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NIAS-IPRI Brief

# State of Peace and Conflict in Latin America in 2021

Dr Aparajita Pandey

Assistant Professor, Institute of Public Policy, Amity University, NOIDA

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## Introduction

The region of Latin America has been dominated by the Covid and its wide-spread impact primarily. The pressure that the pandemic put on the region augmented the political inadequacy, economic instability, and the societal inequality and divisions that have long been a part of the region's fabric. The world saw Latin America erupt in protests almost as an entirety instead of small pockets and with good reason. While there are peculiarities to every country, there is also a common thread of dissatisfaction and political fatigue among the people. Popular protests that began and then spread across the region like dominoes falling to unearth a beautiful pattern did so due to the fact that the majority of the work force in the region demands change in the very foundations of Latin American societies. The inequality in social capital and income that is synonymous with the region is a legacy of colonialism; however, Latin America now demands change.

## Major Developments in 2021

While Covid remained an important theme in the region, Latin America was also in the middle of an election super cycle and attempting to recover from the economic ravages of 2020.

## Politics

Beginning with the politics, every few years the world gets obsessed with either the beginning or the culmination of a new 'pink' tide in Latin America. The Pink in the Pink Tide is an acceptable shade of the originally 'red' left in the proverbial American backyard. This palatable shade of Pink is emblematic of governments that are often termed as the Left of Centre, focused on socialist fundamentals, social spending, and welfare. While the election results in this cycle almost provide favourable settings for the declaration of a Pink Latin America; they don't quite hit the mark. The region has often been characterized by its contradictions and this election cycle is not devoid of such wonderful conundrums either. While Honduras, Peru, and most recently Chile have elected Presidents that can be placed on the spectrum towards the left in varying degrees; and the Argentina has continued with Fernandez and Bolivia elected another indigenous leader immediately after Evo Morales; they all come with caveats. The Peruvian President has been quite vocal about being ruthlessly tough on

immigrants and has shown no signs of softening the Peruvian stance on homosexuality and /or reproductive rights of women. The Boric Gabriel in Chile, is yet to deliver on his campaign promises and it still remains to be seen as to how he effectively marries the economic interests with social ones. Alberto Fernandez' party that narrowly won the provincial elections is already showing signs of a split and in all probability, he seems like a one – term president despite being the one to legalise abortions a year ago. Moreover, one only has to look towards Central America and Venezuela to realise that authoritarianism is alive and well in the region. Daniel Ortega, Nayib Bukele, and Nicolas Maduro are the pillars of authoritarianism in the region that refuse to fall. The people seem to be too exhausted and terrified to protest or fight. It would be harsh to colour the lack of popular protest in authoritarian countries as surrender; it must be studied with the understanding of the regions history of death squads and torture and little compunction about political assassinations.

The existence of Gabriel Boric who represents change and popular will, and Nicolas Maduro who represents the oppression, and autocracy in the same region at the same time points not to the convenience of an all-encompassing wave but towards a need for greater understanding of individual countries.

### **Economics**

2021 wasn't too abysmal for Latin America. The region showed some signs of improvement as the world started to put in place systems that could function with the Pandemic restrictions. As these systems came into place; Latin American economies also began to find their feet and begin stabilizing. While no country in the world has reached their pre-Covid levels of growth, and the same goes for Latin America; 2021 saw the Latin American economies recovering in a way that was better than the one predicted.

The other major development has been the discovery of massive crude oil and natural gas reservoirs in the region. While crude oil fields have predominantly been discovered in the Caribbean region; a massive reservoir of natural gas has also been unearthed in Paraguay which is estimated to be larger than the Bolivian reserves. As the region as a whole begins to transform in to an energy destination of the world it has attracted the Chinese attention in its energy sector. China has been making large scale infrastructural investments in the region and has now began to make large scale investments in the national oil and gas companies of the region in addition to its infrastructure and defense sectors.

It will not be far-fetched to expect a greater presence of the US in the next decade in the region not only to contain the rapidly increasing Chinese presence, but also owing to the fact that Latin America with the Caribbean is on its way to becoming an energy destination to the world.

### **Social**

Countries saw wide-spread protests against the policies that focused on increase in taxes and reduction in social spending. While some countries were trying to adopt measures to combat their plummeting economies due to Covid for others it was just a political decision that was completely devoid of concerns for the people or any recognition of their problems. Countries like Chile, Colombia, Bolivia saw protests as the

administration raised taxes on the use of everyday services like public transportation which acted as the last straw in an already seething population. The protests have been brutal and violent but have led to political cognizance and change. The outcome that popular protests lead to wide-spread political change is commendable and has not been replicated in other parts of the world. Countries like Poland and Belarus also witnessed wide spread protests that emerged from a discrepancy between social needs and political action; however, no other region reacted to the demands of the voters with change albeit after violence the way Latin American nations have changed.

## **Major Trends**

### **Need for Change**

The Elections in Latin America have pointed towards a need for endemic change. Peru, Bolivia, Chile, to an extent even Argentina witnessed the election of leaders who can be termed as left leaning. One is quick to label leaders as left and right; however, what is more important to realise for Latin America is that while the leaders might come from political parties that are left or right leaning; they have been elected on the basis of their own political rhetoric and promises. A new term that has now been bestowed upon the region is 'Millennial Left'. This term quite aptly describes the new wave of politics that most of the younger Latin Americans from 18 to 40 years of age are leaning towards. A millennial left leader is one who personifies progressive change; an increase in social spending, sensitivity and commitment towards the environment, understanding and fixing the gender gap, building a society and a parliament that is more inclusive of communities and minorities, and one who is open to change beyond religious parameters, accepting of LGBTQIA community. While Latin America has seen progressive leaders in the past and has whole heartedly supported these leaders; due to the region's religious inclinations homosexuality, reproductive health and rights, as well as non-traditional gender norms have remained untouched topics, the generation that makes up the work force wants a dialogue on these subjects and also wishes to see transformation towards an equitable society.

### **Change through Protests**

The Chilean Protests have elicited reactions of shock and awe in the world. While it is not unknown for countries to formulate entirely new constitutions, such an event usually is a consequence of political regime change, or the incumbent reforming the constitution to ensure their own political permanence. The Chilean case however, is a study in the political transformation that germinated from the grass roots. The Chilean constitution had been built on the foundations of neo - liberalism and class divisions; it was the Constitution formulated during the Pinochet era and was reminiscent of not just an era of extreme oppression and state sanctioned death squads, it was also a system that allowed the concentration of wealth and power among the powerful few. The protests that began with a marginal increase in the metro fare ended in the agreement to formulate a new constitution and now the election of a young, tattooed Gabriel Boric who comes from the coalition of left of centre parties including the party that is considered an extreme left party.

### **Demand for Greater Gender Equality**

The legalisation of abortions in Argentina has also inspired similar demands across the region. The religious tenacity of the region has often manifested itself in the oppression

and suppression of reproductive rights and the freedom of sexuality. While the social dialogue regarding both has managed to include and attract people from all aspects of the spectrum; the increased financial independence of women, and greater freedom of choice that is both demanded and accepted as a social norm by women around the world has had an impact in the Latin American continent too.

Coupled with this sentiment is the backlash against high rates of sexual and violent crimes against women in the region. As well as their villainization as a tactic in conservative politics. This was widely witnessed during the Brazilian elections when a women's protest was presented as an attack on the prevalent conventional social system often equating a demand for freedom with an escalating loss of morality and righteousness. This narrative directly plays into the concept of Marianismo that puts women on a pedestal of sacredness and venerability which conveniently sets them up for failure and degradation at the slightest action which would be considered outside the framework of the accepted social norms.

This dialogue and conflict between what is socially acceptable and what is demanded by women is a reality of Latin America which shall have political and social manifestations in the future.

### **Growth in the energy Sector**

Nations like Guyana, Suriname, Jamaica and Barbados have had huge crude oil and natural gas discoveries which have the potential to change how the world perceives the region. Geologically most islands and the nation of Guyana share the same underwater shelf as the Orinoco River. It is the same Orinoco River that flows through Venezuela and whose basin has been a provider of dense Maya crude to Venezuela of centuries, while the reserves in Venezuela have not diminished, years of maladministration and lack of technical know-how have driven Venezuela into a situation where they find it difficult to harvest the vast quantities of crude oil that they have in their midst. The same plate has led to most geologists believing that most of the Caribbean islands and continental Caribbean countries potentially would possess crude oil and natural gas reserves. Trinidad and Tobago proved this theory right decades ago, when they also were an oil rich nation, however, Trinidad and Tobago now are a nation with depleted oil reserves but still surviving on natural gas. As of the recent discoveries, Guyana has come out on top of the crude oil lottery, since 2015 it has announced twenty-two commercial oil discoveries in its territorial waters. Similarly, Jamaica, Suriname and Barbados have also had sites that have had positive crude oil and natural gas discoveries around these countries. It stands to reason that with further research more sites could be discovered and larger oil reserves could be found.

While these sites are welcome news for the Caribbean nations and their economies, it is also a harbinger of some change. Beginning with the events in the region itself. As a country that is has been steadily spiraling out of control since 2015, Venezuela is understandably unhappy about alternatives to its status as the largest oil producing nation in the Latin American and the Caribbean region. Maduro has also claimed that the Guyanese off shore sites fall inside the Venezuelan territorial waters in addition to initiating small border skirmishes along the Venezuelan – Guyanese border. There is little to no substance in these claims.

Natural gas reserves have also been found in Paraguay and are estimated to be larger than those in Bolivia which are already some of the biggest reserves in the world. This has led to a renewed interest of the world in the region. As the world attempts to engage with the region, staking their claim in the energy sector and bidding for their share, it will be interesting to see the dynamics between Latin American politics with that of China and the US and the competition for dominance on Latin America between the US and China.

### **Projections for 2022**

Covid, Protests, and elections have been the primary theme for Latin America for 2020-21. The election cycle that began in 2019 will end in 2022 with the two big Presidential elections in Brazil and Colombia. An economic recovery will be the major endeavour in the region; and the society shall continue to battle protest movements and, in all probability, new strains of Covid. The Caribbean might be the only source for a little cheer with its energy boom.

2022 looks for Latin America and the Caribbean, a lot like its past two years. It would be unfair to think that such melancholy predictions are limited to Latin America and the Caribbean; most regions in the world are grappling with economic and social insecurities that have been augmented by the constant threat of Covid – 19 and its ever evolving new variants. While the global north is gearing up to provide booster shots to their populations and those in the south are yet to vaccinate large majorities of their population; it would be wrong to single out only Latin America and the Caribbean that would be suffering the consequences of the Omicron variant.

### **Elections**

As Brazil and Colombia head towards Presidential elections, it seems like a probable victory for Lula in Brazil, and Gustavo Petro in Colombia who is rapidly becoming a favourite. While Lula's return seems certain in Brazil, it won't be wrong to expect Jair Bolsonaro to adopt Trump like tactics for violence and disruption; however, Bolsonaro doesn't enjoy a support base as loyal, blind, and large as Trump in the US. Colombian politics on the other hand is responding to the protests that were seen in the country these past two years. Colombia has been a largely conservative country; however the people's outburst about increasing taxes and reducing social spending and the protests in Chile have inspired the people to see a potential leader in Petro. The polls suggest that he would garner 43 per cent of the votes in the first primary which is not enough to ward off a second primary but it would not be far sighted to say that Petro might just win the race.

### **Economic Recovery**

economists suggest a slight slowdown again. This would be attributed to statistical adjustments that happen after an initial bang, while the increase in growth rate that happened in 2021 was encouraging it was also exaggerated statistically as the reference point became the year 2020 when the world had come to a complete halt. Therefore in 2022, when the point of reference is 2021; the slight statistical shrinking of Latin American economies is a mathematical inevitability.

The Caribbean on the other hand is all set to see rapid increase in growth rates and over all economies as it is set to become the new energy destination of the world. With Guyana, Jamaica, Suriname, and Barbados discovering crude oil and natural gas in their

waters, companies like Total, Shell, and Exxonmobil have flocked to the region and the Caribbean is set to become the new oil destination in the near future. This would certainly lead to a strengthening and burgeoning of the economies of the region; however, the political interaction with major multinational oil companies and state sovereignty over their own resources is a separate topic for discussion.

### **Greater Political Protests**

Social unrest seems to be a predictable outcome for the region in 2022. The impact that protest movements can have on the politics of the region has been demonstrated quite well in the past two years. However, as the people demand greater progressive change for a society more equal than the one they grew up in; the values of political, religious, and economic conservatism are set to clash with the values of the majority of the work force that demand gainful employment, job security, equality of income, gender, and sexuality. The demands that are being made by voters aged 18 to 40 who also make up the majority of the work force can be termed as the 'Millennial Left' demands. They want a society that is progressive, tolerant, and accepting. A society more equal with opportunities for growth. A voice for women and minorities, and equality of opportunity for those who have been marginalized for generations.

### **Authoritarianism is here to stay**

On the diametrically opposite end of the spectrum, it is also true that countries currently under authoritarian leaders shall remain under authoritarian leaders. Authoritarian regimes will hold on to power through greater political violence and militarization of police. Countries like Venezuela and Nicaragua, show no signs of a possible revolution and US shows no signs of wanting to step into the politics of Venezuela and/or Nicaragua; beyond making official statements. Venezuela and Nicaragua are bound by a common thread of lack of political opposition; while Nicaragua hardly has an opposition leader not controlled by Ortega, Juan Guaido of Venezuela does not enjoy popular support as he is seen as an American attaché rather than a potential Venezuelan president. Bukele in El Salvador shall also continue with his less than democratic regime.

### **Conflict due to Climate Change**

As the impact of energy discoveries lead to the inevitable process of crude oil and natural gas harvesting which is an extremely polluting procedure by its very nature and the shrinking amazon becomes apparent and the loss of homes, bio-diversity, and for the Caribbean entire neighbourhoods becomes a reality, an obvious conflict will emerge as a result. An imminent refugee crisis that could be preceded by waves of social unrest might see a beginning in 2022.

### **Contesting Chinese and US Presence**

The Chinese presence in the region is already quite pronounced and as China is gradually encroaching on the defense and the energy sector as well, the US has started to take notice. The recent declaration by Biden about an increase in the aid package to the region is a subtle nod towards a combined past of the US and Latin America but not the only one. It can be reasonably predicted that Latin America would witness a greater presence of the US in addition to that of China.

As Latin America and the Caribbean enter the new year it would be interesting to see how they match their expectations with their reality.