

The new Latin choir: democracy vs injustice in Latin America

By Ivan Briscoe,
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6,000 radicals shouldered their flags through the baroque masonry of central Salamanca, but for once their cries had already been heeded. Obliging, and at the very time the protesters were gathering, representatives at the fifteenth annual summit of “Ibero-America” – the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking nations of Iberia and Latin America – had signed up to a declaration thick with pledges to cut poverty, spread wealth, institute the right to work and respect migrants. “Before there was always a horrific neo-liberal choir, and you always felt the odd one out. Now nobody defends neo-liberalism,” declared an ebullient [Hugo Chávez](#) [0], Venezuela’s president, at the summit’s end.

A new orthodoxy, articulated by victorious leftwing politicians and sanctified by the studies of the World Bank and United Nations, has swept over Latin America in under five years. Whereas a typical summit before then rehearsed the teachings of free market and trickle-down economics – guided by the polestar of Argentina’s Carlos Menem before his [country’s ruin](#) [0] – the continent’s leaders now reiterate the primacy of inequality and popular discontent above all else.

George W Bush’s paean to “faith in the transformative power of freedom in individual lives” before the [Organisation of American States](#) [0] in June met with indifference; in Salamanca, mutterings from the United States embassy in Madrid about indulging the “Cuban dictatorship” in a condemnation of the Helms-Burton law toughening the US embargo on Cuba were largely shrugged off.

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A pattern of upheaval

Yet the exhibition of pan-Latin unity will soon dissipate on the leaders’ return home, just as Salamanca, once General Franco’s headquarters, will resort to being a bastion of Spanish conservatism. The continent, barring Cuba, may have embraced democracy (twelve elections are scheduled to be held before the end of 2006), secured its highest growth rate for decades (5.9% last year), and in some cases reduced poverty (notably Chile), but instability in politics and immunity to reform in institutions and societies remain the hallmarks of Latin American public life. The figures in 2004’s eighteen-country United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) [survey \[1\]](#) were eloquent: 43.9% believed that democracy did not solve their countries’ problems.

For the truth is that what looks on the conference stage like progressive, enlightened policy seems from home more like a fearful and mendacious response to failure. The contrast between domestic reality and diplomatic packaging is frequently galling: in an article written for the summit, Bolivia’s interim president, [Eduardo Rodríguez \[2\]](#), recast the turmoil of the last three years, the inter-ethnic fractures and indelible poverty rates as “an authentic and fertile process of citizens’ participation with political inclusion.”

And while [Peru’s President Alejandro Toledo \[2\]](#) waxed lyrical about fiscal probity, foreign investment and fresh infrastructure, one Peruvian political correspondent at the Salamanca summit, Jorge Saldaña Ramírez of *El Comercio*, describes an almost apocalyptic political breakdown in his country: “None of the possible candidates for next year’s election have approval ratings over 20%. No one believes anything the political class does. This is very dangerous.”

This is not to say that democracy as such is under immediate, direct threat: the popular uprisings in Venezuela (2002, to restore Chávez after the coup), Bolivia (2003 and 2005), [Ecuador \[2\]](#) (2000 and 2005), Argentina (2001), and arguably [Haiti \[2\]](#) (2004), have all been viscerally democratic responses to perceived ills, and have all given way to elections or promises to hold them. But it does suggest that the conventional channels of democracy have neither harmonised the public’s demands with government actions, nor managed to achieve the landscape of civil and social rights, responsive institutions and basic security that supposedly surrounds a democratic regime.

Summit liturgies on repairing this social malaise restate the indisputable. Yet the true dynamics of Latin America – and its new ideological divide – are instead to be found in the way this democratic failure is to be interpreted. And here the desiccated arguments of university faculties in the north assume a vibrant, living form. The two strands of democratic theory – the constitutional liberal, stressing individual rights and formal representation, and the participative and popular –

are two routes not just to establishing a democratic system, but two very different platforms for dealing with the historical burden of fractious, stratified societies.

Asked why he was so unpopular, Peru's Toledo told a press conference in Spain that he had merely offended against history. After his heroic electoral stand against an [Alberto Fujimori](#) [3] now on the comeback trail, Toledo took power in 2001, only to see himself afflicted by a perfect example of Latin democratic slump: his popularity collapsed (to 8%), his coalition partners fell out, protesters took to the streets, a short-lived armed rebellion broke out (in [Andahuaylas](#) [4] in January 2005). "Managing a country in a transition from dictatorship to democracy, and managing an economy responsibly, has a high political cost. And I paid it."

The inequity of power

His comments reflect a central truth: the inheritance of Latin American democracies has been shaped by massive financial indebtedness, a slew of dead bodies and structures of power marked by the interference of military, big business or foreign interests. Aside from losing an outstanding generation of political leaders to the [1976-83 dictatorship's](#) [4] operatives, Argentina's foreign debt climbed fivefold before Raúl Alfonsín took power; Lula was not the first democratic president in Brazil, but market oscillations around the future of \$250 billion in public debt in 2002 were perhaps the foundation stone of his government's economic caution and its resulting disappointments.

This tainted legacy is unquestionable, and the new democratically elected leaders of the continent take much solace in it: press them on these failures to deliver, and the talk will turn to "inflated popular expectations." Yet such expectations would not have existed without the very particular genre of democracy that has been the heir to dictatorship – a marketplace of votes, rained on with promises and entertained by TV celebrities, the end result of which is the common condemnation to be heard from any Latin American's lips. "They're all the same as before, nothing has changed." Or as Argentine political analyst José Pablo Feinmann put it: "To govern in Argentina you first have to achieve consensus in society and then listen to the establishment."

For the fact is that this highly formal democracy – based on frequent elections, supine representative assemblies and a very fragile judiciary – has made the process of winning and keeping power primordial. And power in such an environment of uncertainty tends to seek out its dependable servants.

Patronage in its most brute forms survives, even in the midst of progressive rhetoric: [Argentina's Néstor Kirchner](#) [4] is currently accused of buying votes with cheques and domestic appliances. Economic elites and foreign lenders take on an even greater importance given the damage they could wreak before election time: witness [Lucio Gutiérrez's](#) [5] almost immediate caving in to the IMF in Ecuador. The media, owned by the richest in society, becomes a key political player: look at how it orchestrated the coup in Venezuela. Lastly, and most recently, the modern branding of "terrorism" serves to justify emergency powers and divert attention from social and institutional problems, as in the [Colombia of Álvaro Uribe](#) [6].

There are of course exceptions to this, such as Chile, albeit within the boundaries set by its post-dictatorial settlement, and Latin governments have certainly learnt the merits of not printing money or emptying the state's coffers in their hunger for legitimacy. But the overall impression is of weak representative regimes which, in depending on elections and bargaining between elites, fail to make any difference to gross inequalities. Bolivia may be democratic, but infant mortality amongst its poorest is four to five times the rate amongst the richest. The richest 10% of Brazilians receive 48% of the country's income; as Spanish economist [José Antonio Alonso](#) [7]

has observed, handing four of those percentage points to the poorest 10% would instantaneously eradicate absolute poverty.

The next project

Sooner or later a reaction was bound to occur, and it is no surprise that the form it has taken is a direct challenge to representative democracy. For through their leaders' relentless focus on electoral and political survival, liberal regimes have become blind to their starting points. They may point repeatedly to their immediate inheritance as an excuse, but they can do nothing to rewrite the entire given structure of wealth and power: these are the instruments they use to stay in power, rather than the targets of their policy.

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“Argentina: how politicians survive while people starve” (April 2003 [7])

“Beyond the zero sum: from Chávez to Lula” (July 2003 [7])

“Dreaming of Spain: migration and Morocco” (May 2004 [7])

“All change in Venezuela’s revolution?” (January 2005 [7])

“Néstor Kirchner’s Argentina: a journey from hell” (May 2005 [7])

The words in June of Remberto Postigo, an Aymara from the impoverished and tumultuous suburb of El Alto in Bolivia [7], are in this sense typical: “We cannot back down. They have been screwing us for 500 years, and at some point we have to bring it all crashing down and start all over again.” Bolivia’s radical leader and possible next president, Evo Morales, talks of “*refundar* (refund, re-establish) Bolivia.” His choice of verb echoed that used, somewhat less sincerely, by Néstor Kirchner on his accession to power in 2003. Hugo Chávez prefers to use the words revolution [7], or process, so long as it is “Bolivarian” – i.e., starting all over again.

Naturally, the form of democracy they prefer is mass participation, channelled through charismatic and resolute leadership; turgid debates in assemblies are simply obstacles to action. Impregnated with history (wholly unlike the neo-liberal brand of conservatism), their

democracy – almost fundamentalist – stresses the preconditions of a fair society over the balance of powers or property rights.

Clearly there are causes for alarm here. In the effort to remake society, independent institutions and the private sector will tend to be emasculated, as Chávez has already demonstrated to the detriment of Venezuela's supreme court, the private media and landowners; his example, furthermore, is wholly dependent on access to oil. The need for constant action to justify expectations also leads to the prevalence of dramatic, media-oriented gestures over the construction of new institutions. And even if these institutions are built, it remains to be seen to what extent the old social castes and divisions are perpetuated within them.

Yet the tension between these two ideologies, and their accompanying theories of democracy, is the primary political divide in Latin America today, in spite of all the clustering around Salamanca's worthy principles [8]. The hope remains that out of this conflict, a consensual form of social transition can be constructed. It does not take a genius to know what this would include: a progressive tax system; a guarantee of judicial independence; the initiation of a welfare state; a zero tolerance approach to corruption. But it will take some exceptional circumstances to see these go beyond rhetoric and yet stay free of bombast.

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[1] <http://www.undp.org/dpa/pressrelease/releases/2004/april/0421prodal.html>

[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eduardo_Rodriguez

[3] <http://www.fujimorialberto.com/en/index.php>

[4] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4146915.stm>

[5] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/4341092.stm>

[6] <http://www.latinamericabureau.org/?lid=2139>

[7] <http://english.safe-democracy.org/bios/alonso-jos-antonio.html>

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