

# An overview of the left-wing movements in Latin America

PROF., DR. NGUYEN VAN KHANH  
*University of Social Sciences and Humanities  
Vietnam National University, Hanoi*



*The turning point for Latin American Leftists was Venezuela's 1998 presidential election that resulted in Hugo Chavez's victory \_ Photo: dailysignal.com*

## 1. Leftist ideological trends in Latin America

### *a. Bourgeois democracy*

The current trend of political reformation is characterized as Leftists' attempt to surpass the neoliberal hegemony while retaining bourgeois democratic institutions. Political researchers refer to this trend as the "pink tide".

The bourgeois democratic orientation is widely advocated by the Leftist and Peronist ruling parties, especially by President Lula de Silva's administration in Brazil and his peers Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina and Michelle Bachelet in Chile. They seek to circumvent neoliberalism by implementing government regulations to achieve economic recovery and exhort national and regional bourgeois in their work. These Leftist governments tend towards a capitalist economic model similar to European countries in which competition

among labourers is strongly advocated in order to maximize benefits and enhance their competitiveness in the global market. As such, Leftist governments insist on protecting bourgeois democracy and state governments only act to fix the damages of global financial crisis fuelled by the capital strike<sup>(1)</sup> while creating social programs to placate the people groups who are dissatisfied with the new economic development strategies. For example, the state government in Brazil gives direct subsidies to the poor, which can ensure support for the ruling party from underdeveloped regions.

In general, these “Pink Tide nations” attempt to diverge from neoliberal hegemony and adopt a market economy. Other policies include: addressing social issues, nationalizing a number of economic sectors, promoting anti-corruption programs, and implementing social programs concerned with equality and democracy (such as poverty reduction, illiteracy eradication, solving unemployment, improving public services). In terms of foreign policy, although these nations retain their cooperation with the US (especially in trade), they assume a more independent and assertive role in advocating for the integration and democratization of the region and the international community, aspiring to create a new world order for the sake of peace, national independence, and social enhancement.

*b. Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century*

*The foundations of “Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century”*

The establishment of “Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century”, led by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, was fuelled by the abolishment of neoliberalism and the influence of the growing democratization processes and experiences from other socialist states (Vietnam, China, Cuba). President Hugo Chavez garnered attention at the World Social Forum 5 (January of 2005) by stating: Venezuela will reform Socialism, but it will be different from the Socialism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>(2)</sup>. In 2006, Chavez explained: Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is based on solidarity, fraternity, love, justice, freedom, and equality. Also, this form of socialism has no pre-definitions and must be reconstructed every day<sup>(3)</sup>.

After publicizing his new ideology, President Chavez was deemed a “political phenomenon in Latin America” by the media and foreign statesmen. With the objectives of social equality and poverty eradication, this ideology received strong support from three other Leftist parties in the region: Movement for Socialism (MAS) in Bolivia, PAIS Alliance (AP) in Ecuador, and Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in Nicaragua.

*The rationale of “Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century”*

*Marxism - Leninism*

Latin American Leftist parties did not embrace Marxism - Leninism from the beginning of their social reformation. In his first presidential term (1998), President Chavez believed in a “humanitarian capitalism” approach and tended to follow the Third Way, which was promoted by other social democratic movements. However,

the failed coup d'état employed by oppositional Rightists (April 2002) convinced him that the only way to escape poverty was to engage in Socialism.

Latin America's initial perceptions of Marxism were mainly critical. Heinz Dieterich Steffan criticized Marxist ideology for its heavy inclination towards social renovation, class struggle, absolutizing the national government and idealizing Socialist society. He argued that, instead of constructing a society dictated by the proletariat, a majority democracy should be established in which people with a variety of perspectives are involved in the decision-making process of national affairs. The President of the Republic of Ecuador Rafael Correa further emphasized: *In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are obliged to reject elements of traditional Socialism that are not feasible and desirable, such as class struggle, violent change, and dialectical materialism itself<sup>(4)</sup>.*

In general, "Socialism of the 21st century" has retained a number of Marxist principles on the political economy, anti-Capitalism, opposing Bourgeois political oppression and economic exploitation, idealizing an equitable and classless society. The followers of this ideology advocate for the democratization of production and for the nationalization of certain means of production, especially in strategic sectors, without completely abolishing privatization.

#### *Bolivarianism<sup>(5)</sup>*

Simon Bolivar conceived the tenets of Bolivarianism when he led the struggle for independence in Latin America. Bolivar's ideology, which plays a pivotal role in the theoretical structure of "Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century", adheres to seven main principles: *National independence, people's right to self-determination, social equity, an educated populace, anti-corruption, anti-imperialism, and Latin America solidarity.*

President Chavez studied and applied Bolivar's ideas in the construction of "Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century", which he called the Bolivarian Revolution. Furthermore, Bolivar's notions of regional integration and building "a great American nation without borders, presented and opened to the world" have also been continued by many of the region's Leftist governments to create "universal balance" with powerful nations in this era of globalization.

#### *Christian Humanism*

President Chavez advocated for the Christian ideals of equality, charity and especially freedom for the poor, asserting that Jesus was "the greatest Socialist in history". Given that belief, he encourages his peoples to act according to God's doctrines and instils a sense of unity and care into the community, allowing the people to set aside individualism and oppose Imperialist oppression and exploitation. With 80% of Latin Americans identifying as Christians, the religious approach of Leftist governments has proven to be an advantage in rallying support for the construction of Socialism.

In conclusion, Leftist governments have utilized and combined elements of Marxism, Bolivarianism, and Christian humanism to create a theoretical basis for "Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century".

## 2. The role of the Leftists in Latin America's political, economic and social scenes

### *a. The ruling Leftist parties steer the political scene*

As notable representatives at the forefront of Latin American society, many Leftist parties have developed political platforms that appeal to the aspirations of the majority. On this basis, Leftist parties have successfully rallied support from the people by means of electoral votes in national general elections eventually become the organic part in every nation's political system. After a turbulent period, they have managed to turn the tide in the long slog against the Rightists.

The turning point for Latin American Leftists was Venezuela's 1998 presidential election that resulted in Hugo Chavez's victory. Subsequently, there came a soaring number of Leftist nominations, led by Ricardo Lagos in Chile in 2000, and then Lula de Silva in Brazil in 2002, Nestor Kirchner in Argentina in 2003, and Torrijos in Panama with Vasquez in Uruguay in 2004. Morales became the first Bolivian president to come from an indigenous population in 2005.

Since 1998, there have been 17 ruling leftist parties in Latin America, which account for half of the countries in America and 3/4 of the Latin American countries. However, due to ineffective operations and military interference from external forces, several Leftist parties have lost their power to Rightists, notably in Haiti (2004), Honduras (2009), and Paraguay (2012). Nevertheless, the advancement of regional Leftist movements, once described as "impossible" by the Americans, remain unaffected.

This breakthrough in the Latin America political scene has proven significant to the advancement of global leftist movements, especially since the communist and international labor movements have not completely overcome the 1980s crises. With a democratic approach, Latin American Leftist movements have made a positive impact on the political scene, marking sharp contrasts with their European counterparts. European leftists tend to prioritize numbers of seats in their Parliaments, which contributes to the growing "middle way" trend, *while Latin American leftists aim for a pure leftist ideology with the purpose of protecting their national independence, opposing interference and oppression from imperialist nations and transnational corporations, and solving social problems rooted in neoliberalism*<sup>(6)</sup>. Given these objectives, the leftists and other parties in Latin America have created pressure for serious social reform. At the same time, the combination of leftist ideologies has created a number of regional alliances, including the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) and the South American Community of Nations (CSN).

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At the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the global leftist movements had to cope with a variety of challenges due to crises and disorientation. While in Europe many leftist parties lost their power and became opposition parties, Latin Americans placed their faith and support in leftist movements. This twist was due to three main reasons. First, the failure of the neoliberal economic model increased poverty, unemployment, and inequality in Latin American societies, which ignited the people's desire for national independence and democracy. Based on these dreams, leftist parties intensively promoted their cause and became the champion of democracy, equality, and social reform. Second, the leftist parties continuously innovated their ideology and methods of operation in the midst of tumultuous global and regional circumstances. Instead of violations and armed struggle, leftist parties emphasized on rallying support from common people and competing for parliamentary power with appealing political platforms. Third, there existed not only alliances among leftist parties but also between leftist parties and other forces fighting for democracy and social reform through a variety of forums and conventions, which afforded leftist movements additional grassroots support.

*b. Promoting economic development and social welfare*

Neoliberalism allowed Latin America to achieve a number of temporary successes but ultimately led its nations into a full-scale crisis by the end of the 20th century. A number of social issues - poverty, unemployment, inequality, corruption, foreign debts - had taken prominence without proper resolutions from Rightist governments, which gradually degraded Latin America's society and economy.

During election campaigns, Leftist parties proposed many resolutions to the crisis and immediately put them into motion after taking power. Although these resolutions were manifested at varying levels, they all targeted a shift from a neoliberal economy to a market economy, solving social issues with a democratic approach. New policies included: anti-corruption, land reform, fighting poverty, improving medical services, promoting community culture, and amending the constitution to protect labor rights.

Among the nations that continued with bourgeois democracy, Brazil boasts the highest number of achievements. During the 2002-2006 presidential term, President Silva's administration attempted to control governmental corruption, maintain a sustainable economy, protect the natural environment, and solve pressing social issues. Annually, the government provided a subsidy of 4 billion USD for 11.5 million poor families, a total of 60 million people, which accounted for one third of Brazil's population. Social and economic development rates also achieved positive results: the economy achieved a growth rate of 5% a year, inflation rate was curbed, currency reserves increased sharply (up to \$375 billion), unemployment rate dropped to 7% (2009), 24 million people got out of poverty, and millions of children received monthly educational aid<sup>(7)</sup>. At the end of 2005, Brazil had completely paid off its debts to the IMF, accounting for billions of dollars, and became one of the three largest economies on the American continent.

In addition to their well-established ideology, the left-wing governments of four Latin American countries following “Socialism of the 21st century” also learned from the reformations in China, Vietnam, and Cuba to further their policies. In Venezuela, President Chavez encouraged the participation of all people in the decision-making process of national affairs, which he considered the “main factor”, the core, of an equal, united and democratic society. Given this perspective, he implemented a series of amendments to the institutions, held a referendum on the new constitution, built a constitutional congress able to meet the demands of democracy, ratified a number of property laws that benefited impoverished citizens, and nationalized the oil industry. The government also used the interests of the oil industry to fuel social improvements. By implementing these advanced and democratic methods, Venezuela achieved many spectacular results over the period of a decade. The poverty rate was reduced and Venezuelans are now able to benefit from numerous social, educational, and medical services as well as participate in a number of social functions. By the end of 2007, Venezuela’s unemployment rate dropped into the single-digits and public debt fell from 30.7% in 1998 to 14.3% in 2008<sup>(8)</sup>.

By implementing policies that benefit the labourers and prioritize the development of a sustainable economy, other countries in Latin America such as Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, and Ecuador have also achieved notable results. Due to these improvements, Latin America has shifted towards a new era; the economy is gradually recovering, the political scene is stabilizing, and people’s lives are markedly improved. For six consecutive years since 2008, Latin America has achieved a sustainable growth rate from 4.5% to 5.5%, the poverty rate dropped from 44% in 2002 to 35.1% in 2008, and extreme poverty dropped to 12.7%<sup>(9)</sup>. These figures, and the success they portray, help to explain the continual emergence of leftist movements in Latin America.

*c. Accelerating international and regional dialogue and cooperation*

In order to cope with a turbulent world and the fast-paced development of globalization, left-wing governments in Latin America accelerated their policies of mutual cooperation. CSN’s second summit, held in Cochabamba (Bolivia) on the 9<sup>th</sup> of December 2006, emphasized that Latin American nations must integrate their region while maintaining their individual customs, respecting differences of ideology and political tenets in order to accelerate mutual dialogue and cooperation with the aim of consolidating regional sustainability. Latin America favoured an economic model similar to that of the EU, which require a common currency and a single economic-trade mechanism, in order to abolish their dependence on the capitalist economic and financial system controlled by the U.S. Since 2006, Latin American nations that follow leftist ideologies have been members of numerous international and regional economic-political organizations such as: Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), EU-MLT, CALC, Organization of American States (OAS), and the United Nations Security Council. The sense of solidarity and consensus among member states in Latin America will significantly contribute to the

economic and social development of the region and prepare them well for future challenges.

In relations to the U.S, left-wing governments agree on policies that strengthen trade cooperation, but in a more independent manner; they criticize the United States' oppressive policies. Venezuela, for example, has publicly renounced a number of the United States' policies (the embargo against Cuba, interferences in Middle East, etc) but also remains flexible in its strategies to maintain trade relations between the two countries. In 2005, the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) was established by Venezuela and Cuba with the purpose of consolidating agreements of regional economic integration, opposing the Free Trade scheme devised by the U.S. ALBA facilitated the PETRO CARIBE and PETROSUR energy alliances in order to utilize regional energy sources.

Opposing the United States' embargo against Cuba was an important point in the policies of many Latin American countries. A number of leftist governments have re-established diplomatic relations with Cuba, promoting relations with Non-Aligned Movement and socialist countries. Venezuela and Bolivia established a strategic relation and became partners with Cuba in matters of economy, education, and medical care. Bilateral and multilateral cooperation between left-wing governments and Vietnam, China, Iran, Russia are gradually developing, expressed in high-level visits, conventions, and agreements on cooperation frameworks.

Latin American leftists also support the democratization of international relations and the reformation of the United Nations for a more peaceful, democratic and advanced world. In order to achieve that, Leftists have cooperated with communist parties and social forces to establish a number of international forums and conferences. The Sao Paulo Forum is a notable case that attracted 140 parties and political organizations, while the annual conference on "parties and a new society" held by Mexico Labour Party attracted nearly 60 regional communist, labour and left-wing parties as well as many major parties from Asia and Europe. Through these conferences and forums, nations have an opportunity to exchange their experiences, assess regional situations, ruminate on the consequences of neoliberalism, and devise an alternative method for constructing a people-centered society.

### **3. Challenges for Latin American leftist government**

Under the leadership of left-wing governments, the Latin American economy has recovered quickly after a decade of turmoil. Vice President of World Bank Hasan Tuluy said: "Latin America is a role model for other regions in the world in the midst of economic and financial crisis"<sup>(10)</sup>. However, the reduced prices of agricultural products and oil have weakened the Latin American economy and introduced new challenges. Though less influential than before, the U.S. remains Latin America's largest trade partner. Given this relationship, every country in the region of Latin America is negatively affected when the U.S is struck with an economic crisis. Author

Jack Rasmus unflinchingly stated that the depression in Latin America is rooted in the dealings of the U.S.<sup>(11)</sup>

In fact, Latin American countries cannot resolve their current economic and social issues by themselves. In assessing their own economic potential and geopolitical position in the midst of globalization and a changing, multi-polar world, they recognized that cooperation with the U.S. is inherently vital to their economic development. However, the stalemate between the U.S. and Cuba was a hindrance to these cooperative efforts. Therefore, the normalization of relations between the U.S. and Cuba in 2004 was considered a turning point in international dialogue that may lead to the resolution of many issues.

The left-wing governments of Latin America voiced their support for the recent agreements made between the U.S. and Cuba. President Dilma Rousseff (Brazil) affirmed that this event will usher in a new era for the region. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Chile, Heraldo Munoz, described the event as “the beginning of an end to the Cold War in Latin America”. The dialogue will act as a touchstone for the U.S. and other countries in the western hemisphere to resolve their conflicts and promote cooperation. Although it remains a long-term affair, the initial results from the normalization of relations have shifted the OAS to a new phase and widened regional trade agreements<sup>(12)</sup>.

In order to react accordingly to the current political situation, developed countries such as China, Russia and Japan have attempted to implement new strategies toward Latin America by conducting many high-level visits in 2014 and 2015. In correspondence to these moves, Latin American countries have also adjusted their policies toward these developed nations by making themselves more flexible. On the one hand, they publicly advocated for the abolishment of the United States’ embargo against Cuba and the strengthening of a trade partnership with the U.S. On the other hand, they signed numerous trade agreements with China, Russia and Japan to create a balance of power in which they are not dependent on any one country. Latin American countries also aspire to take part in other regional and global trade agreements. Specifically, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of October 2015, 12 countries reached the final settlement of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Although there are ongoing heated disputes over this decision, the TPP will certainly benefit the Latin American economy to a degree, especially Mexico, Peru and Chile - member states of the agreement. In general, due to recent standardizations, Latin American countries have come to many agreements in conferences of political agenda, including the topics of democracy, human rights, global competitiveness, energy, and the natural environment,

Nevertheless, a complete resolution of conflicts and disagreements between the United States and Latin America still has a long way to go. Disputes are continuously arising, notably the U.S. sanction against Venezuela in 2015 for the stated reason of protecting human rights. Venezuela is now the biggest rival to the U.S. in the Western hemisphere. Therefore, while the sanctions against Cuba are gradually being dismissed, the U.S. has decided to increase sanctions against Venezuela. Despite the urgent calls



from the global community to lift these sanctions, President Obama remains steadfast in his decision. These policies toward Venezuela are nothing new; they are a form of business<sup>(13)</sup>. Other sources have raised concerns that Latin America may become a “quarry” in the struggle for power between the larger world powers. In order not to prevent falling into that pit, left-wing governments in Latin America are attempting to utilize their international relations and enhance their partnerships with other countries. In relations with the United States they remain careful and cautious, as they believe that the U.S. will never abandon the dream of hegemony in the Western hemisphere ■

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● Endnotes:

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- (1) CPV Online Newspaper: *On the leftist force in Latin America*, <http://cpv.org.vn>.
- (2), (3) Gregory Wilpert, “*The Meaning of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialism for Venezuela*”, <http://venezuelanalysis.com>.
- (4) Ecuador: *Interview, “President Rafael Correa discusses ‘Citizens’ Revolution’, socialism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century”*, <http://links.org.au>.
- (5) Simon Bolivar (1783-1830) is the well-known revolutionary of Venezuela, who leads the movements for national liberation in South America in early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Under his leadership, these movements have toppled the rule of Spain, gaining freedom for six countries Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia.
- (6) Nguyen An Ninh: *Leftists in Latin America and Leftists in Europe: Difference brings about breakthrough, Theoretical foundation of the leftists as seen from Marxist viewpoint*, *Proceedings of international scientific symposium, Policy Research and Analysis Center, Labour Publishing House, Hanoi, 2010, p.283.*
- (7) Nguyen Hoang Giap, *The leftist wave of Latin America: Major Reasons and Outcomes*, *American Magazine*, issue 3, 2007, p.38; Truong Tuan Anh: *Outlines of current ruling parties in Latin America*, *Social Science information journal*, issue 11, 2013, p.5.
- (8) J. Preston Whitt: “*The changing face of socialism in the 21<sup>st</sup>”*, <http://www.cetri.be>.
- (9) Tran Thao Nguyen: *Socialism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: Theory, Reality and Prospect*, *Theoretical foundation of the leftists as seen from Marxist viewpoint, Proceedings of international scientific symposium, Policy Research and Analysis Center, Labour Publishing House, Hanoi, 2010, p.247.*
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- (12) Global Risk Insights: “*U.S.-Cuba Thaw Stepping Stone to Expanded Latin America Trade*,” *International Policy Digest* (December 2014), <http://globalriskinsights.com>.
- (13) Alan MacLeod: “*US Sanctions in Latin America*”, <http://www.counterpunch.org>.