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From left to right; from right to left: the continuous political pendulum in Latin America

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Prof.dr. Patricio Silva

**From Left to Right; From Right to Left:
The Continuous Political Pendulum in
Latin America**



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The political pendulum in Latin America



From Left to Right; From Right to Left:
The Continuous Political Pendulum in Latin America

Valedictory Lecture

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Professor of Modern Latin American History

Leiden University

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Universiteit
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Dear colleagues, students, members of the Latin American diplomatic corps, family and friends,

Twenty-two years ago, I delivered my inaugural lecture in this Auditorium during my installation as a professor of Modern History of Latin America at Leiden University. On that occasion, I addressed the significant divide that had emerged at the beginning of this century between Latin America's left-wing and right-wing political sectors. My presentation centred on a crucial debate regarding the roles the state, civil society, and the market should have to play in the region.¹ Since my inaugural lecture, it has become evident that the cleavage between the left and the right in Latin America has widened and deepened, leading in many countries to unprecedented levels of confrontation.

In my farewell lecture, I will examine a significant phenomenon related to the left-right political divide. Specifically, I will discuss the ongoing zig-zag movement between left-wing and right-wing governments that many Latin American countries have experienced over the past two decades.² Of course, these shifts to the left and right did not happen exactly at the same time in all the countries that experienced a political pendulum movement. However, the political evolution in Latin America over the past two decades

1 Patricio Silva, "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: staat, civiele maatschappij en de markt in hedendaags Latijns-Amerika." Rede uitgesproken bij de aanvaarding van het ambt van gewoon hoogleraar in de Geschiedenis van Latijns-Amerika. Leiden, 1 oktober 2002.

2 Chile is a prominent example of the back-and-forth political shifts between left-wing and right-wing governments in Latin America. In 2010, left-wing President Michelle Bachelet was succeeded by right-wing President Sebastián Piñera. Bachelet returned to power in 2014, and after her term ended in 2018, Piñera took over again. Piñera was later succeeded in 2022 by President Gabriel Boric, who represents the radical left.

clearly shows a dominant influence from either the left or the right at different periods.

The major 'turn to the left' occurred from the late 1990s until 2015, beginning in Venezuela with Hugo Chávez's landslide victory in the 1998 presidential elections. This historical event marked a significant turning point in the political landscape of the entire region. Since Chávez's victory, left-wing forces have gained power in numerous other Latin American countries. This widespread shift toward the left has been referred to by scholars as the "Pink Tide" or the "Left Turn" (cf. Levinsky and Roberts, 2011; Falletti and Parrado, 2018; Ellner, 2019). A key distinguishing characteristic of this expansion of left-wing leaders is that they all came to power through democratic means. This is an important distinction, setting them apart from previous left-wing movements, such as the governments of Fidel Castro in Cuba and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, which emerged from revolutionary armed struggles.

Between 2015 and 2020, Latin America experienced a shift to the right, referred to as the "Blue Tide" or the "Right Turn." For the first time since the military regimes of the 1970s and early 1980s, right-wing sectors were able to gain power through democratic means in several Latin American countries, including Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Paraguay, and Uruguay (Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014; Borges et al., 2024).

The right's electoral success, however, was not long-lasting. Left-wing Mexican leader Andrés Manuel López Obrador's victory in the 2018 elections marked the beginning of another "turn to the left" in Latin America's political landscape. In subsequent years, several left-wing presidents were elected in countries such as Honduras, Argentina, Peru, Chile, Bolivia, Colombia, and Brazil.

More recently, however, the electoral victories of right-wing candidates in countries like El Salvador and Argentina—along with potentially in Chile and Brazil in 2025 and 2026, respectively—have led some political analysts to speculate about a possible new “shift to the right” in several Latin American countries (Freeman, 2023; Guerra, 2024).

Before I explore the main political, social, economic, and cultural factors contributing to the pendulum movement of the last 25 years, it is important to provide some historical context. I believe it is essential to examine a couple of specific aspects of the region's political development from the early 1960s to the late 1990s. This examination is not merely for the sake of history; my contention is that two events have deeply marked the course of the left-right cleavage. Firstly, the 1959 Cuban revolution and its subsequent impact on the rest of the Latin American political development in the 1960s and 1970s. Secondly, the neoliberal economic reforms in the 1980s and 1990s and their effect on the left-right political confrontation in Latin America. These major events continue to influence the collective memory and political behaviour of both sides of the political spectrum.

Historical contextualisation

Following the Second World War, the United States put Latin American countries under huge pressure, forcing them to accept the new geo-political logic of the Cold War. From 1945 to the late 1950s several Latin American political leaders attempted to modernise their countries by introducing a series of social and economic reforms. They were soon blamed by the US government for representing a ‘communist threat’ to the Western hemisphere (Field *et al.*, 2020). That was for instance the case of the left-wing President Jacobo Arbenz who ruled Guatemala in the years 1951-1955. He obtained a landslide victory in the 1951 elections, promising to improve the living conditions of the large indigenous population by introducing an agrarian reform. The US government and the CIA accused

him of being a Communist in disguise and actively supported a military complot that brought down his government in 1955 (Schlesinger and Kinzer, 2005). Following the fall of Arbenz, many Latin American left-wing leaders began to adopt a much more radical stance. They concluded that the armed struggle constituted the only viable way to achieve power and to defend their eventual revolutionary governments from eventual US interventions.³

However, what represents, without doubt, the most important historical event in shaping the nature of the left-right divide in Latin America for the following decades has been the Cuban Revolution in 1959. The establishment of Fidel Castro's revolutionary regime instantly produced a dramatic change in the political scenario across the entire Latin American region. In a short period of time, left-wing sectors became rapidly radicalised in many Latin American countries. From Guatemala to Colombia, from Bolivia to Peru, several left-wing guerrilla groups emerged in an attempt to replicate the Cuban revolution in their own countries (Kruijt, 2017).

The Cuban revolution and the subsequent emergence of left-wing guerrilla groups in the region generated an immediate response from the United States and the Latin American elites. They decided to isolate Cuba from the rest of the American continent by cutting all financial, economic, and political ties with Fidel Castro's government. At the same time, in many Latin American countries, the armed forces launched a frontal attack on the left-wing guerrilla groups operating in their territories. The increasing armed conflict affecting several countries in Latin America in the 1960s resulted in many cases in the establishment of military regimes (Weyland,

³ This was for instance the conclusion taken by the young Argentine physician Ernesto (Che) Guevara. He was in Guatemala at that time and personally witnessed the military coup against Arbenz. He would later say that after that marking personal experience, he decided to become a revolutionary.

2019). Time and again the new military leaders tried to justify their coup d'état by presenting it as a necessary step to prevent the emergence of a 'second Cuba' in their nations (Davies and Loveman, 1989).

During the 1960s and 1970s, military right-wing regimes initiated an unprecedented campaign of persecution against not only guerrilla groups but also anyone expressing left-wing beliefs. In countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay, the armed forces conducted a 'dirty war' against political opponents. This campaign resulted in the assassination of many left-wing politicians, union leaders, intellectuals, students, priests, and ordinary citizens (cf. Remmer, 1989).

The brutal repression of the left by right-wing military regimes produced an unbridgeable divide between both sectors that has engendered mutual hatred ever since. Chile is a good example of this. Until today, the Chilean right has constantly accused the left-wing sectors of having tried to take total control of power and destroy democracy during the short-lived left-wing government of Salvador Allende in the early 1970s. From this perspective, the right presents the military coup of September 1973 against the Allende government as an ultimate and patriotic act to avoid the consolidation of a communist dictatorship in the country. The left, for its part, has permanently blamed the right-wing forces for the destruction of Chilean democracy. It has also constantly demanded justice and punishment for the gross human rights abuses that occurred during the Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990). The 1973 coup and the subsequent repression under Pinochet have still kept the left and the right in Chile extremely divided, often regarding each other as enemies (cf Constable and Valenzuela, 1993). This became evident in 2023 during the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the 11 September 1973 military coup. During the commemoration, the Allende-vs-Pinochet dichotomy dominated the minds and emotions of

many Chileans. It became clear that both sectors were still not disposed to revise their persistent visions about who was to blame for the collapse of Chilean democracy in 1973.

As already mentioned, the second major factor that, in my view, has strongly contributed to the polarisation between the left and right-wing sectors in Latin America since the turn of the century has been the application of neoliberal pro-market economic reforms since the early 1980s.

By the mid-1980s, most Latin American military dictatorships had disappeared, making room for a fragile process of democratic restoration (O'Brien and Cammack, 1985). The new democratically elected governments faced severe economic and financial constraints, as during the 1970s, the foreign debt of most Latin American countries had reached historical highs. It became evident by the mid-1980s that the recently installed democratic governments would not be able to pay back the foreign loans received in the 1970s from international financial institutions. This resulted in the so-called 'debt crisis' that since the mid-1980s affected the entire region. It is in this dramatic scenario that the so-called 'Washington Consensus' emerged between the White House, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, all based in Washington DC. They agreed to 'condition' future loans for Latin American nations to the application of profound neoliberal economic reforms in those countries. This included a reduction of the role of the state in the economy by forcing these nations to privatise their public enterprises. The so-called 'structural adjustment programmes' (SAPs) promoted by the Washington Consensus also included, among other measures, the reduction of the size of the state bureaucracy and the opening of the Latin American economies to foreign competition (Panizza, 2009).

The neoliberal economic agenda was carried out in Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s by centre-right governments

(Stokes, 2001). The application of the neoliberal policies resulted in most countries in a severe contraction of their economies. It also produced a sharp increase in the rate of unemployment and poverty as the opening for foreign competition led to the bankruptcy of a large number of local industries (see Huber and Solt, 2004).

The expansion of neoliberalism across Latin America led to growing discontent and frustration among the masses. This anger was successfully capitalised on by the left. From the late 1980s onwards, the Latin American left regained its protagonism in the political scene by launching an appealing anti-neoliberal agenda (Silva, 2009; Goodale, 2013). Left-wing parties and movements demanded the immediate ending of the application of free market policies and made a call to reverse the privatisation of the economy. They regarded the adoption of the neoliberal agenda in Latin America as an unacceptable imposition by the United States and international capital, framing it as a clear expression of US imperialism. In this respect, the 1998 electoral victory of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela was the first successful attempt to achieve power based on combining a radical anti-neoliberal agenda with a strong anti-US rhetoric. After that many other countries will follow. The positioning of the political actors *vis-à-vis* the role of the market forces and the United States has become ever since one of the two most important dividing markers between the left and the right in Latin America.

The persistence of the Left-Right conflict in Latin America

It is worth questioning whether it still makes sense to discuss 'the left' and 'the right' in today's world, which is often characterised by rising depoliticisation and political apathy among citizens. Long-established ideologies and political and social organisation forms, such as political parties and unions, have experienced significant decline. It is certainly intriguing the co-existence between the persistent swings between left and right-wing governments in Latin America, on the one hand,

and the widespread discontent among citizens and their growing rejection of political parties, politicians, and the political class as a whole, on the other (Mainwaring, 2018). As I will argue later, this paradox may be one of the factors contributing to the ongoing pendulum shift between left- and right-wing forces.

In recent years, it is evident in Latin America that both the left and the right remain very active and influential political categories. It is important to recognise that these categories do not merely reflect ideological orientations or political preferences; they also carry significant cultural and identitarian implications. Over time, this has led to a deep division among many Latin Americans, framing their views in terms of 'us' versus 'them' based on the left-right spectrum.

Norberto Bobbio (1996) has suggested that the key marking distinction between the left and the right worldwide has been their conflicting positions concerning the existence of inequality in society. While the left has put the combat on inequality at the centre of its political discourse, the right has tended to justify the existence of inequality by representing it as an inevitable natural phenomenon. In this respect, it is important to stress the fact that Latin America possesses the highest levels of inequality in the world. In that region, the gap between the haves and the have-nots is often much more extreme than the situations one can find in most African and Asian countries (cf Hoffman and Centeno, 2003). So the existence and persistence of high levels of inequality in Latin America may be an important factor in explaining the great resilience that the left-right division still has in this region.

Moreover, the existence in Latin America of socio-economic elites with European ethnic backgrounds, on the one hand, and large impoverished masses of mainly indigenous descendants, on the other, has generated a marked 'ethnisation' of inequality. This has resulted in a quite rigid social pyramid

which is generally characterised by having white minorities at the top, mestizo segments at the middle, and large indigenous and Afro-American masses at the bottom of the social ladder (cf Wade, 2010). In my view, the persistence of profound social inequalities with strong ethnic connotations has become a powerful source of combustion that has constantly fed the quite confrontational nature of the left-right cleavage in Latin America.

The high levels of social inequality in the region may be one of the reasons why a strong political centre has never fully developed in Latin America. The political history of the region indicates that adopting moderate, middle-of-the-road positions has rarely provided a viable alternative to the traditional left-right divide. This is in stark contrast to many Western European nations, where moderate social democratic forces played a crucial role in establishing welfare states after the Second World War. In this respect, Chile, Costa Rica and Uruguay constitute the exception to the rule. In these three countries, moderate political forces have been key actors since the Second World War. In the Chilean case, the Radical Party and the Christian Democratic Party represented both the political centre and the middle classes and played a stabilising role in Chilean politics in the period 1938-1970 (Scully, 1992). In Costa Rica, the Partido de Liberación Nacional (centre-left) and the Partido Social Cristiano (centre-right), were responsible for a very long time for the achievement of national agreements which benefited social prosperity and political stability in this Central American nation (Booth, 1999). Like Costa Rica, Uruguay has also had for a long time a de facto bi-partisan political system. The Colorado party and the Blanco party (both of centre-right orientation) helped to develop a rather harmonious political culture in the country, avoiding by this the emergence of radical positions among the electorate (González, 1992). What is important to stress here is that these three countries have been characterised by possessing a long democratic tradition, a strong party system,

and large middle classes; all features which are not common in the rest of Latin America. In my opinion, these three factors were decisive to canalise and to mediate the tensions between the left and the right in these countries for a long time.⁴

Agitating the Pendulum: Political polarisation till Eternity

The shifting dominance between left-wing and right-wing governments has been closely linked to the growing polarisation in Latin America's political landscape since the 1990s. I believe that several factors have contributed to the increasing polarisation of political positions in the region during this time.

To begin with, the emergence of populist leaders and governments –both from the left and the right-- have in my view clearly contributed to the permanent polarisation that characterises the political climate in Latin America since 2000. If there is one thing that both right-wing and radical left-wing populist leaders have in common, that is the use of a conflictive dichotomy between the 'us' and 'the enemies of the Nation'. Left-wing populist presidents – such as Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Rafael Correa in Ecuador and Evo Morales in Bolivia – were characterised by their permanent efforts to accentuate tensions between the popular masses (the 'people') and the wealthiest social sectors of their countries. For this purpose, right-wing forces in their countries became demonised by the left-wing governments by portraying them as 'traitors' and as puppets of US imperialism. Something similar has also happened with right-wing populist presidents. This is the case of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and more recently Javier Milei in Argentina who have systematically made use of accusations and insults against their leftist opponents, in

⁴ In recent years, however, Latin America's political centre has become practically empty. Many moderate parties and movements that in the past mainly represented middle-class interests (such as the Radical Party in Argentina and the APRA Party in Peru) have almost completely disappeared from the political landscape.

an attempt to demonise them in the eyes of public opinion (Pereira, 2023; Sendra and Marcos-Marne, 2024).

Both left-wing and right-wing populist leaders have shown very little disposition to reduce the degree of political tensions. Nor have they actively sought the achievement of agreements and consensus with the opposition to improve their nations' governability levels. In this respect, they clearly differ from the old populist leaders in Latin America (of the period 1930-1950). Although the old populist leaders during their presidential campaigns also made use of incendiary rhetoric against 'imperialism' and the 'oligarchy', soon after their installation they generally attempted to depolarise the political climate by calling for national unity and dialogue (Knight, 1998; De la Torre, 2020).

8 The wave of polarisation seems also to be related to the rapid weakening experimented by the party system in the region since the beginning of the century. This has led to a strong fragmentation and atomisation of political forces in Parliament with the emergence of many small political parties and movements. This has made it increasingly difficult to obtain consensus and agreements within the legislative branch and between parliament and the government. In a highly competitive electoral landscape, many politicians increasingly resort to radical and confrontational rhetoric. This approach helps them distinguish themselves from their opponents and capture the attention and support of the electorate.

On the other hand, the weakening of the party system and political parties in general have stimulated the emergence of personalistic leadership. This is undoubtedly a phenomenon also occurring in Europe and other parts of the globe. This trend has been exacerbated since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War. This has made possible the emergence of political figures who defend radical positions of the right and the left who do not come from strong and

traditional political parties. They are aiming to break with the status quo and to gradually dismantle the structures of liberal representative democracies. This is the case, for instance, of Evo Morales in Bolivia. Using the mobilisation of historically marginalised social forces from outside the traditional party system, he raised the Indigenist flag and achieved power with a radical leftist programme (Harten, 2011). From the other end of the political spectrum, there are cases such as Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. After being for a long time a little-known member of the parliament representing a marginal political party he suddenly jumped into the main political arena, becoming President of the largest country in the region (Hunter and Power, 2019).

It is indisputable that in the last two decades, the political scenario has become very polarised between the contending political forces and their leaders in Latin America. In most countries, government and opposition forces have indeed increasingly attacked each other in a very belligerent manner. The question that emerges from all of this is whether one can automatically assume that the entire society has also become polarised.

For instance, there are indications that the polarisation has mainly occurred at the upper echelons of the political system. So while government and opposition leaders have exacerbated their mutual personal attacks through the mass media and at the parliament, opinion polls generally show that most of the electorate adopts more moderate positions than the political class (cf Murillo, 2022). This partly explains the high degree of disaffection and discontent Latin American citizens show concerning political parties and politicians in general. Many people think that the entire political class (from left to right) is mainly preoccupied with achieving or maintaining power. In contrast, the citizens experience that politicians do not show concrete solutions for the problems that they consider urgent

(such as unemployment, lack of jobs, insecurity, low quality of public services, and so forth).

Nevertheless, if the population is so dissatisfied with the entire political class, why then do the majority of the voters in many countries of Latin America elect alternately left-wing and right-wing leaders as Presidents? There are at least two possible explanations for this paradox. Firstly, the electorate expresses in this way its deep discontent with the incumbent governmental forces, regardless of whether they are right-wing or left-wing. So what voters do is simply to support the candidate of the opposition in the following presidential elections. Indeed, for the last two decades in most Latin American countries, the political forces in power have been unable to win the next presidential elections. In this manner, the decision to vote for the oppositional forces at the next presidential election can be regarded in most cases as a protest vote against the government. In other words, these votes express more the rejection of the current national authorities than a genuine vote of support for the oppositional forces. This means that the voters' loyalty to the newly elected President is from the very beginning very feeble. Hence, if the new authorities do not deliver the goods soon, broad sectors of the population abruptly drop their support to the government after a brief honeymoon.

Even if one assumes the protest-vote explanation is convincing, one must still answer the following question. Why does the population vote for the extremes of the political spectrum (the left and the right) and not for candidates not directly connected to either the left or the right-wing forces? For instance, candidates that place themselves at the centre of the political spectrum and call themselves independents. A possible answer to this question is that the existing political elite (coming from both the left and the right) have managed to completely monopolise the electoral market, not allowing the emergence of other alternatives outside their control.

It is essential to recognise that changes from leftist to rightist governments and vice versa do not always indicate a significant shift in the electorate's political preferences. As Dabène (2023) points out, it is important to consider the magnitude of the winning candidate's victory (percentage of votes) compared to that of the defeated candidate. Additionally, it is relevant to examine the degree of political shift regarding the programmatic and ideological differences between the two candidates and the changes implemented by the new government.

Sometimes, the victory of the left or the right occurs by a narrow margin of votes, indicating not a significant swing from one end of the political spectrum to the other but rather a kind of political tie. An example of this can be seen in the disputed presidential elections in Brazil in October 2022. The left, represented by Lula da Silva, won the election with 50.9% of the votes, while the right-wing candidate, Jair Bolsonaro, who was seeking re-election, received 49.1%. On the other hand, the shift from a left-wing to a right-wing government can be characterised by a high degree of continuity in terms of policies and the general orientation of the country. This happened in Chile when the right-wing President Sebastián Piñera succeeded the left-wing government of Michelle Bachelet in 2010. He largely continued the policies established by the previous four centre-left Concertación governments. The lack of any significant change was so evident that some right-wing critics referred to his administration as the fifth Concertación government.

The open confrontation between Right and Left at the regional stage

Since the early 2000s, the dispute between the left and the right has no longer been restricted to the national territory of each Latin American country. The personal confrontations between leftist and rightist presidents in the regional political scene have increased in intensity since then.

This clearly signifies a new trend in Latin America's political landscape. Before the turn of the century, Latin American presidents largely refrained from criticising other heads of state or addressing the people of neighbouring countries directly. This approach respected the principle of national sovereignty and aimed to prevent interference in the internal affairs of other nations.

That tradition was visibly broken following Hugo Chávez's triumph in Venezuela in 1998. From the very beginning of his administration, Chávez made clear that his ambitious political project went far beyond the Venezuelan borders. Based on what he called Bolivarianism⁵ and using an anti-neoliberal and anti-US discourse, he aimed to unify the peoples of Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia and the rest of the region under his leadership. In that effort, the Chávez regime began to openly intervene in the local politics of other Latin American nations. He did so by financing the political campaigns of like-minded candidates sympathetic to its Bolivarian vision. In addition, he began to directly criticise and make extremely offensive remarks about other Latin American presidents who did not share his ideas and objectives (cf Bolívar, 2008).⁶

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5 After the Venezuelan liberator Simón Bolívar (1783-1830) who unsuccessfully attempted to create a united Latin America, following its independence from Spain. During Bolívar's rule, the territories of present-day Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador constituted a single country, the Gran Colombia. Bolivia was named after Bolívar.

6 For instance, he called Mexican President Vicente Fox a puppy of US imperialism. He criticised Peruvian President Alan García for his bulky body and accused him of being extremely corrupt. He depicted President Álvaro Uribe of neighbouring Colombia as a coward and a liar. Chávez called the secretary general of the Organization of American States (OAS), the Chilean José Miguel Insulza, to be an 'asshole' (pendejo). Other Latin American leaders were also targets of insults from the Venezuelan leader.

In the last two years, Latin America has experienced a disturbing escalation in the verbal clashes by X (former Twitter) between left-wing and right-wing Presidents. This has resulted in some cases in the suspension or definitive break of diplomatic relations between countries.

The current left-wing Colombian President Gustavo Petro has become notorious in this respect. He wrote for instance several tweets against the right-wing candidate Javier Milei during the October 2023 presidential elections in Argentina. According to Petro, Milei represented barbarism and compared him with former dictators Videla and Pinochet. Following Milei's victory, Petro wrote in his X account that his triumph was 'a sad moment for Latin America: poor Argentina'. Milei on his part responded to Petro, calling him a terrorist and a murderer, referring to Petro's past as a member of a guerrilla group. He also called Petro to be a lethal plague for the Colombian people. These personal clashes between both Presidents ended with the expulsion in March 2024 of the Argentine diplomatic personnel from Colombia.⁷

Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador, the former left-wing President of Mexico, also became involved in several verbal and diplomatic conflicts with various right-wing Latin American Presidents. In December 2023 he granted political asylum at the Mexican embassy in Quito to the former left-wing Ecuadorean Vice-President Jorge Glas. He proceeded with this action despite Glas being convicted of corruption by an Ecuadorean court. In addition to this and following the victory of the right-wing candidate Daniel Noboa in Ecuador, López Obrador implicitly suggested in a press conference that Noboa could have been connected to the assassination of Fernando Villavicencio, another presidential candidate who was killed

7 However, soon after this the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of both countries managed by using diplomatic persuasion to deactivate the conflict created by their superiors, bringing the situation back to normal again.

a week before the elections. Ecuador responded by declaring the Mexican ambassadress 'persona non grata' and asking her to leave the country. The following day, Ecuadorean military personnel raided the Mexican embassy and detained Glas. After this, Mexico decided to break diplomatic relations with Ecuador.

On the other hand, right-wing Uruguayan President Luís Lacalle Pou has constantly confronted Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela for not allowing free elections and for repressing their political dissidents. So for instance, Lacalle did not send invitations to the leaders of these countries to be present at his installation ceremony in March 2020. In September 2021, at a summit meeting of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), Lacalle openly criticised the presence of officials from Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela in the gathering, accusing those countries of not respecting institutions, democracy and human rights. During that gathering, a hard verbal clash took place between President Lacalle and Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel, while the right-wing President of Paraguay, Mario Abdo Benítez, severely criticised Nicolás Maduro who was also present at that summit.

The latest and toughest episode of the right-left confrontation at the regional level took place following the presidential elections in Venezuela in July 2024. The sitting left-wing President Nicolás Maduro claimed to have won the elections while many international observers and the opposition argued that his right-wing contender, Edmundo González, had won the elections. Several Latin American countries decided not to recognise Maduro's alleged victory as long as his government did not publish the electoral acts, certifying his triumph. Although Maduro had initially promised to publish the vote registers, he finally desisted to do so. A couple of weeks after the elections, Maduro unilaterally decided to break diplomatic relations with Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Peru, Panama, the

Dominican Republic and Uruguay for not having recognised him yet as the winner of the electoral contest.

Left-wing Presidents Gustavo Petro from Colombia and Lula da Silva had developed a good relationship with Nicolás Maduro in recent years. After the crisis resulting from Maduro's controversial re-election, both Presidents offered their good offices to the Venezuelan government in an attempt to resolve the stalemate. In the end, this attempt proved to be unfruitful. These mediation efforts eventually resulted in a break between Maduro and the other two South American leaders, as the latter criticised Maduro's inflexibility in reaching an agreement with the opposition.⁸

Right versus Right; Left versus Left: Receiving 'Friendly Fire'

Political confrontations in Latin America encompass more than just clashes between the left and the right. In recent times, there has been an increase in clashes among leaders within the same political segment. These conflicts often arise from power struggles as individuals vie to control a political party or ideological sector. Additionally, they can also occur when newly installed Presidents break away from the influence of their predecessors, who played a crucial role in helping them attain power. Several notable cases exemplify this phenomenon.

⁸ At one point, Lula da Silva referred to the Maduro administration as a "very unpleasant regime" with an "authoritarian slant." These comments sparked outrage in Venezuela and among its few Latin American allies, including Cuba, Nicaragua, and Bolivia. Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua responded to Lula da Silva by saying, "The way you've behaved, Lula, in the face of the legitimate president of Venezuela's victory is disgraceful. Disgraceful! By repeating the slogans of the Yankees, the Europeans, and the subservient governments of Latin America, you show that you are also subservient, Lula!". *Foreign Policy*, 8 October 2024.

One of the most illustrative cases is the open conflict generated in the early 2000s within the right-wing forces of Colombia between former President Alvaro Uribe and his successor Juan Manuel Santos. Santos was one of President Uribe's closest collaborators during his two administrations. Uribe entrusted Santos to the Ministry of Defence, being in charge of the combat against the leftist guerrilla groups operating in the country. As a result of his military successes, Santos enjoyed an increasing popularity among the population. This made him the natural candidate of the right to succeed Uribe, who was not allowed by the Constitution to run for a third term in office.

However, following his installation, Santos took a more moderate path than his predecessor concerning Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and the Colombian guerrilla groups. This resulted in the reestablishment of relations with Venezuela and his decision to initiate a peace process with the guerrilla organisations. In 2016 Santos signed a historical peace agreement with the FARC guerrilla group. This put an end to more than 40 years of military confrontation between the Colombian government and this revolutionary organisation. Uribe and the right-wing hardliners tried unsuccessfully to block the new political orientation adopted by Santos, which they considered a betrayal of the traditional positions defended by the Colombian right.

A similar phenomenon of personal conflicts between former allies occurred in Ecuador between former left-wing President Rafael Correa and his successor Lenin Moreno. The latter was vice president during the Correa administration and became the candidate to represent the ruling alliance in the 2017 presidential elections. As happened in the Colombian case, soon after his installation Moreno began to distance himself from his predecessor. Moreno started to criticise Correa's economic policies, and the huge public debt left by his administration. Moreover, as a part of an agreement with

the IMF, Moreno initiated the application of severe austerity measures in an attempt to curbe the fiscal deficit. This was severely criticised by Correa and his supporters. Accusations of corruption against Correa led to a definitive break between both leaders. As a way to avoid legal persecution in his country, Correa abandoned Ecuador and initiated a self-imposed exile in Belgium. Correa continued criticising the Moreno administration from Europe by actively using social media. Correa also put forward two close collaborators as candidates in the following two presidential elections in an attempt to regain some control of the political process. They were defeated by right-wing candidates.

In Chile, right-wing President Sebastián Piñera, who ruled the country twice (2010-2014, 2018-2022), also faced severe opposition from other right-wing sectors. His victory in 2010 ended twenty years of governments from the centre-left Concertación coalition. For the first time since the end of the Pinochet regime in 1990, the Chilean right had managed to win a presidential election. His triumph generated an intense reaction within the Chilean left as many among them felt that the right had no moral authority to rule the country. This was because the right-wing forces had given total support to the 1973 military coup against Allende and the subsequent military dictatorship of Pinochet.

Aware of the sensitivities stemming from his victory, Piñera chose to adopt a more moderate political approach. He decided to continue implementing most of the social-democratic policies established by the previous Concertación governments. In addition, he also searched for agreements with the moderate sectors of the centre-left as a way to expand the support for his legislative agenda at the Parliament. Piñera's moderation, however, was not well received by the more conservative and radical sectors of the Chilean right, who had expected from his government a more radical break with the previous Concertación era. Piñera's persistence in

following a centrist political path resulted in a major split within the Chilean right. The more radical sector, which still openly expressed its support for the former military regime, abandoned the more traditional right-wing parties (RN and UDI) and created the Partido Republicano. The leader of this new right-wing party, José Antonio Kast, became a formidable adversary of President Piñera. The growing internal divisions among the several sectors of the Chilean right impeded Kast from winning in the first round of the 2021 presidential elections.⁹

But what has been, without any doubt, the most remarkable case of ‘friendly fire’ has recently taken place in Bolivia. Following the fall of his government in November 2019, the left-wing leader Evo Morales was forced into exile. Interim right-wing President Jeanine Áñez announced new presidential elections for October 2020. As Morales was still not allowed to return to Bolivia, his MAS party chose Luis Arce, former minister of finance under Morales, as its candidate for the presidential elections. This happened at that time with the full support of former president Morales. Arce won the elections, and as expected, soon afterwards, Evo Morales was allowed to return to Bolivia. After Morales’ comeback, tensions quickly escalated between Arce and Morales as the latter began to criticise various aspects of his successor’s policies. By the passing of time, Morales became Arce’s worst enemy, as the former President managed to regain control of the MAS party

9 The right confronted the presidential elections with three separate candidates. During the first round, Kast received the largest number of votes (27.9%). The two other right-wing candidates, Sebastián Sichel and Franco Parisi, received each of them 12.8% of the votes. So the right managed to obtain the support of 53,5% of the electorate. The radical left candidate, Gabriel Boric, who in the first round had only obtained 25.8% of the vote, won the second round against Kast. The defeat of the right-wing candidate in the second round was partly because both Sichel and Parisi did not trespass their support to Kast.

and to expel Arce and many of his allies from its files. It is evident that Morales wants to present himself as the candidate for the MAS party during the next presidential elections which are scheduled for August 2025. Arce however has still the intention to go for a second term (Brown, 2024).

While the MAS party has officially declared Evo Morales as its candidate for the electoral contest of next year, the Plurinational Supreme Court (TCP) has made clear he cannot be a candidate as the Constitution establishes that Bolivian citizens cannot occupy the position of President for more than two terms. In addition to this, Morales is currently being investigated for charges of human trafficking and statutory rape. An arrest warrant has been issued against Morales as he had rejected the calls to provide his testimony before a legal prosecutor. Instead, Morales decided to take refuge in his political stronghold in the coca-producing region of Chapare in Cochabamba. At the same time, Morales instigated his followers to block the most important routes in the country to force the Arce government to put an end to what he called a ‘political persecution’ against him. The roadblocks have severely affected the Bolivian economy while analysts do not foresee an end to this personal struggle within the Bolivian left.

13

What is important to stress here is that amidst this fratricidal struggle, the Bolivian right-wing forces have just been simply spectators. They certainly hope to capitalise on this profound division between ‘arcistas’ and ‘evistas’ to have a chance to win next year’s elections.

From Ideological to Affective Polarisation

For the last forty years, a significant transformation has occurred in the nature of political polarisation in Latin America. During the 1960s and 1970s, the political cleavage between the left and right was largely driven by ideological factors. Several “isms,” such as socialism, communism, nationalism, and anti-communism, dominated political

conflicts in that era, which was characterised by a bipolar world under the influence of the United States and the Soviet Union. Since the restoration of democratic governance in the 1980s, both the left and right in Latin America have experienced some significant changes.

One of the most notable transformations within the left has been its fading emphasis on class struggle and the aspiration to build a socialist society. Similar to trends seen in Europe following the fall of the Berlin Wall, a considerable part of the Latin American left has shifted its focus towards cultural and identity issues. Traditional Marxist-Leninist parties have largely been replaced by various social movements advocating for causes such as environmental protection, indigenous rights, LGBTQ+ rights, feminism, and more (Levitsky and Roberts 2011).

14

In my view, the significant fragmentation within the left into numerous single-issue movements has prevented the development of a comprehensive worldview and cohesive agenda for present-day society as a whole. The many issues and movements have led to an unregulated struggle within the left, where each group strives to elevate its specific demands as the most important priority. This competition intensifies both when the left is in opposition and particularly when it is in power, as access to limited state resources for funding specific policy agendas becomes highly competitive.

The shift in left-wing priorities has not occurred uniformly, resulting in significant differences among various governments. For instance, Chilean left-wing President Gabriel Boric has typified his administration as being feminist, enthusiastically adopting an ambitious environmental agenda and actively advocating for the rights of sexual minorities and indigenous groups (Peña and Silva, 2024). In contrast, the governments of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua and Nicolás Maduro in

Venezuela have consistently overlooked the requests and needs formulated by these particular social movements.

Important changes have also taken place on the right side of the political spectrum. For instance, some sectors of the right have attempted to distance themselves from the previous authoritarian experience of military rule. In some cases, this has led to open self-criticism for their unrestricted support of dictatorships and for ignoring gross violations of human rights. In addition, the most liberal right has gradually abandoned their traditional positions concerning the so-called '*temas valóricos*' or moral issues. They have abandoned their traditional resistance against sex before marriage, divorce, and sexual diversity, showing more tolerance in general. Finally, younger generations of the right have demonstrated more sensibility for cultural and social issues, which historically received almost no attention from the right-wing old guard. This implies recognising the profound cultural changes produced in recent decades by processes of modernisation and globalisation and the growing demand among citizens for equal treatment. This has also produced more commitment among some sectors of the right to apply public policies directed to combat poverty and improve the general well-being of the popular sectors (cf Niedzwiecki and Pribble, 2017). These changes were particularly visible during the right-wing government of President Sebastián Piñera in Chile.¹⁰ Also the right-wing governments of Mauricio Macri in Argentina and Luis Alberto Lacalle in Uruguay showed significant advancements in those areas.

In contrast to this, over the past two decades the more radical segments of the Latin American right have increasingly focused on religious issues. In other words, the '*temas valóricos*'

¹⁰ Piñera legalised same-sex marriage, extended maternity leave and introduced a basic pension scheme for all Chileans, among many other reforms.

have become central to the radical right's political battle against both the left and the moderate factions of the right. They have directed their criticism toward feminist and sexual minority organisations, emphasising traditional Catholic values centred on the family and marriage restricted to a marital union between a man and a woman. Some clear regional referents of this stream are former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and the leader of the Chilean radical right, Juan Antonio Kast. The decision to emphasise moral issues also has a clear electoral objective. The radical right seeks to win the support of older generations and especially of large evangelical groups in society, who oppose same-sex marriage, divorce, abortion, and other value-related topics defended by the left.¹¹ In Argentina, right-wing President Javier Milei has launched an open attack on the feminist agenda by closing the Ministry for Women and by voting at the United Nations against resolutions to improve the position of women and girls in their home countries.

The fact that the population seems to be much less polarised than the political elites does not mean that civil society is free of polarisation. According to Murillo (2024), polarisation at the societal level has become much more 'tribal' in which partisan identity or feeling of 'my team' versus yours seems paramount. This type of 'affective polarisation' is not an entirely new phenomenon in Latin America.¹² If we look

11 Curiously enough, Venezuelan left-wing President Nicolás Maduro has also sought a rapprochement with evangelical groups to try to strengthen his declining popularity somewhat and expand support groups as much as possible. He has even participated in evangelical rituals to ask for the elimination of US sanctions against Venezuela. In return, Maduro has incorporated thousands of evangelical pastors into a social protection plan called the 'sistema patria'.

12 Paolo Moncagatta and Pedro Silva define affective polarisation as 'the adoption of positions by rival sociopolitical camps based on feelings or sentiments rather than ideological preferences' (2024: 25).

back into the political history of the twentieth century, we see several classical cases of affective polarisation. Murillo refers, for instance, to the deeply entrenched enmity between Liberals and Conservatives in Colombia, the hostility of Aprist and anti-Aprists in Peru and the permanent struggle between Peronists and Anti-Peronists in Argentina. This affective polarisation has often been fuelled by emotional factors which have been transmitted within families for generations. People profess a firm sentiment of loyalty for a certain political group which is maintained in time independently of ideological shifts of that entity and the quality of its political performance.¹³ Nowadays, affective polarisation seems to be less connected with loyalty and tradition and more with negative emotions and feelings against the adversary, the political class and the 'establishment' at large. This phenomenon is also called 'negative partisanship' (cf Bankert, 2024). For instance, the triumph of the right-wing candidate Javier Milei in the November 2023 presidential elections in Argentina was mainly the result of his ability to mobilise the majority of the electorate against what he pejoratively called '*la casta*' (Torcal and Carty, 2023). Milei refers to 'the caste' as the dominant political elite formed by Peronists and the traditional right, which has asserted power in the country for over fifty years.

Another important aspect of the current political polarisation in Latin America is the notable asymmetry observed between the levels of polarisation on the right and the left. This asymmetry has already been studied in the United States and Europe. For instance, Hacker and Pierson (2015) have explored the continuous and rather unilateral radicalisation experienced by the Republican party and the right-wing sectors in the United States, which has been personified in the

13 This type of affective polarisation shows some similarities with the great loyalty shown by football fans to their own club and their eternal enmity with their adversaries of other clubs, independent of their own club's performance.

figure of Donald Trump. In contrast, the Democratic Party and the more liberal segments of American society have been caught off guard by the radicalisation of their opponents. They have yet to find out how to respond to this new social and political landscape in an effective way. The same applies to the radicalisation of the right in many Western European countries, including the Netherlands. For many years, the right in Western Europe has embraced an increasingly radical discourse centred on an anti-Islamic agenda, opposition to immigration from developing countries, and the final pulling down of the welfare state (Mudde, 2007). This radical shift has produced a dramatic paralysis among leftist and social democratic forces, as voters have turned away from them all across Europe.

16

In my opinion, what we observe in Latin America is an almost perfect mirror image of what is happening today in the United States and Western Europe. For the last two decades, Latin America has been experiencing an inverted type of asymmetrical polarisation in which the left has radicalised itself at a much higher rate and intensity than the right-wing forces. This phenomenon of asymmetric polarisation in Latin America has not been sufficiently studied, as not many scholars have yet perceived or are disposed to recognise the existence of this phenomenon in the region.

I have recently studied the asymmetric polarisation in the Chilean context, which shows a sudden unilateral radicalisation of the left since the early 2010s, a phenomenon that I call 'mono-polarisation' (Silva, 2022; 2023). In my opinion, the absence of radicalisation in the Chilean right can be attributed to the persistent influence of neoliberalism in Chile since the late 1970s. The right claimed victory as it succeeded in establishing a political, economic, and institutional system that appeared to be firmly entrenched. This situation, I believe, ultimately exacerbated frustrations within various segments of the Chilean left. Following Sebastián Piñera's victory in

2010, the left adopted a range of political strategies, including organising violent street protests, in an effort to thwart the consolidation of neoliberalism in the country by any means necessary. Until 2010, the right did not feel the need to adopt a more defensive posture. At that time, the anti-systemic left was a minority and appeared to lack significant capacity for massive political and social mobilisation. Moreover, the right understood that both the economic system and existing legislation were safeguarded by the so-called 'politics of agreements' established by the centre-left Concertación governments with the right-wing opposition parties. Even after the radical student movement emerged in 2011, the Chilean right believed for a long time that the status quo would remain secure. They grounded this conviction in the assumption that a thriving economy and robust political institutions would continue safeguarding the political and institutional framework underpinning the free market system. Following the student protests of 2011, the Chilean left experienced a significant shift towards accelerated radicalisation. This developmental trajectory ultimately culminated in the October 2019 Rebellion, which represented an effort to topple the right-wing Piñera administration and to put an end to neoliberalism in Chile. Although the October 2019 Rebellion did not achieve its ultimate goal, the Chilean left has maintained a trajectory of increasing radicalisation. This was clearly illustrated by the extremely radical proposal for a new Constitution formulated by a committee primarily composed of leftist members, which aimed for a complete 're-foundation' of the Chilean state. In the end, this proposal was rejected by the Chilean citizens in the referendum held in September 2022.

Left vs Right, Right vs Left, and the *Narcos* against both

The ongoing clash between the left and right in Latin American countries has facilitated the emergence of a third major actor in the political and societal arena: organised crime linked to drug trafficking. These criminal organisations have seriously challenged both left-wing and right-wing

governments. Organised crime, including drug cartels, does not adhere to a specific political ideology. Instead, it opposes any government that threatens its illicit activities, regardless of whether that government is right-wing, like Vicente Calderón in Mexico, or left-wing, like Lula da Silva in Brazil. In fact, there are instances where criminal organisations have simultaneously supported both the extreme right and extreme left in their respective countries. A notable example is the Colombian cartels, which, during the armed conflict, established agreements with both the leftist guerrilla group FARC as well as the AUC ultra-right paramilitary force. By doing this, the narco organisations were able to produce cocaine and conduct other illicit activities in territories controlled by both combating forces.

A significant issue shaping the current situation in Latin America, which has also found an expression in the left-right divide, is the growing insecurity among citizens due to the rise of organised crime and drug trafficking. Numerous public opinion surveys across the region consistently show that the lack of security and the resulting fear among the population are the foremost concerns for most people.

In recent years, several Latin American criminal organisations have expanded their activities across the region and beyond, including several South European countries such as Spain and Italy. In this manner, Mexican cartels have developed a complex ramification of joint ventures with local gangs in several Central and South American countries. So, for instance, the increasing drug-related violence in Ecuador has been linked to the activities of local criminal gangs which work in association with Mexican cartels such as the Sinaloa and Jalisco Nueva Generación cartels. On the other hand, the Venezuelan criminal organisation ‘Tren de Aragua’ has rapidly expanded its activities in other countries by recruiting new members among the millions of Venezuelans who have

emigrated to other Latin American nations as a result of the political and economic crisis in their homeland.

It is widely acknowledged that drug-related organised crime is a transnational scourge that requires coordinated action across the region to combat it effectively. However, cooperation among various Latin American governments has been more than insufficient to date. One of the primary reasons for this lack of collaboration is the ongoing left-right political confrontation among several Latin American Presidents. This factor is one of the main causes why the governments of the cocaine-producing countries (Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador and Colombia) do not closely collaborate with each other. The left-right schism is also responsible for the fact that Mexico, a strategic hub in the drug trafficking route towards the US market, does not collaborate much closer with countries such as Ecuador and Peru.

So during the right-wing government of Alvaro Uribe in Colombia and the left-wing government of Rafael Correa in Ecuador, both Presidents were practically on non-speaking terms. Uribe accused Ecuador of providing refuge and support to the Colombian FARC guerrilla group as it regularly conducted attacks on the Colombian army in the border region, retreating after that into Ecuadorean territory. For his part, Correa severely criticised the growing military cooperation between the United States and Colombia in the war against drugs. The miscommunication between the leaders of both countries has recently continued as the political orientation of the Presidents of both countries has been inverted. Nowadays, Colombia is ruled by a left-wing government (led by Gustavo Petro), while Ecuador has elected a right-wing President (Daniel Noboa). Noboa has continuously criticised Petro for not doing enough to stop the criminal activities in Ecuador of Colombian drug cartels and for not providing sufficient information to the Ecuadorean

authorities which can be used in the battle against organised crime.¹⁴

In recent years, the governments of Peru and Bolivia showed for a while some form of coordination in their approaches to organised crime and drug trafficking. That was facilitated by the good political tuning existing between Peruvian President Pedro Castillo and his Bolivian counterpart Luis Arce, both representatives of the left. However, after Castillo's removal from power in December 2022 following his failed auto-coup attempt, the close contact between both countries abruptly ended. According to constitutional regulations, Dina Boluarte, the country's vice president, assumed the presidency of Peru. Boluarte faced rejection from several left-wing governments throughout the region, including those of Bolivia, Colombia, Nicaragua, and Mexico, as a demonstration of solidarity with Castillo. Also former Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador came into open conflict with Boluarte, accusing her of usurping power in Peru.

The rising levels of insecurity and criminality experienced in most Latin American countries have become today a major point of contention between left and right-wing sectors. In this regard, the right has taken the opportunity to spread its favourite slogan about the need to adopt a tough 'iron fist' approach against criminality. This has been particularly the case in Central America, where for the last two decades, drug-related juvenile gangs (the so-called *Maras*) have declared an open war to the national authorities. For years, the numbers of assassinations, extortions, kidnappings, violations, assaults and other crimes conducted by these illegal organisations have reached exponential heights in countries like El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

14 The enmity has also become personal. In an interview in *The New Yorker* of June 17, 2024, Noboa described Petro as a 'leftist snob' who 'accomplishes nothing'.

The promise of an iron fist against criminals has helped the right-wing political parties and leaders to reach power in many Central American countries. In practice, these governments have generally not achieved visible improvements in providing more security to their citizens. Nevertheless, the electorate has preferred them above the left-wing alternatives, as the latter has been characterised by often adopting ambiguous positions about how to reestablish the rule of law and guarantee the security of the population in their countries.

The Latin American left, in general, has always felt uncomfortable with themes connected to 'law and order' and having to make use of force against criminals by deploying the police, the army, and the intelligence services for that purpose. This has partly to do with the left's own experience in the past with these armed institutions when the authoritarian states persecuted its members.

However, the left also faces a practical political challenge regarding using force to combat crime and enhance security in their countries. A substantial portion of the left's popular support comes from marginalised neighbourhoods, where poverty and crime often meet each other. Consequently, any repression of organised crime through police raids in lower-income neighbourhoods by leftist authorities, whether mayors or the central government, is viewed as a highly risky approach. This could severely damage the clientelist and emotional bonds existing between the popular sectors in poor parts of the city and the leftist government. This can at least partly explain why, for instance, drug-related criminality has become totally out of control in Venezuela during the governments of Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro.¹⁵ It is evident that the struggle against criminality has never been among the key priorities of both administrations.

15 Venezuela possesses by far the highest homicide rate in Latin America (46 murders per 100.000 citizens).

In Chile, the radical left-wing government of Gabriel Boric (2022 to present) has been confronted with a huge increase in criminality rates associated with organised crime and drug trafficking. All opinion polls constantly indicate that a large majority of the population considers criminality and the lack of security the country's most acute problems. Although Chile still has one of the lowest criminality rates in Latin America, for a country that until very recently was not accustomed to this level of delinquency, many experience the current situation as intolerable.¹⁶ Boric's ruling coalition includes several radical left-wing movements, the Communist Party, and some moderate socialist sectors. Until now, they have been unable to agree on formulating a strong security agenda. Many among them, referring to human rights concerns, do not want to allow law enforcement forces to increase the use of institutional violence against organised crime.

The Chilean right has capitalised on the growing discontent among citizens regarding the Boric government, primarily due to its failure to implement concrete and visible measures to reduce the levels of criminality. Unlike right-wing leaders in other Latin American countries, Chilean rightist parties have not taken a radical stance, such as advocating for an 'iron fist' approach. However, they have made it clear that addressing security issues will be their top priority as the right wins the next presidential elections in November 2025.

Finally, it is necessary to refer to right-wing Salvadorian President Nayib Bukele and his growing influence and popularity throughout Latin America. Until recently, El Salvador was one of the most dangerous countries in Latin

America. Competing juvenile criminal gangs (the *Maras*) had totally dislocated Salvadorean society, spreading crime and terror among the population. In the period 2009-2019, two left-wing governments of the former FMLN guerrilla group attempted to end the disbanded delinquency generated by some 70.000 gang members. For this purpose, the FMLN governments used all types of strategies, going from a repressive 'iron fist' approach to negotiations and deals with the gangs' leaders. Ultimately, the FMLN Presidents were unsuccessful in reducing the number of assassinations and other crimes committed by gangs.

In February 2019, the 37-year-old centre-right candidate Nayib Bukele won the presidential elections, promising to end gang violence in the country. After his installation, Bukele implemented a comprehensive security plan aimed at delivering a decisive blow to the gangs. It included a massive deployment of military and police forces to combat the *Maras* and to regain control of the streets and neighbourhoods by the state. He also attacked the *Maras*' financial structures, confiscating an important part of their incomes obtained by drug trafficking, robbery, and extortion. Moreover, Bukele radically reformed the jail system in an attempt to eliminate corrupt jailers and to isolate the imprisoned gang leaders from their followers outside the penitentiary's walls. Finally, the pro-Bukele Parliament declared in March 2022 the state of emergency, which has been in place ever since. This has allowed the Salvadorean state to conduct large-scale arbitrary arrests of suspected *Maras* and to keep them in prison without legal representation. Finally, Bukele has constructed a mega-prison capable of housing 40,000 inmates. The tough security policies followed by Bukele have been severely criticised by international human rights organisations and by several left-wing leaders from other Latin American

¹⁶ So, for instance, a large international survey conducted by IPSOS in 2023 indicates that Chileans are the most concerned and preoccupied with insecurity of all the studied countries. See IPSOS, 'Views on Crime and Law Enforcement around the World: A 29-country Global Advisor survey'. June 2023.

countries.¹⁷ The Salvadorean population, however, has enthusiastically received Bukele's security policies, as he has managed to reduce the country's homicide rates drastically.¹⁸ In February 2024, Bukele was re-elected, obtaining 85 per cent of the votes.

The Salvadorean President has become a reference figure for other right-wing leaders in the rest of Latin America as they notice that the figure of the Salvadorean President enjoys great popularity in their own countries. Indeed, a growing number of Latin Americans openly express their desire that their own national authorities follow the Salvadorean security approach, leading to what has been called the 'Bukelisation' of the Latin American political agenda. The frequent visits to El Salvador by right-wing presidential candidates and other political figures from diverse Latin American countries highlight their interest in observing Bukele's security policies. These visits often include photo opportunities with Bukele, which they intend to use back home in their respective political campaigns and other proselytist activities.

Final remarks

In this brief review, I have highlighted some of the most significant aspects of the enduring left-right political divide in Latin America. Over the past two decades, this divide has produced a continuous zig-zag movement between leftist and rightist governments in many countries of the region. Both the 1959 Cuban revolution and its aftermath and the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s constitute significant

17 For instance, Colombian President Gustavo Petro exchanged a series of polemic tweets with Nayib Bukele in 2023 about their differences in combating criminality in their own countries.

18 When he took power in 2019, the homicide rate in El Salvador was 38 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. By 2023, this rate was reduced to 2.4 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, the second-lowest rate in the Americas (after Canada). Today, his approval rating among the Salvadorean people is 92 per cent, which is by far the highest popularity rate among Latin American Presidents.

milestones in the ongoing confrontations between the left and the right in Latin America.

For a long time, the Cuban revolution has been an undeniable source of inspiration for the Latin American left. Conversely, right-wing sectors view this Caribbean experience as the embodiment of the communist threat that has menaced the entire region ever since. On the other hand, the neoliberal economic reforms represent, in the eyes of the Latin American left, a product of US imperialism that has to be destroyed by all means in order to restore the centrality of the state against the market. In contrast, the majority of the Latin American right views the free market economy as essential for eliminating underdevelopment and poverty and, hence, an effective weapon to defeat the left in the political arena.

The great resilience shown in Latin America by the left-right cleavage can certainly be connected to the high levels of inequality existing in this region. However, the swing movement from left to right-wing governments and vice-versa seems to be more related to the inability of both political sectors when they are in power to provide concrete solutions for the major social and economic problems facing their countries. In other words, the zig-zag movements mainly express the great frustration and disenchantment among the masses with the entire political class. Each time, the masses support the opposition forces to punish the incumbent political forces.

The rise of left- and right-wing populist governments since the late 1980s has normalised confrontational rhetoric and the use of polarisation as standard political practice. Polarisation within the political class has, to some extent, also extended to the wider society. However, the public also repeatedly indicates that they desire greater cooperation among politicians to address national issues.

The confrontation between left and right-wing leaders has nowadays trespassed the national borders, leading to constant oral clashes between Latin American Presidents at the regional level through social media and press interviews. These confrontations often begin with discussions between two political leaders. However, other Presidents soon joined the dispute, aligning with their ideological allies. This scenario of polarisation and confrontation among Presidents has certainly become a major obstacle to tackle at a regional level many socioeconomic, political, environmental and security issues affecting the entire region.

However, not all major political confrontations in Latin America can be reduced to clashes between left-wing and right-wing forces. Confrontations among leaders of the same political colour have become a common feature of present-day political disputes in the region. As party structures, discipline, and shared ideological projects have become less central to contemporary politics, personal clashes between power contenders within the same political sector have become recurring. This increasing phenomenon has led to significant disappointment among supporters of a specific political faction. At the same time, it has made it easier for their political opponents, who repeatedly observe their rivals making painful and expensive unforced errors.

In a scenario in which old ideologies have lost much of their appeal among the masses, present-day confrontation and polarisation in Latin America have acquired an increasingly affective and emotional dimension. So paradoxically, the increasing depoliticisation of the population in recent decades has not necessarily resulted in lower levels of polarisation and confrontation among the people. As a battery, it has just changed from a positive to a negative pole. Today, many people no longer fight to achieve a specific type of society as they did in the past. Instead, they are mainly motivated by a sense of rejection towards certain political and social actors,

who are viewed almost as total enemies. This new political reality certainly complicates the achievement of agreements on fundamentals among the contesting political forces.

The emergence and expansion of powerful narco-trafficking criminal groups in Latin America have become both a big challenge but also a great opportunity for Presidents from different ideological orientations to try to find ways to combat this common threat for their nations. So far, very little has been accomplished on this front. Short-term electoral considerations and the lack of mutual trust among left- and right-wing Presidents have been formidable obstacles to combating this transnational enemy at a regional level.

The specific nature of this short presentation did not allow me to address other important issues related to the left-right divide in Latin America. For example, the significant influence that the United States, Russia, and China exert on the region and its political impact on Latin American allies. The economic and financial dependency of the Latin American countries on these northern nations continues to sustain and deepen the left-right divide within the region. Also the eruption of major international conflicts, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the war in Gaza, have produced an immediate reaction among left and right-wing Presidents in the region. The invasion of Ukraine received the support of left-wing governments of Bolivia, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Cuba. With respect to the Gaza conflict the right-wing Argentine President Milei has expressed his full support for Israel, while the left-wing Bolivian and Colombian Presidents expressed their total alignment with the Palestine cause and decided to sever diplomatic relations with Israel.

I have also not paid sufficient attention to the specific ways in which mass and social media have exacerbated the left-right confrontation among Latin American citizens who have an

extremely high level of daily exposure to television and online devices.

In the coming time, more attention has to be given to the growing number of autocratic measures adopted by various left-wing and right-wing governments. These actions include restricting the freedom of the press and intimidating journalists, many of whom have been forced to flee their countries to escape imprisonment, as has been the case in countries such as Mexico, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Venezuela.

At the end of the lecture, I can conclude that most political indicators suggest that the strong left-right divide in Latin America will persist for a considerable period of time. The same can be said about the intense political polarisation between the left and the right within the political class.

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Throughout my extensive academic career, I have had the pleasure of meeting many individuals and colleagues with whom I share deep affection and fondness. I will refrain from mentioning specific names, as doing so would invite the risk of omitting others, which is not my intention in this farewell lecture. The group includes not only some close colleagues and friends from my own department and university but also many Latin Americanists from other Dutch academic institutions. I also think of the numerous students I have taught and supervised over the past 37 years, from whom I have learned more than they may realise. My thoughts also extend to the many Chilean colleagues and students who have helped keep my ties to my home country very much alive over the years.

Ik heb gezegd.

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Professor Patricio Silva (1957) studied Political Science at the University of Amsterdam, where he received his Doctorandus degree (cum laude) in June 1983. In June 1987, he defended his PhD dissertation at Leiden University, which focused on the political and ideological dimensions of Pinochet's agrarian strategy in the Chilean countryside. In the period 1987-2002 he was University Lecturer at the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology at the Faculty of Social Sciences. In May 2002 he was appointed as Professor of Modern Latin American History at the Latin American Studies programme (TCLA) at the Faculty of Letters.

Throughout his career, Professor Silva has held various managerial positions within the academia, including member of the Board of the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Sociology of Development, Chair of the Latin American Studies programme (TCLA/LAS) at Leiden University, Chair of the Executive Board of the Centre for Study and Documentation of Latin America (CEDLA) in Amsterdam, Executive Secretary of the Netherlands Association of Latin American and Caribbean Studies (NALACS), and Member of the Executive Committee for the Society of Latin American Studies (SLAS) in the UK. Additionally, he has been member

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He has also been Fellow at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS) at Wassenaar and the Latin American Study Centre at St. Antony's College, University of Oxford. Additionally, he has been a member of several editorial boards, including the Bulletin of Latin American Research (Blackwell, Oxford) and the Revista de Ciencia Política (Universidad Católica de Chile).

Professor Silva has been awarded the 'Medal of Merit' by the Chilean Parliament and the 'Gabriela Mistral Order' (at the rank of Gran Oficial) from the Ministry of Education of Chile. He also received an honorary doctorate degree from the University of Tarapacá in Chile.



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