Latin American Politics after the “Third Wave” of Democratization and Its Future Prospects

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Abstract

The global expansion of democracy in the last quarter of the twentieth century was described by Samuel Huntington as the “third wave” of democratization. Since it washed ashore in Latin America in the 1980s, important changes have taken place in Latin America’s political development process. The following characteristics can be observed: (1) The democratization process has been moving forward steadily. (2) Political reforms have been implemented in a more systematic way. (3) Some of the political parties in Latin America have lost their traditional influence. (4) Latin America is swerving left. (5) The importance of party politics has been increasing in Latin America. (6) “Democratic fatigue” is emerging.

Looking towards the future, Latin America still needs to consolidate its democracy. Towards this end, the region should deal efficiently with the social problems; maintain relatively higher economic growth; keep the professionalized military away from politics; and curtail corruption and reinforce governability.

The last quarter of the twentieth century witnessed another surge of democratization around the globe. Its momentum was so powerful, the geographical areas it affected so wide and its duration so long-lasting that Samuel Huntington dubbed it as the “third wave” of democratization.

In the 1960s and 1970s, military coups occurred one after another in the major countries of Latin America. Starting from the 1980s, however, authoritarian regimes gradually gave way to democratic ones. Indeed, Latin America has never seen so many countries with democratic governments and never before have Latin American democracies been so energetic.

This paper endeavors to explore two questions: what features has the process of Latin American political development exhibited after the “third wave” of democratization? And, what challenges does Latin America face now to consolidate the process?

I. Features of Latin American Politics after the “Third Wave”

Latin America’s political development after the “third wave” has demonstrated the following major features:

1. The democratization process has been moving forward steadily. A United Nations report titled Democracy in Latin America pointed out, “Over the course of 200 years of independent existence, democracy in Latin America has emerged and ended on dozens of occasions. Even as it was being enshrined in Constitutions, it was being destroyed in practice. War, tyranny and short periods of stability are associated with much of this history of
independence, during which even flagrant violations of democracy were committed in its name. This scenario changed with the arrival of the “third wave” of democratization.

Latin America occupied an important position in this wave of democratization. Before it washed ashore in Latin America in the 1980s, most of the major countries in the region were under military rule. On April 2, 1982, the military government of Argentina dispatched 4000 soldiers to the Malvinas Islands in an attempt to take over the disputed territory’s sovereignty. Argentina was shamefully defeated by the United Kingdom, deepening the South American country’s ongoing political and economic hardships. The turbulent domestic situation and the rising discontent of the public forced the military government to hand over its power back to the civilian politicians.

Indeed, the step-down of Argentina’s military government signaled the beginning of a democratic wave in Latin America. By 1999, every country had realized democracy.

Since the arrival of the “third wave”, Latin America’s democratic institutions have been improved steadily. This achievement is reflected in the following two aspects.

First, the transfer of presidency has been carried out regularly in a fairly democratic framework. In very few cases, election was held before or after the constitutionally-set schedule. In some countries, although there were disputes surrounding the results of the election, they were finally settled down peacefully. Mexico was a case in point. In the 2006 presidential election, the left-wing presidential candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador was narrowly defeated by Felipe Calderon. Obrador did not acknowledge his failure and even held an unofficial swearing-in ceremony. But he had to face reality. President Calderon has ruled Mexico since then.

Second, the military has never succeeded in intervening in politics. The most notable cases were Haiti in 1990 and Venezuela in 2002. In both cases, the democratically-elected governments were overthrown by the military, but democracy was restored within three years in the case of Haiti, and within 48 hours in the case of Venezuela.

There are several reasons that can explain why most Latin American countries can maintain overall political stability. First of all, mechanism of Latin America’s party politics has been improved so that there is a whole set of fair, transparent and free “rules of the game” guiding competition among the parties. Second, the military has become highly professionalized over the years and its desire to intervene in politics is becoming weaker and weaker. Even when the country is caught in a crisis, the military tends to stay away from politics and acts as a political “stabilizer”. Third, in a globalized world, political democracy is proceeding smoothly in other regions and this external factor has been quite positive in promoting Latin American democracy. Finally, for its own sake, the U.S. does not wish to see any unrest in its backyard.

However, Latin America’s democracy is far from being fully consolidated. Since the 1980s, there have been fourteen presidents who could not fulfill their constitutional duties due to uncontrolled popular demonstrations protesting against governmental policies, corruption and other things.

2. Political reforms have been implemented in a more systematic way. People in Latin America from all walks of life agree that political reforms are needed to improve the functioning of the democratic system and make the politicians more adaptable to the needs of the society. This consensus created the foundation for political reforms in the region. At the same time, disenchantment with the functioning of democracy and the conduct of government officials at all levels has fueled this call for political reform.

Generally speaking, Latin America’s political reforms consist of the following aspects:

1) To improve the electoral system. The purpose of this effort is to strengthen “rules of the game” for election so as to increase its fairness and legitimacy. Measures towards this end usually include: modifying the duration of the tenure of the presidency; lowering the voting age; stipulating the behaviors of the political parties and candidates in the election campaign; setting the ceiling limit for political donations; altering ways of electing congressmen and their tenure in office; and adjusting the percentage points needed for a victory in the election.

Of the above measures, extending the presidential tenure in office is the most important. After constitution was amended regarding this issue, Alberto Fujimori of Peru, Carlos Menem of Argentina, Fernando Henrique Cardoso of Brazil, and Hugo Chávez of Venezuela all succeeded in serving longer in office.

2) To redistribute powers between the central and local governments. This issue is concerned with two aspects: how to decentralize power and how to make the democratically elected local officials more accountable to the people.

Decentralization often involves financial responsibility. Along with more power from the central government, the local authorities tend to acquire a bigger share of the tax revenues as well as expenditures. Through the political
reform process, the central and local governments now have a clearly-cut line in terms of distributing tax incomes and undertaking expenditures and other financial responsibility and obligations.

Before the political reforms, most of the local officials were appointed by, and responsible for, the high-level governments. This way of choosing bureaucrats often resulted in a lack of accountability for the people. Since the 1990s, the majority of the local officials in Latin America are elected directly by the voters. As a result, their priority is to satisfy the needs of the people, not to please the higher-level government that has appointed them.

3) To enhance judiciary independence. Before the political reforms, although political power was divided among an executive, a legislature, and a judiciary, there were not effective checks and balances. In the constitution, for instance, the court is enshrined as a suprapartisan organ and the judges are empowered with holy independence. In reality, however, interference in legal affairs is widespread, particularly when a top-level official is on corruption charges.

In the minds of the public, the judiciary was inefficient and corrupt. Through the political reforms in many of the Latin American countries, judiciary procedures have been simplified so as to raise efficiency and independence. In addition, judges are appointed on the basis of merit and competence. Undoubtedly, if the appointment is free from political influence, the judiciary can enforce laws.

3. Some of the political parties in Latin America have lost their traditional influence. Development of Latin America’s democratization has changed the landscape of the region’s party system. The traditional parties that had dominated the political stage for so long were defeated by the newly-founded parties in the ballot box. In the 1990 presidential election in Peru, for instance, political newcomer Alberto Fujimori’s party Cambio 90 (Change 90), established just one year earlier, defeated the powerful Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana (APRA, American Popular Revolutionary Alliance) and the Partido Popular Cristiano (Christian People’s Party), which had been reigning over Peru’s political arena for decades. Once again in Peru, in the 2001 election, Alejandro Toledo, who founded the party Perú Posible (Peru Possible) only two years earlier, succeeded in the presidential election. In Venezuela, Hugo Chávez, who founded the Movimiento V República (the Fifth Republic Movement), in early 1998, won in the presidential election in the same year. In Mexico’s presidential election in 2000, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party), was defeated after seven decades in power.

Many reasons can explain why Latin America’s traditional parties have lost their prestige. First of all, with the development of political reforms, the oppositions gained more strength to challenge the long-established political order. Second, despite the fact that the traditional parties were well-organized, confrontation among the different frictions within the party could not be contained. Third, in a political culture characterized as “pendulum effect”, voters tend to trust the new parties that have different political orientation and slogans. Fourth, the traditional parties were often blamed by the public for their failure to reduce the social cost of the economic reforms. Finally, the new political parties were successful in attracting the voters with charismatic image and pleasing promises.

4. Latin America is swerving left. While the influence of the traditional political parties is shrinking, Latin America’s left-wing force has come to occupy a conspicuous position on the region’s political stage, posing great challenges to its established political order. Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela have all been under the leadership of the left politicians. These countries account for more than two-thirds of the region’s total area and more than half of its total population.

Two major characteristics can be attributed to today’s Latin American left. First, the left-wing leaders seem to pay more attention to social development. Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva’s Fome Zero (Zero Hunger) program won a great deal of support from the poor people in his country. With huge sums of oil income, Venezuelan President Chávez implemented many large-scale anti-poverty programs. Second, the left has abandoned the use of guerrilla warfare, which was often used by Che Guevara and other revolutionaries back in the 1960s.

However, as Jorge G. Castaneda said, “There is not one Latin American left today; there are two.” These differences have made it hard to define the meaning of the left.

There are two major characteristics within the left in Latin America. One is the attitude towards the role of the state, and the other is the relations with the United States.

Venezuelan President Chávez, Bolivian President Morales and Ecuadorian President Correa believe that the state should play a more important role in the economy. Therefore, they have implemented nationalization policies so as to control their natural resources. In contrast, other left leaders continue to follow the so-called neoliberal policies. They even argue that nationalization policy is against the tendency of globalization.
Chávez was seen by President Bush as “Castro II”. The United States even helped Chávez’s opposition in a coup plot in April 2002. That was why Chávez took his verbal battle with the United States to the floor of the U.N. General Assembly in September 2006, calling President Bush “the devil.” President Morales also said that his success in winning the presidency could be a “nightmare” for the United States. As the international media put it, Chávez and Morales, along with Fidel Castro and others, have formed the “Anti-American Axis” in the western hemisphere.

At the same time, however, President Lula and many other left leaders have kept warm relations with the Untied States, although Brazil and some other countries are strongly opposed to the idea of establishing a free trade area in the Americas. Even Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega said that his country would respect the U.S.-Central American Free Trade Agreement.

5. The importance of party politics has been increasing in Latin America. Latin America’s party system originated from the nineteenth century. At that time, only two major political parties, the conservative and the liberal, competed for power. Their members mainly came from the upper class of the society. Women were not allowed to vote.

But in the twentieth century, with the rapid development of industrialization and the awakening consciousness of the working class, party politics started to move to the central stage of the Latin American society.

In the 1960s and the 1970s, however, Latin America’s democracy was interrupted by repeated military coups and many political parties were forbidden by the military governments to engage in political activities.

The “third wave” of democracy also revived party politics in Latin America. Since the 1980s, with the return of democracy, party politics has been playing an increasingly important role. As in other regions of the world, party politics is often used as a tool to mobilize political participation in Latin America. Politicians believe that parties hold the keys to political power, and more and more ordinary people have started to consider parties as indispensable to the progress of democracy in their countries.

6. “Democratic fatigue” is emerging. Development of party politics depends on the enthusiasm of the voters to cast their ballots. Indeed, since the “third wave” of democratization arrived in Latin America, elections have been held regularly according to the constitutionally-set timetable. Beneath this rosy picture, however, there is a worrisome phenomenon. In the 1998 presidential election in Brazil, 48% of the voters failed to go to the polling stations or cast an invalid ballot. This percentage was 50% for the 2000 presidential election in Peru, 43% for the 2000 presidential election in Venezuela, and 42% for the 2001 congressional election in Argentina.

The low turnout in Latin America’s elections has been termed as “democratic fatigue” by the political scientists. Some commentators even argue that the greatest danger faced by Latin American democracy today is not military coup, but “democratic fatigue”.

The phenomenon of “democratic fatigue” results from several factors. First, widespread corruption by the government officials and party leaders has deprived the voter of their trust and confidence in politics (See Table 1). Second, the voters do not believe what the candidates say in the election campaign. Third, economic reforms since the 1990s have generated many side-effects like worsening social problems and widening income gap. The voters tend to blame these negative things on the politicians running for public offices. Finally, many parties are well-known for their internal disputes and confrontation, their top leadership is interested in gaining an upper-hand over the other factions within the party.
Whether the legacy of the “third wave” of democratization in Latin America can be consolidated will be determined by many factors and the following are the most important.

1. Will the graveness of the region’s social problems be reduced? Over the past two decades in Latin America, economic reforms have achieved evident progress. At the same time, however, social problems have become worse and worse. For instance, poverty is still widespread and crime rates are on the rise. In many cases, social problems have been the root for political instability. Given the seriousness and persistence of these problems, it will not be an easy task for Latin American policy-makers to deal with them. As a result, political stability of the region will be at risk.

II. The Future of Latin American Politics

In 2006 the United Nation’s Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) put forward the notion of social cohesion. According to ECLAC, social cohesion can help ease the serious social problems in

![Table 1: Confidence in Congress](image-url)

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Note: For “Effectiveness of lawmaking bodies”, 1 is “very ineffective” and 7 is “very effective”.

Latin America. In order to consolidate social cohesion, ECLAC suggested three types of policies: (1) To generate more employment. Employment is the most important link between economic development and social progress because it is the main source of household income (about 80% of the total in Latin America). (2) To promote education. Education is essential for reducing poverty, since it prepares people to exercise citizenship, protects the most socially vulnerable groups and promotes greater equity in access to opportunities for well-being. (3) To reinforce social protection. Social protection can give all citizens the access they need to services that reduce their vulnerability and improve their quality of life. It can also reduce the risks such as unemployment, underemployment, sickness and the loss or drastic curtailment of income in old age.\(^{viii}\)

If these policy measures are fully implemented, Latin America’s social problems will be eased, thus contributing to the effectiveness of preserving political stability.

2. Will high economic growth rate be maintained? High economic growth rate can create employment, raise real wages and improve people’s living standards, thus contributing to the region’s political stability in the future. On the contrary, failure to maintain reasonably high economic growth would result in worsening social problems and public discontent. When Argentina was hit by the financial crisis at the end of 2001, this South American country witnessed five presidents coming and going within a short period of two weeks.\(^{ix}\) This absurd political development was quite rare even in human history. Argentina was considered as a failed state by the international media.

According to Albert Fishlow, Latin America needs to achieve economic growth rate higher than 6 percent so as to create enough jobs. In order to obtain this growth rate, it should raise investment rate to more than 25 percent.\(^{x}\) Except for Chile, no Latin American country has reached this target.

Much of the investment should go to infrastructure. According to a World Bank report, Latin American countries must substantially boost their spending on infrastructure so the region does not lag behind China and other dynamic Asian economies.\(^{xi}\)

3. Can the military remain in the barracks? As early as in the colonial times, the military was one of the most dominant players in the region’s political life. Military leaders such as Simón Bolívar and José de San made great contributions to the victory of Latin America’s independence movement. After gaining independence, Latin America underwent through a period of political turmoil caused by the so-called Caudillos competing for power and influence among them. In the 1960s and 1970s, the military was blamed for its active intervention in politics.

Since the “third wave” of democratization emerged in Latin America, however, the military in most countries of the region appears to have been tamed. It agrees to undertake the duties assigned by the constitution. At the same time, the governments in many Latin American countries have satisfied the military’s request for more funds. Since the 1990s, military expenditures in many countries of the region have risen steadily. If the military-civilian relations can be kept on good terms, political stability in the region will be guaranteed.

4. Will Latin America’s corruption be curtailed? Latin America’s corruption is notorious in the world. According to the Transparency International’s 2007 Corruption Perceptions Index, only four countries, i.e., Chile, Barbados, Saint Lucia and Uruguay, were among the thirty least corrupt countries in the world, whereas ten countries were among those whose rankings were after one hundred, and Haiti was the last but one. In some of the Latin American countries, even the top leaders have been accused of corruption charges. Brazilian President Fernando Collor de Mello and Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez were impeached from office. Former Nicaraguan President Arnoldo Aleman was sentenced to twenty years in prison. Former Costa Rican President Miguel Angel Rodriguez stepped down from the post of Secretary-General of the Organization of the American States and was immediately detained after he returned home from his office in Washington D.C. Former President of Peru Alberto Fujimori, facing a corruption scandal, fled to Japan, where he attempted to resign his presidency. But his resignation was rejected by the Congress, which preferred to remove him from office by force of vote. He was finally extradited to face criminal charges in Peru in September 2007.

In Latin America, many government officials at lower levels and even the judges and police have been found embezzling their powers for personal profits. Needless to say, wide-spread corruption has caused enormous public discontent, and in some extreme cases, political stability has been endangered.

5. Can the Latin American governments upgrade the level of their governability? Governability is the political and institutional capability and effectiveness in decision-making and administration. Governability matters, particularly in the days when political and economic reforms are being implemented and the society is being greatly
transformed. Low level of governability can cause problems, upheavals and disorder to the economy and society, and popular discontent against the government would escalate.

In Latin America there are many examples in which lack of governability can cause political instability. Soon after assuming presidency of Venezuela in February 1989, President Pérez raised the price of gasoline, cut subsidy for public transportation and food, and devalued the currency. These measures, which were expected to meet the demands of the IMF, exerted great pressure upon inflation, worsening the living standards of the poor. On February 27, wide-scale demonstration broke out in the capital city of Caracas, protesting against the government policies. Several hundred people were killed in the clashes between the military police and protestors. This tragedy marked the end of the days when Venezuela was seen as the “model of democracy” in Latin America.

A similar story took place in Bolivia. In September 2003, President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada announced his plan to export natural gas to North America through a Chilean port, provoking large-scale protest. Transportation came to a standstill in many places across the nation, and there were even riots in some cities. Police came to restore order and a few hundred demonstrators were killed in the clashes, leading the resignation of President Sánchez, who then went into exile in the United States.

Sánchez’s successor, President Carlos Mesa, once again met with strong popular resistance against his plan to export gas. Many people accused him of acting on behalf of the foreign companies at the cost of Bolivia’s national interests. Wide-spread demonstrations broke out again in many parts of the country in May 2005. Almost one hundred highways in seven of the nation’s nice provinces were blocked, leading to shortages of many supplies and high inflation in the urban areas. On June 9, President Mesa’s resignation was accepted by the congress.

III. Concluding Remarks

Since the arrival of the “third wave” of democratization in Latin America, its political development process has been developing steadily. Political reforms have been implemented in a more systematic way. While some of the political parties in have lost their traditional influence, the left has re-emerged as a critical political force. Although the importance of party politics has been increasing, the region is also suffering from “democratic fatigue”.

In order to preserve the legacy of the “third wave” of democratization and consolidate political stability, Latin American nations should double their efforts to deal with the social problems, push forward economic growth, keep the military in the camps, fight against corruption and strengthen governability.

Bibliography

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3 Chile was the last country in Latin America to shift from military rule to civilian government. According to Chile’s 1980 constitution, General Pinochet could stay in power until October 1988, and then, a plebiscite would be held to decide whether Pinochet could rule until 1997. Pinochet did not get the support from the majority of people in the plebiscite. As a result, a democratic election took place in 1999 and Patricio Aylwin became the first civilian president after 19 years of military rule.
5 The “Fifth Republic” refers to Chávez’s “Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela”, the fifth republic in Venezuelan history.
In order to stop the run on the banks, President Fernando de la Rúa announced a series of strict financial regulations on December 3. These measures prevented the financial sector from bankruptcy, but generated a great dispute within the political parties and created wide-spread discontent among the public. On December 18, unrest broke out in the capital city of Buenos Aires, protesting against the government’s financial controls. President de la Rúa resigned.


Marianne Fay and Mary Morrison, Infrastructure in Latin America and the Caribbean: Recent Developments and Key Challenges, World Bank, 2005.