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What if the right fails?

The right is losing support across Latin America. But that alone will not bring the left back to power

For Latin America's new right-wing heads of state, these days present a welcome opportunity to demonstrate their power on the regional stage. On 28 July, the neo-liberal conservative Keiko Fujimori, daughter of the former dictator Alberto Fujimori, took up her presidential post in Peru. This week, the right-wing populist Abelardo de la Espriella will follow suit in Colombia.

The progressive 'pink tide' that had gradually swept across the continent since the turn of the millennium is being replaced by a right-wing populist 'blue tide'. Only Mexico, Brazil and the smaller countries of Uruguay and Guatemala are still governed by social democratic forces. However, these four countries together are home to just under two-thirds of the subcontinent's population, so the sheer number of countries masks the actual balance of power.

In recent months, opposition politicians and politically inexperienced but charismatic newcomers in Chile, Bolivia, Honduras, Peru and Colombia have skilfully exploited the failings of their left-wing predecessors to fuel highly emotional election campaigns. The desire for strong leadership in uncertain times, coupled with anger over soaring crime, corruption, inflation and economic stagnation, has propelled charismatic right-wing and right-wing populist leaders to power. They found easy scapegoats – migrants, criminals and corrupt left-wing politicians – and promised a bright future: through moral renewal, a tough stance on crime and the unleashing of market-liberal forces by dismantling state regulation. But mobilising voters is one thing. Turning a (usually very narrow) election victory into successful governance is quite another. For several newly elected right-wing heads of state, things are already going terribly wrong, just a few months into their terms.

An ongoing poor track record

In Chile, José-Antonio Kast won by bashing migrants and promising an uncompromising crackdown on crime. However, his governance has

primarily involved dismantling environmental regulations and creating tax breaks for the wealthy and businesses, whilst cutting spending on health, education, science and culture, and allowing fuel prices to rise rapidly. Elected with 58 per cent of the vote, his approval rating has since fallen to 30 per cent.

In Argentina, supporters of the libertarian 'chainsaw president' Javier Milei point to macroeconomic successes: inflation has fallen from 200 per cent to around 30 per cent. But there is more to the statistics than meets the eye. Prices have not fallen because the economy has become more productive, but because the government has deliberately eroded the purchasing power of wages. Anyone shopping in Buenos Aires now pays European prices – with Argentine wages. Because hardly any new labour-intensive investment is coming into the country, tens of thousands of workers have lost their jobs, whilst at the same time cuts are being made to healthcare, education and social benefits. In short: the once-broad middle class is becoming impoverished.

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In Ecuador, President Daniel Noboa has repeatedly failed in his attempts to amend the progressive constitution, either at the Supreme Court or directly at the hands of the people, most recently in a referendum. Nor has his uncompromising approach to security yielded any resounding successes so far. His model is the security policy of Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele, who succeeded in drastically reducing the murder rate – from 36 per 100 000 inhabitants in 2019 to 1.3 in 2025 – through a heavy-handed approach and mass arrests. Yet, despite many imitators, the Salvadoran example remains a regional anomaly, achieved at the cost of massive human rights violations: prisons are three times over capacity, and 92 000 people have been arrested and found guilty in mass trials without legal safeguards. In countries such as Ecuador, where this security approach has so far shown little success, doubts are growing as to whether it is worth it.

The new right's poor track record in government is tempting for the left, but it should not lead to premature optimism. The fact that Kast, Milei or Noboa are losing support does not mean that the electorate will automatically swing back to the left. The underlying conditions that helped the right come to power in the first place – anger over crime,

inflation, corruption and the feeling of having been let down by one's own government – have not disappeared. They are waiting for the next force to credibly address them.

A new vision

For the progressive camp, this means that the opposition's weakness presents an opportunity, but no guarantee. The decisive factor will be whether the Left can make its own government achievements visible and accessible to the public, rather than merely defending them. The task is to demonstrate convincingly that problems such as security, inflation and economic stagnation can be resolved without dismantling social welfare and democracy.

Firstly, this means delivering results rather than merely administering. Brazil and Mexico bear particular responsibility in this regard, as they serve as 'showcases'. Both their success and their failure will have regional repercussions. Brazil's President Lula and Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum must demonstrate that crime, inflation and inequality can be curbed through social policy rather than purely repressive measures – and they must proactively communicate these successes before the right wing claims them as its own or plays them down.

Secondly, there needs to be a renewal of personnel and policy rather than merely defending the status quo. This is an even more difficult task, as both Lula and Sheinbaum are rooted in political ideologies of the last century, be it Marxist class struggle or state-capitalist dependency theories of the industrial age. These approaches will get us nowhere in the 21st century, which will be shaped by protectionism, geopolitical conflicts, the AI revolution, migration and the climate crisis.

The political left itself must resist the pull towards authoritarianism that even some of its own leaders feel when quick, tough solutions beckon.

Latin America needs a vision of its own, distinct from Chinese state capitalism and US casino capitalism, both of which view the subcontinent purely as a market and a source of raw materials. A vision that does justice to its geographical and economic position as well as to its history and culture. There are plenty of approaches: for example, post-extractivism, which aims for a gradual transition away from dependence on raw material exports towards a diversified economy. The focus here is on strengthening local communities, economic resilience and a circular economy. Concrete examples can already be found today, for instance with regard

to the rights of nature, which are recognised in various forms in more than 40 countries. Or in commons projects, in which resources are managed and used collectively rather than being subject to private ownership or state control – such as water, forests, pastureland and fishing grounds, but also knowledge, software and public urban space. Another approach is the care economy. It focuses on the reproduction of life and interpersonal care, rather than orienting economic thinking solely towards profit and growth.

Thirdly, this requires substantive – rather than merely tactical – alliances with intellectuals, social movements and those sections of society that are actively shaping politics on the ground day in, day out. This calls for a new political culture, moving away from rigid hierarchies towards more active participation. Problems must be solved in a practical way at local level; people must be empowered to do this themselves. What is needed, therefore, is more grassroots democracy and less top-down control.

And fourthly, the political left itself must resist the pull towards authoritarianism that even some of its own leaders feel when quick, tough solutions beckon. The case of El Salvador shows where this path leads once institutions have been hollowed out: there, Bukele – who began his career in the left-wing FMLN party – has consolidated all powers under his control, silenced the critical press and is planning an unconstitutional third term in office. Preventing this example from setting a precedent is currently the most urgent task facing progressive forces in Latin America, not only in relation to the right, but also as a warning to themselves. Whether the pendulum swings back will therefore not depend on whether the new right fails, but on whether the left can prove by then that it can do better.



Sandra Weiss
Mexico City

Sandra Weiss is a political scientist and a former diplomat. A freelance journalist, Sandra writes articles about Latin America for several German newspapers, among others *Die Zeit* and *Die Welt*.