

# Leftism in Latin America

By Sarah Anand<sup>1</sup>

The term *leftism* itself has been used quite frequently (especially in relation to Latin American politics) to characterize the state of a country's affairs. However, there is a tendency to ascribe the particular adjective without fully understanding its entire meaning. For the past couple of years, specific countries in Latin America have started making shifts to becoming more "leftist." The world has taken notice of these changes, whether through the antics of Hugo Chavez, the comeback of Daniel Ortega, or the improbability of Evo Morales as president. But, what exactly is leftism, and how does it relate to what is happening in Latin America?

## An Umbrella Term

Instead of having a solid definition, which is applicable to every case study, leftism can be viewed as more of an encompassing word, which acts as a general way to refer to recent changes in Latin America. The actual degree to how socialist or communist a country is has been disputed. Marta Lagos, executive director of Latinobarómetro explains: "The 'leftist' label confuses the public, because it's a concept that comes from the Cold War...and is associated with revolutionary movements like those of Che Guevara, the government of Salvador Allende in Chile, and the Cuban revolution itself" (Osava). If what happened during the Cold War is considered the true leftist revolutionary movements, then today's trend is definitely different. For each country, the move from the center has been distinct from one another, with "leftist" practices manifested differently. Jorge G. Castenada, author of *Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left After the Cold War* and contributor to *Foreign Affairs* attempts to describe what being "left" is in today's times: "...current of thought, politics, and policy that stresses social improvements over macroeconomic orthodoxy, egalitarian distribution of wealth over its creation, sovereignty over international cooperation, democracy over governmental effectiveness" (Castenada).

## How did the shift start?

One of the obvious reasons for a shift towards leftism has to do with the politics during and immediately after the Cold War. The United States was consistently suspicious of any socialist or communist leader in Latin America, linking them to the Soviet Union. However, once the U.S.S.R. collapsed, Latin American countries could embrace their leftism more fully, shirking off any ties the U.S. could make. As time went on, leftism became more of a necessity than just a reaction to American intervention.

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Latin America has/had one of the highest income inequality gaps in the entire world. In fact, Thierry Lemaesquier, a member of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals team remarked in 2005 that "The inequality affects the rate at which poverty is reduced. It also affects growth, so then we have a vicious circle" (United Nations). The problems concerning inequality that Latin America as a whole faces are ones that started decades ago, around the same time as the communist influence of the Cold War era. Leaders across the continent decided to explore the options that a leftist government could provide, specifically because trends have shown, the more unequal a country is in terms of wealth, the more leftist they tend to be (Castenada). Logically thinking about it, those who are less fortunate will make decisions (especially in terms of politics) based on what they truly believe will make them better off.

Another reason that is accountable for the shift towards leftism is the acclamation toward democratic rule. As democracy became more commonplace, it allowed leftist leaders to gain inroads with the voting population (especially with those less off), ushering in an era of politics colored by leftist tendencies. The climate for change was perfect, especially because, as mentioned before, demographically speaking, leftist politicians had massive amounts of support from citizens.

### **Two Lefts?**

As the policies of the left began to pan out over the years, it became apparent that Latin America would not follow a singular brand of leftism. In the decades that followed, *two* particular thought processes have come to govern various countries.

The first type of leftism is reminiscent of the Communist revolution in Cuba and the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. While in the beginning it was more authoritarian (and more severe) than the people cared for, since it's embracement, it has become much more mellow. One of the reasons this is true is because leaders who chose to utilize the kinds of philosophies similar to those revolutions realized that the changing times needed to be reflected in changing governmental policies. Castenada explains: "The communist, socialist, and Castroist left, with a few exceptions, has been able to reconstruct itself, thanks largely to an acknowledgment of its failures and those of its erstwhile models" (Castenada).

The second type of leftism has its roots in a type of policy that is well known in today's political sphere (especially in Latin America): populism. Populism is defined as "urban-based, multiclass coalitional, hierarchical, co-optive, ad hoc, and nonrevolutionary, led by ebullient (if not charismatic) figures who promised to redress popular grievances and to build social solidarity" (Becker). Anyone who has been paying attention to the news knows that Hugo Chavez, president of Venezuela, champions this type of policy as a way to bring prosperity to the country. While this form of leftism started out less severe than the other one, it has become, as some critics point out, extremist as time has gone on. Following the trend of Chavez, leaders like Evo Morales of Bolivia and Rafael Correa of Ecuador have been sworn into office. A central theme among these leaders is their aversion to being included in the United States's sphere of influence.

Oftentimes, both forms have been hard to coordinate around (and through) especially for countries trying to engage diplomatically with Latin America. In modern times, Brazil and Venezuela are good representations of the first and second types of leftism's (respectively).

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