

Democracy in Latin America

Is the region turning Left? What Left?

Yale University

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I

If one reads both press reports and analytical articles produced by academic circles today, the overriding opinion seems to be that the Left - whatever meaning, if any, this word may still convey today - is making a comeback to Latin America.

I will argue that the current debate on the political outlook in Latin America calls for far more complex answers. I am afraid that I will thus complicate matters by adding new dimensions to the discussion. But I am sure that a more detailed analysis is needed lest oversimplification may obscure rather than clarify what is taking place in that part of the world where I have lived and which I have studied for most of my life.

Let me begin by putting current events into a proper historical perspective.

II

The eighties and the nineties were marked by deep and accelerated change in Latin America.

Democracy replaced military rule in several countries and raised high hopes of a better life for everyone. Democracy was portrayed by new leaders in the region not only as a better political architecture, but also as a supposedly more effective system of governance that would automatically bring prosperity with it.

Whereas blending political and economic considerations provided a powerful justification for new leaders to advance democracy, this could also prove to be an explosive cocktail in the long run if promises of material progress did not materialize, if economic development happened somewhat to lag behind the institutional building of democracy.

In the economy, Latin America was largely at a stalemate in the late eighties/early nineties. Partly as a result of the relative success of inward-oriented economic models that had brought some growth in preceding decades, almost all countries in the region were late comers to the globalization process and had to make up for lost time in a world where competition for foreign investment was increasingly fierce. Latin America was losing the battle for investment to Asian or even to Eastern Europe economies.

Latin American nations found themselves with the double task of restoring democracy and of doing their

homework in economic matters. By the turn of the century, almost all of them had implemented a vast agenda for reform that included, among others, the opening of the economy to foreign trade, privatization - especially of utilities, and fiscal adjustment.

Many analysts and politicians saw these first-generation reforms and the reorientation of State actions as either an ideologically-motivated search for a “minimal State”, inspired by “neo-liberalism”, or as an unwanted imposition from abroad as it was misleadingly implied in the very expression the “Washington Consensus”.

III

In today’s world, there is hardly any alternative for emerging economies other than becoming more fully integrated into the global economy. The drawback is that globalization was never conceived of as a road to a more just world.

Globalization is justified on economic rationale alone: it is allegedly a more efficient system for allocating means of production worldwide. The concept of globalization has never been at the negotiating table as the subject of intergovernmental talks. Drivers of globalization are expanded production scales, industry strategy and the development of possible global consumption patterns by corporations.

Few countries in Latin America have been successful in reaping the promised fruits of that process. Globalization was never an equal opportunity game. Larger economies as well as those countries having invested more heavily in education stand a better chance.

Mexico, Brazil and Chile are cases in point, having received an enormous inflow of foreign investment over the past few years. Medium-sized economies such as Argentina and Colombia are at a halfway point. Smaller economies in South America lost with globalization. This would probably be the case of Venezuela as well, were it not for the oil price bonanza of the past few years. Central American countries, for their part, negotiated preferential access to the US market for their exports, which may be good enough for them.

The legacy of the nineties in Latin America was broadly positive for Latin America. Growth resumed after the lost decade in the eighties, even though GDP increased a paltry 1.4% annually in the nineties. Yet wealth was unevenly shared. Latin American economies have grown more dual, more unequal, with higher levels of unemployment and of informality. Many young people live in hopelessness. Democracy was restored in all countries in the region and yet it remains fragile in several places. And regional economic integration became a dominating feature of Inter-American relations. The NAFTA, MERCOSUL and the FTAA talks are some of the milestones in this process.

IV

The current decade has seen new leadership in Latin America that has been questioning reform. Several among the new leaders claim leftist credentials. Winners in the ballot box have captured a widespread

sentiment of revolt and hopelessness in vast parts of Latin America. A study on the state of democracy in the region published last year by the United Nations Development Program has gone deeply into the problem. Its main finding is pretty clear: promises for a better life that democracy carried with it are still elusive for most Latin Americans.

Needless to say that this sentiment is, in a region where democracy is not yet firmly established, a dangerous breeding ground for real threats to democratic rule and to the strengthening of institutions.

It is true that candidates for any major elected post have not challenged democratic principles openly. It is also true that democracy has been formally preserved. But there is no denying that it has been weakened lately, as the door has been opened to demagoguery and to a populism that is heavily tinged with nationalism (usually anti-America). Political speech has shifted from rational discourse to the vagueness of empty phraseology.

It is not that the Left is making a comeback in Latin America. It would be more appropriate to say that it is the good old populism that is reappearing under new forms and clothes.

After decades of harsh military rule in several countries, followed by a return to democracy in the eighties/nineties, populism seems to be returning to certain countries in the region, claiming now leftist rather than the traditional conservative colors. But populism it is. Let there be no doubt about it.

Populism as a political phenomenon was born in the twentieth century together with contemporary mass democracies. Populism can be seen as a deviation of mass democracies or as an ill-shaped form of mass democracy, as a mass democracy that has gone off-bounds.

Both populism and mass democracies presuppose universal suffrage, growingly urban societies and the extensive use of mass communications techniques. They differ, though, in important ways:

- i) Democracy portrays itself as rules-based model, as a political system dependent upon the smooth functioning of institutions. Institutions and rules matter more than whoever holds power. By contrast, populism tends to be shaped essentially by the personalities, the personal ambitions and the political views of those who are in command, usually a charismatic and authoritarian leader. But it may very well be the case that a group of persons also come to exert populist leadership. The military in Brazil, for example, toyed with populism in the seventies when the economy was growing rapidly;
- ii) Legitimacy in democracies is to be found essentially in the results of the ballot box. Legitimacy is conferred upon a democratic Government to the extent that the Rule of Law is applied and enforced. Populism seeks legitimacy in exactly the opposite, in heavy criticism of the "old political establishment" and of the complex mediation processes of representative democracy. Populist leaders define themselves as "outsiders" who have established a direct connection with the population. That justifies the fact that they can allegedly do without rules, without institutions, without

diverging opinions, often resorting to referenda or to other forms of direct democracy, as if they were better and more legitimate by themselves rather than being chosen by representative democracy mechanisms;

- iii) Finally, populism is based on manipulation and propaganda rather than deeds and informed opinion when it comes to making use of mass communication. All populist leaders are good communicators, albeit with scant use of truth. They simplify reality as they see fit. Their messages are usually simple, even though they may be delivered in the format of lengthy speeches full of empty rhetoric. Probability of success is higher if the audience is not educated or if it is poor and therefore more inclined to accept promises of paradise. This has been traditionally the case in Latin America.

V

Fortunately, however, Latin America is not a uniform political landscape. Differences probably matter more than commonalities in recent developments in the region. Hugo Chávez, Tabaré Vázquez, Néstor Kirchner, Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, Evo Morales and Michelle Bachelet have origins as different as can be and have also very diverse personal backgrounds.

Do not look for ideological consistency among them, neither for coherence between discourse and practice. While there is an undeniable kernel of truth in the widely disseminated perception that Latin America has turned Left as a bloc, the fact is that individual country circumstances and capabilities have resulted not in a common, but in a broad array of national responses to current challenges.

In my view, there is less a general movement towards the Left in Latin America than a sentiment of dissatisfaction among voters caused by two separate and yet interlinked reasons: insufficient economic growth and the systematic failure of traditional institutions of representative democracy both to meet the demands of an increasingly informed society and to bridge the alarmingly wide gap between the poor and the rich in Latin America. The same old problems have led to new responses. Some of those responses have taken the form of populism in selected countries.

VI

It is not only in Latin America that the inner workings of representative democracy in contemporary mass societies are being openly questioned. People everywhere are not happy any more with the mere formalities of democracy. They want to be part of the political process as they mistrust the ways of the old establishment.

Citizens today have multiple interests and identities. They may be, to use terminology better employed to describe class or ideological divides, from the Left or from the Right. But these terms have lost a precise meaning today. And usually more relevant to voters is their ethnic origin, their age group, their religious creed, their sexual orientation, their consumption patterns, their life stories. This array of loyalties allows for

multiple and overlapping identities.

Seen against this background, Latin America is again a diversified landscape in which vibrant democracies co-exist with frail political systems. In some countries such as Bolivia, Ecuador and Costa Rica there have been, recently, evident symptoms of a serious crisis in governance. At the other extreme I guess I can mention, by way of illustration, Chile and my own country, Brazil.

A society has been formed in Brazil that thinks and acts independently, irrespective of whoever holds political power. It is an organized and open society that is used to exerting political pressure. An unjust and yet an open society, marked by high levels of social mobility.

The dynamism of the Brazilian society calls for new forms of relationship with the State, for a partnership where there was imposition, for a dialogue where there was a monologue, for autonomy where there was bureaucratic centralism.

It demands flexibility, a spirit of constant negotiation and tolerance. It requires diversity of vision. It can do without saviors who pride themselves on being the bearers of a messianic ideology. Our society is saturated with self-congratulatory and otherwise empty speech.

What is the true meaning of Left in this changed political reality? It has certainly little to do with collectivization of production means, with either nationalization or expropriation. It has little to do with authoritarian forms of governance. On the other hand, there is a wide space for a democratic Left in Latin America, a Left that is supportive of simple ideas such as better services delivered by the State - with equal access by the population to those services - with affirmative action to minorities, with more rather than less democracy.

VII

Coming back now to the broader Latin American context, one may wonder what is still missing to consolidate democracy for good in the region. I have a very simple answer to that: Latin America needs to deepen the reform process of the nineties rather than to halt it.

Reform is an unfinished business in Latin America. It must go beyond economic policy (where there is still much room for improvement after all) and be extended to areas of the State that are closely associated with the smooth operation of institutions. We have a State that has been only partly renovated, whose institutions are often archaic, whose methods are old and practices are dysfunctional. Delivery of proper public services remains elusive. At worst, corruption may be endemic and the State simply does not exist for all practical purposes.

On this second wave of reforms, these would be in my view the more relevant or more pressing points:

1. political reform, meaning by that more efficient and more legitimate mechanisms by which people may channel their demands and voice their concerns, by which political parties and elected politicians may become more accountable for the actions they take on behalf of voters, by which Government officials may be exposed to a dialogue with taxpayers and citizens. This will demand an enlarged space for democratic deliberation, in which actors representing civil society directly will have a greater say;
2. reform of justice with a view to making it more independent, faster and more accessible to the poor;
3. combat against corruption, which is a chief cause for the growing lack of credibility of Congress and of democratic institutions in some countries in Latin America;
4. better public security. Violence is widespread in Latin America, both in towns and in the countryside. Sometimes it is police forces themselves that blackmail ordinary people. No society can survive fear. No society can believe in democracy when it feels threatened by the very authorities who are supposed to offer it protection;
5. better education which is the foundation for all those above mentioned reform areas to succeed; and
6. finally, the ideal of economic and political integration must be resurrected lest it disappears for lack of progress and tangible results. Integration in Latin America has been chiefly driven by economic considerations. It seems that political decisions are now taking precedence, representing, in my view, a risk of reversing what has already been accomplished.

It is time in my view to move ahead with economic and political integration in Latin America. They should go hand in hand.

VIII

I remain optimistic about Latin America's future as a democratic region. But I do not underestimate the challenges ahead. The way forward will take a lot of hard work and difficult choices. Populism and demagoguery are serious enemies that must be defeated.

We must undertake reform in areas that would call for change in some of the most deeply rooted ways in which we behave. Progress is likely to be slower and frustration may ensue. But there are no options if we want to continue taking a justified pride in our democracy.

Brazil, finally, has certainly a role to play in the regional context. Helping democratic forces and promoting dialogue is one way to influence events in Latin America. Another is establishing limits to populist regimes in their dealings with Brazil. Brazil traditionally does not use its weight in domestic political processes in any country. One may argue whether or not the time has come for a more meaningful role to be played by Brazil

in favor of democracy. After all, there could be few more serious threats to democracy in Brazil than populism and demagoguery on its borders.