

Latin America: Leftist Parties Win Important National Elections in 2014

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The Latin American Revolution continued to score major victories in 2014 with the re-election of leftist parties in Brazil, Bolivia and El Salvador. This is the left's fourth consecutive term in Brazil, its third in Bolivia, and its first re-election in El Salvador (see "Social movements and the FMLN's second term," October 2014). Altogether leftist parties now govern in 10 Latin American countries, with these latest victories showing a deepening of the revolution, and a growing political maturity and confidence on the left.

On October 26, President Dilma Rousseff of the Brazilian Workers Party (PT), which has been in power for the past 12 years, narrowly defeated pro-business rival Aécio Neves by 3.5 million votes. Rousseff describes herself as an economist, a mother, grandmother and wife who has overcome lymphatic cancer. She is also a former member of the Palmares Armed Revolutionary Vanguard, a Cuban Revolution-inspired urban guerrilla organization that fought the brutal 20-year U.S.-backed military dictatorship that seized power in 1964. She was imprisoned and tortured by the dictatorship.

The close margin of Rousseff's victory is not particularly unusual, since many U.S. presidents have won with similar numbers. This was, when all is considered, a vote for continuity. However, the tight race does signify important changes in the composition of the PT's base. Where previous elections were won with support from the middle class in the south of the country, this time Rousseff can thank the poor who live mainly in the north of Brazil.

According to Manuel Larrabure, a PhD candidate in political science at York University who is writing his thesis on alternatives to neoliberalism in Brazil and Venezuela, the Brazilian middle class is split: one faction still supports the PT while another has gone over to the neoliberal opposition represented by Neves.

"The pro-PT middle class could be called the 'progressive' middle class," Larrabure explains. "Although there is some disappointment with the PT in this section of the middle class, most of it voted PT. However, some of this section has drifted to [other parties on] the left.

"The anti-PT middle class opposes the PT's social programs and could be called the 'centrist' middle class. Some of this middle class voted PT in the past hoping for growth and employment. However, a significant part of this middle class switched to Neves in this election in part because of the slowing economy and in part because of the fear and demonization campaigns launched by the corporate media against the PT."

The social programs of the PT have lifted 40 million Brazilians (from a population of 200

million) out of poverty during the last 12 years. Poverty has been reduced by 55% and extreme poverty by 65% in a country that had one of the highest rates of income inequality in the world. The PT also achieved record low levels of unemployment and tripled per capita income growth.

Prominent amongst the PT's social programs is *Bolsa Família*, which gives cash payments to poor families on the condition they keep their children in school, and *Minha Casa Minha Vida*, which facilitates home ownership for low- and middle-income families. The PT's affirmative action law reserves 50% of seats at all federal universities for low-income and racialized students (51% of Brazilians are Black and of mixed race). And recently, Rousseff introduced *Mais Médicos* (More Doctors), a program that increases the number of doctors in impoverished areas by bringing in foreign doctors, including from Cuba.

"These changes are significant and explain in part why Brazil's poverty and inequality rates have improved in the last decade," comments Larrabure. "Importantly, these changes have been felt more in the north of Brazil, where poverty rates are much higher and the racial composition is mostly Black. These reforms have been effective at alleviating major problems experienced by large sections of the population. As a result, the PT's base has been slowly shifting towards the north."

Middle class support for Rousseff has been undermined by the fact that under Rousseff, Brazil has slipped into recession, although a mild one so far. This is mainly due to the global recession finally reaching Brazil after six years.

"For the centrist section of the middle class, the anti-poverty measures of the Dilma government strike the wrong chord. They are simply too much for them, particularly in the context of an economic slump. For them, the PT's social programs smell too much like Bolivarianism in Venezuela. They therefore voted for Neves," explains Larrabure.

The Brazilian vote also appears to be split along racial lines, which was encouraged and provoked throughout the election by an elite tiring of Rousseff and the PT.

"The corporate media has taken advantage of the recession to mobilize sentiments of fear. Not only fear about the economy but also xenophobic and racist sentiments targeting PT initiatives," says Larrabure. "We saw this when Brazilian doctors and supporters mobilized against Cuban doctors who were arriving in Brazil as part of the *Mais Médicos* program.

"The racism of sectors of the middle class became even more obvious when they realized that the north had been instrumental in re-electing Dilma. Social media and even some newspapers were filled with racist sentiments against the northern population."

In spite of the hostility of the mainstream media, the financial elite, part of the middle class, and the U.S. government, Rousseff still won largely by refusing to adopt austerity measures and staying faithful to the PT's redistributive welfare policies.

Bolivia: still moving toward socialism

Where the left squeaked by in Brazil this October, it won by a landslide in Bolivia with the re-election of President Evo Morales. His Movement Towards Socialism party (MAS) secured 60% of the vote versus 25% for his right-wing rival, Samuel Doria Medina Auza. After two terms and nine years in power, Morales is so popular that according to *Al Jazeera*, "millions

of Bolivians have come to worship him.”

This is because Morales has profoundly transformed Bolivia by nationalizing its oil and gas and mineral wealth and redistributing the benefits of these to the poor Indigenous majority through income transfers and the expansion of access to healthcare and education. As a result, the Morales government has wiped out illiteracy in the country and cut poverty by 32.2%, more than any other Latin American country, according to the UN. Bolivia’s economy is currently booming with the highest growth rate on the continent.

Raul Burbano, program director at Common Frontiers, a Canadian network of labour, human rights, environmental, church and development groups focused on Latin America, says the debate came down to opposing economic and political visions: “Morales’ communitarian socialism and nationalization versus the opposition’s capitalism and privatization.”

Burbano has been an international observer in Bolivia on several occasions and has produced two video documentaries on the Bolivian Revolution under Morales. He says people continually choose the MAS because of this revolution, which “has empowered the country’s majority, the Indigenous peoples and popular classes, and at the same time uprooted Bolivia’s historical political elites from power.”

Burbano explains that the October election also re-confirmed the country’s faith in the broader MAS project towards communitarian socialism, or living well—“a vision that is community-centric and values plurality, self-determination, economic and social equality and participation and solidarity.”

Morales’ rival Medina, on the other hand, “is one of the richest men in Bolivia and owner of Burger King. He was proposing to take the country backwards toward capitalism and privatization,” says Burbano, adding that Morales’ political stance also enhanced his popularity with voters.

“Evo’s approach has been one of dialogue and consensus and reaching out to all sectors in Bolivia. He has engaged the urban middle class and even the business elite, which is demonstrated in his electoral success in the wealthy departments [provinces] like Santa Cruz that have historically rejected his policies.”

Burbano points out that another crucial source of Morales’ popularity is the fact that he is the first leader of the country to firmly establish its sovereignty by significantly curbing the influence (and presence) of the U.S. government, which has dominated Bolivia for decades. This step has been key to carrying out Bolivia’s social transformation.

“The Morales government successfully ended the political interference of the U.S. by expelling its ambassador in 2009, then did the same with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the U.S. Agency for International Development in 2013. All three had to close down their operations in Bolivia as they were accused by the Morales of trying to overthrow him,” says Burbano. Morales also removed the International Monetary Fund (IMF) from Bolivia.

The U.S. has overthrown several Bolivian governments in the past and imposed murderous military dictatorships on the country, destroying its development.

Indeed, President Morales told cheering supporters at the presidential palace in La Paz after his October election victory, “this win is a triumph for anti-imperialists and anti-colonialists.”

He dedicated his victory to Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez, Venezuela’s late president, both major opponents of the U.S.

In a later interview Morales added: “I have no regrets—in fact, I am pleased to have expelled the U.S. ambassador, the [DEA] and to have closed the U.S. military base in Bolivia. Now, without a U.S. ambassador, there is less conspiracy, and more political stability and social stability. Without the [IMF], we are better off economically.”

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