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## *Latin America and Caribbean Year 2022 in Review*

Xiomara Castro in her inauguration. Photograph Source: 總統府 – [CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/)

*Challenges for a Pink Tide Surging Over a Volatile US Hegemony*

2023 marks the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Monroe Doctrine. This imperial fiat arrogates to the US the unilateral authority to intervene in the affairs of sovereign states in the Western Hemisphere and to exclude any other power from meddling in what is viewed as Washington's backyard. Two centuries later, the doctrine faces a fragile future.

Going into the new year, the neoliberal model for regional development has been discredited in Latin America and the Caribbean. The socialist model is under siege, and the social-democratic model is encountering unfavorable conditions.

Paradoxically, the very problems that the progressive movements protested against, which brought them into power, now have become theirs to solve, once in power and in a time of mounting economic distress. Antonio Gramsci's observation back in 1930 aptly characterizes the current state: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."

### **Volatile US hegemony**

Last June, US President Joe Biden issued his imperial summons for a hemispheric "democracy summit" in Los Angeles but did not invite Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Cuba. Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, known by the acronym AMLO, took umbrage that not all of the countries of Our Americas had been invited. He then led a boycott of the event, causing a major embarrassment to the self-proclaimed world leader of democracy.

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Regardless, the principal superpower, far from retrenching, has been intent in extending its imperial fiat to the whole planet. With overwhelming military dominance – a war budget larger than the next nine contenders – the US has aggressively asserted “full spectrum dominance” over the entire world.

From a previous stance of enforcing a “Pax Americana” on the premise that a stable world order is good for capitalism, the US has become the leading provocateur of chaotic conditions, most notably provoking a confrontation with Russia, which could escalate to nuclear war.

And with overwhelming financial dominance, the imperial power has imposed sanctions on a third of humanity, throwing the world economy into a gathering recession. In reaction, proposals for alternatives to the US dollar are being circulated. But paradoxically, the greenback is stronger than ever in the last two decades, because it provides what is perceived as the most secure shelter from the international economic precariousness itself precipitated by the US.

### **Pink Tide Surges**

Starting in 2018, neoliberal regimes in *all* the major economies in Latin America have been defeated at the ballot box. AMLO ended over 36 years of neoliberal rule in Mexico in July 2018. Mexico is the second largest regional economy, the thirteenth in the world, and the US’s second largest trading partner.

In Argentina, Alberto Fernández replaced Mauricio Macri in October 2019. Luis Arce retook Bolivia in October 2020 after a coup had overthrown leftist Evo Morales a year before. In Peru, Pedro Castillo, a rural school teacher from the leftist Perú Libre Party, became president in June 2021. Former student protest leader, Gabriel Boric was victorious in Chile in December 2021.

Gustavo Petro became the first left-leaning president ever in Colombian history in June. The former leftist guerilla, since gravitated to the center left, ran with Afro-descendent environmentalist Francia Márquez. Their Pacto Histórico emerged out of the protest movements of 2019 and 2020. In defiance of the US, the new administration has reestablished friendly relations with neighboring Venezuela, while it has pursued implementing the 2016 Peace Accords with paramilitaries and guerillas.

The spectacular comeback of Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil over Jair “Trump of the Tropics” Bolsonaro last October was of international significance. Brazil is the leading economy in the region and eighth in the world. Lula, as he is affectionately called, went

from being a popular president from 2003 to 2010, to sitting out the 2018 presidential contest in prison as a victim of US-backed “lawfare,” to again winning the presidency.

Lula promises ambitious social programs for the poor. Although his inauguration is not until January 1, 2023, he is already playing a leading international role, championing regional integration. Ignoring the lessons of Gadaffi and Hussein whose attempts to replace the US dollar were terminated with extreme prejudice, Lula has proposed the “sur” as a new regional currency.

Among the smaller countries, Xiomara Castro became the first female president of Honduras a year ago. This was an especially sweet triumph for the left as her husband Manuel Zelaya had been deposed in a US-backed coup in 2009. Her predecessor, Juan Orlando Hernández (JOH), was immediately extradited to the US for drug trafficking proving beyond doubt that hers was a victory over a nacro-dictatorship. JOH was the last of a line of corrupt *golpistas* (coup mongers) that the US had propped up for the last dozen years.

Other developments on the left included a successful referendum for a new progressive family code in Cuba, legalizing same-sex marriages. In Nicaragua, which was recovering from an unsuccessful US-backed coup in 2018, the left Sandinista party swept the municipal elections last November.

### **Venezuela’s resurgence**

A leader of the left initiative, Venezuela has been enjoying a resurgence. A year ago last November, the ruling socialist party (PSUV) swept the regional and legislative elections. The economy, which had been tanked by US-imposed “maximum pressure” sanctions, has shown signs of recovery with hyperinflation under control and oil production slowly recuperating.

Juan Guaidó, Venezuela’s so-called “interim president,” was anointed by Donald Trump in 2019. But today, only a handful of Washington’s most sycophantic allies along with Mr. Biden fail to recognize the democratically elected Nicolás Maduro as the legitimate president of Venezuela.

Guaidó’s term in the National Assembly will expire by January 5 and any fiction of his “interim presidency” will be over with his own far-right bloc rejecting him. Unfortunately, this came too late for the imprisoned Venezuelan diplomat Alex Saab. His bid for freedom under diplomatic immunity was rejected on December 23 by a federal judge in Miami largely on the grounds that he was appointed as a special envoy by a government the US does not recognize.

## **Multilateralism**

The entire region is tilting toward more independence from the “Colossus of the North” and toward its corollary, greater regional integration. Collective bodies, which exclude the US and its vassal Canada, are being revived. UNASUR, CELAC, MERCOSUR, and ALBA date back from the previous Pink Tide led by Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez. The vision of *patria grande*, the project of Latin American unity, is alive.

Significantly, China has emerged as the region’s second largest trading partner, with over twenty states in the region joining Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative. This provides a substitute to monopolar dependence on commerce with Uncle Sam. Russia, too, has been pushing under the greenback curtain. Brazil is already in the BRICS alliance with Russia, India, China, and South Africa. Argentina is slated to join an expanded BRICS+.

China, Russia, and newcomer Iran have more than provided an alternative. They have been a vital lifeline for the explicitly socialist states of Nicaragua, Cuba, and Venezuela, which are in the crosshairs of imperialism.

## **Revolt against the neoliberal model**

“Neoliberalism was born in Chile and here it will die” was the slogan of the massive demonstrations of 2019-2020 in Chile. This was also the animating sentiment of the entire current Pink Tide, which was a reaction to and rejection of the discredited neoliberal model for development. Neoliberalism is roughly defined as the contemporary form of so-called free-market capitalism.

Out of the anti-neoliberal protests in Chile came the Gabriel Boric presidency and a referendum on replacing the Pinochet-era constitution. The latter was soundly defeated by the voters on September 4. And, of the current crop of “pink” presidents, Boric has criticized his more left-leaning colleagues for being “authoritarian,” while he has suffered plummeting approval ratings at home.

The rejection of the neoliberalism model has also spawned more decidedly non-progressive manifestations with the rise of right populism, epitomized by Bolsonaro in Brazil. The appeal of someone as unappealing as Donald Trump in the US is a similar example. Such politicians opportunistically capitalize on the revulsion against neoliberalism by associating its failures with their more liberal opponents.

The poster child for the failure of the neoliberal model is Haiti. The proud home of the first successful revolution and slave revolt in the region in 1804, Haiti has had to pay “reparations” for freeing the slaves. A burdensome debt imposed by mainly the former

colonial power of France and the US has contributed to Haiti being the poorest nation in the region.

US-led policy further destroyed small-scale agriculture impoverishing the population to serve as cheap labor for foreign corporations. The US had twice helped engineer coups removing the democratically elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

Today, Haitian civil society has risen up, and all the US can propose is a return of a multi-national military force. Haiti is without an elected president, a parliament that doesn't meet, and governmental services that barely function; proof that western patronage is a formula for un-development.

### **Socialist alternative under siege**

The current surge of the Pink Tide was a “battle at the ballot box” focused on the electoral arena. It did not produce any new socialist revolutions, and none are on the horizon. On the contrary, the socialist states of Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela are under heavy siege, struggling for survival.

These states have had to retrench some of their social programs, forced by economic necessity to introduce clearly neoliberal forms such as “free-trade” zones. Of the three countries with explicitly socialist governments, it should be noted, only Cuba has a socialist economy where there is central planning and where key economic units are state-controlled.

While US hegemony may be on an increasingly fragile footing, there is no counter-hegemonic force in the current world geopolitical arena comparable to the former Soviet Union and the role that it played in fostering a socialist alternative. China offers alternative trade opportunities, along with limited debt relief, cultural exchanges, and Covid care assistance. But much more than mere commerce is needed to offset the deleterious impacts of US “hybrid warfare” on Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. The current reality is that all states have to engage in an international economy where the US dollar is supreme.

The debilitating effects of the blockades imposed by the US and its allies have been further amplified by the impact of the Covid pandemic and then followed by lethal hurricanes, rains, and flooding last October. As a result, all three socialist countries have experienced unprecedentedly high out migration this last year.

Recent on-again-off-again offers of asylum to Nicaraguans and Venezuelans and the longstanding Cuban Adjustment Act are deliberately perverse incentives exacerbating out migration from the socialist states.

The economic refugees from the socialist states should be distinguished from the Northern Triangle migrants from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala who are also fleeing gangs, societal violence, and insecurity in addition to economic push factors. They, along with Mexicans, continue to comprise the bulk of those seeking to enter the US.

### **Limits and liabilities of the social democratic model**

Compared to its zero-tolerance of the nominally socialist states, cooption and subversion are Washington's strategies for the regional social democracies. Governance in Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, and others is based on a lopsided partnership. The owning classes control, but allow some of the wealth produced by the popular classes to remain with those who produced it.

In the previous Pink Tide wave around 2008, such uneasy inter-class arrangements allowed dramatic decreases in poverty. The more privileged sectors did well too, such as large and politically powerful agribusinesses in Brazil, because a booming international commodities tide raised all ships.

These states now face a much-changed international economic recessionary climate. Low interest rates the previous decade and then the need for emergency spending during the Covid crisis encouraged the accumulation of high debt obligations. Debts now must be paid back in more costly dollars in these globally inflationary times. Capital flight to western banks is accelerating. Under such conditions, fulfillment of social programs is more problematic.

In short, western and particularly US domination of the world financial order considerably limits the possibilities for the new Pink Tide administrations to develop their economies successfully. A near monopoly of 96% of the region's trade continues to be denominated in US dollars.

### **Countercurrents**

As the metaphor of the Pink Tide implies, the grand class struggle ebbs and flows. President Arce of Bolivia survived a rightwing coup attempt in October. Then by yearend, the progressive project suffered back-to-back reversals in Argentina and Peru.

Current vice-president and former president (2003-2007) of Argentina, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, was the leading contender on the left for the 2023 elections. But on December 6, she was sentenced to six years in prison for corruption and barred from running for office. Although she is appealing what is considered a "lawfare" frameup, the right is anticipating a comeback in the upcoming election. A huge debt burden and high

inflation rates, incurred by the previous rightwing administration, was inherited by the current left Peronist government.

The next day, former CIA operative and current US ambassador to Peru, Lisa Kenna, is widely credited with greenlighting a parliamentary coup. The elected president of Peru, Pedro Castillo, is now imprisoned and some 30 people have been killed in popular demonstrations in his support. Mexico, Cuba, Venezuela, Argentina, Nicaragua, and Bolivia have condemned the coup. Colombian President Petro commented: “The crisis in Peru, the imprisonment, without a judge and without defense, of a popularly elected president, has seriously questioned the role of the American Convention in the Latin American legal system.”

Latin Americans quip that the reason there never has been a successful coup in the US is because there is no US embassy in Washington. The retort to that aspersion on Yankee integrity is that with the neo-con takeover of the Democratic Party, there is no reason for a coup.

US ambassadors to Honduras and Mexico were among the more vocal in interfering in the internal politics of their host countries this last year. Meanwhile Nicaragua preemptively rejected the appointed US ambassador to Managua after he blatantly criticized his presumptive post country in his congressional ratification hearing.

### **Bolívar’s prophecy**

Biden has continued Trump’s policies for Latin America and the Caribbean with only a few cosmetic variations. Full-throated regime-change measures for Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua are more aggressive and effective than ever before, according to the Cubans.

And as bad as Trump’s treatment of immigrants from south of the border had been, Biden’s has been arguably worse. The US special envoy to the debacle in Haiti publicly quit in protest to the current administration’s “inhumane” policies.

Symptomatic of the bipartisan Washington consensus was the so-called BOLIVAR Act tightening sanctions on Venezuela, which passed the US Senate by unanimous vote on December 16. The US legislation was pointedly named after Simón Bolívar, the revered leader of the struggle against colonialism and for regional integration in South America.

That the imperialists abused the name of Bolívar can best be understood in the context of his prescient observation in 1829: “The United States seems destined by providence to plague America with misery in the name of liberty.”

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