

A Right Turn in Latin America?

*By Santiago Anria and Kenneth Roberts**



Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro in January 2019. / Marcos Brandão / Agência Senado / Flickr / Creative Commons

After a long winning streak, the left in Latin America has experienced electoral defeats in a number of former strongholds since 2015 – including Argentina, Chile, and Brazil – but the trend is not unidirectional and so far falls short of being a regional “right turn.”

- Right wing presidents govern today in those three countries as well as Colombia, Guatemala, Paraguay, Honduras, Panama, and Peru – a scenario that is quite different from 2010, when about two-thirds of Latin Americans lived under some form of leftist government. Democratization, financial crises, and market liberalization shaped the 1980s-90s, while mounting social discontent against neoliberal market reforms helped to produce a “left turn” that spread across the region following the election of Hugo Chávez in 1998. Leftist candidates won 30 presidential elections in 11 different Latin American countries between 1998 and 2014.

The current trend lines are hardly unidirectional across the region. Mexico, which remained under conservative government when most of the region turned toward the left after 1998, has recently elected long-time leftist leader Andrés Manuel López Obrador to the presidency. Incumbent leftist parties have been re-elected one or more times in Uruguay, Bolivia, Costa Rica, and El Salvador. Notably, leftist parties

in some countries where they have been historically weak, such as Colombia and Honduras, have strengthened electorally and organizationally, laying the groundwork for further growth. Leftists' records elsewhere are mixed. Rivalries among Ecuadorean leftists make their future uncertain. Venezuelan President Maduro and Nicaraguan President Ortega have resorted to increasingly repressive and authoritarian measures to maintain their grip on power.

- With the possible exception of Brazil, the right's surge is not the result of the sort of social backlash that brought the left to power. In general, the right's victories appear to be a routine alternation of power rather than a regional wave with common starting points and driving forces. Argentina and Chile are the two clearest examples of routine electoral alternation of power explained by retrospective, anti-incumbency voting in contexts of economic slow-downs, corruption scandals, and social policy discontent. In countries like Paraguay and Honduras, on the other hand, the shifts were initiated by non-electoral means – a politically motivated presidential impeachment in the former and a military coup in the latter – and then consolidated through elections after the fact. In Brazil, the right turn can be traced back to the social protests that broke out against Dilma Rousseff's leftist PT government in June 2013, but former conservative allies' opportunistic impeachment of Rousseff, along with their imprisonment of former President and PT founder Lula, seriously weakened her party – paving the way for the election of anti-establishment candidate Jair Bolsonaro.

*The left in power is still strong, though probably not unbeatable today, in countries like Bolivia and Uruguay, at least in part because of their roots in and strong connections with social movements. Unlike the PT, both **Bolivia's MAS** and Uruguay's FA have managed to preserve more of their movement character and to avoid extreme forms of top-down control and professionalization. The ability of mass popular constituencies and grass-roots activism to hold party leaders accountable and steer public policies in desired directions—a condition largely absent in countries like Brazil, Ecuador, and Venezuela—has helped the left maintain cohesion in Bolivia and Uruguay. This cohesion, accompanied by significant reductions of inequality, helps to explain the continued vitality of left parties in these countries. The recent strengthening of leftist alternatives in Mexico and Colombia, moreover, should guard against facile assumptions that a region wide right turn is underway. Conservative forces' recent victories are better understood as a reinforcement of the post-neoliberal left-right programmatic structuring of political competition in Latin America than a unidirectional political shift to the right. That said, Brazil wields significant political and economic influence in the region and, traditionally seen as an “early mover” in the region, may be a bellwether of the future. The ability of President Bolsonaro and his model of governance to deliver the results that Brazilians want—and to operate within the parameters of democratic institutions—will be key factors in determining the direction and strength of the region's rightist wave.*

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Bolivia: The Exceptional Case of the MAS

By Santiago Anria*



A rally celebrating the nineteenth anniversary of the MAS in Bolivia. / Tercera Información / Wikimedia Commons

Bolivia's Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) is one of the most important and electorally successful new parties in Latin America because it has succeeded in achieving and maintaining high levels of internal grassroots participation and bottom-up influence, even after assuming national power. Unlike the ad hoc electoral vehicles created to sustain the support of a single charismatic leader like Hugo Chávez in Venezuela or Rafael Correa in Ecuador, the MAS has maintained autonomous forms of social mobilization by popular constituencies that have contributed to keeping party vibrancy and served as a check on concentrated executive power.

- A “party of movements,” the MAS began as a largely indigenous coca growers’ union, but after 20 years of existence and more than a decade in power, it still deviates from the conventional wisdom that such parties inevitably become oligarchic in their operation. Compared to most other movement-based parties, the MAS remains responsive to the interests, demands, and preferences of its social bases – propelling its leader, Evo Morales, to the presidency but also, at times, limiting his authoritarian tendencies. My research, recently published in a book entitled *[When Movements Become Parties](#)*, reveals that Bolivia is a rare example in which a party’s social movement origin not only facilitated party-building but also enabled the party to preserve high levels of grassroots participation in the

selection of candidates and the crafting of public policies, with “bottom-up” correctives to hierarchy and concentrated executive authority.

- While institutional checks and balances can be (and have been) weakened by an ambitious leader like Morales, governing parties more open to bottom-up input preserve opportunities to establish checks on decisions and constrain strategic behavior and hierarchical control. Channels to exert “voice” provide incentives for the social bases to shape important decisions, as these bases become *de facto* veto actors within the organization. At the broader regime level, when a governing party establishes and upholds well-developed opportunities for bottom-up grass-roots participation, instances of bait-and-switch policy-making are less likely – a condition conducive to policy stability and ensuring the “continued responsiveness” that is central to democratic representation in between election cycles. Finally, when governing parties are more open, they may generate opportunities and incentives for the political empowerment of traditionally marginalized groups by boosting the input that those groups have in the political power game.

The MAS has avoided extreme forms of professionalism and “top-down” control. While the party as a bureaucratic organization remains weak after 20 years, that reality has allowed the social bases to act autonomously and continue to influence, constrain, and hold the party’s leadership accountable. This has enabled the party to maintain unusually strong ties with the country’s major popular movements, which still provide a formidable mass base and coalition of support. Today, 12 years after it gained power for the first time, the MAS remains the only truly national party in Bolivia and is that country’s dominant party. The ongoing strength and relative autonomy of social mobilization in Bolivia not only explains much of the MAS’s continued success but also sets the Bolivian case apart from the Brazilian PT, where social mobilization withered, and from Venezuela under Chávez and Nicolás Maduro, where mobilization is strong but largely controlled from above.

The system is far from perfect. Poised to seek a fourth term in 2019 after a legally dubious maneuver, polls show that Morales may not be unbeatable. The party lacks a viable successor, and another reelection can open the door to further abuses and greater personalization of power – all of which can undermine the development of the democratic regime. This could also atrophy the links between the party and segments of its movement base, a process already under way. Power is already concentrated in an executive administration that too often treats opponents and the press with raw hostility. Institutions are inefficient, liberal rights are poorly safeguarded, and courts are feeble and politicized. Even if checks and balances on presidential authority have weakened, however, autonomous grassroots participation, inclusion, and accountability are highly robust. Inclusion has created a “new normal” in the Bolivian political arena, with larger numbers of Bolivians enjoying rights of citizenship and greater input into political decision-making and into determining who gets what, when, and how – with the MAS

at the center. Seen from the long arc of Bolivian history, this is an exceptional change in a society characterized by social and political exclusion.

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Bolivia: Implications of Referendum for Democracy and the MAS

*By Santiago Anria**



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A Bolivian referendum on February 21 – one month after the 10th anniversary of President Morales’s rise to power – threatens a break with the country’s tradition and the democratic principle of power alternation. A “Yes” vote on the constitutional amendment up for approval would allow Morales and Vice President García

Linera to run in 2019 for a fourth consecutive term – a scenario that the fragmented opposition claims would mean not only greater concentration of power in a personalistic leader but also a shift toward authoritarianism, similar to that in Venezuela. The government claims that a “No” vote would mean the end of an era of unprecedented economic and democratic stability, the end of measures that have empowered subordinate groups in society, and the return of the right and neoliberalism. Opinion polls so far show the vote will be close.

Morales’s efforts to extend his time in office are consistent with his tendencies to dominate politics and the policy process. Yet my research shows that increased political incorporation during his government has also given previously marginalized groups enhanced influence over agenda-setting and policy-making and led to important shifts in domestic power relations. In today’s Bolivia, well-organized interest groups typically belonging to the “informal” labor sector (such as coca growers, cooperative miners, and transportation unions) have greater influence over policy from within the state (in representative institutions and state bureaucracies at all levels) and from without (direct pressure in the streets). This has resulted in greater regime responsiveness to the groups’ interests and in policies that expand economic and social benefits, as well as improvements in poverty and inequality reduction – even without meeting some of their fundamental needs such as employment and health care reform. While in some instances newly empowered groups have mobilized and served as a check on state power, their role is founded on a highly particularistic relationship of the MAS and allied groups and, as such, can actually be an obstacle for governing in the interest of broader segments of society.

An intense government campaign in favor of the constitutional amendment is already under way and will likely deepen in the coming weeks. The Morales government lacks the kind of epic framing it had when it first won the presidential election in 2005. Citizens today express concerns similar to those voiced during previous governments – concentration of power, widespread corruption, inefficient institutions, weak protection of liberal rights, politicization of courts, and hostility to opponents and the press. A “Yes” victory on February 21 would not automatically mean a shift to an authoritarian regime as core features of authoritarianism (i.e., power exercised by a small group overriding the will of the citizens) are not currently evident. In addition, Morales’s tendencies to dominate often meet strong checks from a relatively autonomous civil society. Comparative evidence suggests, however, that a fourth Morales term might lead to further power concentration and decreased political input from below — which could mean a weakening of the MAS as an organizational actor for the empowerment of subordinate groups independent of its undisputed leader. A “No” victory, on the other hand, would not necessarily mean the end of the social and political transformations carried out by the MAS. If nothing else, Bolivia’s “process of change” over the past decade has given rise to a “new normal” of more inclusive institutions and basic social programs that benefit large sectors of the population and will be difficult for any future government to reverse.

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Bolivia: Lessons from the MAS

By Santiago Anria*



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As Bolivian President Evo Morales's *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) prepares for the October 12 general election – which opinion polls indicate it will win by wide margins – the MAS appears to be a remarkably diverse organization capable of adapting operations to different regions of the country. It fits neither the typical journalistic portrayal of Latin American social and political movements as clashing with political parties and elected governments, nor political scientists' characterization of parties as unitary actors

under the control of a unified leadership. Founded by coca growers in the mid-1990s as their “political instrument” to contest power, the MAS has become the collective political expression of grassroots organizations now in power – to this day having diffuse boundaries and multiple faces, combining features of a grassroots movement and a party, and being a remarkably successful instrument for exercising rule.

The MAS's regional diversity is one of its greatest strengths. As an organizational actor, it looks and operates differently in different contexts depending on how the political space is structured. In the Bolivian central region of the **Chapare**, where strong peasant unions are aligned with the MAS and control the territory, civil society and party are fused. Grassroots organizations monopolize the political space, and local decision-making structures are embedded in the union structure. Their success is rooted in “agrarian union democracy,” which emphasizes that “bases” exert control on the leadership – that the rank and file should lead and leaders should follow. In the eastern city of **Santa Cruz**, on the other hand, the MAS has made inroads in traditionally hostile territory by developing an unusually strong local party organization with remarkable mobilization capacity, and that capacity gives it a central role in local governance. As in other cities with large informal economies, the local structure draws support from two powerful urban sectors – transportation workers and street vendors – and is organized territorially in districts that operate both during and between elections. Rather than having the features of a movement, in Santa Cruz the MAS looks and works more like a conventional political party. In the Chapare, Santa Cruz and elsewhere, the MAS organization has considerable latitude to operate locally within alliances and policies usually defined

at the national level. As a result, the MAS and its governmental counterparts are not often, or by necessity, in tension.

Latin American history offers many examples of political movements becoming personalistic vehicles for charismatic leaders. More than 10 years since it became a credible electoral vehicle, the MAS may offer a more promising organizational alternative. Morales is certainly a charismatic leader, with significant popular legitimacy and authority within the MAS. His leadership cannot be overstated, and he is the dominant figure binding a wide array of grassroots movements and organizations. Yet, the MAS has remained permeable to popular input in areas where civil society is strong and has mechanisms to arrive at collective decisions. In the last general elections in 2009, grassroots influence was consequential: it led to the massive entrance of individuals and members of allied grassroots organizations into the highest level of political representation. Their participation in Congress (the Plurinational Legislative Assembly) has pushed to diversify the legislative agenda still largely subordinated to the executive. New MAS leaders willing or able to challenge Morales's leadership have not emerged but, as the candidacies for the upcoming elections are defined, the strong regional dynamics could alter the composition of the new parliamentary group. Whether the MAS will remain open, and whether it will manage to outgrow its dominant leader figure, will depend on the continuing strength of allied groups in civil society.

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Argentina's Mid-term Elections: the beginning of the end for Cristina?

By Santiago Anria and Federico Fuchs *



Cristina Fernández mural Photo credit: CatelncBA / Foter / CC
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Rising inflation, loss of confidence by the private sector, and lack of access to international credit markets make victory in Argentina's mid-term elections on October 27 especially important for President Cristina Fernández – or else she will face the prospect of two years as a lame duck. Her governing Front for Victory (FPV) faction of the Justicialist Party (PJ) seeks to protect its legislative majority. (Half the seats of the lower chamber and a third of those in the upper chamber are at stake.) Based on the results of the Open, Simultaneous and Obligatory Primaries (*PASO*) held on August 11, the FPV appears likely

to lose some seats but still maintain a slight majority, considering that a number of the seats in dispute in the lower chamber correspond to districts in which it fared poorly in the 2009 elections. Before her unexpected surgery last week, Fernández had been central to the electoral campaign, hand-picking and endorsing Lomas de Zamora Mayor Martín Insaurralde as the first deputy on the FPV's list. According to some surveys, previous adjustments to her communications strategy increased her approval ratings, and with her recovery from surgery expected to take a month, there is speculation that the FPV may win some additional "sympathy" votes.

The *PASO* primaries showed that the FPV lost in key electoral districts, including the city of Buenos Aires, and the provinces of Buenos Aires, Córdoba and Mendoza, but that it continues to be the only political force with national reach. The opposition remains fragmented, but Sergio Massa, a former government ally and current mayor of Tigre (elected on the FPV ticket), has emerged as the key opponent in Buenos Aires province and as a likely presidential candidate for the 2015 elections. He may challenge Daniel Scioli, who is the current governor of Buenos Aires and is, at least until now, backed by Fernández as her potential successor despite resistance from some factions within the FPV). Massa's *Frente Renovador* still has limited territorial reach, but he enjoys the support of the mainstream media, a branch of the General Confederation of Labor (CGT), the Church and, perhaps most importantly, a prominent group of mayors in Buenos Aires province. He is trying to capture a more centrist vote, promising the "end of confrontational politics" and

focusing on what he claims are the “real issues” affecting Argentines – corruption, citizen security and crime prevention, and inflation.

The results of the upcoming elections will define the options for the Fernández administration. If the FPV fails to keep a solid majority in Congress, the issue of constitutional reform that would allow for reelection will be off the table, and Fernández will not be able to run for a third term. In policy terms, negative results will increase pressure for economic adjustment and pro-business policies. Fernández and her predecessor, deceased husband Néstor Kirchner, have both proven their capacity to revamp their administrations after electoral defeat by defying such pressures and raising the stakes. But with defeat in the polls, and with a diminished force in Congress, it will be harder for her to maintain party discipline as the prospects for 2015 grow bleaker. A lot also depends on how the opposition fares: a clear winner among them (most likely Massa) will become a clear challenger for 2015 and probably put even greater limits on any government strategy, whereas a still atomized opposition may give Fernández more leeway. The task ahead for the FPV will be to define and support a presidential candidate that can continue the Kirchnerista project. Performing well in the congressional elections will give Fernández more room to define this, or to at least block non-desired candidates. We may be witnessing the beginning of the end for Cristina, but it is not clear whether any of the opposition candidates can force her to steer the Kirchnerista project in a new direction. Not even the most plausible contender in the opposition (Massa) or the most likely successor in the FPV (Scioli) seems to have any meaningful change to offer. If both of them represent anything, it is Peronism’s ability to adapt in adverse times to stay in power. But that is nothing new in the history of Peronism.

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