

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7978>



Latin America

New popular resistance in Latin America

- IV Online magazine - 2023 - IV577 - February 2023 -

Publication date: Tuesday 7 February 2023

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Latin America continues to be an area convulsed by popular rebellions and transformative political processes. In different corners of the region, the same tendency to restart the uprisings that marked the beginning of the new millennium is verified. These uprisings have subsided over the past decade but have regained intensity in recent years.

The pandemic interrupted this escalation of mobilisations in a limited way, which neutralised the short conservative restoration of 2014-2019. That period of renewed coups failed to deactivate the prominence of the popular movements.

The 2019 rebellion in Ecuador inaugurated the current phase of protests, which has repeated the traditional pattern of transmission. Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Peru and Haiti have been the main centers of recent confrontation.

The political effects of this new wave are very varied. They have disrupted the general map of governments, recreating the significance of progressivism. This aspect has prevailed in the bulk of the geographical area. At the beginning of 2023, presidents of that type prevail in the countries that bring together 80% of the Latin American population (Santos; Cernadas, 2022).

This scenario has also facilitated the continuity of governments harassed by US imperialism. After enduring countless onslaughts, the demonised presidents of Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua remain in office.

The cycle of military and institutional coups sponsored by Washington in Honduras (2009), Paraguay (2012), Brazil (2016) and Bolivia (2019) has also been partially counteracted. The recent coup in Peru (2023) faces heroic opposition in the streets.

This rebellion has obstructed, until now, the disguised intervention of the marines in devastated countries like Haiti. The same popular struggle dealt heavy defeats to the outrages attempted by the recycled neoliberal governments of Ecuador and Panama.

But this great intervention from below provokes a more virulent and programmed reaction from the ruling classes. The enriched sectors have processed the past experience and exhibit far less tolerance for any challenge to their privileges. They have articulated a far-right counteroffensive to subdue the popular movement. They aspire to resume with greater violence the failed conservative restoration of the past decade. This complex scenario requires evaluating the forces in dispute.

Revolts with Electoral Effect

Several uprisings in the last three years had immediate electoral translations. The new mandates of Bolivia, Peru, Chile, Honduras and Colombia emerged from large uprisings that imposed changes of government.

This sequence was first verified in Bolivia. The uprising successfully confronted the gendarmes and overthrew the dictatorship. Añez threw in the towel when she lost her last allies and the middle sectors that initially accompanied her adventure.

Corrupt management of the pandemic strengthened that isolation and diluted the civil continuity attempted by the centre-right candidates. The rebellion from below imposed the return of the Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement for Socialism/ MAS) to the government and several people responsible for the coup were tried and imprisoned. The conspiracy continued in its bastion of Santa Cruz and it is currently being decided whether it will persist or be crushed by forceful official reaction.

A similar dynamic occurred in Chile, as a result of the great popular uprising that buried the Piñera government. The spark of that battle was the cost of transportation, but the rejection of the 30 pesos of that expenditure led to an impressive feat against 30 years legacy of Pinochetism.

That outpouring led to two electoral victories that preceded Boric's win over Kast. [1] The great increase in electoral participation with anti-fascist slogans in popular neighbourhoods enabled this achievement, in the country emblematic of regional neoliberalism.

Due to the significance of Chile as a symbol of Thatcherism, the election, within the framework of the Constituent Assembly with a huge popular presence in the streets, of a progressive president, aroused enormous expectations.

A more dizzying and unexpected sequence was recorded in Peru. Popular weariness with right-wing presidents surfaced in spontaneous protests led by young people stripped of their rights. That uprising followed the health tragedy of the pandemic, which enhanced the ineptitude of the ruling bureaucracy.

Castillo became the beneficiary of popular discontent and Fujimorismo could not thwart his arrival at Government House. [2] The teacher unionist's talk of redistributing wealth created the expectation of cutting the oppressive succession of conservative governments.

In Colombia, the massive rebellion forced the establishment to resign its direct management of the presidency for the first time. Several million people participated in huge, imposing demonstrations. Massive strikes met with fierce repression and succeeded in overthrowing a regressive healthcare reform. As in Chile, they were later extended to express the enormous malaise accumulated over decades of neoliberalism.

That annoyance translated into the electoral defeat of Uribeismo [3] and the improvised ultra-rightist who tried to prevent Petro's victory. [4]] With that victory, a centre-left leader rose to the presidency, avoiding the terrible fate of assassination suffered by his predecessors. He is accompanied by a person of African descent, representative of the most oppressed sectors of the population. [5]

In the same vein is the triumph of Xiomara Castro in Honduras. Her victory was a result of the sustained fight against the coup endorsed by the US ambassador in 2009. That coup began the long Latin American cycle of lawfare and parliamentary judicial coups.

The 15-point advantage that Xiomara obtained over her opponent neutralised the fraud and proscription attempts. In a dramatic context of poverty, drug trafficking and crime, the heroic popular struggle led to the first female presidency. Xiomara began her management by repealing the State secret management laws and the delivery of special zones to external investors.

However she must deal with the suffocating presence of a large US military base (Palmerola) and a Washington ambassador who intervenes quite naturally in internal debates on peasant settlements as well as laws to reform the electrical system (Giménez, 2022).

Victories of a Different Kind

In other countries, the rise of progressive leaders was not a direct result of popular protests. That resistance did operate as a background for social discontent and the inability of the dominant groups to renew the primacy of their candidates.

Mexico was the first case of this modality. Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) came to the presidency in 2018, in a harsh confrontation with the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party /PRI) and Partido Acción Nacional (National Action Party / PAN) castes supported by the main economic groups. AMLO took advantage of the wear and tear of previous administrations, the division of the elites and the obsolescence of continuity through fraud. But he acted in a context of less impact than the previous mobilisations of teachers and electricians.

Unions in Mexico have been very affected by the reorganisation of industry and were not the determining factor in the current political turn. AMLO maintains an ambiguous relationship with his Cardenista historical legacy, but he inaugurated an administration that was far removed from his neoliberal predecessors. [6]

Nor was the arrival of Alberto Fernández (2019) in Argentina an immediate result of popular action. It did not reproduce the arrival of Néstor Kirchner (2003) at the Casa Rosada, in the midst of a generalised rebellion. Previously, the right-wing Mauricio Macri suffered a resounding setback in the streets, when he tried to introduce a pension reform (2017). But he did not face the periodic general uprising that shakes Argentina.

The main movement of workers on the continent is located in Argentina. Its willingness to fight has been very visible in the 40 consummated general strikes since the end of the dictatorship (1983). Unionisation is at the top of international averages and is linked to the striking organisation of piqueteros (unemployed and informal).

The struggle of these movements has made it possible to sustain State social aid, which the ruling classes granted under great fear of a revolt. The new forms of resistance “linked to the previous working class militancy” facilitated the return of progressivism to the government.

In the last three years, the disappointment generated by the non-fulfillment of Fernández’s promises has led to great rejection, but with limited protests. There were important victories of many unions, frequent concessions from the government and prominence in the streets, but the action of the popular movement was contained.

In Brazil, Lula’s victory has been an extraordinary achievement, in a framework of unfavourable social relations for the popular sectors. Since the institutional coup against Dilma Rousseff [7], the control of the streets had been captured by the conservative sectors that anointed Bolsonaro. The labour unions lost leadership, the social movements have been harassed and militants of the left adopted defensive attitudes.

Lula’s release encouraged the resumption of popular action. But that impulse was not enough to reverse the setback of the context, which allowed Bolsonaro to retain a significant mass of voters. The PT resumed mobilisation during the electoral campaign (especially in the Northeast) and revitalised its forces during the victory celebrations.

In a context of great division between the dominant groups, fed up with the ex-captain’s outbursts and Lula’s cohesive leadership, Bolsonaro’s defeat has created a scenario of potential recovery of popular struggle (Dutra, 2022). The fear of this breakthrough induced the military high command to veto the rejection of the verdict of the polls that Bolsonarism favoured.

But the battle against the ultra-right has only just begun and in order to subdue this great enemy, it is imperative to win back the confidence of the workers (Arcary, 2022). That credibility was eroded by the disappointment with the model of pacts with big capital that the PT developed in its previous administrations. Now a new opportunity emerges.

Three Relevant Battles

Other situations of enormous popular resistance in the region did not result in progressive electoral victories, but in major defeats for neoliberal governments.

In Ecuador, the first victory of this type was recorded against President Lasso, who tried to resume privatisation and labour deregulation, together with a plan to increase tariffs and food prices as dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). This outrage precipitated a confrontation with the indigenous movement and its new radical leadership which promotes a strong programme to defend popular income.

In mid-2022, that clash recreated the battle waged against the aggression launched by Lenin Moreno to increase the price of fuel in October 2019. [8] The conflict was settled with the same results as the previous struggle and with a new victory for the popular movement. The gigantic Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador/ CONAIE) mobilisation entered Quito in a climate of great solidarity, which neutralised the rain of tear gas triggered by the cops.

In 18 days of strikes, the experienced indigenous movement defeated the government's provocation by imposing the release of leader-activist Leónidas Iza (Acosta, 2022). CONAIE also won the repeal of the state of emergency and the acceptance of its main demands (freezing of fuel prices, emergency bonds, subsidies to small producers) (López, 2022).

The government ran out of support when its insulting speech against indigenous peoples lost them credibility. It had to give in to a movement which once again demonstrated its great capacity to paralyse the country and neutralise the attacks against social gains.

Another victory with similar relevance was achieved in Panama in the middle of the year, when the teachers unions converged with transport workers and agricultural producers in rejecting official increases in gasoline, food and medicines. The unity forged in developing this resistance added the indigenous community to the protest movement, which paralysed the country for three weeks. The protest marches were the most important in recent decades.

This social reaction subdued a neoliberal government that had to go back on its adjustment plans. President Carrizo could not satisfy the business chambers that demanded greater toughness against the protesters.

This victory was particularly significant in an isthmus that has experienced tremendous growth in the last two decades, taking advantage of profits generated by the administration of the Canal for the dominant groups. Inequality is staggering, in a country where 10% of the richest families have incomes 37.3 times higher than the 10% of the poorest (D'Leon, 2022).

The US invasion in 1989 put in place a neoliberal plan which complements this asymmetry with scandalous levels of corruption. Tax evasion alone is equivalent to the entire public debt (Beluche, 2022). The victory in the streets dealt a severe defeat to the model that the Central American elites present as the path to follow for all small countries.

The third case of an extraordinary popular resistance without electoral derivations occurred in Haiti. Gigantic mobilisations once again occupied centre stage during 2022. They confronted the economic looting policies implemented by a regime managed from the offices of the IMF. That body led the increase in the cost of fuel that unleashed the protests, in a country still torn apart by earthquake, rural exodus and urban overcrowding (Rivara, 2022).

Street marches by no means take place in a political vacuum. There have been no elections for six years, with an administration that dispenses with the judicial and legislative power. The current president survives simply with support provided by the embassies of the United States, Canada and France.

The current misrule is prolonged by the indecision that prevails in Washington when it comes to consummating a new occupation. These interventions, in the guise of the UN, the Organisation of American States and the United Nations Stabilisation Mission in Haiti, have been recreated over and over again in the last 18 years with disastrous results. The local servers of these invasions demand the re-entry of foreign troops, but the futility of these missions is obvious.

This type of imperial control has in fact been replaced by the general spread of paramilitary bands that terrorise the population. They act in close complicity with business (or government) mafias that compete for the spoils in dispute, using the 500,000 illegal weapons provided by their Florida accomplices (Isa Conde, 2022). The assassination of President Moïse was just a sample of the sorts of disaster generated by gangs managed by different power groups. [[9](#)]

These organisations have also tried to infiltrate protest movements in order to break up popular resistance. They sow terror, but have not managed to confine the population to their homes. Nor could they recreate hopes for another foreign military intervention (Boisrolin, 2022). The rebellion continues, while the opposition looks for ways to forge an alternative to overcome the current tragedy.

Resistance-focused approaches

The sequence of resistance in the last three years confirms the persistence in Latin America of a prolonged context of struggles, subject to the usual pattern of ups and downs. Successes and setbacks are limited. There are no historic victories, but neither are there defeats like those suffered during the dictatorships of the 1970s.

This stage can be characterised with different denominations. Some analysts observe a long cycle of contestation of neoliberalism (Ouviña, 2021) and others highlight the preeminence of actions of popular resistance that determine progressive cycles (García Linera, 2021).

These approaches correctly hierarchise the role of the struggle and the consequent importance of the popular subjects. They provide perspectives that go beyond the frequent disregard of the processes that unfold from below. In this second type of view, a great ignorance of social struggle and a biased investigation of the geopolitical trends from above predominate. They especially study how conflicts are resolved in the exclusive field of powers, governments or the ruling classes.

This last point of view tends to prevail in the characterisations of progressive cycles, as processes merely opposed to neoliberalism. Its democratising political impacts, its heterodox economic paths or its autonomy from US domination are highlighted.

But with this approach, the different positions of the dominant groups are evaluated without registering the connections of these strategies with policies of control or submission of the popular majorities. They omit this key information because they do not value the centrality of the popular struggle in determining the current Latin American context.

This distortion is very visible in the biased use of categories inspired by Gramsci's thought. These notions are taken to evaluate how the capitalist classes manage articulating consensus, domination and hegemony. But it is forgotten that this cartography of power constituted for the Italian communist a complementary element of his evaluation of popular resistance. Rebellion was the pillar of his strategy for the conquest of power by the oppressed to build socialism.

An updated application of this last approach for Latin America requires prioritising the analysis of popular struggles. The modalities used by the powerful to expand, preserve or legitimise their domination enrich, but do not replace, this evaluation.

Comparisons With Other Regions

When investigating the resistance of the oppressed, the Latin American peculiarities of these struggles are perceived. In recent years, popular action has presented similarities and differences with other regions.

In 2019, a strong trend towards the emergence of a new wave of protests was observed in various parts of the planet, led by outraged young people from France, Algeria, Egypt, Ecuador, Chile or Lebanon.

The pandemic abruptly interrupted this irruption, generating a two-year period of fear and confinement. This reflux was in turn accentuated by the force of right-wing denialism that challenged health protection. In this framework, the difficulty of articulating a global movement in defense of public health emerged, focused on the elimination of vaccine patents.

After this dramatic period of confinement, the protests tend to reappear, prompting the warnings of the establishment of the proximity of post-pandemic rebellions (Rosso, 2021). They especially fear the outrage generated by high fuel and food prices (The Economist, 2022). This dynamic of resistance already includes a significant resurgence of strikes in Europe and unionisation in the United States, but the leading role of Latin America continues as an outstanding fact.

Everywhere the subjects of this battle bring together a great diversity of actors, with the significant relevance of young precarious workers. This segment suffers a higher degree of exploitation than formal wage earners. They suffer from job insecurity, the lack of social benefits and the consequences of labour flexibility (Standing, 2017).

For those reasons, deprived of the traditional arenas of negotiation and facing a very diffuse boss counterpart, s/he is particularly active in street fighting. In different countries they are pushed to impose their demands through the State.

Migrants, ethnic minorities, indebted students are frequent actors in these battles in central economies, and the mass of informal workers occupy a similar centrality in peripheral countries. This last segment does not integrate the traditional factory proletariat, but forms part (in broad terms) of the working class and of the population that lives from its own labour.

The piqueteros in Argentina make up a variety of this segment, which given the loss of work in the places that centralised their demands has forged its identity by blocking streets. From that battle sprouted the social movements and different varieties of the popular economy. An equally relevant role is played by the peasant sectors that forged the MAS in Bolivia and the indigenous communities that created the CONAIE in Ecuador.

The links of these Latin American struggle movements with their counterparts in other parts of the world have lost visibility due to the deterioration of international coordination. The last great attempt at that connection was the World Social Forums, sponsored in the past decade by the alter-globalist movement. The Summits of the Peoples as an alternative to the meetings of governments, bankers and diplomats have stalled. The battle against neoliberal globalisation no longer has that centrality and has been replaced by more national popular agendas (Kent Carrasco, 2019).

The great vitality of the movements for struggle in Latin America is due to multiple reasons. But its progressive political profile, far from chauvinism and religious fundamentalism, has been very significant. In the region it has been possible to contain the reactionary tendencies to generate confrontations between peoples or wars between oppressed nations which have been sponsored by imperialism.

The Pentagon has not found a way to induce in Latin America the bloody conflicts that it managed to unleash in Africa and the East. Nor could it install an appendage like Israel to perpetuate those killings or validate the enduring terror of the jihadists.

Washington has been the invariable promoter of these monstrosities to try to maintain its imperial leadership. But none of these aberrations have prospered so far in its “backyard” due to the centrality that organisations for popular struggle maintain.

For this reason, Latin America persists as a reference point for other international experiences. Many organisations of the European left seek, for example, to replicate the unity strategy or the redistributive projects developed in the region (Febbro, 2022). But all the peoples of the continent are currently facing a dangerous far-right enemy, which we will analyse in the next text.

Summary

The popular uprisings contained the conservative restoration, recreated progressive scenarios and faced the redoubled counteroffensive of the right. They had immediate electoral effects and caused the precipitous departure of right-wing presidents in Bolivia, Chile, Peru, Honduras and Colombia.

In Mexico, Argentina and Brazil, social discontent did not provoke equivalent protests, but it did lead to similar victories at the polls. In Ecuador and Panama, important victories were achieved in the streets against neoliberal outrages, and in Haiti a sustained resistance to the chaos imposed by the elites and their imperial partners persists.

The analysis of this struggle is frequently neglected by studies exclusively focused on the form of domination by the oppressors. The evaluation of this resistance clarifies similarities and differences with other regions.

12 January 2023

Translated from [Punto de Vista Internacional](#) and annotated for **International Viewpoint** by David Fagan.

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[1] Gabriel Boris, won the 2021 Chilean Presidential elections for the Apruebo Dignidad (Approve Dignity) alliance against the Frente Social Cristiano (Christian Social Front) right-wing alliance headed by José Antonio Kast.

[2] Fujimorismo is the authoritarian, neo-liberal, socially conservative policies of Alberto Fujimoro who was President of Peru from 28 July 1990 until 22 November 2000.

[3] Reference to the policies of Alvaro Uribe, President of Colombia 2002-2010, which saw an increase in attacks on armed leftist insurgency along with the deaths of thousands of civilians killed by the Colombian Army and right-wing death squads. He resigned his Senate seat after being arrested and charged with bribery and witness tampering charges.

[4] Gustavo Petro, former guerrilla fighter and current President of Colombia.

[5] Francia Márquez, the first Afro-Colombian vice president in the country's history and the second woman to hold that post.

[6] Lázaro Cárdenas was a nationalist Mexican army officer and politician who was President of Mexico from 1934 to 1940. During this period the Mexican oil industry was expropriated, various labour and educational reforms were introduced and Leon Trotsky was allowed asylum in the country. Along with many progressive reforms his populist rule also tied workers and peasants organisation to the state.

[7] Dilma Rousseff succeeded Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva as President of Brazil from 2011 until her impeachment and removal from office on 31 August 2016.

[8] Lenin Moreno was president of Ecuador, from 2017 to 2021

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[9] Jovenel Moïse was a Haitian entrepreneur and politician, President of Haiti from 2017 until his assassination in 2021.