite as obvious as in El Savador; and there are some countries, such as Uruguay and Costa Rica, which have proven more resistant to extremists and autocrats. The overall tendency, however, is plain to see — and eminently disconcerting. As justified as voters' concerns may be and as important as the questions facing the continent are, the populists very rarely have solutions or answers. Whether they are left-wing or right-wing, their approach is remarkably similar: permanent polarisation and grassroots mobilisation against the current 'enemies of the people'; personalisation, militarisation, authoritarianism, politicisation of the courts, and the curtailing of institutional powers.

In short, it's about nothing less than stifling all dissent by co-opting where possible and intimidating elsewhere; the agenda is to accrue power and privileges. With this approach, elections can be a means to an end — especially when the autocrat in question is popular like Bukele or able to manipulate the electoral system like Ortega. Yet none of this is enough to disguise the fact that they are not politicians, but rather quite the opposite: anti-politicians who do not see debate as the legitimate foundation of political decision-making.

*Increasingly, the line between politics and organised criminality is becoming blurred.*

It is deeply worrying to observe how willing the continent's authoritarian rulers are to enter into criminal dealings. In Nicaragua and Venezuela, for instance, illegal organisations enjoy government protection to extract gold and thus circumvent international sanctions, while in Honduras, libertarian investors have

presidential permission to erect wholly private cities as nigh-on extra-territorial enclaves with all the concomitant potential to function as tax havens and oases for dirty money. Increasingly, the line between politics and organised criminality is becoming blurred.

Voters tend only to recognise the trap they are in once it has already shut and there are no democratic means left, no option to vote for an opposition. Venezuela is the clearest example of this — and indeed it is a curious fact that, after Uruguay with 74 per cent, support for democracy as a form of government is highest in Venezuela at 68 per cent. The Venezuelans seem to now regret their dalliance with anti-politics.

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