

On Separatism in Latin America

Written by W Alejandro Sanchez and Kimberly Bullard

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W ALEJANDRO SANCHEZ AND KIMBERLY BULLARD, MAY 20 2013

In mid January 2013, the inhabitants of Chile's Easter Island carried out major protests, declaring that the central government in Santiago had largely forgotten them and had failed to contribute to the island's growth and development. An article in the British daily *The Guardian* explained how some islanders had even asserted their right to self-determination, threatening to secede from Chile.[i] The protests eventually dissipated, and order has been restored for time being. However, there is always the possibility that the Easter Islanders may rebel again, particularly if the next president (Chile will hold elections in 2014) does not address the islanders' concerns.

This article uses the Easter Island demonstrations as a starting point for a discussion on separatism in Latin America. The goal of the following analysis is to begin a debate about the different manifestations of separatism and to describe to what extent these movements have taken place in Latin America. While Latin Americans have suffered many types of violence—narcotrafficking, guerrilla terrorism, and inter-state warfare—over the past several decades, traditional separatist movements have not been as prominent as in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Europe. In particular, Latin America has not witnessed the collapse of existing States along with the subsequent emergence of new countries, as with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the violent fragmentation of Yugoslavia. It would still be incorrect to say that the region has not experienced any separatist movements in recent decades. While many scholars have minimized the presence of Latin American separatist movements, their analyses misrepresent the region's reality.

New Nations Everywhere

The first era of global separatism began after World War II with a wave of decolonization, which created new States with "socialist" orientations. Socialism was considered the best political tool available for resisting "imperialism." This first type of separatism did not appear in Latin America outside of the Caribbean due primarily to three characteristics shared among the region's diverse ethnic groups, mainly of American, Asian, and African descent: (1) politically organized into republics; (2) a common language (Spanish or Portuguese); and (3) a common religion (Catholicism).

The end of the Cold War signaled the rise of a new brand of separatism in Europe and Africa, which aimed to overthrow a plethora of dictatorships and one-party States. Accordingly, the democratization of the Soviet Union (USSR) under Mikhail Gorbachev laid the foundation for separatist movements in the Balkans.[ii] Supporters of these movements believed that a State would be more successful politically and economically if they adopted free-market capitalist ideologies which called for privatization of its national economy and the opening up to foreign investment and trade. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War, the Russian Federation emerged as a new State and 14 other former USSR members became independent, including the Baltic region, South Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia.[iii] In addition, in 1993, Czechoslovakia broke apart into two countries, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. But, it was the division of Yugoslavia that really exemplified post-Cold War separatism. The term "balkanization" was coined as Yugoslavia violently broke apart in the 1990s and a multitude of new nations emerged, such as Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, and Montenegro. Outside Europe, other nations have also appeared over the past decade. For example, in 2002, East Timor achieved independence from Indonesia.[iv] Most recently, in July 2011, Sudan split into two entities, Sudan and South Sudan, after a bloody civil war.[v] There are also new States that have only been recognized by a very limited number of nations such as Taiwan.[vi] Another recent example of this would be Abkhazia and South Ossetia, two separatist regions of Georgia that became

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independent from Tbilisi following the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia.[vii] Nevertheless, only a few governments have recognized the independence of these regions, such as Russia, Nicaragua, and Venezuela (though even this limited support may change in the future).[viii]

But the global order seems to be perpetually reorganizing itself, and there is a real possibility that new regions may achieve independence in the coming years, either through formal negotiations or violent rebellions, as there are a number of regional and subnational movements with demands varying from greater autonomy to complete independence. Among the new independent States that may appear in the future is Scotland, the citizens of which will vote on a referendum in September 2014 to decide whether their nation will remain part of the United Kingdom or become an independent entity.[ix] However, although secessionist conflicts continue to exist in various areas of the globe, it is very unlikely that we will see any Latin American nations break apart in the future.[x]

The Western Hemisphere and New Nations

When it comes to 20th century nations in Latin America, only a few new ones have appeared in the “mainland” of the Western Hemisphere. The most recent examples would be Cuba, which became independent from the United States in 1902 and Panama, which separated from Colombia in 1903 (a reason for this was U.S. involvement, known as “gunboat diplomacy,” to build the Panama Canal).

As previously mentioned, the post-World War II era saw several European colonies become independent. In the Western Hemisphere, this occurred primarily in the Caribbean. For example, Suriname became independent from the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1975, while Guyana and Belize gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1966 and 1982 respectively. Nevertheless, the independence of Caribbean nations was generally achieved via negotiations, and Latin America (Spanish-speaking nations plus Brazil), has not witnessed separatist wars *a la* Yugoslavia in over a century.

Separatist Movements in Latin America

In an April 2008 article for the *CQ Global Researcher*, Brian Beary discusses separatist movements across the globe.[xi] Interestingly, when it comes to the Western Hemisphere, only three cases are mentioned: Quebec in Canada, the Lakota Nation in the U.S. state of South Dakota, and the 2008 protests in Bolivia. While Beary describes extensively various separatist movements around the world, he summarizes separatism in the Western Hemisphere simply as, “across the Americas, separatist movements are scarcer and weaker than in Europe, Africa and Asia.”[xii] Nevertheless, even though Latin America has not experienced violent, secessionist-oriented separatism as compared to the USSR, Sudan, or Indonesia, it is imprecise to conclude that separatist movements have not existed in the region. The following are secessionist rumblings and incidents among Latin American states.

Ecuador

In Ecuador, indigenous communities, led by the National Confederation of Indigenous Nations of Ecuador (CONAIE), have suffered a long history of exploitation by European-mestizo elites who violated their territorial integrity and denied them the right to self-rule. Prior to President Rafael Correa’s ascension, CONAIE, directed by its political arm Pachacuti, formed alliances with the country’s urban forces to oust the right-leaning electorate.[xiii] CONAIE was most successful in June 1990 when nationwide protests managed to paralyze the entire country for one week. The event was Ecuador’s largest social uprising and actually forced the government to sit down and dialogue with the indigenous, but it did not eradicate the historical discrimination. Since then, the Ecuadorean indigenous has remained weak and unable to form rural-urban alliances.[xiv]

Today, CONAIE is disgruntled with Correa’s administration whose resource extraction policies have given a number of concessions to foreign mining and oil corporations that have not only undermined the subsistence of local fisherman and farmers but also continue to contaminate the environment, mainly the air and drinking water.[xv] The social group that has benefitted most from Correa’s regime is middle class professionals and progressives from the Quito urban area. They have received governmental preference for salary increases, contracts, and political

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employment—all made possible by the tributary culture (taxes and revenues) installed by Correa's social revolution.[xvi] Thus, CONAIE's separatist protests have been restricted to the marginalized population and easily squashed by those in power.

Venezuela

During the administration of the late Hugo Chávez, indigenous and Afro-Venezuelan communities, which historically occupied the bottom of the social ladder, often demanded greater autonomy. However, the government responded by increasing funding for social programs (particularly in health, education, and subsidized food stores), essentially buying out the marginalized masses and providing only limited autonomy.

Another separatist movement involved Venezuela's oil rich state of Zulia, which is located on the western border with Colombia. The right-wing elites in Zulia's government controlled the vast majority of Venezuelan oil production and thus the country's revenues. In an attempt to achieve a more equitable distribution of national wealth, Chávez intervened in the provincial politics to centralize control over a number of public facilities and spending. The late president justified the executive intrusion by claiming that the entry of Colombian paramilitary forces in Zulia was a national security threat. Furthermore, Chávez, in a clientelistic move, appointed his own followers to provincial positions of power. Given Chávez's preference to appease his allies, Zulia was not able to increase its decision-making authority.

Bolivia

Probably the closest that a Latin American State has come to breaking apart into two nations in recent memory occurred in 2008 when major protests broke out in Bolivia against President Evo Morales. Bolivia is an ethnically mixed nation, where socioeconomic differences divide the country into the highlands, which are known to be particularly indigenous, poor, and underdeveloped, and the lower regions (meaning in the lower Andes) of Pando, Tarija, and Santa Cruz, which are known to be especially rich as they enjoy natural resources. In May 2008, tensions exploded in major protests as the northern region (known as the Media Luna, the Half Moon, because of the shape it takes) wanted to break apart from the rest of the country in order to keep the wealth they earned from mineral exports. The protests, while they became violent, eventually subsided and Bolivia has remained united. Highlanders, who control the country's natural resources and thus are wealthier than the indigenous lowlanders, feared that Morales's efforts to redistribute the wealth more equitably would interfere with their traditional control of land and resources (oil and gas).[xvii]

Other Movements

In addition to the threat of secession by the inhabitants of Chile's Easter Island, Chile has had problems with another major indigenous community, the Mapuches, who inhabit the southern cone area of Chile and Argentina.[xviii] The group was persecuted under the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet and abuses were committed against its members as some radicalized Mapuches who were members of the Revolutionary Leftist Movement (MIR) guerrillas that fought Pinochet's rule. Even today, the Mapuches regularly stage protests demanding land rights, autonomy, and the protection of their historical territory.[xix] It is debatable if the Mapuches as a whole (around 1.5 million in Chile and over 200 thousand in Argentina according to recent censuses) want independence.[xx] Nevertheless, it is safe to assume that a constant demand of Mapuches in Chile is greater autonomy, and some more radicalized members may hope for an independent Mapuche State, like they once had.[xxi]

Brazil, has experienced several small separatist movements, such as the 19th century attempt to create the *Republica Riograndense* in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. Finally, some members of the Aymara people that inhabit the Andes would like to see the creation of an Aymara state that encompasses Southern Peru and parts of Bolivia and Chile.[xxii] Needless to say, all of these movements have been unsuccessful.

Discussion

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Most scholarly research on separatism focuses on areas that have gone through it, such as Africa or the Balkans. For example, Beary's article mentions separatism in Tibet, Kosovo, and Iraq only in the first page. Denis Tull's *Separatism in Africa*, while comprehensive, focuses on Africa.[xxiii] Using a variety of case studies from across the world, scholars argue that separatism generally crops up when at least one of two conditions is present—uneven development resulting in inequalities of wealth, income, and power, and/or polarization of ethno-religious differences, which are typically resolved through warfare and extreme violence. The commonality is that regional separatist movements arise from popular discontent.[xxiv]

With regards to Latin America, in spite of the examples above, what is usually discussed is a sort of reverse engineering situation about what *is* happening rather than questioning why something is *not* occurring. Why, in spite of all kinds of warfare that Latin America has experienced, has separatist violence in the last decades not been as common as in other parts of the globe?

Modern Latin American violent movements have come primarily from movements from oppressed indigenous minorities or right-leaning, capitalist elites—in essence, conflicts between different social classes. In this way, violent groups have not aimed to breaking away from their countries, but rather at causing a political regime change. For instance, Peru's Shining Path guerrillas aimed to overthrow the government in Lima (the group's leader, Abimael Guzmán called himself President Gonzalo), rather than create some autonomous state in the Peruvian highlands of Ayacucho. Meanwhile, the Mexican Zapatista indigenous movement, which rose to prominence in the 1990s in the states of Chiapas and Oaxaca wanted more autonomy from the central government in Mexico City, not to secede from Mexico.

The strength of nationalism and national identities in Latin America may also be part of the answer to why separatist movements have not been as widespread in the Western Hemisphere as in other regions. Countries like Argentina, Mexico, and Peru have arguably stronger national identities than, for example, the mixed population of the former Yugoslavia or among separatist movements in India, and hence have a greater affinity towards their countries' symbols and national integrity. The fact that Latin American guerrilla movements in the 1970s and 1980s fought for regime change instead of separatism or secession may be an example of this. Then again, when indigenous groups feel that the central government does not take their rights and beliefs into consideration, we may see the rise of groups demanding greater autonomy, like the Mapuches and Easter Islanders in Chile, Zapatistas in Mexico, or CONAIE in Ecuador. Historical racial tensions certainly play a role in these conflicts, as they did in the 2008 crisis in Bolivia, where resource-rich and ethnically different regions of the country believed that they were essentially maintaining the poorer regions. It can be argued that separatism in Latin America is due to uneven development, especially considering the numerous governmental policies that finance ruling elites in one region who are involved in banking, commerce, and extraction of low cost resources from another region. The consequence has been the concentration of wealth and accumulation of capital among a very small social group within the country.[xxv]

Finally, it is necessary to highlight an argument mentioned in Tull's *Separatism in Africa*. He maintains that in Africa, "one reason for the lack of secessionist agendas may be the robustness of the international norm that protects the integrity of states." [xxvi] This argument can also be applied to Latin America, where regional organizations such as the Organization of American States, the Andean Community, or the new Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) are less likely to recognize a region that has declared independence from the main government unless this occurred through a negotiated solution, such as the independence of several Caribbean islands from the United Kingdom between the 1960s and 1980s. On the other hand, when the violent protests occurred in Bolivia in 2008, the heads of UNASUR met in an emergency summit in Chile and stated their support for President Morales as the head of a united Bolivia.

Conclusion

For countries like India, Russia, and China that have to deal with separatist movements, a major concern is that of precedent. For example, there was concern in these governments that when new States, such as Kosovo and former Yugoslav republics achieved independence, it would inspire separatist movements in other nations (i.e. the ETA in Spain, Tibet and the Uyghurs in China, and Chechnya in Russia).

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Latin American governments, for the most part, have not dealt with this issue, as separatist movements have been very scarce, though there is always the possibility of “what if” radicalized Mapuches begin earnestly and interruptedly protesting and demanding an independent state from Santiago. This might encourage similar protests by the Aymaras in Bolivia and Peru or communities in Ecuador or Brazil. With that said, the authors of this analysis would argue that, in spite of the turmoil Latin America has experienced in the past 50 years, from military juntas to civil wars, major protests, widespread human rights abuses, ongoing corruption and overall state weakness in several States, a strong sense of nationalism is widespread throughout the region, which makes separatist violence less probable than in other areas of the world.

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