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**The Authoritarian Offensive of the 21st Century
in Latin America**

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The Authoritarian Offensive of the 21st Century in Latin America

Michel Pinard¹

“Nothing is possible without men; nothing is lasting without institutions,” Jean Monnet, 1978.

Introduction

During the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, a change started to take place in Latin America. Citizens’ democratically elected candidates, who promised social reform while tackling income inequality under a pro-nationalist rhetoric, pushed for taking back strategic industries from foreign corporations. This came to be known as the *Pink Tide*, in which a practically complete ideologically aligned Latin America made regional integration progress, increased cooperation, and emphasized the idea of establishing south-south focused partnerships, even beyond the region. However, democratic institutions suffered attacks from the executive branches that wanted to concentrate more power in already presidential systems, leading to the establishment of authoritarian regimes unwilling to follow their citizens’ democratic desires.

Keywords: democracy, institutions, Latin America, social movements, transformation.

¹ Michel Pinard is a Junior at the University of Miami, with majors in International Studies and Latin American Studies and minors in Political Science, Modern Languages, Geography, and Ecosystem Science and Policy. Originally from Caracas, Venezuela, Michel’s interests aim attention at the rise of democratically elected governments in Latin America that overtime evolved into authoritarian regimes with democratic facades.

The observation and study of the objective reality present in today's Latin America show that there are two Americas that are not divided by language, economic industrialization, or geography, but by the belief and defense in democracy and its values versus authoritarianism and dictatorship. In the 1990s, Cuba was the only dictatorship present in the continent. Fidel Castro drove the *Cuban Revolution* from a hopeful movement that would bring freedom to its people after the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista, to another dictatorship and an economic failure that had been surviving from the economic benefits given by the Soviet Union. However, once it disintegrated after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Cuba suffered from severe economic difficulties, known in the island as the *Período Especial*, characterized by food shortages, hunger, and food rationing. Meanwhile, those shortages of food and other failures of the Cuban model were blamed on the U.S. embargo to the island instead of looking at the national economic policies pursued by the Cuban regime that led to the collapse of the food industry, subsequent shortages, and dependency on the Soviet Union.

During that time, Cuba fell into oblivion under a dictatorship unwilling to give up control over the nation while still wanting to continue its aggressions to democracies in the region, but without the financial resources to make it possible. However, in 1999, Venezuelans elected a new president, Hugo Chávez, that would bring back Cuba to the center of the region's political agenda. An agreement was signed between Cuba and Venezuela to lay the foundations of a political movement, financed by Venezuela's oil revenues, that would bring to power left-wing politicians to the highest offices throughout the region in the early 2000s and that many give credit to Hugo Chávez as a regional leader through his so-called *Bolivarian Revolution* and *Socialism of the Twenty-First Century* (Berzaín, "Castrochavismo: Crimen Organizado en Las Américas"). The left would democratically win the presidencies of Bolivia, Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Nicaragua, and El Salvador.

For many, the 21st century was supposed to be a time for the consolidation of democracy in Latin America. However, a series of events happened that would open the path to the crisis that the hemisphere currently faces. According to Carlos Sánchez Berzaín, author of the book titled "*Las Dos Américas: Dictadura y Democracia*", Cuba's regional grand strategy resulted in the resignation of Fernando de la Rúa due to the financial crisis of 2001 in Argentina, the overthrow of Jamil Mahuad (2000) and Lucio Gutiérrez (2003) in Ecuador, Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada in Bolivia (2003), and the replacement of Miguel Rodríguez Echeverría (2004) as Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS). The later event would result in the election of José Miguel Insulza, a member of the Socialist Party of Chile, who would spend the next decade as the Secretary General of the biggest multilateral organization in the Western Hemisphere and the oldest of its kind in the world, in silence towards the democratic erosion that was taking place in the region (Berzaín, "XVI Cumbre Latinoamericana Democracia y Desarrollo - Crisis en las Américas").

The early 2000s saw the political alignment of ideologies in the majority of Latin American nations, allowing the creation of international organizations that would promote regional integration alongside economic independence from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The Union of South American Nations, better known as UNASUR, and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC, for its Spanish acronym) were the two most important ones due to not only their objectives, but also due to the number of nations that integrated both projects. While CELAC had an implicit objective to serve as replacement to the Organization of American States (OAS), UNASUR would ideally become something similar to

the European Union. Moreover, a proposal was made for the establishment of a bank, 'Banco del Sur', in order for member states to have a regional entity to go for financing if needed instead of using the IMF or the World Bank. Furthermore, there had been conversations regarding the creation of a common currency that would eventually replace the national currencies of member states.

However, with the change in mandataries and ideologies, both projects were forgotten. The OAS has recovered its active participation defending democratic values in the region in the hands of a new Secretary General, Luis Almagro, added to Hugo Chávez's death and his regional leadership with him, while leaving CELAC basically useless today. Meanwhile, UNASUR, which had noble objectives, has also been left behind as national politics tend to shift with changes in governments. For example, the viability of this project in particular received strong questioning from the current President of Colombia, Iván Duque, and even processed with the total withdrawal of that country from the organization in 2018 for considering it as an "accomplice of the Venezuelan dictatorship" (Marcos, 2018).

The political shift of the tide back to more right-wing governments occurred especially due to corruption scandals that directly involved populist leaders and/ or close relatives and/ or high-level members of their respective administrations. For example, Lula Da Silva in Brasil, Correa in Ecuador, Humala in Perú, and Cristina Fernández in Argentina, currently with open cases for corruption. As direct result of the magnitude of the alleged corruption that took place under the *Pink Tide* governments, the electorate distrusted them as leaders, and even their political parties, generating a clear rejection to their political projects in subsequent elections by choosing right-wing candidates, such as Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Mauricio Macri in Argentina, Tabaré Vázquez in Uruguay for the second time, Mario Abdo Benítez in Paraguay, and the return of Sebastián Piñera in Chile.

However, the so-called *Bolivarian Revolution* created by Chávez, inspired in Marxist ideas, remains alive. Democratically elected governments came to power in Bolivia, Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, Nicaragua and other parts of Central America, but they slowly debilitated democratic institutions in order to establish systems that eventually violate human rights and forego the basic alternation in governance that democracies should have. The São Paulo Forum, which is the political arm of the *Castrochavismo*, still tries to regain power in order to continue its goals of establishing a system inspired in the failed political, economic, and social system that brought the Soviet Union to collapse.

Even though there is an effort to recover democracy in the region, the path to institutional rehabilitation is difficult and challenging. In Ecuador, for example, President Lenin Moreno is being considered by experts as an example of a reformist for his transitional government from the authoritarianism of Rafael Correa to a free and democratic republic based in the rule of law (Berzaín, "XVI Cumbre Latinoamericana Democracia y Desarrollo - Crisis en las Américas"). In Venezuela, Juan Guidó was proclaimed Interim President based on the Constitution of 1999 and that disowned Nicolás Maduro as the legitimate president of the country, who has established the criminal organization that Pablo Escobar would have dreamed of creating in Colombia.

However, the opportunities to rescue democracy are not eternal. Venezuela's reincorporation to the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (TIAR, for its Spanish acronym) will not be useful until the Interim Presidency of Venezuela does not solicitate the application of the treaty under Article 3 and Article 6. The council of ministers, known as advisory council of the TIAR would have to meet in the headquarters of the Organization of American States (OAS) in Washington D.C. to discuss and decide over the assistance to

Venezuela, a state not only under the influence of Cuba regime, but also unwilling to protect its own citizens.

From a dictatorial regimes crisis to a regional crisis, not only have the democratically elected presidents been questioned, but also the democratic system itself has been under attack. According to Carlos Sánchez Berzaín, executive director of the Interamerican Institute for Democracy and former Bolivian minister under Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada's Presidency, today's crisis of the Americas, in almost every nation in the region, can be seen as the discontent that has recently driven people to the streets in Ecuador and Chile in protest against political systems and/ or governments that do not respond to their expectations. However, what the region is experiencing is a "counteroffensive of the criminal group that controls the dictatorships of Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, and Nicaragua (...) that has been called *Castrochavismo*" (Berzaín, "XVI Cumbre Latinoamericana Democracia y Desarrollo - Crisis en las Américas").

Castrochavismo is a group of international delinquency that usurps the political power and must be treated as a criminal apparatus and no longer as a political process. "It is the biggest threat for peace and security in the region" (Berzaín, "XVI Cumbre Latinoamericana Democracia y Desarrollo - Crisis en las Américas"). From being in a stage of deterioration, the dictatorships have passed to a counteroffensive that consist in generating local problems to all their enemies. Cuba demonstrated that in the 1960s with the establishment, logistical and financial support, and training of guerrillas in Bolivia, Perú, Ecuador, Colombia, Uruguay, Argentina, among others, and even in Africa starting in the 1970s. However, now that Cuba has drained the economy of its principal colony, Venezuela, the *Castrochavismo* has to finance itself with money that comes from drug trafficking, terrorism, extortion, etcetera.

These actions might seem local, and with direct response from bad governments, these countries encounter a reduction of subsidies, and an increase of the price of transportation such as in Ecuador and Chile respectively. The local pretexts might be real, but are exploited in order to generate violence, creating chaos that puts democratic systems under pressure, while pursuing a political change aligned to the São Paulo Forum's needs and demands. "The pretexts are certainly local, but the problems are not. Coincidences that are not coincidences" (Berzaín, "XVI Cumbre Latinoamericana Democracia y Desarrollo - Crisis en las Américas"). In Colombia, a faction of the FARC went back to guerrilla fighting; in Perú, the Congress was shut down; riots in Ecuador occurred and social turmoil in Chile rose not even one week apart from each other. As it was widely said in the protests that shocked Argentina during the crisis of 2001, *¡Que se vayan todos!*, making direct reference to the idea that politics do not work, spreading people's disbelief in the system. "Politicians are groups of elites that do not solve our problems and that do not respond to anyone" (Berzaín, "XVI Cumbre Latinoamericana Democracia y Desarrollo - Crisis en las Américas"), developing the belief that it is not the government that has to be changed, but rather the system itself. According to Carlos Sánchez Berzaín, the first step to find a solution is to accurately identify the problem. The second step is to identify the adversary, that in this case is the *Castrochavismo* operating internationally through a project that is not political but criminal (Berzaín, "Castrochavismo: Crimen Organizado en Las Américas"). The society has to realize that it is not a social rebellion or justification of any sort; people engaging in acts that destabilize democracies are being manipulated, and the proper political as well as civic leadership, and fact-based information are vital in order to achieve a civic and democratic consciousness among citizens.

"We cannot change the north," said Juan José Rendón, better known as J.J. Rendón, Venezuelan political strategist, activist, psychologist, and professor dedicated to the fight for

democracy and human rights, when asked to talk about his perspective regarding Venezuelan opposition parties to Maduro (Rendón, 2019). Today, there is a crisis in almost every nation in the region pushed by movements that present themselves as political and democratic when in reality there is a group engaging in permanent aggressions to the democratic civic values under which the republics were founded in Latin America.

Bolivia: The End of an Era

Evo Morales, arrived at the Presidency of Bolivia as a humble indigenous that wanted to reclaim the rightful place of “his people.” After fourteen years in the presidency, he became a bourgeois in love with power who lost a referendum and, therefore, could not run for another reelection.

He pursued an illegal reelection based on the constitution and, later, a fraud that the Organization of American States (OAS) denounced (Del Rincón, Fernando. “Jeanine Áñez: ‘Este es un Gobierno de Transición.’”). Consequently, people took to the streets initially calling for a second round to take place, as it was initially projected to be a result of the first round of elections. However, after Bolivia’s own national electoral commission reviewed the results and concluded that there had been unquestionable manipulation in the process, people were calling for Evo Morales to resign. Only after the air force and some sectors of the national police recommended him to resign in order to bring back calm to the country, Evo Morales resigned together with his Vice President, Álvaro García Linera, and other members of his cabinet.

According to Bolivian Senator and former presidential candidate, Óscar Ortiz Antelo, the constitutional succession was complicated since both people in line, the President of the Senate and the President of the Chamber of Deputies, stepped down. Subsequently, both vice presidents of the Parliament followed the same trend and also resigned; leaving the Second Vice President of the Senate, Jeanine Áñez, to take over as President of the Senate and, subsequently, being proclaimed as Interim President of Bolivia based principally on the Article 170 of the Constitution due to the fact that Evo Morales not only resigned, but also left the country abandoning his position as president (Vásquez, Tuffi Aré, 2019).

Arturo Murillo, the then newly appointed Minister of Government, stated that four alleged Cuban doctors were detained with approximately US\$100,000 in their possession. In their first declarations to the Bolivian authorities, they claimed that the money would be used to finance certain social groups. However, they would change their declarations afterwards. Minister Murillo also informed that they had captured four Venezuelans citizens not only with police uniforms from the Bolivarian National Police of Venezuela, but also with weapons, clearly conspiring against the Interim Presidency of Bolivia. “We will not tolerate any foreign intervention in Bolivian territory no matter where it might come from: Cuba, Venezuela, or the United States” (Del Rincón, “Ministro de Gobierno: ‘Hay Campañas de Desinformación.’”).

The Prime Left-Wing but Highly Questioned Forum

The São Paulo Forum is the instrument where the *Castrochavismo*, a system of multinational organized crime gets its political façade and, therefore, the politization of crimes that its members commit and/ or support. It has two missions today: contribute to the retention of power, and destabilization of democracies, through different tactics including but not

limited to sedition and guerrilla warfare (Berzaín, “Castrochavismo: Crimen Organizado en Las Américas”). According to Ian Vásquez from the Cato Institute, the São Paulo Forum is a regional alliance of the far-left political parties that was created after the collapse of the USSR, and started meeting in 1991, invented by Fidel Castro to look for a new geopolitical and financial strategy while continuing to undermine Latin American’s democracies (Vásquez, Ian, 2019). The country with stronger left-wing tendencies at the time was Brazil with the Workers’ Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores* in Portuguese). Until 1999, when Hugo Chávez arrived to power in Venezuela, the meetings did not have the economic resources needed in order to operate effectively and, therefore, its members also started using the term *Década Perdida*, or the Lost Decade, to make reference to not only the economic difficulties that countries in the region were facing, but also the forum’s incapability to successfully react to new challenges. The almost infinite petro-money that Chávez provided after 1999 generated a series of overthrow and subsequent raises of left-wing candidates to their respective countries’ presidencies. Currently, based on this year’s forum held in Caracas, it cost US \$200 million only in logistics financed heavily by the narco-dictatorship of Nicolás Maduro (Berzaín, “XVI Cumbre Latinoamericana Democracia y Desarrollo - Crisis en las Américas”). As Isabel Bonig, a Spanish Congresswoman, said in 2015 during an intervention in the Corts Valencianes, which is the main legislative body of the autonomous Valencian community of Spain, the public relations of the left-wing parties are admirable to the point that citizens have to be more politically and civically conscious (Bonig, 2015). The São Paulo Forum is portrayed as a political forum that is hosted by a legitimate government instead of a criminal gathering held by a dictatorship and/ or authoritarian regimes that might hold the power illegitimately and that constantly violates the basic human rights that its members claim to defend. Nicolás Maduro’s regime, for example, has engaged in a wide range of crimes: from torture and targeted killings to drug trafficking and blockade of humanitarian aid (Lamadrid, 2018). Additionally, the Cuban regime has been conspiring for decades, pursuing the alteration of governability in democracies by keeping them occupied with internal problems while defending their attacks with their left-wing ideological and political façade (Berzaín, “XVI Cumbre Latinoamericana Democracia y Desarrollo - Crisis en las Américas”).

Based on Carlos Berzaín’s most recent book, titled “*Castrochavismo: Crimen Organizado en Las Américas*”, the hard-core leftists have a basic strategy with four pillars that have also silenced the more moderate members of the Latin American left. The first pillar is to keep power at all costs. Secondly, destabilize those government that call them out as dictatorships through conspiracy with a few guerrillas and some turmoil. Thirdly, politicize their crimes: when they kill it is called defense, when they commit crimes it is called revolution, when they engage in corruption and abuses it is called reclamation in order to provide them with political argumentation. Fourthly, engage in dialogue when threats are made and do not have oxygen to keep operating as they wish (Berzaín, “Castrochavismo: Crimen Organizado en Las Américas”).

Conspiracy theories can be hard to believe and that might be the reason behind the denial among many to accept and even acknowledge the existence of a connection between the aspects previously explained. However, as times goes by, the authoritarian offensive of the 21st century in Latin America seems to be transforming from a mere conspiracy to a real coordinated plan directed by Cuba’s regime through the São Paulo Forum to undermine the democratic systems that have brought lasting prosperity to low income classes while safeguarding freedom and liberty of its citizens. Nicolás Maduro and the regime’s number two, Diosdado Cabello, has

stated that the protests, which shuddered Chile, Ecuador, and other countries last year, is a presage of a “Bolivarian hurricane” that would explicitly spread instability in the region (“La Advertencia de Diosdado Cabello sobre los Estallidos Sociales en la Región: ‘Lo que está pasando es apenas la brisita, ahora viene el huracán bolivariano’”). Democratic governments and civic society must properly address the danger that Venezuela’s and Cuba’s regimes represent to the democratic stability of the entire hemisphere before the so-called *Bolivarian hurricane* never leaves.

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