

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

consolidation in the foreseeable future as well as delay considerably the time frame in which they may achieve it. (One need only look at the deleterious legacies of the Fujimori decade for Peru's post-2000 democracy.) The reason is straightforward: democratic institutions have been manipulated and revamped to fit the rulers' political interests, perpetuating a cycle of institutional instability by way of undermining the acceptance of such rules and institutions (including tailor-made constitutions) on the part of current opponents and future politicians.

The appearance of self-sustaining nondemocratic hybrid regimes and their possible spread to yet more countries raises the obvious question: what causal factors undergird the onset of electoral authoritarianism in Latin America? To be sure, an important factor lies in the elevation to the presidency of populist leaders, as argued by Levitsky and Loxton (2013), particularly if they are outsiders rather than mavericks (insiders who choose to distance themselves from the political class). Populists who become chief executives may be prompted to undermine existing democratic institution by their predispositions (due to a lack of socialization and practice in the ways of democracy), incentive structures (lack of a political stake in the existing rules of the game), and windows of opportunity (prevailing winds of public opinion, weakness of opponents).

But populism constitutes a proximate cause, itself the manifestation of more deeply rooted structural causes. A deeper factor underpinning the erosion and eventual breakdown of democracy lies in the collapse of party systems. It is not coincidental that three of the four cases of electoral authoritarianism identified here have emerged in the wake of such collapses,

as did the nondemocratic regime of Alberto Fujimori. The vanishing of traditional parties in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador opened the door for populists to be elected to high office, for it spawned a newfound mass of floating voters disgruntled with the old parties available for political socialization. But crucially, party system collapses also removed key veto players (i.e., political parties) with the wherewithal to restrain or impede elected presidents' ambitions to accrue power. In the absence of bona fide parties, institutions of horizontal accountability (legislatures and others) tend to lose much (or all) of their clout and independence. Moreover, the electoral vehicles and proto-parties that come to replace their deceased and more solid partisan cousins are more politically malleable, less organic, and more beset by collective action dilemmas. In consequence, they are much less effective at constraining incumbents. The onset of competitive authoritarianism in the wake of party system collapses (in four out of five cases) evinces the indispensability of parties for the very *viability* of democracy. Where democracy does survive the weakening of party systems, its quality inexorably erodes. It is not coincidental that Álvaro Uribe amassed enormous power and undermined the relative solidity and impartiality of a number of democratic institutions in the wake of the breakdown of the traditional Colombian parties; nor is it coincidental that the Kirchners—aside from the political effects of the resource boom—were able to build a decade-long politically hegemonic rule while politicizing a number of institutions in the wake of the breakdown of the Radical party at the national level. Because party system deinstitutionalization has transpired in a number of countries (Sanchez 2008; Morgan 2011) across the region (affecting even unsuspected candidates such as Costa Rica), Latin America as a whole arguably has weaker

levels of representation, interest aggregation, and state-society mediation than before—the very functions political parties fulfill, however inadequately. It is worrying that party building has proven elusive in most places, given an inauspicious historical time, populist politicians uninterested in the task, and social landscapes marked by poverty, rampant inequality, and enfeebled civil societies. This nonevent stands as a bad omen for the future health of democratic governance in the region. (To be sure, exceptions exist. Successful party-building cases include the MAS in Bolivia or the Polo Democrático in Colombia.) A deeper cause for the erosion and breakdown of democracies lies in state weakness. Because this condition is so prevalent in Latin America, it hardly serves as a useful indicator of countries in imminent danger of democratic decay and breakdown. But it does constitute a near-necessary condition: democracies with sturdy state institutions are poor candidates for competitive authoritarianism.

The scourge of the drug trade and its damaging effects on democratic institutions and civil rights aside, the gravest threat to Latin American democracy in recent times has come, rather counterintuitively, from democratically elected presidents. As the subfield moved away from analyzing transitions and toward assessing the quality of the young democracies, Latin Americanists largely obviated this creeping gravedigger of democratic governance. The late Guillermo O'Donnell presciently pointed out the danger to democratic governance that can come from a “thousand blows” rather than one big blow (the classic coup d'état), a danger less visible to the eye but fatal in its consequences. This is precisely how democracy has been destroyed in some Latin American nations and eroded in

others in recent years: incumbents systematically chipping away at the rights of political minorities via legal and other means while concurrently augmenting their own power resources. Old-fashioned coups d'état have become rarer, for well-known reasons. Nonetheless, coups have not disappeared from Latin America, as seen in recent years in Honduras and Ecuador. And the region continues to be marred by the abuse of existing legal frameworks even in the realm of high-level politics, as witnessed in the dubious ouster of Fernando Lugo in Paraguay by conservative forces. (While not an illegal act, it was an abuse of constitutional authority on the part of Congress.)

The domestic barriers that can avert democratic breakdowns via a thousand blows are essentially two: the strength and vitality of civil society, and the strength of political institutions. Barring these—and such traits are absent in many countries in the region—the last frontier of democracy protection may be said to rest on regional organizations and the foreign policy stance of the United States and other Western states. The Organization of American States (OAS)—the main organization with an explicit mandate to safeguard democracy in the region—has proven embarrassingly inadequate to the task. As the number of nondemocratic regimes ensconced in the OAS has increased, these regimes have predictably banded together in order to shield each other from potential censure by democratic member states. Nondemocracies have also joined efforts to pull the teeth out of regional bodies whose task is to scrutinize deviations from civil and political rights, while dismissing reputable reports coming out of Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch. The OAS can hardly be more than the sum of its parts: if it keeps in its midst nondemocratic regimes, its defense of

democratic governance will predictably falter. Concurrently, democracies with economic ties to nondemocracies have been reluctant to use their clout with a view to increasing the political cost of assaults on democratic governance on the part of Chávez/Maduro, Correa, Ortega, or Morales, following instead a supremely pragmatic (but hardly principled) approach. Sadly, democracy has had few powerful defenders among Latin American nations in recent years. The clear unwillingness of Brazil, Colombia, and other democracies to put pressure on the Venezuelan government to address the credible claims raised by the opposition surrounding the probity of the 2013 presidential election vote count constitutes only the latest example. The waning clout of the United States in hemispheric affairs coupled with the presence of a bloc of hybrid regimes in the Andes means that the international and regional constraints on authoritarian rule have been somewhat relaxed in Latin America—surely as compared to the 1990s.

It may be countered that democracy has become consolidated in countries with relatively long democratic histories such as Uruguay, Costa Rica, and Chile, while it has built deeper roots in Brazil. However, the regression toward nondemocratic rule in no less than four important countries, the undermining of checks and balances in others also beset by overpowering presidents (such as Argentina under the Kirchners, and Panama under Martinelli), coupled with the ravages of the growing drug trade on institutionally feeble Central American countries, paints a rather desolate canvas of the health of democracy in Latin America. A snapshot of the state of democracy in the region as of 2013 would arguably show it to be at its lowest point in the post-Third Wave period.

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