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The challenges ahead for Latin America's left

With the victory in Chile, progressive forces in Latin America have gained ground. Nevertheless, democracy in the region is still under pressure

In the Chilean presidential election in December, more than 55 per cent of voters who opted for Gabriel Boric's left-wing electoral alliance were voting for more than just dignity (the alliance's name *Apruebo Dignidad* translates roughly as 'I choose dignity'). Importantly, they were voting against the resurgence of the Latin American radical right. With Boric's opponent, José Antonio Kast, Chile would have seen a return to the politics of the Pinochet dictatorship – with a man in presidential office who has ties to European right-wing extremist outfits such as *Vox* in Spain.

It would be a mistake, however, to see in Boric's electoral alliance of the Communist and *Frente Amplio* parties a left-wing populist mirror-image of the type common in the Latin American political landscape. Rather, from his early days as a student representative, notably during the 2011 protests against private companies' profits in education, and then as an elected member of the national Chamber of Deputies, Boric has always centred his progressive brand of politics on human rights as the first priority – ahead of societal progress and to the vexation of some of his communist allies, especially in questions of regional geopolitics.

What we are currently seeing is a shift in the 'Pacific Bloc' of Latin America – Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru. Until now, they had been something of a counterweight to the left-leaning 'Atlantic side' of the continent.

Latin America's new left

Beginning with the victory of Andrés Manuel López Obrador in the Mexican elections of 2018, recent political developments have undermined this dynamic: in 2021, teaching unionist Pedro Castillo pulled off a surprise win in Peru. In Colombia's upcoming presidential

elections, the left-wing candidate Gustavo Petro is currently one of the favourites. The outcome of the race is still up in the air, but it's clear that the right-wing around former president Álvaro Uribe is much weaker today.

Colombia's protests of 2019 and 2020 have mobilised a broad cross-section of young people in the county. They call into question a model marked by violence against social activists and any number of other injustices.

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In Bolivia, meanwhile, the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) quickly returned to power after the fall of Evo Morales in late 2019; and in Argentina, Peronism is once again, after four years in opposition, back in the presidential palace *Casa Rosada*. Further north, late last year left-wing candidate Xiomara Castro won the Honduran elections in a country that well remembers how her husband Manuel Zelaya was ousted in the coup of 2009. Even where moderate right-wing parties have carried the day, such as in Ecuador, a centre-left parliamentary majority and regular street protests limit their room for manoeuver.

Two sticking points

From the point of view of the region's progressives, the icing on the cake would be a victory for Brazil's Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in October 2022. At current polling, the former president certainly has a chance of beating the incumbent Jair Bolsonaro, whose support is crumbling – even in the elite on which he thus far has been able to count. In this context, Lula is making overtures towards those in the political centre, courting fellow former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso, a moderate conservative, and trying to reduce scepticism in the business community about what a return of his Workers' Party would mean for the economy.

At the same time, two governments remain in power in the region who have, in democratic and constitutional terms, crossed the Rubicon. In Venezuela, the victory of the *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* (PSUV) in the recent gubernatorial elections leaves Nicolás Maduro's position strengthened. While the opposition mounted something of a comeback during the campaign, it remains fragmented and was beaten almost everywhere in the country by a united Chavist front. In Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo were re-elected –

somewhat unsurprisingly, given that they had put all of the opposition candidates in prison prior to the ballot.

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The connections to these two countries on the 'Bolivarian Axis' have become problematic for democratic left-wingers. Their positions are sometimes hard to make out: discrete attempts to mark political distance are tempered by a wariness of becoming complicit in 'imperialist interference'. As such, neither Maduro nor Ortega have been invited to the *Grupo de Puebla*, a forum for discussion among Latin American progressives.

Yet in the case of Ortega, matters are even more complex – for multiple reasons. There is the fact that he maintains economic ties to governments with seemingly opposing ideologies, such as to that of soon-to-be-former Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández or indeed to the US, with whom he has signed a range of trade agreements. Indeed, as Nayib Bukele in El Salvador proves, the rise of authoritarianism in Central America is pan-ideological.

It's not another 'Pink Tide'

Nevertheless, the fact remains that left-of-centre parties may well soon be in government in more of the region's countries than at the height of the 2000-2010 'Pink Tide'. It would, however, be too easy to simply count left-wing governments. Beyond a superficial analysis, what electoral outcomes such as Mauricio Macri's defeat in his attempt to win a second term as Argentinian President in 2019 show is that centre-right parties trying to ride on the globalisation optimism of the 1990s have a problem: they talk about 'engaging with the world', but the world has changed since Donald Trump's presidency called the global liberal order fundamentally into question.

Moreover, a fuller analysis reveals that, in terms of policy pledges, this new 'turn to the left' is more mild and less transformative than that of the early 21st century. These are administration of a 'progressivism with lower intensitiy', acting as they must in a context of continuing economic crises, declining regional integration, resurgent organised crime, and anaemic voter loyalty. The dilemma is clearest in its most extreme instance: as Alberto Fernández' difficult position in renegotiating the gigantic Argentinian sovereign debt inherited from Macri with the International Monetary Funds (IMF) shows, it is currently impossible to pursue governmental agendas beyond firefighting.

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Another difference to the glorious 2000s is that the region's progressive governments find themselves facing stronger opposition, which is contesting the sway the left has long held on popular mobilisation. The new right-wing outfits of recent years such as those headed by Kast in Chile and Bolsonaro in Brazil or the Argentinian 'Libertarians' embodied by economist Javier Milei know how to play hard-ball, connecting a law-and-order agenda with a radical defence of unfettered capitalism; and, just as in Europe, they decry a supposed 'dictatorship of the politically correct'.

Indeed, Peronists' defeat in Argentina's mid-term parliamentary elections in 2021 at the hands of Macri's moderate conservatives *Juntos por el Cambio* ('Together for change') shows that, in a time of social upheaval and widespread scepticism towards 'the political class', the electorate is behaving ever more erratically.

Only in Chile does the progressive momentum seem to have held where others in the region have weakened: protests were followed by a constitutional assembly and a generational shift in the corridors of power – Boric becomes president aged 36; many of the country's mayors are even younger. These developments give rise to great expectations, to hope that real change is underway. Yet in implementing his reform agenda to expand social security provision, the new president will come up against numerous difficulties.

High pressure on representative democracy

In essence, the region is facing a combination of political polarisation and party fragmentation, with the result that elected presidents are often unable to govern with parliamentary majorities. This, in turn, leads to increased instability.

In Peru, for instance, it is comparatively easy to impeach a president, and this possibility dangles over the head of Pedro Castillo like the sword of Damocles. In Chile, Boric will have to negotiate with the moderate left and confront a strong right wing holding half of the seats in the Senate. Argentinian Peronism, meanwhile, suffers from internal factionalism, with the 'Kirchnerists' in favour of Vice-President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner against the 'Albertistas' behind President Alberto Fernández.

The internal fault lines came to the fore as the groupings took different positions during negotiations with the IMF.

In this complex situation, both progressives and conservatives are trying to adapt to a new framework. In Latin America, a newly ideological climate is becoming tangible, in which traditional political identities are called into question and mobilising new forms of non-conformist politics. While these developments do not always fit neatly into established categories, it is clear that they have the potential to exert no small amount of pressure on representative democracy in the region.



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