

More Power to the Executive: The State of Latin American Democracies in the Early Twenty-First Century

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In this issue, our contributors converge on the notion that twenty-first-century Latin American democracies are deeply flawed and perhaps not at all what people would expect three decades after the democratic transition in the region. They argue that Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela, and Nicaragua are beginning to look more authoritarian and less like the liberal participatory democracy everyone expected to see in 2013. At the same time, Argentine democracy continues to show the deep contradictions that have afflicted it since the advent of *kirchnerismo*. In all cases, this new wave of democracy has served to increase the power of the executive eroding the emergence of liberal democracies.

Omar Sanchez-Sibony, from Texas State University, is perhaps the most adamant critic of the current state of affairs in the region. Arguing that the term “democracy” is itself problematic in describing the type of governments that have emerged in Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, he prefers to use the term “competitive authoritarianism” (a hybrid model of authoritarian regime types) to describe the new phenomenon. He further states that what we are really observing in the region is the advent of what Samuel Huntington called “political decay”; after all, democratic transitions do not always give way to stronger political institutionalization. María del Pilar García-Guadilla and Ana Mallen, from the Universidad Simón Bolívar in Venezuela, echo this sentiment by describing the ongoing polarization of the Venezuelan people, which has ultimately played into the hands of the executive. The Venezuelan Bolivarian project, or Socialism for the Twenty-First Century, inspired other similar regimes in the region, but according to the authors, these democratic initiatives were never really able to transcend their local character. The inability to formulate a

unifying vision for the country and the ongoing violence associated with this polarization have ultimately played into the hands of the Chávez/Maduro government, creating a powerful executive.

In Argentina, according to Maristella Svampa of the Universidad de la Plata, an entire decade of kirchnerismo allows us to see important trends in this political initiative. Plagued with contradictions from the beginning, kirchnerismo is perhaps more deeply rooted in the historical experience of Peronism than the current regime would like to believe. The author states that kirchnerismo clearly diverges from the experiences of other democratic initiatives in the region that tried to bring about more inclusion and popular participation. Instead, it was troubled from the very beginning by conflicts between its historical roots and its political agenda, its ability to connect with powerful multinational corporations, and its loyalty to the progressive middle class. The author believes that those contradictions are more likely to be exposed in the years to come, as Argentina’s experience increasingly evokes Gramsci’s “passive revolution,” specifically, the ability to bring about transformation and restoration while ultimately creating a hierarchical model of governance.

Two highly respected Latin American journalists—Raul Peñaranda, political analyst, journalist, and founder of the Bolivian newspaper *Página Siete*, and Mónica Almeida, the Quito editor of the Ecuadorian newspaper *El Universo*—provide us with powerful and detailed grassroots analyses of the daily challenges and contradictions inherent in the democracies of Bolivia and Ecuador. According to these authors, Evo Morales and Rafael Correa have astutely used democratic institutions to destroy the rule

of law. Peñaranda and Almeida maintain that government leaders have hijacked the national media and/or passed laws (Ley de Comunicación in Ecuador) that not only give them more power over the national discourse but at the same time are used to punish opposition voices. In both countries, the obsessive attention to the media has had negative implications for the freedom of the press. In a telling example, Almeida claims that Ecuadorian journalists are not able to discuss Julian Assange and Edward Snowden, even while the Ecuadorian government has offered or granted them asylum. Recent protests by CONAIE and other organizations demonstrate how various sectors of the population, including indigenous people, increasingly resent the current state of affairs in Ecuador. In Bolivia the president and vice president are able to appear as many as ten times a week in various media outlets to advance their political agenda, Peñaranda contends. Evo Morales and Rafael Correa have used revisions of their national constitutions to increase the power of the executive branch and ensure their ability to run for office again and again. The combination of legal manipulation and persecution of dissenting voices makes it impossible for any meaningful opposition to emerge. Indeed, government monopoly of most political institutions has allowed the Morales government a free hand in persecuting and imprisoning political opponents, forcing many to seek refuge in Brazil and elsewhere. In both countries, according to Peñaranda and Almeida, initial gains in inclusion and greater political participation have given way to massive state control of political institutions. They appear to describe the emergence of what seem to be almost *caudillo*-style leaders with a modern twist, who use modern technology and the mechanisms of democracy to get their message across. These contributions also

Democratic Breakdowns via a Thousand Blows in Latin America

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imply that committed journalists are increasingly risking their professions and their safety in an effort to make their governments accountable to the rule of law and to their constituents.

Paradoxically, the contributors in this debate are actually in agreement. They claim that democracy in Latin America (especially in Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Argentina) is being eroded and weakened by leaders who monopolize the structures of government and use the mechanisms of democracy to increase their power. In this way leaders are effectively able to provide the perception of participatory democracy while at the same time disenfranchising various sectors of the population in the name of preserving democracy. The authors here maintain that as voices are silenced, controlled, or co-opted, and as the rule of law is eroded, government rhetoric is increasingly in conflict with the experience of the majority of the people. The ability of these governments to revise constitutions to stay in power and to more boldly attack their opponents once they are reelected does not bode well for the future of democracy in Latin America, these authors assert. ■

Peru's drift toward electoral authoritarianism under Alberto Fujimori entailed a notable aberration in Latin America insofar as it deviated from hemispheric democratizing trends. While such hybrid regimes flourished in Africa and Asia in the 1990s, virtually all regimes in Latin America were, at a minimum, electoral democracies. The 1990s provided substantial empirical evidence that democratic consolidation—defined here as the deepening of democracy—would not be a linear process attained by the mere passage of time, as a good number of commentators implicitly assumed. The first decade of the 2000s has provided even stronger evidence underlining the formidable difficulties and obstacles on the road to consolidated democracy and lent credence to critics who contend that the concept of democratic consolidation is plagued with a teleological flavor. Events of recent years serve as a stark reminder, as the late Samuel Huntington noted, that political decay is just as common an outcome as political institutionalization.

Nondemocratic hybrid regimes are no longer rare specimens in Latin America. The region has witnessed the emergence of competitive authoritarianism by way of sustained assaults on democracy. As of 2013, at least four countries in the region are incorrectly and regularly referred to as democracies (whether with adjectives or as diminished forms): Venezuela, Nicaragua, Ecuador, and Bolivia. In truth, all fit the category of electoral authoritarianism. While a good many presidents in Latin America engage in sporadic executive assaults that undermine some aspect of democratic governance, what distinguishes rulers of competitive authoritarian regimes is that they act systematically to tilt all of the main arenas of political competition—elections, legislatures, judiciary, and the

mass media—in their favor, thereby ushering in an incumbency hyperadvantage.

That these regimes are all too often mislabeled may indicate that a good many Latin Americanists have yet to heed the call to define democracy more precisely by including the slope of the playing field; second, ideological reasons may work against an impartial assessment of these left-wing regimes on the part of some scholars. Many defenders of these regimes argue that Ecuador, Venezuela, and Bolivia are entering a new phase of participatory democracy and that their leaders have been democratically elected. However, a regime must first be deemed a democracy before it can be called a participatory democracy. (The claim that the Correa regime is participatory is particularly far-fetched given its concerted strategy to disorganize and undermine autonomous civil society organizations, including indigenous ones). The notion that these leaders have been democratically elected is also false as it applies to reelection contests and referenda—that is, virtually all electoral events except the very first one that thrust them into power. Electoral contests in Chávez's Venezuela (now Maduro's), Ortega's Nicaragua, Morales's Bolivia, or Correa's Ecuador have not been free (due to frequent violations of freedom of the press, coercion of state employees to vote for the incumbent, and at times, the de facto or de jure banning of opponents from participating) nor fair (the playing field is not level in the electoral arena because the electoral management body is controlled by the incumbent and because state resources are massively deployed to favor the incumbent as well). In consequence, these regimes simply do not pass the bar of minimalist electoral democracy. The onset of competitive authoritarianism will undermine the prospect that the afflicted countries shall attain democratic