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Latin America and the Caribbean

# Tensions, dangers and opportunities in a period of crisis

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**In the context of the capitalist polycrisis that is deepening year by year throughout the world, the political, ecological and social crises in Latin America are taking a particularly acute and chaotic turn. This is largely due to the poverty of large sections of the population, deep social inequalities, the proliferation of “zones of sacrifice” for extractivism and episodes of intense drought, state violence and violence by armed groups, as well as the extreme polarisation of societies, while the dominant classes in the region seem prepared to rely on the far right to maintain their hegemony.**

It is in this “tense” context that, for more than twenty years in a number of countries, reactionary governments of various persuasions have alternated in power with governments often described as “progressive”, also with fairly varied orientations linked to different national contexts. The characteristic feature of recent years (at least since 2016) seems to be an acceleration in the pace of this alternation, sometimes in the form of “electoral disengagement”. The “progressives” have evolved in much more stale and social-liberal versions, and the reactionary conservative governments much more radical versions.

## Authoritarian offensives

On the right, in Brazil, Argentina and Chile, we have seen the emergence of the political forces embodied by Jair Bolsonaro, Antonio Kast and Javier Milei, clearly positioned on the far right, and advocating class politics aimed at brutally repressing all social movements, asserting their hatred of LGTBQI+ and feminists, and their xenophobia, the better to allow the ultra-neoliberal economic measures demanded by capitalism in crisis and the imperialist powers. Faced with them, the progressive movements and the parties of popular nationalism (such as the Workers’ Party in Brazil or the Bolivian Movement Toward Socialism, for example) have appeared to be increasingly on the defensive, largely disconnected from the popular struggles (from which they had partly emerged), disappointing in their weakly redistributive economic policies, when they were not openly fighting their popular support and critical movements on the left.

The limitations and contradictions of progressive policies have facilitated the return or emergence of far-right forces. In some countries, on the other hand, we have witnessed forms of sui generis regression without a swing to the far right, where it is the forces of popular-nationalism that are sinking into authoritarianism and repression: in Venezuela, first of all, where the crisis of the Bolivarian process seems bottomless (despite the prospect of presidential elections on 28 July) and - in its most abject version - Nicaragua under the thumb of the Ortega clan.

From North to South, the situations are obviously very varied, but a few common points can be identified. Violence in societies has increased everywhere, whether it is linked to drug traffickers and mafia networks, landowners and paramilitaries, transnational mega-projects, or simply to employer repression backed by increasingly repressive state apparatuses, supported by an arsenal of emergency laws and the militarisation of the public sphere. The first victims of this violence are, of course, the popular classes in general, in both urban and rural areas, and in particular the indigenous populations, the tens of millions of migrants who cross the continent every year, and trade union, feminist and environmental activists. In a number of cases, especially among communities of indigenous peoples, self-defence (including through community policing, as in Mexico) is the response. But in many other cases, particularly in the Southern Cone, this violence is used above all by governments or reactionary movements to promote an all-out repressive policy and increasingly repressive regimes, which deploy propaganda often based on a patriarchal vision of the family and the social order, but also on promises of economic growth and the fight against

elite corruption, with nationalist, identity-based and messianic overtones. This partly explains the success of Bolsonaro, Katz and Milei among the working classes. . The terrible paradox of this trend is that the violence caused by the widespread precariousness of life, the scale of informal work (more than 50% of the working population in Argentina) and the neoliberal extractivist system hits the oppressed classes hardest and becomes an argument in return for them to accept, or even desire, “radical ruptures” which are capitalised on politically by the extreme right, while the anti-capitalist lefts are still too weak and often fragmented.

## The difficulties of the “progressive” currents

Another common factor is the weakening - and sometimes discrediting - of the social and “plebeian” movements that had led and sometimes won major struggles. These movements had been the leading edge of the anti-neoliberal resistance movements of the 1990s-2000s and the basis on which the “progressive” governments had built their electoral victories, sometimes with a clearly post-neoliberal and anti-imperialist discourse (Bolivia, Venezuela, Ecuador). Once in power, most left-wing governments and their charismatic leaders tried to contain, stifle or channel these movements.

In the Cold War years, coups d'état and military dictatorships were the response of the ruling classes and US imperialism to the rise of popular struggles, faced with the “danger” of revolutionary victories (as in Cuba and Nicaragua). Since the beginning of the 21st century, there have certainly been several coups d'état, often more “institutional” than simply “politico-military”, but the response of those who uphold the capitalist order has generally been to prevent any radical advances by the lefts in power, while supporting the emergence of new conservative forces, riding on the disappointment of the popular classes with progressive governments. Anti-progressivism has also been made possible by Washington's manoeuvres in the region, in its struggle against the now central influence of China, and by an extremely aggressive global media agenda in the hands of major groups and also reactionary evangelical churches.

## Crisis and renewal on the left

A third salient point, and perhaps the decisive one, is the deterioration in global economic conditions since 2008-2009, and particularly the fall in world prices for the raw materials that provide the bulk of the foreign currency resources for most of the countries in the region. The extractivist policies pursued by all the progressive governments had enabled them to redistribute resources in a way that benefited the most vulnerable sections of their populations, and facilitated the (re)construction of public services. With their financial room for manoeuvre shrinking, far from compensating for this loss with a policy (particularly fiscal) aimed at attacking the privileges of the dominant classes, these governments have on the contrary shifted their policies towards more and more neoliberalism, and have deprived themselves of the support of large sections of the popular classes. It is on the basis of these profoundly worsened economic and social conditions that the most radical right-wing has been able to flourish in many countries.

Here again, however, in Latin America's many and varied regions, this general observation needs to be qualified. We should also point out that since the election of Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico in 2018, a left-wing progressive (or “left populist”) orientation confirmed hands down by the recent victory of Claudia Sheinbaum, several countries have seen the development of a “late progressive” (to use the expression of Marxist sociologist Massimo Modonesi): after Mexico, we saw the victory of Gabriel Boric in Chile, then Gustavo Petro (2022), preceded by the return of the MAS to power in Bolivia (2020) and followed by that of Lula Da Silva (but on the side of the right) in Brazil in 2023. On the other hand, where right-wing and extreme right-wing parties have managed to come to power

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through the ballot box, they have so far failed to hold on to power for long, even though they seem to have succeeded in winning over large sections of the popular and middle classes.

Ultimately, the period is dominated by contradictory trends and headwinds, reflecting the scale of the crisis and the disarray running through Latin American and Caribbean societies, while sustainable alternatives with a democratic and emancipatory outlook are struggling to take shape. Despite everything, this is also a period of political opportunities for the radical and ecosocialist lefts to build movements that can rise to the challenges of the present: the anti-capitalist experiences and regroupments under way in Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Puerto Rico and Chile are, in this respect, central to the future.

In our different articles, with the examples of Puerto Rico, Brazil, Mexico and Argentina, we will find some of these characteristics, both common and contradictory, but also the important differences between the processes underway and the complex situations facing the popular classes and our anti-capitalist comrades on the ground, in the face of all the dangers that threaten them. Threats which are also ours, from Europe, and which confirm more than ever the imperative need to build and consolidate internationalism on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as on a global scale.

*PS:*

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