

MARXIST

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JOHN CHERIAN

The Current State of the Left in Latin America

The left-wing ‘pink tide’ that swept Latin America in the last decade and a half may have temporarily retreated. However, signs of its resurgence can be discerned all over the region. The ‘pink tide’ was the phrase used to describe the surge of progressive forces in the region. The process of left-wing political consolidation had started picking up momentum after the electoral victory of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela in 1997. Brazil, Argentina, Ecuador, Uruguay, Bolivia and other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean at the beginning of the last decade soon elected left-wing leaders. By mid-2000, more than 350 million people in the region were living under some sort of left-wing governance. The left-wing governments in the continent did not have a uniform agenda. The governments of Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador were among the more radical, drawing their inspiration from the Cuban revolution. The pink tide after all was a reaction to the neoliberal policies that were harshly implemented by the pro-Western governments in the region.

The other progressive governments in Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay in comparison, did not implement big bang radical reforms. All the same, the Bolsa Familia (BF) programme in Brazil introduced by the Workers’ Party was a landmark achievement in the annals of poverty alleviation. Before Lula and the Workers’ Party took power, the poorest 60 per cent of the people had only four per cent of the wealth while 28 per cent of the population ruled

the roost. The cash transfers to the poor under the BF programme has helped Brazil halve its extreme poverty—from 9.77 to 4.3 per cent of its population.

The pink tide started receding around 2012, soon after the demise of Hugo Chavez. His passing away coincided with the crash of the global commodity boom which had helped many of the left-wing governments finance their social programmes. The end of the commodity boom had adverse effects on the functioning of the left-wing governments, especially those states dependant on revenues from hydrocarbon extractions like Venezuela and Ecuador. Oil was selling for over \$100 a barrel for most of the years that Chavez was in charge. The windfall from the oil revenues was well utilized for the benefit of the masses. Huge improvements were witnessed in the education, health and the social sector in general. After the commodities boom ended, Brazil, the economic powerhouse of the region, witnessed the worst recession in the region.

By 2015, left-wing governments started ceding ground to the Right. As President Hugo Chavez observed a few months before his death, his concept of socialism of the 21st century had failed to achieve many of its goals. Unlike in Cuba, the capitalist state remained virtually intact. In Venezuela, key industries along with influential sections of the media remained under the control of the elite. The scourge of corruption may have been contained but it was not completely eradicated in countries like Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador under left-wing governments.

In some Latin American countries like Ecuador, Honduras and Paraguay, the right wing used subterfuge and extra constitutional methods to impose its agenda. In Ecuador, Lenin Moreno, who had pledged to carry on with the progressive policies initiated by his predecessor Rafael Correa, quickly changed his tune and allied with the pro-American right-wing governments in the region. Moreno had served as vice president under Correa. It was Correa's left-wing support base which propelled Moreno to

a narrow victory at the polls held in February 2017. The election results were a defeat for the neoliberal opposition. The former Ecuadorian President, along with Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales, the president of Bolivia, were among the most prominent leaders the pink tide had thrown up. Correa had made the Americans vacate their military base in the country in 2007 and had instituted policies that favoured the indigenous communities. He stopped doing business with the World Bank the same year.

During Correa's two terms in office, the poverty rate had decreased from 37.6 per cent to 22.5. The economy was registering a steady growth rate. At the same time, he had doubled spending on health, education and housing. The country had witnessed its longest period of political stability in decades. In the previous decade, the country had witnessed ten 'presidents' being removed from office, each of them barely lasting a year.

Moreno, however, showed his true colours immediately after taking office in 2017. The country's foreign policy took a rightward turn. The political refugee status accorded to Julian Assange by President Correa seven years ago was harshly withdrawn. The strong military and strategic ties with Washington have been now restored. Moreno has also restored ties with the IMF. Ecuador has recently signed a \$4.2 billion loan agreement with the IMF. The structural readjustment policies which Ecuador had to implement to secure the loan have hurt ordinary working-class people and have led to widespread protests.

It was the IMF's failed policy prescriptions for Latin America that had led to political upheavals culminating in the 'pink tide' that brought progressive governments to the forefront in the region. 'The Washington Consensus', a set of economic prescriptions for developing countries promoted by the IMF, the World Bank and the US Department of the Treasury has been responsible for most of the serious economic problems that countries in the region had faced. The 'Washington Consensus' has come to signify an uncompromising neoliberal set of policies emphasizing export-

oriented growth through rapid sweeping economic reforms, including rampant privatization.

In Paraguay and Honduras, the democratically elected Presidents were ousted through blatantly unconstitutional means. Manuel Zelaya had aligned himself with the left-wing bloc in the region headed by Cuba and Venezuela and had joined the regional grouping ALBA (the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas) and UNASUR—the Union of South American States. The two groupings were set up to counter the malignant influence of US dominated institutions like the OAS (Organization of American States) on the region. Before Zelaya could complete his term, he was ousted by the military in 2009 with the tacit support of Washington. A controversial election was held in 2017 which saw the sitting President, Juan Hernandez, win a second term in office. The left-wing opposition alliance, according to independent observers, should have won the election. Only widespread electoral fraud prevented that outcome.

A similar stratagem was employed against Fernando Lugo, the first left-wing president in the history of Paraguay. Lugo, a former Catholic bishop and an adherent of ‘liberation theology’, had taken up cudgels on behalf of the peasantry in his country. Liberation theology is a synthesis of Christian principles and Marxist socio-economic policies that focused on the social concerns of the poor and their political liberation. Leading proponents of ‘liberation theology’ like the Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero, were assassinated by right-wing death squads connected to the state. After being elected president in 2008, Lugo sought to align his country with the bloc of left-wing countries in the region in regional and international forums.

The right wing in the country which enjoyed a brute majority in the country’s legislature, made sure that Lugo’s left-wing agenda would not be implemented. Violence involving landless peasants and the security forces had resulted in two deaths. President Lugo was blamed for the deaths and was impeached on very flimsy

legal grounds by the national assembly and replaced by his Vice President, who belonged to a right-wing conservative party. Most leaders in the region described the President's impeachment in 2012 as a constitutional coup d'état. Lugo's impeachment was soon to be replicated in Brazil.

In Brazil, the constitutional coup against the government of the Workers' Party was planned in a more sophisticated way. When the first signs of economic distress started creeping in, the Brazilian political establishment started its moves to sideline the Workers' Party and replace it with an authoritarian set-up that would ride roughshod over the working class and reverse some of the progressive laws that the Workers' Party had enacted. The wheeling and dealing involved in Brazilian politics always involved a lot of money changing hands. The Workers' Party never could manage a legislative majority and had to get the support of disparate opposition parties to get important legislation passed. Fighting elections in the country is also an immensely expensive affair. Some senior Workers' Party officials have also been enmeshed in corruption scandals.

However, President Dilma Roussef was impeached on the technicality of 'manipulating the budget'. The former President, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, was convicted on charges of corruption despite the prosecution not being able to provide a shred of credible evidence to prove the charges. Judge Sergio Moro, the prosecutor who led the investigations has been rewarded with the justice minister's portfolio in the right-wing government that currently runs Brazil, for services rendered. Recent revelations have conclusively proved that the 'Lava Jato' investigations were being stage managed by Moro in cahoots with the right-wing parties and business groups. The main purpose was to deny Lula an opportunity to run in the 2018 election. At the time of his arrest, Lula was polling more than 60 per cent in public opinion surveys.

An opinion poll conducted in 2018 revealed how dramatically the public mood has changed in the region. The poll revealed that a

majority of people in the region have a low opinion of governments in general and political parties in particular. Faith in the armed forces remains relatively high at around 40 per cent. This could explain a political non-entity like Jair Bolsonaro being propelled to the Presidency in Brazil. Bolsonaro, a former Captain in the Brazilian army, had once called for the dissolution of the Brazilian parliament and invited the army to take over power once again. After assuming the Presidency, he has appointed retired army officers to top positions in the government. Brazil's Vice President, Hamilton Mourao retired as a general from the army. In fact, it is the Vice President who is preventing President Bolsonaro from completely aligning Brazil's foreign policy with that of President Donald Trump. As it is, Bolsonaro's outrageous statements and extreme right-wing positions on key international issues have lowered Brazil's international standing.

Many observers of the Latin American political scene are of the opinion that it is only a question of time for the former army chief to step into Bolsonaro's shoes. Recent Brazilian history has witnessed a few occasions of 'presidents' not being able to complete their terms and being replaced by the vice president. The military after a long gap is indirectly playing an important role in Brazilian politics through the auspices of its retired officers. For that matter, Chavez himself came through the ranks of the country's military. The Venezuelan military has remained loyal to the Bolivarian revolution. The Brazilian army has until recently stayed away from openly interfering in the country's politics after it handed over power to the civilians. The Brazilian economy is now in free fall. The new government's attempts to implement its free market and a reactionary social agenda have led to widespread protests.

President Mauricio Macri of Argentina, a millionaire businessman who came to power in 2015 after 12 years of progressive rule, has reversed the key policies of the previous government immediately after taking over. The right-wing Argentine government slashed subsidies on fuel, electricity and

transportation. Inflation is now running above 50 per cent and unemployment is around 10 per cent. A third of the population is now below the poverty line. The country's currency has halved in the last year and the government has been forced to go back to the IMF for a rescue package. Macri had promised a stable currency, more jobs and lesser inflation under his watch. Elections are due to be held in Argentina, Latin America's second-biggest country, later this year. The Peronist Left, under the leadership of the former President, Christina Fernandez, is expected to be swept back into power.

The previous governments under Nestor Kirchner (2003-07) and his wife Christina Fernandez Kirchner, who succeeded him, gave cash handouts to the neediest and put in place many welfare programmes. To keep food prices under control, the government imposed taxes on agricultural exports. Macri, on the campaign trail, had promised not to tinker with the social programmes put in place by the previous government.

But once in power, Macri bowed to the diktats of the IMF and even compromised with the 'vulture funds' by agreeing to the terms dictated by American courts. 'Vulture funds' are controlled by unscrupulous investors and hedge funds, mainly based in the United States. The previous left-wing government in Argentina had refused to deal with the outrageous demands of the vulture funds which had bought Argentina's international debts at huge discounts. The previous left-wing government had said that the 'vulture funds' were making unscrupulous claims and were in fact 'financial terrorists'. Argentina had defaulted on \$80 billion on international debts in 2001, 93 per cent of the country's creditors had decided to walk away with only 30 per cent of what they were owed. The vulture funds sensed a killing and refused to deal with the Argentine government.

The Macri government did not put up a fight and lamely agreed to part with \$2.28 billion to an American hedge company for bonds the Argentine government had failed to pay for. The

company got 1,500 per cent on its returns. It had bought bonds with a face value of \$617 million for the bargain basement price of around \$117 million. Many countries have blacklisted vulture funds. The Macri government rewarded them instead at great cost to the Argentine people and their economy. The Argentine government's decision will embolden hedge funds to prey on other developing countries struggling with debt.

The vultures could descend again as Argentina under Macri seems poised to default on its international debt once more. The country's economy is in a worse state than it was in 2001, the year that witnessed Argentina's biggest debt default. The right-wing government in Argentina also has the dubious distinction of purging tens of thousands of civil servants and public sector workers for their political leanings.

Colombia was the only significant holdout when the pink tide swept the region. Colombia which had close economic and strategic ties with Washington remained mired in a civil conflict which had started in the 1950s. Left-wing guerrilla groupings, notably the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), had continued the fight against successive Colombian governments backed by successive American governments. The struggle of the FARC had inspired many revolutions, including the ones in Cuba and Nicaragua. The 52-year-old civil war in Colombia finally came to an end in 2016 after the signing of the peace deal.

Cuba and Venezuela had played a big role in convincing the FARC to come to a negotiated settlement with the government in Colombia, then headed by Juan Manuel Santos. Talks, despite protests from Washington, were held in Havana between representatives of the right-wing Colombian government and the Marxist guerrillas. The painstaking deal that was negotiated is now, however, under threat. Santos was succeeded by Ivan Duque, a protégé of Alvaro Uribe, a former President with ties to the right-wing death squads and who had forged the extremely close military ties with Washington. Duque, a lightweight candidate

defeated Gustavo Petro, the candidate of a left-wing coalition, known as 'Human Colombia' (HC).

The Left got more than 41 per cent of the vote in the elections, one of its best results so far, despite the machinations of the right wing. Petro was caricatured as a 'godless communist' who if elected would close down churches and expropriate land holdings. Prominent left-wing politicians including those running for Presidency have been assassinated in the last seventy years. The killing of Jorge Gaitan, the leader of the socialist movement in the country in 1949, put the country into the spiral of a bloody civil war. He was running for the Presidency when he was killed. Fidel Castro, a great admirer of Gaitan, was in Bogota on the day he was assassinated. The Americans had branded Gaitan a Communist for his role in organizing the working class. Other left-wing personalities running for the Presidency who have fallen to the assassin's bullet are Jaime Pardo in 1987, Luis Carlos Galan in 1989 and Bernardo Jaramillio in 1990.

Alviro Uribe, the former President with close ties to death squads and narco traffickers, representing the landowning elite and the interests of Washington, never accepted the peace deal with the FARC despite the Marxist guerrillas disarming and the level of violence de-escalating. FARC has decommissioned under UN supervision and has formed a new party, known as the Alternative Revolutionary Force of the People, also known by the same acronym, FARC. The right-wing government has been busy trying to undermine the Havana Accord. Many surrendered FARC leaders and commanders have been assassinated by right-wing groups supported by the Colombian 'deep state'.

Washington's main foci for destabilization are Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua. President Donald Trump's national security adviser, John Bolton, in a speech delivered last November, designated the three countries as the 'troika of tyranny'. According to Bolton, the perennial warmonger, these three countries 'are the genesis of a sordid cradle of communism in the western hemisphere'. He said

that the United States is committed 'to watching each corner of the triangle fall'. One of the first things Trump did after assuming office was to backtrack on the previous administration's historic agreement with Cuba. President Barack Obama had paid a historic visit to Havana in 2016 and many of the sanctions that were in place for the last seven decades were relaxed.

The Trump administration has reinstated most of the draconian sanctions on Cuba. The efforts at regime change in Venezuela and Nicaragua are ongoing despite Washington's failure to either enthrone the countries of the region or the people residing in those countries about its plans. In Venezuela, the blatant efforts to instigate the army to stage a coup against the popularly elected government have failed to materialize. Trump is now talking about a military invasion to overthrow the government of Venezuela. In early August, the Trump administration announced the imposition of draconian sanctions on the lines Washington has implemented against Cuba for the last seven decades. The puppet 'President', Juan Guaido, appointed from Washington, does not even have the support of senior opposition leaders in his country.

The American backed section of the opposition had finally consented to open negotiations with the government in Caracas after the American plans for regime change failed. The Norwegian government has been hosting the talks. But the Venezuelan government has suspended participation after the Trump administration's unilateral decision to impose an economic blockade on the country.

For that matter, the two previous American administrations had also tried their hand at overthrowing the left-wing government in Caracas. George W. Bush had tried to remove Hugo Chavez through a military coup. President Obama had funnelled in large amounts of financial aid to the opposition and encouraged the violence which erupted after the first electoral victory of President Maduro. He had also started the practice of sanctioning Venezuelan government officials and politicians. President Obama

had designated Venezuela 'as a threat to America's national security'. Since the beginning of this year, there have been three attempts by the Trump administration to instigate military coups in Venezuela.

In Nicaragua, the violent street protests against the Sandinista government of Daniel Ortega, which lasted for months, have died down. The protestors backed by rich businessmen and conservative sections of the Catholic Church had called for the resignation of the democratically elected government. The demonstrations and the riots had lasted for more than three months with the open support of the Trump administration. Bolton has demanded 'fair and free elections' in Nicaragua or the 'Nicaraguan regime, like Cuba and Venezuela, will face the full weight of America's robust sanctions regime'. Washington had financed anti-Sandinista 'contra' fighters and mined the country's harbours to overthrow the Sandinista revolutionaries in the late 1980s.

The Trump administration is trying to replicate the Reagan era's cold war policies in the region and is looking for allies. Only Brazil's Bolsonaro and Colombia's Duque seem to be wholeheartedly supporting Washington. However, the security establishment in both Brazil and Colombia have put their foot down on the Trump administration's talk of staging a military invasion of a neighbouring country. Before the election of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, popularly known as AMLO, as president in 2018, Mexico tended to side with Washington in regional disputes in recent years. But Obrador, an avowed leftist, has vowed to follow an independent foreign policy as previous Mexican governments did till the latter half of the 20th century. The new Mexican President has been a fierce critic of Donald Trump's immigration policies. After being sworn in, Amló had slashed funding on border security and vowed to treat migrants flowing in from Central American countries with dignity and compassion.

Amló's election victory could be an indication that the Left is on a comeback trail in Latin America. His victory was widely

welcomed on the continent. Dilma Roussef said that Amlo's win was a victory for the whole of Latin America. Christina Fernandez said that Amlo represents hope 'not just for Mexico but for the entire region'. Mexico's new President has said that his first priority is to tackle the problem of growing inequality and endemic poverty in his country. He has already reversed the privatization of the country's hydrocarbon resources, much to the anger of the oil conglomerates. Amlo has been trying to find a solution that will bring an end to the 'drug war' that has been going on for more than two decades. More than 200,000 Mexicans have lost their lives in the war between drug cartels and the Mexican security forces. Mexicans had thronged to his political platform mainly because of his pledge to eradicate corruption. He has said that he would finance his social programmes for the poor from the money the nation saves from the elimination of corruption.

Amlo has been careful in his dealings with the Trump administration. Mexico and the United States are joined economically 'at the hip', with 80 per cent of the country's exports heading to the United States. NAFTA, the free trade agreement which had enmeshed the economies of Mexico, the United States and Canada, has been replaced by a trilateral free trade agreement between the three countries. Though the Mexican President is a fierce critic of Trump's immigration policies he has preferred not to openly antagonize Washington at this juncture.

Trump had threatened punitive tariffs on Mexican exports in June 2019, blaming Mexico for the alleged influx of illegal refugees into the United States through the long border the two countries share. Amlo wants to first focus on domestic issues and has till now played a low-profile role in regional affairs. Punitive American tariffs would be devastating to the Mexican economy and would impact the ambitious social programmes Amlo wants to implement.

The alliance between the Left-leaning countries in the region and Cuba remain strong. Cuba has been providing invaluable

help to Venezuela on many fronts. The re-imposition of American sanctions on Cuba which was partially suspended after the agreement signed between Obama and the former President, Raul Castro, is part of the crude attempts by Washington to pressurize Cuba into abandoning the left-wing government in Venezuela. The entry of Russia and China into the region in a big way has also changed the political, economic and military dynamics. China has invested heavily in Latin America and continues to be the biggest buyer of Venezuelan oil despite American sanctions. Russia is helping Venezuela to face the American military threat.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration, trampling on the sensibilities of the people of the region, has announced the revival of America's hated 'Monroe Doctrine'. Named after President James Monroe in 1823, the doctrine essentially stated that the United States had the right to intervene in the internal affairs of any country in the region situated south of its border to ensure that other countries from outside do not exert their influence in what Washington considers as its backyard. In the 19th century, the United States did not want European imperial powers to come back to the region again. The whole of Latin America and the Caribbean was considered to be the 'backyard' of the United States.

President Theodore Roosevelt, an avowed imperialist, had once said that it was the duty of the United States to ensure that Latin American nations 'behaved with a just regard of their obligations towards outsiders'. The term 'outsiders', the American government had indicated crudely at the time, referred to American companies and citizens in the region. The Monroe Doctrine was used during the cold war to justify American military intervention and political interference in the affairs of Latin American countries. Left-wing political parties, trade unions and progressive movements in general were under America's imperial scanner.

John Kerry, Obama's Secretary of State, had ostensibly given the Doctrine an official burial in 2013. 'The era of the Monroe Doctrine is over', Kerry had announced while delivering a speech

at an OAS summit meeting. The Trump administration has now seen it fit to announce to the world that the Monroe Doctrine far from being dead is alive and kicking in this day and age.

Trump in his address to the UN general assembly in 2018 said that the 'Monroe Doctrine' has been America's 'formal policy' and that Washington 'rejects the interference of foreign nations in this hemisphere'. It was supposed to be a warning to Russia and China. Trump has been repeating since then that the Monroe Doctrine 'is alive and well' and that America was justified in using the 'big stick' in dealing with its neighbours any time it sees fit to do so. The whole of Latin America, including those countries that have grown closer to Washington in the last decade, have been perturbed by the Trump administration's claims to be the one and only hegemon in the region.