

Will the left last?

Can the leftist governments of Latin America sustain their fight against inequality in the face of global economic recession?

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Critics of the leftist wave that has spread over Latin America - and most notably South America - this century like to say that these governments have consolidated themselves on the back of a good macroeconomic climate. The surging global demand for oil, gas, soy, copper and other commodities in recent years has offered large quantities of cash to the socialist governments with which they can govern almost at will.

By following this argument, it becomes obvious that the current global crisis will test the leftist governments and serve to prove whether the critics are right or whether the administrations are truly progressive and capable of governing with the same discourse under harsher conditions.

Analysts in the foreign media and various financial institutions have referred to the dissimilar governments in the region as leftists without noting their nuances. They divide these governments into two groups: moderates and radicals. The first group includes Chile, Brazil and Uruguay, while the second counts Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua in its files, with Argentina drifting between the two (the governments of Guatemala and Paraguay were both elected this year and are too new to analyse).

Finding common ground between all the governments is not nearly as easy as it may seem. Their economies are diverse and their political power also varies. However, two common points do exist.

Firstly, they all seem to understand each other well and aspire to create regional integration. The best example was offered when Evo Morales decided, only a few months after becoming president of Bolivia in 2006, to raise the price of gas exported to Argentina and Brazil. Both buyers could have reacted angrily, since it implied rewriting outstanding contracts and raising the price of gas paid by Argentine and Brazilian citizens. But Lula, the Brazilian president, and Néstor Kirchner, the Argentine president at the time, understood Morales's argument that Bolivia needed a fairer deal.

The second point in common between all these governments is the importance they give to fighting poverty, which was recently argued by José Natanson, an Argentine political scientist, in one of the few books to study the progressive trend in Latin America from a Latin American perspective. In his book, Natanson wonders whether it still makes sense to speak of the left as an entity opposed to the right. He finds the answer by reading Norberto Bobbio, who argued that left and right can be differentiated by the importance each gives to inequality and the fight against it.

Natason correctly argues that the leftist governments of Latin America have all put inequality at the centre of their policies because the poor segments of society constitute their electoral power-base. In this context, the poor have been transformed into a powerful political player.

An argument could be made that the poverty-fighting policies of a number of these administrations are simply playing-for-the-crowd populism, and this argument has been made endlessly from the right. Notwithstanding whether all the governments are truly committed to fighting poverty or whether some use it as a simple politicking instrument, there is no arguing that they all place it at the centre of their discourse.

The leftists governments of Latin America share a third feature, which groups them in a loosely bounded pack: their existence is mostly owed to the failed policies of the Washington consensus pushed by the likes of the IMF. Poverty was never a central preoccupation under the consensus; instead it advocated for neoliberal economics. When the strategy to create a foundation for market liberalisation failed, answers were sought elsewhere. Therefore, leftist leaders like Lula, Rafael Correa (in Ecuador), the Kirchners, Evo Morales and Tabaré Vázquez (Uruguay), Hugo Chávez and Daniel Ortega, in his reloaded version, trumpeted inequality as one of their main causes (Michelle Bachelet belongs to the peculiar Chilean process, born earlier than the rest).

All these governments have enjoyed the favourable macroeconomics of recent times. The global economy was booming and commodities were in demand, so they were flush with funds and could balance their accounts with seemingly few efforts.

Now, the financial crisis will press them to prove they can manage and run similar policies when the cash isn't flowing into their pockets. Venezuela will get less for petrol, Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay won't receive as much from soy and other agricultural exports and Chile could have trouble if copper prices and demand falls.

In the end, the crisis could serve to separate those governments that are committed to change from those who have either jumped onto the progressive bandwagon only for the ride or are so shallow that they will crumble when the first strong winds start blowing against them. Those who continue to treat the fight against inequality as the cornerstone of their policies will probably be called the true Latin American left.