

THE RIGHT SIDE OF LATIN AMERICA'S LEFT

The US shouldn't fear South American changes made in the interest of progressive reform and democracy.

Opinion

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BOSTON – With his landslide reelection victory this month, Hugo Chávez maintains his role as lightning rod for US anxieties about Latin America's resurgent left.

President Bush has commended the leftist presidents of Brazil and Chile for embracing free-market orthodoxy and governing with moderation. But administration officials and members of Congress have repeatedly denounced Mr. Chávez - and more recently Bolivia's Evo Morales - for zealously criticizing the US and putting oil and gas resources to nationalist use. With the election of each new leftist president in Latin America, US commentators distinguish "good" leftist leaders who don't rock the boat from "bad" ones who do.

This US perspective is shortsighted. The resurgence of the left in Latin America is part of an ongoing process - which began with the 1910 Mexican Revolution and the rise of leftist parties in the 1920s and 1930s - of extending democratic reform, broadening markets, and increasing the involvement of the middle class in politics. Latin American leftists have not always championed these goals, and other parties have taken them up. But without the presence and pressures of the left, these changes, which support democracy and markets in the long run, would never have taken place.

Instead of worrying about particular leaders and policies, Democrats, moderate Republicans, and US business leaders should recognize that more progressive reform in Latin America, not less, constitutes the best path toward stable societies and a good investment climate.

The US should root for reforms that redistribute land, collect taxes in a progressive fashion, increase democratic decisionmaking at all levels, and broker thoughtful deals with the private sector. Only by providing poor and middle class people with incentives to move from protest in the streets to participation in political institutions will Latin American democracies avert social explosion and foster enduring reform.

The alternative is what has been occurring in Mexico, where outgoing President Vicente Fox has triggered a violent crisis by ordering riot police to dislodge peaceful, indigenous protesters in the state of Oaxaca.

In contrast, Chávez has improved the material conditions of millions of shantytown residents, but urban street violence and class polarization have skyrocketed. Both Chávez and his opponents have exercised power in blatantly nondemocratic ways, from media manipulation to the subversion of public and private institutions. Ironically, this has put economic and social inequality in the limelight for the first time in decades.

To engender further positive reform in Venezuela and across Latin America, the private sector must recognize the need for reform and participate in the political negotiations that craft it. US government and business leaders can facilitate such openness by making clear their support for initiatives that improve people's daily lives in enduring ways.

Latin America's economies are sound. There is virtually no terrorism, ethnic killing, or antimodern religious fundamentalism in the region. Latin Americans want decent living conditions in secular democracies, and despite concerns about American power and intervention, they want economic and cultural ties to the US and free movement for immigrants and visitors.

In this context, a thriving left in Latin America represents a historic opportunity. The US can further its goals of sustainable trade, democratic well-being, and a reliable investment climate in Latin America without heavy-handed intervention. Most of the Latin American left supports just these ends.

But Americans have to recognize that the struggle to achieve more-equitable and inclusive societies in Latin America will involve fierce political battles and painful bargains - just as they did in the US and Europe. At times, powerful elites have to be challenged or frightened to give ground on key issues, as America's own New Deal and civil rights movement made clear.

In the near future, Latin Americans may choose, through democratic means, to change economic rules or set limits on private property, in order to provide fair wages for workers, and food and education for children. The US would be wise to affirm those efforts. And US political and business leaders can themselves help to make democracy and markets pay off for ordinary people by negotiating better terms for Latin

Americans in free-trade agreements and revising the priorities and rules of international financial institutions.

For example, if the International Monetary Fund allowed the fruits of Brazil's economic growth to go to education and infrastructure rather than debt repayment, then Brazil could become more educated and socially just. Without such opportunity, Brazil's leftist president may maintain economic stability, but he won't be able to lift living standards. As a result, more poor Brazilians may decide to block highways and occupy city centers in protest - as teachers, activists, and poor Indians have done in Oaxaca. And more Brazilians will see Chávez's confrontational ways as the only path to viable socioeconomic reform.

As the US grapples with its failures in Iraq, it has the historic opportunity in its own hemisphere to show that democratic politics can improve people's lives. Latin America is making important - if fitful - moves toward progressive reform. Instead of castigating the characters it deems unsavory, the US should support Latin Americans' efforts to foster well-being through new socioeconomic bargains. That would do far more to promote democratic values and a peaceful modern world than military intervention ever could.

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