

The Pink Tide in Latin America: An Alliance Between Local Capital and Socialism?

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Many questions have arisen about what direction Latin America and the so-called “pink tide” will take since Hugo Chavez’s death and his successor Nicolas Maduro’s victory in the Venezuelan presidential elections against Henrique Capriles Radonski on April 14, 2013. These questions broadly focus on the rest of Latin America and the region’s leftist governments and movements. Several important questions are being asked. Will the US gain ground or lose even more influence in Latin America? Will Latin America continue to move leftwards or will the status quo ante prevail?

When looking at this question caution against oversimplification and romanticization is needed. A case in point about this oversimplification and romanticization is that Paraguay’s President Fernando Luga was praised as a steward by the leftists, even though he had to politically work as a centrist. Linked to this, there is also an important question about what right-wing and left-wing really mean. Do governments, groups, and movements that call or consider themselves right-wing or left-wing really fit into such categories?

In this context, the terms “left” and “right” need to be operationalized before any discussion can move forward. For purposes of discussion, the “left” would best be operationalized or defined as a political position that advocates reform or, in its radical form, revolution. Its proponents describe it as a position aimed at reducing or ending social inequality whereas its critics view it as either utopian or destabilizing. On the other hand, the “right” would best be operationalized or defined as a conservative and reactionary political position. Its proponents describe it as traditional and a safeguard of stability whereas its critics and opponents say that it supports social hierarchies that maintain societal inequality.

Socio-politically, the terms “left” and “right” originate in the upheavals of the French Revolution. The French Estates-General of the Bourbon monarchy and its revolutionary predecessor, the French National Assembly, became divided between those groups that supported the Bourbon monarchy, clergy, and “old regime” and those groups that opposed them in favour of revolution and republicanism. The supporters of the “old regime” would sit to the right of the legislative president or speaker in the legislative chamber whereas those groups that supported change and a “new regime” would sit to the left. It is also important to note that the “right” emerged as a reaction to the formation of the calls for change from the “left.”

A Plethora of “Lefts” in Latin America

It should be pointed out that contrary to the highly simplistic dualism portrayed by the US government and most leftists about the categorization of Latin America into “left” or “right”

is overly simplistic. Things are actually not clear-cut. This means that the above operationalized definitions of “right” and “left” are essentially ideal-types.

The leftist governments and movements of Latin America are an eclectic bunch. Thinking of them all in terms of one-size-fits-all is naive and ignores the history and local circumstances/variables that have constructed and influenced each one. In short, each one has its own identity. At least at the grassroots level, they want local agency, relatively more inclusive societies, and a reduction of the influential role of Latin America’s comprador elite oligarchs.

Latin America’s comprador elites are the local representatives of the foreign corporations, governments, and interests that have exploited Latin America for centuries. These comprador elites can frankly be described as either the “House Negros” or racist upper class that have historically ruled Latin America and managed its wealth and resources for the changing centres of power in other parts of the world that have controlled the area. Today, the regional comprador elites are mostly aligned with the United States and prefer Miami or New York City to Caracas or Quito.

Latin American left-wing governments do not strictly operate to the “left.” There is even a debate over whether the Cuban socialist project is genuinely reforming or if it will eventually follow the paths of capitalist restoration like China and Vietnam. The typology of Latin America described by the sociologist James Petras will help frame this as the most workable way to conceptualize the “left” in Latin America. Petras divides Latin America among “four competing blocs” or groups. These are: (1) the “radical left,” which includes the smaller Marxist formations in Latin America and guerrilla groups like the FARC and sectors of various movements like the Rural Landless Movement in Brazil that form a dispersed political bloc that rejects any type of concessions to neo-liberalism; (2) the “pragmatic left,” which includes the governments of Cuba, Venezuela, and Bolivia and the majority of leftist intellectuals in Latin America; (3) the “pragmatic neo-liberals,” which includes Argentina and Brazil; and (4) the “doctrinaire neo-liberal regimes,” which includes Columbia and most of Central America.

The Petras typology helps clarify why the US government considers certain left-wing governments in Latin America as being correct or good and other left-wing governments in Latin America as being wrong or bad. This typology also does not consider the Argentine, Brazilian, and Uruguayan governments leftist. It sees these Latin American governments as neo-liberal regimes and supporters of big capital that pragmatically adopt certain populist policies and project leftist images.

The sociologist Stuart Hall’s theoretical work gives additional perspective to the Petras typology. Hall argued that due to the rise of Thatcherism in Britain, the “left” in Britain was forced to imitate the right to gain power and popularity and that the leftists lacked a proper political program. Tony Blair’s right-wing orientation within the British Labour Party is a case in point. What Hall says may be in reverse operation in Latin America where the “right” has either imitated the “left” or presented itself as centrist or oriented more leftwards. It can also be true of the “left” orienting itself rightwards.

Moreover, one of the threats to the leftist movements in Latin America is corruption and co-optation. Bureaucracy in this regards can be a threat. For example, some supporters of Venezuela became uneasy around 2005. People like the Italian documentary maker Gabriel

Muzio, who was praised in Caracas for his earlier work on Venezuela and then condemned as a falsifier for his later work (which the Venezuelan government itself funded), changed their positions on Venezuela. They complained that they saw the idea of popular power being upset by a concentration of power by the country's bureaucracy.

Leftist Masks

It should be clear that all leftists are not really leftists. For example, the Chilean Socialists are committed to neo-liberal economics. Although Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto's Institutional Revolutionary Party is called a socialist party, it is doubtful that Mexico will dramatically change its politics and policies aside from cosmetic changes. Even in Venezuela questionable business deals are made with foreign companies, like the selling of the Deltana Platform to Chevron-Texaco. Moreover, if leftists are protecting the status quo in their respective societies then they are actually right-wing under the operationalized definition of "right" that was outlined earlier.

Groups and individuals that have actually present themselves as socialists or communists have been major supporters of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). For example, before he even became Brazil's president, the Marxist sociologist Fernando Henrique Cardoso was appointed as finance minister by President Itamar Franco with the IMF becoming Cardoso's most enthusiastic supporter after it had three different Brazilian finance ministers consecutively fired. Cardoso pushed for neo-liberal de-regulation and the privatization of Brazil's public sector. Like many other revolutionaries a lot of the Marxist guerrillas in Brazil who fought against the military junta in their country have put away their fatigues and copies of *Das Kapital* for IMF and World Bank economic manuals. This is why union boss Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva of the Brazilian Workers Party was renounced as traitor and a lackey of the IMF and World Bank by the workers of the Occupied Factories Movement of Brazil after he became president. President Dilma Rousseff, Lula's successor and a former Marxist guerrilla, is continuing his policies. This is why there are those that pessimistically say that you never know what to expect when you vote for the leftists in Latin America.

Capitalist or Socialist Autonomy?

The emergence of left-wing governments has been a manifestation of the decades of local struggle and change in the lower political levels of Latin American societies. Before it started to reflect itself at the national level, the leftward trend began at the level of the municipalities. It has also been progressing in phases. Even the Bolivarian Movement has gone through phases where it has progressively radicalized.

Are domestic or local capital being served by socialist projects or is there common interest? It can be argued that the political current in Latin America is mostly a question of financial and economic independence, rather than a socialist project challenging the capitalist world-system. This means that the trend is about empowering and supporting local capital. The situation for domestic capital has actually improved and expanded in the societies of Latin America's leftist countries, from Brazil to Venezuela. Even Garcia Linera, the vice-president of Bolivia, has viewed the leftist trend in his country in terms of a state-run project for local capitalist development.

Politically and sociologically, the question of intentions is also important here when evaluating this. Populism and regional autonomy are advocated by both socialist movements and local capital alike. It is in the context of regional autonomy that foreign

policy independence is a key feature of the “pink tide” and its “altermunialistas.” Generally, what appears to exist regionally is an alliance of interests between local capital and social movements that have additionally turned to the international capitalist rivals of Wall Street to oppose the United States in Latin America.

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