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Will change happen on a populist or modern platform?

By MARIFELI PEREZ-STABLE

Latin America has two Lefts: one is progressive and moderate; the other, a throwback and confrontational. Michele Bachelet (Chile), Tabaré Vázquez (Uruguay) and, to a lesser extent, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Brazil) embrace modernity; Hugo Chávez (Venezuela), Evo Morales (Bolivia) and Ollanta Humala (Peru), the past.

That's true, yet it's not all. The Left's divisions reflect the long-standing tension between liberalism and corporatism in Latin American politics.

- Liberalism upholds individual rights, pluralism and compromise. It puts a premium on citizens, institutions and checks on power. Competition -- in politics and economics -- is its essence.
- Corporatism wields power without quarter to diversity or dissent. National or group interests are its compass; a state-centered political and economic system, its platform. Charismatic leaders light the way for the masses. Populism, the defense of *el pueblo* against rapacious elites, is corporatism's language.

Corporatism, then, is the road-map that leads us to Chávez and his fellow travelers. It also allows us to include Argentina's Néstor Kirchner and Mexico's Andrés Manuel López Obrador, if not side by side, at least as relatives. Corporatism isn't necessarily Leftist. In the 1990s, Carlos Menem (Argentina) and Alberto Fujimori (Peru) governed like corporatists -- undermining the separation of powers -- but waved the banner of neoliberalism. Both imploded in a whirlwind of corruption due, in part, to their aversion to competition.

Us-versus-them mentality

Kirchner and López Obrador are respectively the heirs to Peronism and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), perhaps the two foremost expressions of Latin America's corporatist tradition.

Juan Domingo Perón -- whose sympathies lay with fascism -- railed against the Argentine oligarchy on behalf of *los descamisados* (the shirtless ones). Peronism incorporated workers to the political mainstream. Perón also rallied manufacturers and protected their interests. The devils were the exporters who had reaped great wealth without doing anything for *el pueblo*. An us-versus-them mentality suffused Peronist politics. Perón's legacy is alive and well in contemporary Argentina. Kirchner has done it service by curtailing judicial independence and freedom of the press.

The PRI was clearly on the Left. The Mexican revolution fired up nationalism and the popular classes. The party was the formula the revolutionary caudillos agreed on to consolidate their power. It ruled for seven decades, including several of solid economic growth and social mobility. Until the 1980s, the PRI deflected all competition. Mexican state long coddled the private sector. Opponents were expeditiously silenced. Patronage and corruption spread the wealth a bit. If elected and true to his promises, López Obrador would aim to retrench the two-decade opening of Mexico.

The throwback Left has thrived on the real or perceived failures of market reforms. Chile excepted, the 1990s did not sustain the per-capita growth needed to make a difference in the lives of ordinary people. Neither has democracy secured equality of opportunity. Citizens are rightfully frustrated. What the throwback Left never recognizes is that the region found itself in the straits of the 1980s -- runaway inflation, asphyxiating debt, plunging incomes -- precisely due to policies such as state-directed economies and profligate spending that are now hailed as the road to salvation.

Led by 'el abuelo'

On one issue, however, there is broad agreement: Latin America must bring the state back in. The debate is whether it happens on a populist or a modern platform. On the latter, there is also consensus between the progressive Left and the modern Right as Chile's recent election demonstrated. The discussion there is about the kinds of actions the state should take. Without a modern state, Latin America will simple not be able to fulfill the citizenry's right to a better life.

If elected, Humala would likely travel to La Paz, Caracas and Havana. Should he finish first on July 2, López Obrador would surely not. A small but not insignificant difference. Morales, Chávez and Fidel Castro are soul mates. El abuelo (the grandfather), Morales called him, and the comandante smiled. Castro would certainly welcome a President López Obrador but would do the same if the PRI's Roberto Madrazo won. Humala and Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega are the next opportunities for kindred souls in power.