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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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17.01.2024

Interview with former Vice President of Bolivia Álvaro García Linera

"The extreme right is defeated with a greater distribution of wealth, not with moderation or conciliation"



Sources: Colombia Humana Center for Thought

As a result of his trip to Colombia to inaugurate the cycle of thought "Imagining the future from the South", organized by the Colombian Ministry of Culture by the philosopher Luciana Cadahia, the former Bolivian vice president Álvaro García Linera spoke about the political and social scenario that Latin America is going through in this "liminal time" or interregnum that we will have to go through during the next 10 or 15 years. until the consolidation of a new world order. It is clear that this unstable darkness is the moment for the entry on the scene of the most monstrous ultra-right that, to a certain extent, are a consequence of the limits of progressivism. In the new stage, Linera argues that progressivism must bet on greater audacity to, on the one hand, respond with historical responsibility to the profound demands that are at the base of popular adherence and, on

the other, neutralize the siren songs of the new right. This implies advancing profound reforms on property, taxation, social justice, the distribution of wealth, and the recovery of common resources in favor of society. Only in this way, starting by resolving the most basic economic demands of society and advancing in real democratization, Linera argues, will it be possible to confine the ultra-right to their niches again.

In the region, the 21st century began with a wave of progressive governments that reoriented the course of Latin America, but this dynamic began to stagnate after the triumph of Mauricio Macri in Argentina in 2015, leading many to predict the end of regional progressivism. Thus, a wave of conservative governments began, but, contrary to the trend, in countries such as Brazil, Honduras or Bolivia, progressivism returned. And in others, such as Mexico and Colombia, he managed to come to power for the first time. How do you read this current tension between popular or progressive governments and other conservative or oligarchic ones?

What characterizes the historical time that goes from 10 or 15 years ago to the next 10 or 15 years is the slow, anguished and contradictory decline of a model of organization of the economy and of the legitimation of contemporary capitalism, as well as the absence of a new solid and stable model that resumes economic growth. economic stability and political legitimacy. It is a long period, we are talking about 20 or 30 years, within which there lives what we have called "liminal time" – what Gramsci called "interregnum" – where there are waves and counter-waves of multiple attempts to resolve this impasse.

Latin America – and now the world, because Latin America was ahead of what later happened everywhere – experienced an intense and profound progressive wave, but one that failed to consolidate, followed by a conservative regressive counter-wave and then by a new progressive wave. Possibly, we will still see for the next 5 or 10 years these waves and counter-waves of short victories and short defeats, of short hegemonies, until the world redefines the new model of accumulation and legitimation that will return to the world and to Latin America a cycle of stability for the next 30 years. As long as that doesn't happen, we will be witnessing this maelstrom of liminal time. And, as I said, one witnesses progressive waves, their exhaustion, conservative counter-reforms that also fail, a new progressive wave... And each counter-reformation and each progressive wave is different from the other. Milei is different from Macri, although he picks up some of him. Alberto Fernández, Gustavo Petro and Andrés Manuel López Obrador are different from the leaders of the first wave, although they collect part of their legacy. And I think we will continue to see a third wave and a third counter-wave until at some point the order of the

world is defined, because this instability and this anguish cannot be perpetual. Basically, as happened in the 1930s and 1980s, what we see is the cyclical decline of a regime of economic accumulation (liberal between 1870 and 1920, state capitalism between 1940 and 1980, neoliberal between 1980 and 2010), the chaos generated by this historical decline, and the struggle to establish a new and lasting model of accumulation-domination that resumes economic growth and social adherence.

We can observe that the right wing is once again implementing practices that we thought had been overcome, including coups d'état, political persecution and assassination attempts... Even you yourself suffered a coup d'état. How do you think these practices will continue to evolve? And how can we resist them from grassroots projects?

Something characteristic of liminal time, of interregnum, is the divergence of political elites. When things go well – as they did until the 2000s – the elites converge around a single model of accumulation and legitimation, and they all become centrist. The left itself is tempered and neoliberalized, although there will always be a radical but marginal left, without an audience. The right-wingers also fight among themselves, but merely over changes and circumstantial tweaks. When all this enters into its inevitable historical decline, divergences begin and the right splits into extreme right-wingers. The far right is beginning to eat up the moderate right. And the most radicalized lefts emerge from their marginality and political insignificance, they begin to acquire resonance and audience, they grow. In the interregnum, the divergence of political projects is the norm, because there are searches, dissident from each other, to resolve the crisis of the old order, in the midst of a discontented society, which no longer trusts, that no longer believes in the old "gods", in the old recipes, in the old proposals that guaranteed moral tolerance towards the rulers. And then the extremes begin to strengthen.

We're going to see that with the right. The centre-right, which ruled the continent and the world for 30 or 40 years, no longer has answers to the obvious economic failures of liberal globalism and, in the face of people's doubts and anxieties, an extreme right emerges that continues to defend capital but believes that the good manners of the old era are no longer enough and that now the rules of the market must be imposed by force. This involves taming people, if necessary with sticks, to return to a pure and pristine free market, without concessions or ambiguities, because – according to them – that was the cause of the failure. So, this extreme right tends to consolidate and gain more followers by talking about "authority", "free market shock" and "reduction of the state". And if there are social

upheavals, it is appropriate to use force and coercion, and if necessary a coup d'état or massacre, to discipline the wayward who oppose this moral return to the "good manners" of free enterprise and civilized life: with women cooking, men in charge, bosses deciding, and workers working in silence. A further symptom of the liberal decline is evidenced when they can no longer convince or seduce and need to impose; which implies that they are already in their twilight time. But that doesn't mean they don't stop being dangerous, because of the authoritarian radicalism of their impositions.

In the face of this, progressivism and the left cannot behave condescendingly, trying to please all factions and social sectors. The left emerges from its marginality in liminal time because it presents itself as a popular alternative to the economic disaster that corporate neoliberalism has caused; And its function cannot be to implement a neoliberalism with a "human face", "green" or "progressive". People don't take to the streets and vote electorally for the left to decorate neoliberalism. It mobilizes and radically changes its previous political adherences because it is fed up with this neoliberalism, because it wants to get rid of it because it has only enriched a few families and a few companies. And if the left doesn't do that, and coexists with a regime that impoverishes the people, it's inevitable that people will drastically shift their political preferences toward far-right solutions that offer an (illusory) way out of the great collective malaise.

The left, if they want to consolidate themselves, must respond to the demands for which they arose and, if they really want to defeat the extreme right, they have to solve in a structural way the poverty of society, inequality, the precariousness of services, education, health and housing. And in order to realize that materially, they have to be radical in their reforms on property, taxation, social justice, the distribution of wealth, the recovery of common resources in favor of society. Dwelling on this work will feed the law of social crises: any moderate attitude to the seriousness of the crisis fosters and feeds extremes. If the right does that, they feed the left, if the left does that, they feed the extreme right.

Therefore, the way to defeat the extreme right, reducing them to a niche – which will continue to exist, but no longer with social radiation – lies in the expansion of economic and political reforms that translate into visible and sustained material improvements in the living conditions of the popular majorities of society; in the greater democratization of decisions, in a greater democratization of wealth and property, in such a way that the containment of the extreme right is not merely a discourse, but is supported by a series of practical actions for the distribution of wealth that resolves the main anxieties and popular demands (poverty, poverty, poverty inflation, precariousness, insecurity, injustice...).

Because, we must not forget, that the extreme right is a perverted response to these anxieties. The more you distribute wealth, the more you certainly affect the privileges of the powerful, but they will be left in a minority around the rabid defense of their privileges, while the left will consolidate itself as the ones that care about and solve the basic needs of the people. But, the more these lefts or progressives behave in a fearful, timorous and ambiguous way in the resolution of the main problems of society, the more the extreme right will grow and progressivism will be isolated in the impotence of disappointment. So, in these times, the extreme right is defeated with more democracy and with a greater distribution of wealth; Not with moderation or conciliation.

Are there new elements in the new right? Is it correct to call them fascists or should we call them something else? Is the right organizing a post-democratic laboratory for the continent (including the US)?

Undoubtedly, liberal democracy, as a mere replacement of elites who decide for the people, inevitably tends towards authoritarian forms. If, at times, it was able to bear the fruits of social democratization, it was at the impulse of other plebeian democratic forms that unfolded simultaneously – the union form, the agrarian community form, the plebeian form of the urban multitude. It is these multiple and multiform collective actions of democracy that gave liberal democracy a universalist radiance. This could have happened because she was always being passed and pulled ahead. But if one leaves liberal democracy as it is, as a mere selection of rulers, it inevitably tends to the concentration of decisions, to its conversion into what Schumpeter called democracy as a mere competitive choice of those who are going to decide about society, which is an authoritarian way of concentrating decisions. And this monopoly of decision-making by authoritarian means and, if necessary, over and above the elite selection procedure itself, is what characterizes the extreme right. Therefore, there is no antagonism between the extreme right and liberal democracy. There is collusion in the background. The far right can coexist with this kind of merely elitist democratization that fuels liberal democracy. That is why it is not uncommon for them to come to government through elections. But what liberal democracy tolerates marginally reluctantly, and the extreme right openly rejects, are other forms of democratization, which have to do with the presence of democracies from below (trade unions, agrarian communities, neighborhood assemblies, collective actions...). They oppose them, reject them, and regard them as a hindrance. In this sense, today's extreme right is anti-democratic. They only accept that they are elected to rule, but they reject other forms of participation and democratization of wealth, which seems to them an insult, a

grievance or an absurdity that must be combated with the force of order and coercive discipline.

Now, is this fascism? Hard to decide. There is a whole academic and political debate about what name this will take and whether it is worth evoking the terrible actions of fascism in the 1930s and 1940s. In academic preciousness these digressions may be worthwhile, but it has very little political effect. In Latin America, people over 60 may have memories of fascist military dictatorships and the definition can have an effect on them, but for the new generations, talking about fascism doesn't say much. I am not opposed to that debate, but I do not see it as useful. In the end, the social adherence or rejection of the approaches of the extreme right will not come from the side of the old symbols and images they evoke, but from the effectiveness of responding to current social anxieties that the left is powerless to resolve.

Perhaps, the best way to describe these extreme right-wingers, beyond the label, is to understand what kind of demand they respond to, which of course, are different demands from those of the 30s and 40s, although with certain similarities due to the economic crisis in both periods. Personally, I prefer to talk about extreme right-wingers or authoritarian right-wingers; But if someone uses the concept of fascism, I'm not opposed to it, although I'm not too enthusiastic about it either. The problem may come if, at the outset, they are labeled fascists and the question of what kind of class action lawsuit they respond to or what kind of failure they emerge from is set aside. For this reason, before labeling and having answers without questions, it is better to ask yourself about the social conditions of its emergence, the type of solutions it proposes and, based on those answers, you can already choose the appropriate qualifier: fascist, neo-fascist, authoritarian...

For example, is it okay to say that Milei is a fascist? Perhaps, but first we have to ask ourselves why he won, with whose vote, answering what kind of anxieties. That's what's important. And also wonder what you did to make that happen. Today it is more useful to ask ourselves that question than to put an easy label on it that solves the problem of moral rejection but does not help us understand reality or transform it. Because if you answer that Milei summoned the anguish of an impoverished society, then it becomes clear that the issue is poverty. If Milei spoke to a youth that has no rights, then there is a generation of people who did not access the rights of the 1950s, or the 1960s, or the 2000s. Therein lies the problem that progressivism and the left must address in order to stop the extreme right and fascism.

It is necessary to detect the problems with which the extreme right challenges society because its growth is also a symptom of the failure of the left and progressivism. They do not emerge out of nowhere but after progressivism did not dare, could not, did not want, did not see, did not understand the class and the precarious youth, did not grasp the meaning of poverty and the economy above the rights of identity. Therein lies the core of the present. This doesn't mean that you don't talk about identity, but that you hierarchize, understanding that the fundamental problem is the economy, inflation, the money that slips out of your pockets. And it cannot be forgotten that one's own identity has a dimension of economic and political power, which is what anchors subalternity. In the case of Bolivia, for example, indigenous identity gained recognition by assuming political power, first and gradually, economic power within society. The fundamental social relation of the modern world is money, alienated but still fundamental social relation, which slips away from you, which dilutes all your beliefs and loyalties. That is the problem to be solved by the left and progressivism. I believe that the left has to learn from its failures and must have a pedagogy about itself in order to then find the qualifiers to denounce or label some political phenomenon, such as in this case that of the extreme right.

Going back to popular projects, what are the main challenges of progressivism to overcome these crises, these failures you were talking about? Is it only because they have not been able to sufficiently understand or interpret the needs and demands of the citizenry that the extreme right is now taking up?

Money today is the elementary, the basic, the classical, the traditional economic and political problem of the present. In times of crisis, the economy rules, period. Solve that first problem and then the rest. We are in a historical time in which progressivism and the extreme right are emerging, and the classic neoliberal, traditional, universalist center-right is declining. Why? Because of the economy. It is the economy, gentlemen, that occupies the command center of reality. Progressivism, the left and the proposals that come from the popular side have to solve this problem in the first place. But the society for which the old left of the 1950s and 1960s, or progressivism in the first wave in some countries, solved the economic problem, is different from today's. The left has always worked on the sector of the formal salaried working class, and today the non-formal working class is an unknown for progressivism. The world of informality grouped under the concept of "popular economy" is a black hole for the left that does not know it, does not understand it and has no productive proposals for it other than mere palliatives of assistance. In Latin

America, this sector accounts for 60 per cent of the population. And it is not a transitory presence that will disappear later in formality. No, sirs, the social future is going to be informal, with that small worker, small peasant, small entrepreneur, informal wage earner, crossed by family relationships and very curious ties of local or regional loyalty, subsumed in instances where capital-labor relations are not as clear as in a formal company. That world is going to exist for the next 50 years and involves the majority of the Latin American population. What do you say to those people? How do you care about their life, their income, their salary, their living conditions, their consumption?

These two issues are the key to contemporary progressivism and the Latin American left: resolving the economic crisis by taking into account the informal sector that is the majority of Latin America's working population. What does that mean? What tools do you use to do it? Of course, with expropriations, nationalizations, distribution of wealth, expansion of rights, etc. These are tools, but the objective is to improve the living conditions and the productive fabric of that 80% of the population, unionized and non-unionized, formal and informal, that makes up the Latin American people. And also with greater participation of society in decision-making. People want to be heard, they want to participate. The fourth issue is the environment, an environmental justice with social and economic justice, never separated and never ahead.

You are here in Colombia to attend a Cycle of Thought coordinated by the philosopher Luciana Cadahia for the Ministry of Culture. What changes are you seeing here with the triumph of the Historical Pact and the leadership of Gustavo Petro and Francia Márquez? Do you think Colombia has a leading role for progressivism in the region?

Taking into account the historical background of contemporary Colombia, in which at least two generations of social fighters and leftist activists have been murdered or exiled, in which forms of legal collective action have been pushed aside by paramilitarism, and in which the U.S. has attempted to create not only a state-wide military base but also a pivot of cultural co-optation, It is all the more heroic that a left-wing candidate has won the government electorally. And of course, when one touches the powerful sediment of the deep Colombia that gushes out in the neighborhoods and communities, one understands the social outburst of 2021 and the reason for that victory.

The fact that a progressive electoral triumph is preceded by collective mobilizations opens up a space of social availability for reforms. And that is why, despite parliamentary

limitations, President Petro's government is now the most radical of this second continental progressive wave.

Two actions place Petro's administration at the forefront of the rest of the leftist presidents. On the one hand, the application of the tax reform on a progressive basis, that is, it imposes higher taxes on those who have more money. In most other Latin American countries, the most important source of tax revenue is VAT, which clearly forces higher taxation on those who have the least.

Second, progress in the energy transition. Clearly, no country in the world, not even the most polluting countries such as the US, Europe and China, has abandoned fossil fuels overnight. A few decades of transition have been proposed, and even a few more years of record production of these fuels. However, Colombia, along with Greenland, Denmark, Spain and Ireland, are the only countries in the world that have banned any new oil exploration activity. The Colombian case is more relevant, because for him, oil exports represent more than half of its total exports, which makes this decision much bolder and more advanced at a global level.

These are reforms that certainly look to the future in a way that is committed to life and that illuminate the course of what other progressive experiences would also have to carry out in the short term.

However, in order for these decisions, and others that are still missing to cement conditions of necessary economic equality, to be sustainable over time, the continuous real improvement in the incomes of the Colombian popular classes should not be neglected, since any climate justice without social justice is nothing more than liberal environmentalism. This will require a millimetric coupling between the revenues that the State will no longer receive in the coming years, with new ones that it will have to guarantee through other exports, higher taxes on the rich and palpable improvements in the living conditions of the popular majority.

I would like to conclude with your reading of the role that Latin America and the Caribbean will have in the world. Or, rather, what political role we can play in a scenario of radical transformations such as the ones we are experiencing.

At the beginning of the 21st century, it was Latin America that sounded the first blow to the end of the cycle of neoliberal reforms that had been established globally since the 1980s. This was where the search for a hybrid regime between protectionism and free trade began, which then, from 2018 until today, has begun to be gradually tested in the US and the different countries of Europe. At this point, despite occasional melancholic

relapses into a short-legged paleoliberalism as in Brazil with Bolsonaro and Argentina with Milei, the world is in transit to a new regime of accumulation and legitimation that replaces neoliberal globalism.

At this point, however, the continent is somewhat exhausted to continue leading global reforms. It seems that the post-neoliberal transition will now have to advance first on a global scale for Latin America to renew its forces in order to regain its initial momentum. The possibility of second-generation, or even more radical, post-neoliberal structural reforms that regain the continent's transformative force will have to wait for greater global changes and, of course, a new wave of plebeian collective actions that modify the field of imagined and possible transformations. As long as this does not happen, the continent will be an intense scene of pendulum swings between short popular victories and short conservative victories, between short popular defeats and equally short oligarchic defeats.

Source: <https://www.lahaine.org/mundo.php/garcia-linera-para-derrotar-a>

Rebellion 16.01.2024