

History Now

A new online journal for teachers & students of American history.
www.historynow.org

Latin America Outlook '08

We have an Economic Strategy for Latin America in 2008. Free Report
www.MoneyMorning.com/Latin_america

Peace & Security

Creating security through improved relations and cooperation
www.america.gov

Ads by Google



<http://www.foreignpolicy.com>

Get a free year of FP! [Two years for only \\$24.95.](#)

The Many Lefts of Latin America

By Javier Corrales

[November/December 2006](#)

Latin America's leftists are anything but united.

For half a decade now, the headlines from Latin America have touted the rise of the Latin left. As leftists have moved off the streets and into government in Bolivia, Brazil, Venezuela, and elsewhere, however, the story line has changed. The vision of a united leftist coalition of Latin nations opposing the United States and free market reforms is an illusion. Instead, intense fights have broken out within the left as protest movements struggle to govern. The Latin American "left," it is now clear, actually comprises a wide range of movements with often conflicting goals.

The Revolutionaries: These are the old radicals who have not changed much since the 1960s. They share an angry romanticism and a strong dislike of markets and institutions. "*¿Qué se vayan todos!*"—"Let's get rid of everyone"—is their slogan, and it became a refrain during the 1999 Constitutional Assembly in Venezuela, the 2001 financial crisis in Argentina, and the everyone"—is their slogan, and it became a refrain during the 1999 Constitutional Assembly in Venezuela, the 2001 financial crisis in Argentina, and the 2003 street protests in Bolivia.

The Protectionists: Many business owners and union leaders in Latin America support tariffs and protection against cheap imports from abroad. They can be found in industries such as auto parts, light manufacturing, toy and apparel producers, and financial services. This camp lost a lot of ground with the reforms of the 1990s and is desperate to regain control of economic affairs. Their slogan is "No to the Free Trade Area of the Americas."

The Hypernationalists: Latin America's unexpected alignment with the United States during the 1990s on trade and drug policy alarmed this group. Inheritors of the "Yankee Go Home" mentality, the hypernationalists pervade the region's universities, and parts of the media, the military, and the middle classes. They deplore U.S. foreign policy since 9/11, believe that U.S. drug enforcement efforts do more harm than good, and consider the International Monetary Fund (IMF) a tool of the White House. Ironically, they also dislike the growing obstacles to getting a visa to visit the United States.

The Crusaders: These are loosely organized citizen groups, such as Alianza Cívica in Mexico, who want greater transparency in government, more public participation in budget decisions, less corruption, and functioning courts. Crusaders gained strength in the 1990s and gravitated toward the left, but they have weaker ideological moorings than other groups.

The Big Spenders: These are groups including teachers' unions and government contractors who want to invest more

in social services and old-fashioned statist projects such as infrastructure and energy development. Tired of more than two decades of budget controls, the big spenders have had enough. They're not inherently anti-market, but they reject the tight fiscal policies of the past two decades, which they blame on the IMF and bond traders.

The Egalitarians: A hybrid of the revolutionaries and the big spenders, the egalitarians advocate blunt redistributive policies to help the poor. Their slogan is, "For the good of all, the poor first," which was Andrés Manuel López Obrador's presidential campaign slogan in Mexico.

The Multiculturalists: They want to end the system of ethnic apartheid prevailing in parts of Latin America, especially in the Andes, where long-neglected ethnic groups still lack political representation. The victory of Evo Morales in Bolivia—the first time an indigenous candidate won the presidency—was a high point.

The Macho-bashers: This more recent trend in the Latin American left started in the late 1980s with the effort to grant women more political and civil powers. They are now beginning to think about how to make these macho societies a bit more gay friendly. The impulse to empower women has made impressive strides, culminating with the groundbreaking election of Michelle Bachelet in Chile, who campaigned on a platform of "gender parity." As for efforts to make Latin American society less machista, that may take decades.

The revolutionaries, the protectionists, and to some extent, the hypernationalists and egalitarians are the most determined enemies of market reform. Market-oriented politicians will have little success cracking their ranks. The other groups, however, have more confused loyalties and represent demands that could be met while pursuing market reforms.

If the left is to remain in power, it must prevent groups like the egalitarians from peeling away from the movement. And that means the left will have to grow up. A protest movement can accommodate almost any grievance. A functioning government cannot. As rulers, the left will not avoid the wrenching process of prioritization. That could lead to political maturity. But the infighting might also lead to economic and political disaster, as happened in Ecuador under Lucio Gutiérrez, in Argentina under Fernando de la Rúa, and very nearly in Brazil under Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva.

High commodity prices have improved the economic situation and made governing easier, but the day of reckoning will come for these leftist coalitions. Compromise with market forces and the various leftist currents will be essential. Radicals have gone the farthest in Venezuela, and this has produced a degree of polarization unseen in the region since the Sandinistas governed Nicaragua in the 1980s. No other government will want to take that perilous route. How successful the inevitable process of adjusting to power will be depends on which left wins out.

Javier Corrales is associate professor of political science at Amherst College.
