

From the Democratic Dream to the Shadow of Authoritarianism: The Political Crisis in the Southern Continent¹

Sebastián Horesok

*"One day it will be true. Progress will reach the plains,
and barbarism will retreat, defeated."*

Rómulo Gallegos

Weapons, demagoguery, and populism have been the major obstacles to achieving freedom, order, and development in Latin America. This essay explores the causes of authoritarianism in the region and provides tools for political parties to promote democratic stability and freedom in the region.

The political history of Latin America has been marked by events that have caused instability within the political systems of the region's countries. Tracing a timeline from independence to the present makes it evident how these systems have oscillated cyclically between different regimes. When one of these nations establishes a civilian government without strengthening its

1 n.d. Dialogo político. Accessed June 7, 2024. <https://dialogopolitico.org/elecciones/el-fantasma-del-autoritarismo-electoral/>

institutions and stabilizing the system's actors, it often opens the door to caudillo-style, militaristic governments that, through arms and terror, eventually consolidate into tyrannies. This seemingly endless cycle has inflicted deep wounds on Latin American societies, wounds that continue to resonate in their political life today.

Latin American nations define themselves as democracies. However, it is well known that democracy in the region is in constant flux. One of the primary factors behind this democratic instability lies in the independence processes. These processes were profoundly influenced by a caudillista character and a significant rejection of civility. During the independence era, the power of arms outweighed the importance of laws or the will of the citizens.

Fearing the wars and anarchy that plagued the continent post-independence, Latin American society harbored a strong desire for order, often without foreseeing the long-term consequences. According to Professor Graciela Soriano,² Latin America's autocratic phenomenon shares many similarities with the tyrannical processes of ancient Greece. There, illegal governments built their support on the "populace," a concept that differs from "people" or "citizenship." "Populace" refers to a group manipulated demagogically by tyrannical elites, using political rhetoric as their tool. In such regimes, it was believed that governance practices offered solutions during times of crisis.

2 Graciela Soriano de García-Pelayo, *El personalismo político hispanoamericano del siglo XIX: criterios y proposiciones metodológicas para su estudio*. N.p.: Monte Avila Editores Latinoamericana, 1993..

Every decision was justified under the pretext of imposing order on the existing anarchy within the Greek cities.

But what do the distant Greek *poleis* have to do with our Latin American societies? Their similarities are grounded in the long-term outcomes of such governments. While these regimes provided some measure of stability to the cities in the short term, their practices eventually devolved into abuses of rights and freedoms for the inhabitants of the *polis*. The constant abuse of power bred greater instability and dissatisfaction over time. In turn, this discontent led to the rise of new tyrants who, through violent conspiracies, sought to overthrow the current government. Ultimately, this process resulted in even greater conflict and a vicious cycle that gradually eroded the foundation of Hellenic civilization.

A similar phenomenon has occurred in the region. In the 19th century, whenever a Latin American government made decisions that did not align with the interests of a particular caudillo, these leaders would deploy their personal armies to seize power, fostering a climate of instability. The justification for their actions lay in the premise that they, with an iron hand, could solve the crisis through military force.

It is worth asking: how did these caudillos amass so much power? One of the fundamental reasons lies in the weakness of the State. This framework was composed of fragile and overly centralized institutions. Furthermore, the rulers, operating from their offices, lacked a tangible presence throughout the national territory. A clear example of this can be seen in Venezuela. Despite its long-standing militarist tradition, for much of the 19th century, the country did not have a functioning army capable of fulfilling

the essential roles of modern states: ensuring the security and defense of citizens and territory.

For some historians, such as Germán Carrera Damas,³ the first formal process of institutionalizing the Venezuelan army occurred during Antonio Guzmán Blanco's initial presidency (1870–1877). However, the reach of this army's operations extended from the capital to the city of Valencia, a distance of just 168 kilometers. This covered less than 10% of the national territory, leaving internal order reliant on pacts between regional caudillos and their private militias, or *montoneras*, and the weak central government.

It is not until the 20th century that caudillismo with these characteristics comes to an end. In 1899, the Restorative Liberal Revolution triumphed. This movement, led by Cipriano Castro and Juan Vicente Gómez, ushered in significant modernization of the Venezuelan army. The initial steps were taken during Castro's presidency, but it was General Juan Vicente Gómez who ultimately solidified the Prussian military model within the Venezuelan Armed Forces. This detail is far from insignificant. The Prussian military model not only shaped Europe's political future through two world wars but also profoundly influenced the political landscape of Latin America. The behavior of Latin American militaries throughout the 20th century is a clear reflection of this model.

Ultimately, it can be said that in the 19th century, there was a clear dichotomy between civilians and caudillos. This dichotomy was based on the following premises: civilian rule equated to

3 Germán Carrera Damas, *Una nación llamada Venezuela*. N.p.: Editorial Alfa, 2017.

anarchy, while caudillismo equated to order. However, this came at a significant cost: under neither form of governance were there freedom, development, or political stability.

The 20th century, however, brought new political actors, particularly on the international stage. Among the most significant was the emergence of the Monroe Doctrine;⁴ a policy that justified U.S. intervention in Latin America to defend its interests across the continent. This intervention took various forms, the most common being the exertion of influence over political systems to ensure governments aligned with U.S. interests. One area that saw considerable involvement was the armed forces of Latin American countries. The United States invested heavily in its modernization, with one of the most notable examples being the establishment of the School of the Americas. This program focused on training in counterinsurgency and guerrilla warfare, the latter emerging as a new form of conflict that would define much of Latin America's 20th-century political landscape.

It is worth analyzing why, despite efforts to strengthen internal order and Latin American institutions, instability continues to prevail. The first point to highlight is that these efforts were not entirely successful. While the Armed Forces were better trained and institutionalized, democratic culture and other institutions were not strong enough. The second factor to consider is the emergence, in the 20th century, of another significant actor that remains highly relevant: communism and its various ideological mutations.

4 See "Qué fue la Doctrina Monroe creada por EE.UU. hace 200 años para «proteger» al continente americano y que acabó convirtiendo a Latinoamérica en el «patio trasero» de Washington", <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/c3g23990xn7o>

Communist ideas arrived in Latin America at the end of the 19th century, accessible only to intellectual elites who were literate. The popular sectors, such as peasants and laborers, did not have access to these ideas for two fundamental reasons: the high levels of illiteracy and the disdain shown toward them by the elites. This scenario changed significantly with the emergence of a political phenomenon that would divide Latin American history into two eras: the 26th of July Movement. This revolutionary movement, led by Fidel Castro, Raúl Castro⁵ and later Ernesto “Che” Guevara, was a Radical Left insurgency that sparked a new wave of armed conflict across Latin America.

It is important to explore the reasons why these guerrilla movements flourished. Litsep⁶ argues in his thesis that a country's economic growth is sufficient to ensure political stability. However, reality shows that other factors must also be considered. At that time, a nation's economic growth and proximity to the United States did not necessarily translate into social improvements. On the contrary, highly exclusionary systems with significant levels of social inequality were often created.

In the Venezuelan case, a clear example of this can be observed in the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez. This authoritarian government, backed by the United States, sought to guarantee political stability through the so-called “Concrete Revolution” and extravagant infrastructure projects. In reality, Pérez Jiménez was fostering a state of vulnerability and social exclusion for millions

5 Gabriel González, “1953: el asalto al cuartel Moncada al que Fidel llegó tarde -DW- 26/07/2023”, DW. <https://www.dw.com/es/1953-el-asalto-al-cuartel-moncada-al-que-fidel-lleg%C3%B3-tarde/g-66352927>

6 Roberto García Jurado, *Teoría de la democracia en Estados Unidos: Almond, Lipset, Dahl, Huntington y Rawls*, La. N.p.: Siglo XXI, 2009.

of Venezuelans, who began to sympathize with the so-called “*Barbudos de Sierra Maestra*.”⁷

Globally, this process was not isolated from the context of the Cold War, a conflict between the two great world powers of the time. Rather than a purely military confrontation, it was a clash of the major ideologies of the 20th century: capitalism versus socialism or communism. This context led the Monroe Doctrine to adopt a new mission: “the Western cause.” According to Linz in *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*,⁸ the so-called “Western cause” dictated that socialism must be prevented from taking root in Latin America at all costs, even if the actions taken caused setbacks to democracy.

In this scenario, the fragile democracies of Latin America began to collapse. The region experienced a political regression, this time with different characteristics from those of the 19th century, but where two competing approaches to wielding power clashed. On one side were the military dictatorships, heavily influenced by right-wing ideology, and on the other were leftist revolutions, pursuing what Professor José Manuel Azcona⁹ has called “the dream of social revolution.”

The influence of the left permeated the entire region. In countries like Chile, the Marxist policies of Salvador Allende

7 Jerónimo Ríos Sierra, y José M. Azcona Pastor, eds. *Historia de las guerrillas en América Latina*. N.p.: Catarata, 2019.

8 Juan J. Linz, *La quiebra de las democracias*. N.p.: Alianza, 2021.

9 José M. Azcona Pastor, Majlinda Abdiu, eds. *El sueño de la revolución social: contracultura, canción-protesta y Kalashnikov*. N.p.: Editorial Comares, 2020..

polarized society to the point of a potential civil war.¹⁰ The outcome of this process was the consolidation of one of the strongest dictatorships in Latin American history. On the other hand, in Nicaragua, the Somoza dictatorship led to the rise of the Sandinista guerrilla, initiating a new authoritarian process, but with a left-wing orientation. Similarly, Argentina experienced years of terror, disappearances, and abuse of power during the National Reorganization Process, leaving a deep wound in society that persists to this day. Ultimately, it is clear how the Cold War shaped the behavior of Latin American political systems, polarizing countries between extreme ideologies.

Only Venezuela achieved significant democratic stability in the 20th century and managed to overcome the ideological and polarizing debate through a system of pacts¹¹ that prioritized democracy not as a means but as an end to achieve political stability. It is important to emphasize the role that political parties played in this process. These structures, which by definition are the link between the needs of society and the state, were the main guarantors of democracy in Venezuela.

Latin American politics continues to evolve. After the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, all of humanity believed that what Francis Fukuyama described in “The End of

10 “Allende: los 191 días que terminaron en un golpe de Estado que aún divide a Chile”. *BBC*. 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/cq599zrgkrvo>

11 Manuel Caballero, *Pacto de Punto Fijo*, BiblioFEP, Fundación Empresas Polar, n.d. Consultado el 5 de junio de 2024. <https://bibliofep.fundacionempresaspolar.org/dhv/entradas/p/pacto-de-punto-fijo/>.

History”¹² had been reached. In this work, the author argued that, after the fall of the Iron Curtain of communism, the greatest consolidation of liberal democracy to date would occur. However, history has shown us that this was not the case. After a wave of democratization around the world and the continent, the old remnants of the Cold War began to play a fundamental role and ended up exploiting the flaws in the democratic system worldwide.

The new weapon driving this regression is populism.¹³ Populism can be defined as a political tool that transcends ideologies, appealing to emotions to achieve its sole objective: gaining power through the masses. To accomplish this, populism employs elements such as polarization, the indiscriminate use of emotions, and a zero-sum approach to relationships within the political system. These processes are always spearheaded by a charismatic leader with messianic traits, offering magical solutions to the most complex issues of democratic systems, such as corruption, poverty, and security.

Antipolitics becomes the main rhetorical element of these populist movements, often expressed through slogans like “Out with them all!”¹⁴ o “Here I stand firm. Send me the people, and I

12 Francis Fukuyama, *El Fin de la Historia y el Ultimo Hombre*. N.p., Planeta-De Agostini, 1993.

13 Jan-Werner. Müller, *¿Qué es el populismo?*, traducción de Clara Stern Rodríguez. N.p., Grano de sal, 2017..

14 Eduardo Duhalde, Néstor Kirchner. “20 años del “Corralito”: 3 cosas que cambiaron en Argentina tras la grave crisis económica, política y social de 2001”. *BBC*, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-59494504>..

will obey. I am a soldier of the people; you are my boss.”¹⁵ These statements reflect a narrative aiming to dismantle the relationship between political parties and citizens, replacing it with a paternalistic or messianic bond.

Another example of this rhetoric can be seen when President Chávez compared himself to Simón Bolívar or, on occasion, to Jesus Christ, while labeling his opponents as Pharisees, Judases, *escuálidos* (weaklings), or *majunches* (mediocre). The ultimate goal of such discourse is to polarize society into “good” and “bad” factions, thereby justifying reforms within the state and paving the way for a broader transformation: the so-called Revolution. Revolutionary rhetoric seeks to convince people that it is the only force capable of resolving their problems and bringing order to the “disaster” supposedly caused by democracy and its parties.

Unlike the 20th century, where regime ruptures were violent, driven by the military’s boots or the guerrilla’s rifle, as Ernesto Guevara¹⁶, the revolutionary transformation of 21st-century populism operates from within, leveraging popular support as its primary mechanism. This process unfolds through the dismantling of institutions, achieved via constitutional reforms, frequent plebiscites, or the centralization of power within the executive branch. Political freedoms are gradually curtailed, freedom of expression is attacked, and electoral districts are often manipulated to make elections increasingly uncompetitive. Furthermore, these governments frequently use state resources

15 “Las frases que inmortalizaron a Hugo Chávez”. *TeleSUR*, 2016. <https://www.telesurtv.net/news/Las-frases-que-inmortalizaron-a-Hugo-Chavez-20160305-0013.html>.

16 Jerónimo Ríos Sierra, y José M. Azcona Pastor, eds. *Historia...*

indiscriminately to benefit the ruling party, aiming to exert greater social control over the population. The consequences of such actions range from the consolidation of a paternalistic state and a dependent citizenry to an excessive increase in public spending and various economic distortions.

At the discursive level, the relationships between political actors within the system are framed in a friend-versus-enemy perspective: if you are not with the process, you are against it. Under this paradigm, the first targets are typically the media and political parties. These two entities represent dissenting voices prioritizing the defense of truth and democracy above all else.

What is peculiar about the phenomenon of authoritarianism in Latin America is that the affinity among these regimes is not ideological, despite their attempts to conceal this in their narratives. A clear example is their shared international allies—nations that can be considered adversaries of the West, democracy, and freedom. These include Putin's Russia, the Ayatollahs' theocracy in Iran, Erdogan's Turkey, and Xi Jinping's China. All of these authoritarian and totalitarian regimes exert influence in the region with the aim of undermining the Western democratic model.

Indeed, relationships such as those between China and El Salvador or Russia and Venezuela are not based on ideology but on power dynamics. In the region, Bukele criticizes Maduro, yet his commercial partner remains the same, indicating that his ultimate interests are unaffected. Bukele does not demonstrate a commitment to supporting democracy in the region. This aligns

with historian Antony Beevor's¹⁷ assertion that the Third World War will not be fought over ideologies but will instead be a battle between democracy and authoritarianism.

Today, the battlefield is quietly set in the Americas, where antipolitics and populism serve as the panzers and stukas of authoritarianism. Political parties must take on the role of the bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki: becoming moral and ethical beacons of diligence for citizens, standing in resistance, and working together despite differences.

It is the duty of democrats to explore ways to combat authoritarianism. First and foremost, it is essential to cultivate truth, democracy, and, above all, freedom. Defending truth means defeating the dictatorship of relativism, which empowers populists through polarization and vindictiveness.

Secondly, liberal democracy must be promoted as the best form of government to achieve prosperity. Populist movements undermine freedoms and aim to create the perception that democratic systems cannot deliver societal well-being. Evidence suggests the complete opposite. Governments like those of José María Aznar in Spain or Konrad Adenauer in Germany provided substantial economic stability alongside robust political freedoms. For instance, Aznar's administration set a precedent for democratic security, overcoming a significant challenge of the 21st century: ETA terrorism. From a democracy, this was achieved through the strengthening of public order institutions. For many politicians,

17 Laura Ventura, "Antony Beevor: "Las guerras del futuro serán entre la democracia y la autocracia". *La Nación*, 2022. <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/ideas/antony-beevor-las-guerras-del-futuro-seran-entre-la-democracia-y-la-autocracia-nid22102022/>.

liberty is not a cornerstone of their agendas. Someone who is free to develop their potential to the fullest, equipped with knowledge, and committed to their dignity becomes a critical thinker who would not follow a populist blindly but rather would challenge them and hold them accountable.

Latin American political parties must adopt stances similar to Spain's Partido Popular: defending democracy without yielding to the pressures of extremist factions. Parties must prioritize citizens in their political discourse and actions, ensuring economic freedom and safeguarding democracy, starting with society's primary political institution –the family. Now is the time to combat populism by reclaiming the political agenda, placing the human person at its core, and restoring dignity to individuals, thus ensuring the realization of the common good.

The centrist parties in Latin America must regain a prominent role among the people, redefining democracy as an end in itself, where justice becomes a virtue that permeates the entire political system. As Dr. Rafael Caldera once said:¹⁸

“It is difficult to ask the people to sacrifice themselves for freedom and democracy when they believe that freedom and democracy are incapable of providing them with food or preventing the exorbitant rise in the cost of living, when they have not been able to put a definitive stop to the terrible scourge of corruption, which, to the eyes of

18 “Discurso de Rafael Caldera - Golpe 4 Febrero 1992”. n.d. *Retóricas*. Consultado el 5 de junio de 2024. https://www.retoricas.com/2010/05/discurso-rafael-caldera-golpe-4-febrero.html#google_vignette

everyone, is consuming institutionality every day. This situation cannot be hidden.”

Political parties must restore the meaning of the words “democracy” and “freedom,” transforming them from mere abstract concepts into guarantees of order and development for all Latin American countries.

Giovanni Sartori,¹⁹ the Italian political scientist, warned that one of the great distortions of democracy was the belief that democracy could only be guaranteed through voting. The great populists know how to take advantage of this to deepen their authoritarian models. To defeat authoritarianism, we must continue fighting from what Sartori calls Demo-Power, that is, electoral struggles, and strengthen Demo-Control, which refers to the institutions responsible for keeping the democratic system afloat. The task of political organizations must be to make these concepts accessible and practical.

Today, the shadow of authoritarianism seems to be consolidating in Latin America. Only political parties, along with the citizenry, can stop it. The challenge is to regain the focus of politics: service. The caudillo, the military, and the guerrilla have already been defeated, and if the battle is fought with truth, hard work, and justice, populist authoritarianism will also be defeated.

19 Rafael Arraiz Lucca, “Giovanni Sartori y el concepto de Democracia”, *Proyecto Base*, 2018. <https://www.proyectobase.org/giovanni-sartori-y-el-concepto-de-democracia/>.