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Latin America

Who's who in Latin America's upheaval

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Latin America is experiencing an abrupt change generated by enormous confrontations between the dispossessed and the privileged. This confrontation includes both revolts by the people and reactions by the oppressors.

The October revolts

The uprising in Chile is the most important event in the Latin American tsunami. It is the biggest rebellion in the country's history. Every day thousands of young people leave schools, universities, and neighborhoods to face down the security forces. Their banners are simple: "Chile got tired. We woke up." A people exhausted by humiliations has risen against the neo-liberal model. Seventy percent of households' entire income is eaten up by debts to pay for private education, health care, and pension savings. Chile shares the podium with eight of the most unequal nations in the world.

The mass of the population is confronting an isolated government, one which took office in elections marked by abstention. Conservative president Sebastián Piñera deploys savage levels of repression, which has already led to more than twenty deaths, thousands detained, and countless wounded. There are indisputable reports of sexual abuse against detained women.

The army conducts this vandalism to preserve its privileges bequeathed by Pinochet, but some soldiers have refused to take part in the repression.

Piñera is overwhelmed. He imposed a curfew, then had to lift it. He asked for dialogue, and then dialed up the bloodletting. Every day he announces some social concession but these bring no results. The populace continues to mobilize so as not to repeat the frustrated experience of mass protests in 2006 and 2011, which led to only cosmetic changes.

Meanwhile, the politicians of the center-left Concertación ("Agreement" or "Common Ground") pact – which includes both Christian Democrats and the Socialist Party – seek to dilute the uprising's demands. These forces supported the regime for 30 years and even initially justified last month's militarization. Now they are promoting a call to hold a plebiscite that will ensure continuity for Piñera's administration while blocking the decision-making sovereignty of any future Constituent Assembly elected to rewrite the constitution.

Ecuador is the second epicenter of revolt. Indigenous communities resisted an increase in fuel prices at the local level and were then joined by other popular sectors in a monumental march on Quito. Lenin Moreno escaped to Guayaquil (a conservative enclave) and opted for bloody repressive, resulting in seven dead and thousands injured. But after several days of intense battle he gave up. He canceled the gas hike and acquiesced to the victory achieved by CONAIE's intransigence – the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador. When the indigenous peoples marched into parliament, the fugitive president remembered how three of his predecessors were taken down by these same forces (1997, 2000 and 2005).

The protesters also occupied the IMF offices, warning the bankers what to expect from this new round of resistance. After winning on barricades, the social movements organized a Parliament of the Peoples, a sign of how the revolt is beginning to articulate alternative projects.

The fascist threat

The coup in Bolivia introduced a dramatic counterpoint to the uprisings in Chile and Ecuador. The right took the initiative and seized the government. It was a decisive action under the direct leadership of the army. President Evo Morales resigned at gunpoint when the generals refused to obey him. He did not resign simply owing to the pressure of the general crisis (as Argentine president De la Rúa did in 2001). He was removed from the presidency by the military high command.

However, the main peculiarity of this operation was its fascist tint. The security forces established their own liberated zones, occupied by thugs who launched a reign of terror. They kidnapped social leaders, invaded public institutions, and humiliated opponents. Coup leader and Christian fundamentalist Luis Fernando Camacho put far-right Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro's proclamations into practice. With bibles in hand and evangelical prayers, his supporters burned houses, abducted women, and chained up journalists. Camacho shouted racist slogans against the "cholos," while his henchmen mocked the "coyas," (terms for indigenous people that are racial slurs in the mouths of the racist elite), they burned the indigenous Whipala flag, and beat indigenous people in the street. Like Germany during the 1930s, Camacho has created legions out of the resentful middle classes to humiliate the indigenous.

The ruling class is gleefully taking its revenge. This class never accepted the fact that an Indian, Evo, won the presidency, and they look favorably upon Camacho's hoards. Bolivia's economic and military elite are hoping to stabilize the coup and – after a period with Camacho's gangs in the lead – then place their trusted men in positions to manage the state. But their immediate priority is to consolidate Evo's overthrow.

The prominence of the United States in the plot was confirmed by Trump's praise for the army's intervention. International business offered the coup leaders generous support and succeeded in securing the European Union's blessing. Self-declared interim president Jeanine Áñez will try to hold the presidency long enough to rig new elections. The coup regime is oscillating between public relations efforts necessary to maintain its farce and the direct exercise of a dictatorship. In response to the coup, Bolivia has returned to its traditions of ungovernability.

Heroic popular resistance is growing under harsh conditions. In the first five days of the coup, 24 were killed. Despite the crackdown, mobilizations extended from the bastion of El Alto – an indigenous-majority city of one million people neighboring the capital city La Paz – to cities across the country. Hundreds of popular neighborhood associations are at the heart of the struggle, organizations that know how to organize street battles. In the course of these actions, the attitude adopted by Evo must be evaluated. The main problem with his strategy was not that he hoped to remain in office continuously, but his total lack of foresight that the coup was coming. The militants organizing the resistance are fully aware of this shortcoming.

A resounding victory and a positive example

Lula's release sparked immense joy among those organizing against his arrest. It also landed an important blow against the Lava Jato (Operation Car Wash) anti-corruption farce mounted by prosecuting judge Moro (currently Bolsonaro's Minister of Justice) and his accomplices at O Globo – Brazil's largest daily newspaper – and their campaign to prevent the tenaciously popular Lula from once again running for president. Now the right must deal with the mass caravan protests demanding the full restoration of Lula's political rights in advance of a potential 2022 presidential bid.

That protests against Bolsonaro will resonate across the continent. And they will have all the more impact as he clearly lacks the minimal self-control required to exercise his executive role at the head of the Brazilian state. Instead,

he will continue on with his carnival-like antics.

Bolsonaro's crude behavior in office is aggravating his government's internal crises. It has already come to light that several of his relatives committed money laundering crimes and testimony has recently emerged directly linking him to the murder of the Party for Socialism and Freedom city councilor from Rio de Janeiro Marielle Franco.

Despite all the damage he has done, Bolsonaro has not been able to translate his reactionary rhetoric into a concrete fascist program or state. Workers launched a huge strike against his neoliberal pension reforms and three million people marched against homophobia, a central component of Bolsonaro's political and personal profile. Meanwhile, student protests against budget cuts reached an unprecedented mass level, mobilized under the banner of "books yes, weapons no."

The unhinged Bolsonaro is planning a counteroffensive, including mobilizing his right-wing social base to demand Lula be sent back to prison. What happens next in Brazil will arise from this confrontation.

The democratic victory in Brazil complements an even more significant victory in Venezuela. Since Trump could not copy Reagan or Bush's invasions of Granada (1983) or Panama (1989), he had to content himself with the appropriation of the Venezuelan national oil company (PDEVESA) subsidiary in the United States. His Venezuelan lackeys tried every imaginable plot, but they were undermined by the failed self-proclamation of Juan Guaidó as president of Venezuela. Facing a very difficult social scenario (aggravated by gigantic mistakes in economic policy committed by president Nicolás Maduro's government), David managed to stop Goliath. To this day, the Bolivarian camp (as the movement sparked by Hugo Chávez is called) maintains an intense level of street mobilizations and fights for control over public space every time the opposition appears. Furthermore, military cohesion and loyalty to the government has been preserved (Gaido failed to win over the high command, for instance) by means of constant political intervention in the army under pressure from the popular militias. These actions illustrate how to confront threats from the right. To beat the fascists, you must act without hesitation.

Relentless struggles and electoral confrontations

Protests in Puerto Rico forced the governor to resign after he mocked victims of the hurricane and spouted homophobic comments. In neighboring Haiti, demonstrations over the last few months have been monumental. Barricades are built every day in the cities to protest a government that aggravated the indescribable impoverishment of the population. Honduras continues to be convulsed by persistent resistance against the bloody regime that took power by means of an electoral fraud (2017 and 2013). The criminals who run the state not only assassinated environmental activist Berta Cáceres, they have murdered some 200 popular militants who dare defy the security forces mafia.

The struggle in Latin America extends to the electoral field as well. Last year, Andrés Manuel López Obrador won an overwhelming victory in Mexico, ending a suffocating cycle of PRI and PAN governments. Hopes are focused on ending violence endemic to the so-called war on drugs, which has turned the country into graveyard: 300,000 dead and 26,000 more unidentified bodies. Countless social leaders have been massacred in a war that goes beyond settling scores between organized crime syndicates. Voters expect López Obrador to end the forced displacement of populations and to investigate and prosecute the perpetrators of massacres like the one in Ayoizinatpa. The achievement of these objectives will clash with the recent enactment of new internal security norms, which authorize anti-drug actions by the armed forces. López Obrador's submission to Trump's blackmail and his demand to block Central American migrants on Mexico's southern border by deploying of the National Guard will only exacerbate this

danger

President-elect Alberto Fernández's victory in Argentina marks another important electoral reversal for the right in Latin America with the return to power of the Peronist bloc, including Cristina Fernández de Kirchner elected as vice president. Argentina's movement will have to settle the score in the responses to the economic-social catastrophe left behind by conservative president Mauricio Macri. This dramatic scenario may lead to the resumption of political mobilization in the country with the highest level of union and social organization in the entire region.

In Colombia, we are witnessing the slow emergence of center-left forces, which for the first time is standing in elections in municipalities and for governorships against the oligarchy and the paramilitaries. [And, on November 21, the largest strike and mass protest in Colombian history shook conservative president Iván Duque's regime, forcing him to close the country's borders and declare a curfew.]

On the other hand, the center-left Frente Amplio (Broad Front) in Uruguay saw its vote decline in 2019 elections after 15 years in power. And a few months ago in El Salvador, an improvised right-wing coalition captured the presidency, ending a decade of shaky management by the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN).

These last examples prove why popular mobilization must be maintained and why the left cannot restrict its actions to the ballot box. Instead, maintaining open communication channels with organisms that emerge from social struggles is vital. We can already glimpse exactly these sorts of modalities at play in the neighborhood associations (Cabildos) of Chile, in the Parliament of Peoples of Ecuador, in the Meetings of Movements in Bolivia, and in the Coordinated Organizations of Haiti.

Pretexts and wrecking operations

It is evident that the coup d'état has resurfaced as an instrument in the hands of the ruling classes. Bolivia crowns a sequence initiated in Honduras (2009), practiced in Paraguay (2012), and extended to Brazil (2016). In each case, the army has returned to the forefront of politics, as guarantor of new authoritarian forms maintained under a state of emergency. The media manipulates information, presenting corruption as a disease unique to center-left governments and promoting fake news stories provided by the intelligence services at the request of rightist groups. Meanwhile, the right buttresses its lies with various devices to confuse popular consciousness, including fostering religious fanaticism based on evangelical churches that contribute millions of dollars to stoke fear and destroy solidarity.

Washington's main priority is to recover the largest oil field in the hemisphere in Venezuela. It has also reinforced its embargo against Cuba and conspired to open access to the enormous reserves of lithium in Bolivia's Altiplano. Evo pursued extensive talks to expand the exploitation of this strategic resource with Chinese firms, a fact not lost on the Trump administration. The recent BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) summit in Brasilia, Brazil included clear statements of intent by China in favor of free trade in the region. Bolsonaro himself has begun to evaluate a Free Trade Agreement with China. To counteract this growing rivalry for influence in Latin America, Trump has increased the regional presence of the U.S. military, forming close relationships with Latin American militaries as a means to assert U.S. corporate economic interests. U.S. intervention also serves to strengthen neoliberalism, which has been challenged by the Chilean uprising.

That revolt demolished the neoliberal myths most praised by the region's capitalists. The trans-Andean rebellion has reverberated internationally because has exposed the Chicago Boys' cherished orthodoxies as scams. The protests have also pointed out how neoliberalism drives social disintegration in Latin America, producing massive migrations

when local economies are opened to international competition and when small farmers are destroyed. Dispossession swells caravans leaving for the North, which no wall or security force can contain. Neoliberalism expanded crime and led to terrifying violence. Of the 50 most dangerous cities on planet, 43 are located in Latin America. This model is also responsible for the destruction of the environment and the recent fires in the Amazon. The intentional burning of large forests is perpetrated to plant soybeans or open pastures for livestock under the law of maximizing profit.

Interpretations and lessons learned so far

The right not only ignores the disasters caused by its management, it claims its model forged a thriving middle class, which now seeks greater participation in public life. But the "middle class" is just a label used by the right to improvise justifications. They mix apples and oranges to force interpretations of social development to fit their prejudices.

At the same time, controversies about the current scenario are not limited to the right. They also include certain confused thinkers who situate themselves on the left. These analysts fail to account for the differences between popular revolt and reactionary clamor. We must make this distinction categorically. An anti-government barricade in Venezuela stands on the opposite side of the indigenous protests in Ecuador. The followers of Camacho in Bolivia are our enemies and those who defend Evo are our allies.

It is important to remember these self-evident facts in the face of neutralist positions, which are intended to elide the huge gulf separating the opposing camps. These neutralist views have criticized Maduro and Guaidó in Venezuela with equal virulence, and now they extend the same equivalency to Bolivia. Proper characterization of the confrontation in Bolivia is not an academic exercise. It is a precondition for organizing against the coup plotters and intensifying solidarity marches and actions. It is impossible to organize solidarity if one does not know who to fight and who to defend.

To defeat the coup, imperialism, and neoliberalism, mobilization must be redoubled and political action intensified. But we must also learn from mistakes committed on our side that have allowed the right to recover. It is very difficult to defeat enemies within our own movement. Their regeneration has been a permanent problem for our side over the past decade. The ultra-reactionary Lenín Moreno is only the most extreme case. Moreno not only reversed previous governments' reforms, he is implementing the ruling class' agenda. Nor should we forget that one of the main architects of the parliamentary coup against Brazilian Workers Party president Dilma Rousseff was none other than Michel Temer, her own vice president. The policy of "broadening the front" to include pro-capitalist elements has even led López Obrador to form a governing alliance with evangelicals, conservatives, and capitalists to the detriment of his radical core.

The right has tended to regain ground when progressive governments naively identify their electoral successes with permanent political support. They forget that the elections constitute a moment in the fight for power. But when effective control of the economy, the judiciary, the army, and the media all remain in the hands of the dominant groups, the return of the right is only a matter of time. That return has usually coincided with an exhaustion of progressive efforts, including improvements in working-class standards of living. This paradox has been verified in Argentina, Brazil and El Salvador and could be repeated in Uruguay. In all cases, center-left governments provided relief and reform for the population, which then resulted in more conservative electorates. That contradiction also underlies the crisis in Bolivia. In recent years, the MAS suffered significant electoral setbacks, despite its unprecedented successes in managing the economy. It achieved high growth rates, a significant reduction in poverty, and strong investment flowing from the productive use of natural gas income.

The depoliticization of the popular movement is the most frequent explanation for this disconnect between

socio-economic improvements and electoral decline. Some argue that voters become more individualistic as consumption expands. Yet, in reality, that depoliticization is a consequence of the continuity of a system that reproduces privileges for the capitalists. Ideology in a society does not float in a vacuum. If the ruling classes retain power, then their preeminence tends to extend to electoral expressions. The powerful regain control of the government because they never lost power.

The return of the right is not inevitable, nor is it merely a natural function of the supposed pendulum of political life. It springs from progressivism's lack of radicalism. Instead of encouraging substantial transformations at the appropriate times, the progressive political current adapts to the status quo. And as it discounts the possibility of wresting power from the great capitalists, it ends up strengthening capitalist domination. The experience of the center-left governments confirms that limiting radicalization opens the floodgates of revenge by the right.

The importance of the left

The current context includes certain similarities with the prevailing picture at the beginning of the century when a succession of rebellions in Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Argentina generated the conditions for the birth of the progressive cycle – the so-called Pink Tide. That period concluded with a conservative restoration, which now, in turn, faces challenges by a new generation of movements and leaders.

The similarity between today and what happened in 1989-2005 can be seen in the resemblance of the Ecuadorian uprising this fall with the 2001 Argentine Caracazo (pot banging protests). Both revolts originated in reactions against an increase in fuel prices imposed by the IMF. There are also parallels between 2001 and Chile's uprising. Popular anger against the political regime ("¡Que se vayan todos!" or "throw them all out!") is now concentrated on the figure of Piñera and the form of government bequeathed by Pinochet.

But what is striking about the current cycle is the sheer scale of popular participation. The number of protesters in the streets is breaking all records set over the last two decades. In Ecuador, marches several times higher than previous peaks are being recorded. In Haiti, an estimated five million people have marched in the protests. In Chile, two million took part with another one million mobilizing in Puerto Rico.

Chances for achieving real gains and changes in power relations are huge. The reopening of the progressive cycle is not the only thing at stake. Today's ongoing battles could lead to new and unexpected scenarios. The most important thing is to understand is the content of the confrontations and to be clear that the interests of a minority of capitalists must clash with the wishes of the popular majority. A right-wing alignment of the powerful will clash with emancipatory proposals from the left. Our peoples' triumph requires we build, strengthen, and renovate that left.

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