

In Latin America, left's rise to dominance has two faces

Latin America's election season ended with a turn to two ideologically different leftist responses to growing discontent among voters.

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LIMA - Latin America's busiest presidential election season ever ended Sunday with the reelection of Venezuela's Hugo Chávez. On the surface, the left scored a resounding series of victories, capturing nine of the 12 races.

But the question is, which left?

The elections of the past year, in fact, show that the region is divided into two lefts: A big-government, antiglobalization version led by Chávez that is suspicious of or even hostile to Washington. And a more market-friendly left headed by Brazil's Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Chile's Michelle Bachelet that decides whether to side with Washington on an issue-by-issue basis.

"There's an unresolved struggle for the soul of the left," Alvaro Vargas Llosa, a Peruvian who heads the Washington-based Center on Global Prosperity, said by telephone. "It's hard to say who's winning."

Nicholas Burns, the State Department's second-ranking official, crowed last month that Chávez's influence was declining because his "rhetorical excesses" -- most notably at the United Nations in September when he likened President Bush to the devil -- had damaged his credibility.

But Rafael Correa, a Chávez supporter, roared from behind in the polls to win in Ecuador on Nov. 26, Sandinista Daniel Ortega won in Nicaragua on Nov. 5, and Chávez himself scored a resounding victory Sunday with 61 percent of the vote.

"Chávez's victory reinforces that he'll play a huge role in Latin America, whether you like it or not," Vargas Llosa said.

Jorge Castañeda, who served as foreign minister under Mexican President Vicente Fox, decoded the two Latin American lefts in an article in the May-June issue of the journal *Foreign Affairs*.

"One is modern, open-minded, reformist and internationalist, and it springs, paradoxically, from the hard-core left of the past," wrote Castañeda, himself formerly a hard-core leftist. "The other, born of the great tradition of Latin American populism, is nationalist, strident and close-minded."

"The first is well aware of its past mistakes (as well as those of its erstwhile role models in Cuba and the Soviet Union) and has changed accordingly. The second, unfortunately, has not," he added.

OTHER WINNERS

Besides Lula and Bachelet, the other center-left presidents who won elections over the past year were Oscar Arias in Costa Rica, René Prével in Haiti and Alán García in Peru.

The only right-of-center winners were Miguel Zelaya in Honduras, Alvaro Uribe in Colombia and Felipe Calderón in Mexico.

The leftward tack in Latin America over the past year is something of a paradox because it comes when the region is enjoying its strongest economic performance in more than a generation, and poverty rates are edging downward.

But demand for Latin America's minerals -- especially by China -- is driving economic growth without creating many jobs. Some 205 million Latin Americans still live below the poverty line, according to U.N. figures. That's only four million fewer than a year ago.

"What we're seeing is frustration at the glacial pace of improvement," said Pedro-Pablo Kuczynski, who served until July as Peru's prime minister. "Most countries have had low growth rates" over the past 15-20 years, he added.

Eduardo Gamarra, a Bolivian native who heads the Latin American and Caribbean Center at Florida International University, said all leftist governments in the region are emphasizing the need to reduce poverty, especially given the yawning gap between rich and poor. The fault line between the two lefts comes over the extent to which the government should intervene in the economy and permit the private sector to operate freely, he added.

Gamarra said another difference is the words used by leaders of the two groups.

"Correa will say a lot about social justice, but in the end he'll have to adjust to the world market," he said by telephone from Miami. "He can't close Ecuador off."

'AFFIRMATION' FOR U.S.

U.S. officials had feared last year that the slew of elections would result in a bevy of Chávez wannabes who, like the Venezuelan leader, would unleash verbal attacks on Bush, extend government control over the economy and oppose free-trade deals.

But thanks to narrow victories by García in Peru and Calderón in Mexico over Chávez-backed candidates, the U.S. State Department's Burns could take enough satisfaction with the overall results to say that they marked "an affirmation" of what the United States wanted for the region, which he said was "grounded" in U.S.-promoted principles like democracy, free trade and free markets.

Stephen Johnson, a Latin American analyst with the conservative Heritage Foundation in Washington, said the end result is not calamitous from the U.S. government's perspective.

"It's not necessarily the ideal picture of Latin America marching in lockstep with the United States that perhaps democracy activists in the 1990s thought might occur," he said. "But it's a Latin America that has become much more plugged into the rest of the world, taking into account some of its own populist traditions and then marching very much in its own direction."

That direction, he added, was "not necessarily a negative one."

Still, few of the elected leaders see eye to eye ideologically with Bush, a fact that was underscored by Chávez, who hyped his win as a resounding rejection of U.S. imperialist designs. Cuba's acting president, Raúl Castro, said Saturday that "the populist and revolutionary movements are becoming more robust."

U.S. officials say they will work with governments of all political colors, provided they respect the democratic process.

They've even been courting the new far-left governments. Last week, Bush called Ecuador's Correa to congratulate him on his victory. In openly touting his friendship with Chávez, Correa had promised to end a military agreement and free-trade talks with Washington.

Last week, Thomas Shannon, the top State Department diplomat for Latin America, traveled to Nicaragua and met with Ortega, a Cold War foe of Washington during his first presidency in the 1980s. The two pledged deeper relations.

The United States and Bolivia, where Evo Morales, a socialist close to Chávez and Fidel Castro, won a landslide election a year ago, also have discussed issues ranging from drug trafficking to trade.

Alejandro Toledo, whose five-year term as president of Peru ended in July, called Latin America's traditional left "an empty shell. What you see is the bubble of cheap populists."

Referring to Chávez, he added in an interview, "It's easy to be a populist when you have a thick wallet."