

Is Latin America's 'Pink Tide' Ebbing?

Exclusive: Many in Official Washington still consider Latin America their “backyard,” a place where U.S. interests rule and where leftist and reformist governments have historically faced “regime change” tactics. But the region has finally broken from U.S. control and isn't ready to go back, reports Andrés Cala.

By Andrés Cala

A string of elections in Latin America, recent and upcoming, had many pundits asking whether the so-called Pink Tide, the continent-wide resurgence of the political Left, was nearing its end. But these rumors of the Left's demise appear premature. Despite some erosion of support, most electoral results indicate that the region's leftist evolution over the past 15 years is being validated, not repudiated.

On Sunday, in Uruguay, the left-of-center candidate Tabare Vazquez of the ruling Broad Front won a plurality of about 45 percent against Luis Lacalle Pou of the right-wing National Party and other candidates, but falling short of a majority means Vazquez will have to face Lacalle Pou in a possibly close runoff election.

Meanwhile, in neighboring Brazil, President Dilma Rousseff won reelection in a tightly contested runoff, winning 51.6 percent of the votes and thus ensuring that South America's largest country, the regional trend-setter with the biggest economy, will stay in the hands of the left-of-center Workers Party which is committed to fighting inequality.

Rousseff's victory extends the 12-year rule of the Workers Party, which was founded by former President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, a leading light of the Pink Tide who remains a popular political figure because he helped redefine Brazilian politics with a commitment to lift up the poor. He is also credited with facilitating Brazil's emergence as the region's economic powerhouse.

The Workers Party's legacy is now so engrained in Brazil's politics that even Rousseff's pro-market challenger Aécio Neves of the conservative Social Democracy Party promised to preserve the socialist and environmental gains of the Left while seeking to rekindle the country's once-rapid economic growth.

Yet, Rousseff's narrow victory reflects the public's disappointment with an economy now in a recession partially induced by the global slowdown but also blamed on the government's policy missteps as well as wasted resources in the energy and construction sectors. But voters apparently were not ready to risk

the gains that they experienced from the Workers Party's reign.

Regionally, the message seems to be that the rowdy initial phase of Latin America's awakening is giving way to a more mature and circumspect one, led by a new generation that has grown up with rising prosperity and higher expectations. Indeed, the competitive challenges facing the Left may be symptomatic of the Pink Tide's success in building a more secure population confident enough to demand accountability from their governments rather than fearful of brutal reprisals for dissent.

In general, there has been a pivot toward a more pragmatic center that addresses the public's demand for economic growth but without sacrificing a pursuit of greater economic equality. One enduring change in most Latin American countries has been a commitment to reduce the region's crushing poverty, a break from past oligarchic regimes that repressed the poor and protected the local rich and foreign investors.

While many social problems remain and political resistance has stiffened from pro-business groups, the overall trend continues in a progressive direction. But it would be a mistake to assume that the Pink Tide narrative means that there is a homogenous political Left in Latin America. Each country is following its own path, even if there are obvious overlaps in policies.

Popular demands also are similar throughout South America with many people impatient with the pace of economic growth while others are uncomfortable with liberal social changes but there is general satisfaction with the continent's overall direction and there is no real threat from the extreme Right with perhaps the exception of Colombia where conservative forces remain very popular.

Latin America is also witnessing a moderation of the harder-line Left as in Venezuela. And, much of the Right is shifting to the center, as in Peru.

Youthful Middle Class

The first generation that grew up under the Pink Tide now represents a growing middle class that is demanding change, especially a more efficient welfare state and a more flexible economic model to encourage entrepreneurship. Generally speaking, this new middle class wants more private and public investment and less poverty and crime.

That has meant that even candidates who present themselves as pro-business say they want to preserve and consolidate the gains of the Pink Tide. It also translates into the left-of-center candidates promising reforms to address corruption and offering to make other corrective changes to government programs.

In Brazil, Rousseff supports working within Mercosur, the trade bloc that also includes Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and Venezuela, while Neves said that either Mercosur would have to change drastically or Brazil should go its own way, which could have meant signing a free-trade agreement with Europe and splitting with Argentina, which is engaged in several diplomatic and commercial disputes. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Argentina v. the Hedge Funds.](#)"]

The Uruguayan presidential election, which is now headed to a runoff, centered on a somewhat different dynamic, with the left-of-center government having built up a strong private-sector economy along with arguably the most progressive, democratic institutions and social reforms in the region, having more in common with the more urbane European socialism than Venezuela's fiery Chavismo and similar populist movements in Latin America.

Uruguay's reforms have included gay marriage, abortion rights and decriminalization of marijuana, policies that have unleashed a social-conservative backlash to Vazquez's ruling party. That backlash has cut across the traditional right-left economic lines, much as the Religious Right in the United States often votes against its economic interests in protest of what it considers "moral" issues.

There is also a generational component with the Left's candidate in Uruguay, Vazquez, who was elected president in 2005 and is seeking to reclaim that office now, is 74. The right-of-center candidate, Lacalle Pou, is 41 and represents a fresh face.

It is Uruguay's young generation, which the Left nurtured, that now seems to want a break from the near-decade-old rule of Vazquez's left-of-center Broad Front, making the runoff's outcome hard to predict. Still, a change of government would probably not threaten the popular social model that Vazquez pioneered.

Elsewhere, the Pink Tide has shown few signs of ebbing. In Bolivia, President Evo Morales won reelection by an overwhelming margin, which included middle-class areas and even conservative bastions that once opposed his rule, such as Santa Cruz.

Bolivia and Ecuador are aligned, though with different economic and political models adapted to their own circumstances. Both share a mix of populist rhetoric with pragmatic policies that spur private investment. They tend to increasingly seek a more moderate version of the hardcore Left, represented by Venezuela and Argentina.

In those two countries, the populism of Chavismo and Peronism, respectively, are

very different as are their goals. But both Venezuela and Argentina are under increasing pressure to moderate their aggressive social and economic policies that have lifted millions from poverty but are blamed for stalling their economies.

U.S. Interference

Unlike some other Latin countries, Venezuela and Argentina have demonstrated more resentment toward U.S. economic and political pressure although acknowledging the need for foreign investment and implementing urgent reforms to their economies. The governments in Caracas and Buenos Aires also are the primary targets of Washington's hostility, along with Cuba and Nicaragua.

Thus, Venezuela and Argentina may have the least time to make adjustments and soften their radicalism or face the possibility of Washington-encouraged destabilization and "regime change." Still, Venezuela and Argentina hope to sustain their revolutions by applying the wealth from their natural resources.

Argentina will hold an election in 2015, and anti-government forces in Venezuela have sought a recall referendum to remove President Nicolas Maduro, who otherwise is elected to serve until 2019.

However, perhaps most important, Latin America appears at little risk of returning to the U.S.-backed regimes of last century, brutal dictatorships which committed widespread human rights abuses and protected the privileged few against the impoverished masses.

Yet, while such old-fashioned right-wing dictatorships long favored by Washington's Cold Warriors may be a thing of the past, there still could be a trend toward more market-friendly policies in countries such as Colombia, Chile, Mexico and Peru. But even those countries have not shown the subservience toward Washington that was common in the old days.

In 2012, Colombia, Chile, Mexico and Peru established the Pacific Alliance, a trade bloc meant to boost free trade and to jointly expand economic ties to Asia but the bloc lacked any specific ideological agenda. The Pacific Alliance countries are seeking different ways to reach the center, whether from the Right or the Left.

Among the Pacific Alliance countries, there is significant diversity of governing approaches. Chile is socialist, yet very business friendly. Colombia this year reelected a moderate-right president who has invested more than any of his predecessors in a welfare state while also seeking peace with a powerful Marxist-Leninist guerrilla force.

Peru is still a long way from elections, but like Colombia, its policies have gradually moved toward a moderate-right orientation. And Mexico has entered a long-overdue reformist cycle under a pro-market government, but its destiny remains tied to the U.S. and shaped by a bloody war on crime and corruption.

But the celebration among some Washington pundits about the fading Pink Tide seems premature at best. The legacy built by the modern Left in Latin America is now deeply engrained amid a popular consensus favoring a progressive direction, albeit with a number of course corrections.

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