

Populism and Extractivism in Mexico and Brazil: Progress or Power Consolidation?

Written by Ian Granit

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IAN GRANIT, JUL 26 2022

At the beginning of the 21st century, most Latin American countries experienced significant increases in economic performance and reduced inequality. Latin America, however, remains the most unequal region in the world.[1] The positive effects from the beginning of the 21st century look fragile, while worries remain among national citizens that the economic gains were not shared with the majority of people.[2] Whether the economic improvements in the 2000s affected ordinary citizens or not, Latin American countries still underperform in many socio-economic aspects.[3] Low-quality institutions and services, widespread corruption, a ubiquitous amount of violence, and the perception of low-living standards have led to growing discontent among citizens in Latin America.[4] The feeling of being left behind creates a social and political environment where populist leaders, who promise a quick and easy solution to their national citizens, can flourish.[5] Moreover, extensive corruption, violence, and inequality give the impression that democratic institutions are not living up to their promises or were never prevalent in the first place. Thus, giving further support to the populist, who once in power, embrace authoritarianism and circumvents common democratic practices to create change in the name of the 'common people'.[6]

Populism consists of two main characteristics. First, populists consider their society as divided between the 'common people' and the 'elite,' where the 'elites' use their power to gain further advantage in society at the expense of the 'common people.' Second, populist leaders claim to embody ordinary people's opinions and to portray themselves as possessing the unique ability to achieve an accurate and just representation of the 'common people'.[7] Authoritarian populism, viewed here as a subset of populism, depicts, just as populism, the struggle between the 'common people' against an unfairly advantaged 'elite' establishment, at home or abroad. Authoritarian populism furthers such discourse by justifying radical interventions in favour of the 'common people.' Interventions, which often undermine democracy and its country's democratic institutions, are, thus, justified through a discourse proclaiming to give back control to the 'common people', while the 'elite' will be at a disadvantage. Authoritarian populists often bypass democratic institutions or use them to centralize power and create legitimate dominance while promising to return their nation to its past greatness or health.[8]

Latin America has a long history of populist and authoritarian leaders from both sides of the political spectrum.[9] Although the military dictatorships disappeared from Latin America in the 1990s, other forms of authoritarianism have persisted.[10] The proclaimed ability of authoritarian populists to create change through coercive measures, where other leaders who favour more democratic means have failed, often leads to the public showcasing initial support for authoritative politics underpinned by a populist discourse in Latin America.[11] Authoritarian populism was especially prevalent during the so-called 'pink tide' in Latin America, where left-leaning populist governments achieved impressive improvements in poverty reduction and political recognition for previously marginalised groups who showed support for the populist governments. The advances depended on extractivism, rents from oil and mineral extraction, and agricultural export. Simultaneously the populists restricted political space for protesters against the established government and concentrated power in the executive branch and sometimes in government leaders.[12] The substance of populist and authoritative politics can, however, draw from either the right or the left sides of the political spectrum.[13] Latin America shows how authoritarian populism does not necessarily characterize a defined political force but instead ranges from the right to the left, depending on how it can frame an image of the 'common people' and the 'elite'.[14]

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Populist leaders in Latin America are especially prone to use extractivism to create economic growth and short-term visual progress in their nations, while simultaneously consolidating their popular support and power through authoritative measures.[15] On the left of the political spectrum, populist Evo Morales in Bolivia substantially increased the oil and mining production in his country to boost government revenues, which was used to create new income and infrastructure programs based on communalism and cooperation for low-income groups.[16] In Ecuador, Rafael Correa accelerated oil production during his time in power while focusing on social welfare payments and re-centralizing the state.[17] In Bolivia and Ecuador, the states became increasingly authoritarian due to the growing protests against the extractive industries, which led both Morales and Correa to coercively suppress protests against their projects.¹⁶ On the right of the political spectrum, Alberto Fujimori in Peru made mineral resources the core of the country's neoliberal economic development, which focused on exporting the country's commodities through a free and unregulated market.[18] In Argentina, Carlos Menem pushed agribusiness forward while implementing neoliberal policies, such as removing import and export taxes, reducing farm subsidies, and privatizing public services.[19] Under Fujimori's extractive regime, the military was used for political purposes, while the state harassed its critics, and closed down the congress.[20] Menem suppressed protests against his regime and created, with the help of the military, security, and intelligence forces, an authoritarian and exclusionary form of democracy within the neoliberal framework.[21]

This article sets out to examine how authoritarian populism is currently gaining a stronghold in the two largest Latin American economies by analysing the current Presidents Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) in Mexico and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. Both AMLO and Bolsonaro campaigned on promises of diminishing crime, corruption, and inequalities while expanding their countries' respective extractive industries in the name of the 'common people.' In Mexico, the state-owned oil company generates over 30 per cent of Mexico's federal income on average,[22] while in Brazil the agribusiness and oil sector accounts for over 30 per cent of the country's GDP.[23] Both Mexico and Brazil, thus, gain a substantial portion of their respective nations' income from extractive industries, which raises questions about how the two populist presidents will rule their countries during their presidencies when considering the history of Latin America and the extractive imperative of populist presidents in the region. Once in power, the leaders follow a populist discourse, with an extractive imperative, claiming that their natural resource extraction is a portrayal of national sovereignty against an 'elite' establishment within and outside both Mexico and Brazil. The latter half of this article analyses how AMLO and Bolsonaro, once in power, use a populist discourse to justify power consolidation in the respective presidencies, instead of living up to their campaign promises.

Political Shift in Mexico and Brazil

Mexico is the second-largest economy in Latin America; however, approximately 48.8 per cent of Mexico's population lives below the poverty line.[24] Even though poverty decreases in Mexico, albeit at a slow rate, the country underperforms in terms of social inclusion, poverty reduction, and economic growth. At the same time, high levels of corruption and violence are prevalent in the country. The Mexican people, thus, have a strong reason for feeling that their past governments have been ineffective, which can be framed to be associated with past governments' political ideology.[25] Past Mexican government's inefficiency, corruption scandals, and lack of engagement with people led to a desire to break the political deadlock and embrace a different type of political governance in the 2018 Mexican presidential election. The centre-right National Action Party (PAN), which held power between 2006-2012, waged a large-scale crackdown against drug cartels, causing an explosion of violence in the northern states of Mexico. The neo-liberal policies of PAN achieved nothing in the face of Mexico's problems with poverty, inequality, and crime, while corruption scandals continued to be present in the country. The drug war, failed policies, and corruption scandals helped the right-wing Industrial Revolutionary Party (PRI) return to power, holding the Presidency between 2012 and 2018.[26] The corruption and dishonesty continued, with several former state governors from the PRI now facing criminal charges, accused of stealing billions from the Mexican state while failing to address the increases in violence. The PRI's neoliberal reforms, such as privatizing the oil industry and opening it to foreign investors, produced minor short-term growth; however, inflation rose significantly, leaving most of the population in a worsening condition.[27]

Brazil is the largest economy in Latin America.[28] For the average Brazilian, incomes only increased 0.7 per cent in the past two decades while the wealthiest one per cent in Brazil accrued 25 per cent of all the country's income.[29]

Populism and Extractivism in Mexico and Brazil: Progress or Power Consolidation?

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Since 2011, Brazil has experienced a severe slowdown in economic growth, while economic activity contracted substantially between 2015 and 2016.[30] The Gini Index, a statistical measure representing wealth and income distribution, increased from 51.9 to 53.9 between 2015 and 2018, attesting that inequality increased in Brazil.[31] Similarly to Mexico, the Leftist Brazilians Worker's Party (PT), which ruled Brazil from 2003 to 2016, was involved in numerous corruption scandals. Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who served as President between 2003 to 2010, was arrested for corruption and money laundering during the 2018 presidential campaign.[32] Luiz's successor, Dilma Rousseff, President from 2011 to her impeachment in 2016, was accused of crimes ranging from inefficient usage of public funds and corruption within the PT. The social policies of the PT did not help Brazil's economy slowdown in 2011, giving the impression that social democracy was failing the country.³⁰ After Rousseff's impeachment, Michel Temer took office, representing a centre-right political agenda. During Temer's time in office, inequality increased significantly,[33] and the country experienced a severe economic recession,³¹ while corruption scandals involving Temer continued just like in the previous presidents' terms.[34]

Before the 2018 election in Mexico, both the Center-Right PAN and the Right-Wing PRI parties had become associated with inefficient policies and corruption. Similarly, in Brazil, the left and centre-right parties were deeply associated with corruption, economic recession, and ineffective social welfare policies. Subsequent development led each nation to embrace populist leaders from the opposite side of the political spectrum with hopes to deliver what previous rightist and centrist governments in Mexico and Leftist and Centrist governments in Brazil had failed to achieve.

AMLO, a political figure in Mexico for decades, has long called for a revolution against the corrupt 'elite' establishment in the country, claiming that because of his strong moral stance and connectedness to the 'common people' he is fit to lead Mexico towards a better future.[35] After the Mexican presidential election in 2006, which AMLO lost, he gave himself the title of 'legitimate President' while protesting against the real presidential winner.[36] In 2014, AMLO expressed traditional parties' inability to address Mexico's problems and established his party, MORENA. Even though AMLO has been involved in politics since the 1970s, belonging to both the established PRI and the PRD parties, he was able to distance himself from previous administrations in his 2018 campaign through a left-wing agenda that promised to double pensions for the elderly, provide medicine and food packages for the poor and create new scholarships programs for youths.[37] Moreover, AMLO promised to create a substantial increase in economic growth, demilitarise the war on drugs, address poverty and inequality, and fight corruption.[38] AMLO used a populist discourse to distance himself further from past administrations, portraying himself as possessing the voice of the 'common people'. Referring to the PRI and PAN parties as 'power mafias' AMLO told his supporters that "we are going to beat them, because the people are already fed up with the corruption of the PRI and the PAN",[39] portraying himself as speaking for the 'common people' in Mexico who are deprived by the corrupt 'elite'. When presenting his development plan for 2018-2024, AMLO claimed that the general interest was not present in the political sphere, since Mexico is 'a network of interests of the elites' who undermine the common people in the country.[40] AMLO blamed the underperformance of the Mexican economy on an 'economy for the elites', which, according to AMLO, failed to create neither development nor jobs.[41] AMLO stated during his campaign that the only way to save Mexico from the 'elite' is through 'the united and organized people' of who AMLO would be the leader,[42] promising to bring the fourth transformation to Mexico – referring to the past three great transformations, which changed the country.[43] AMLO, thus, effectively framed past governments as the 'elite' establishment, while framing himself as the saviour and force of change Mexico needs, and won the Presidential election in 2018.⁴³

Similarly to AMLO, Bolsonaro, a former military captain, had been involved with politics for decades, serving as both city councillor and federal deputy. During Bolsonaro's career, he has been very outspoken about past administrations' failures and idolised the past military dictatorship in Brazil while calling to close down Congress.[44] Before the 2018 Brazilian election, Bolsonaro promoted a far-right agenda, advocating for stricter punishment for criminals, increasing freedoms for police, and further privatising markets to increase economic growth.[45] Simultaneously, Bolsonaro campaigned on undermining the corrupt 'elite' by reducing inequalities and diminishing corruption.[46] By claiming that Bolsonaro's party was "indeed different from those who ruled over us over the past 20 years,"⁴⁷ Bolsonaro effectively framed himself as an outsider and against the 'elite' establishment. Bolsonaro told the Brazilian people that "with us, you will be in the first place",[47] indicating that he knew what the people wanted, and therefore could speak for the people. Bolsonaro framed the 'common people' in Brazil as "workers,

Populism and Extractivism in Mexico and Brazil: Progress or Power Consolidation?

Written by Ian Granit

conservatives, Christians” which he referred to as the “good citizens.”[48] Bolsonaro framed the PT party as an ‘elite’ and criminals by calling them “this gang with a red flag,”[48] indicating that this ‘gang’ would deprive Brazil’s ‘common people’ by associating the PT party with notorious criminal gangs prevalent in Brazil. The previous top-down rule with low accountability, corruption, and failed social-democratic policies, thus, allowed Bolsonaro to effectively frame previous Leftist and Centrist administrations as the ‘elite’ while claiming to speak for the ‘common people,’ making him victorious in the 2018 Brazilian presidential election.[49]

The Extractive Imperative

AMLO puts a great emphasis on going back to the era when oil was at the forefront of the Mexican economy when Mexico’s state-owned oil company Pemex represented over 40 per cent of its federal income.[50] The Mexican President states that he “wants Pemex to be a lever of development” claiming that “Pemex would finance development.”[51] The oil company used to represent a good economy and adequate social welfare for its workers but has experienced a significant decline and is now one of the world’s most indebted oil companies.[52] For AMLO, Pemex is, however, both an act of justice and a source of savings,[53],[54] causing him to invest public money in the company while supporting Pemex further through tax reductions.[55] Furthermore, the President planned to build new refineries and renovate existing ones, costing billions of USD.[56] To gain support for his extractive plans, which faced heavy criticism, AMLO used a populist discourse framing Pemex as a way to fight an international elite who undermines Mexico’s prosperity. When presenting and arguing for his oil-producing plans, AMLO stated that he “does not want to be a colony of any other country” and “aspire to live in a free, independent and sovereign country”.[57] AMLO claimed this can be achieved through energy sovereignty and that “the most important thing is to produce crude”,[57] while adding “for the recovery of sovereignty” to Pemex company’s logo.[58] According to Mexico’s government website, the country faced threats and challenges on an international level and claimed certain powers harass Mexico and prevent it from achieving energy sovereignty.[59] According to the website, oil was a “strategic resource” and “necessary condition” against these international powers. AMLO and his administration, therefore, framed Mexico as under threat from international powers who tries to undermine Mexico’s sovereignty and use the country as a colony. AMLO effectively created an ‘us’ the Mexican people against ‘them’ the international powers by claiming that the international powers will deprive Mexico of its sovereignty by using the country as a colony. AMLO portrayed himself as having the solution to stop these international powers from depriving the Mexican people, by increasing spending on Pemex and producing more oil.

Subsequently, oil auctions to foreign and private companies were suspended by AMLO, leading to what investors see as an unstable investment climate and have since led to a lack of support for his policies.[60] The lack of investments and support for Pemex has led to stagnating oil production.[61] The Mexican President, however, continued to show strong political will for his desire to increase Mexico’s oil production and planned to spend an additional US\$ 4.4 billion on Pemex in 2020, with total spending of US\$ 23.88 on the company from public resources.[62] AMLO remained optimistic about Pemex’s growth and accounted for significant increases in oil production in Mexico’s 2020 budget. Criticism against AMLO’s large focus on Pemex, and failure to achieve other campaign promises, was met with a populist discourse blaming both the ‘elite’ within and outside Mexico’s borders. AMLO’s administration blamed the stagnant oil production on the neoliberal ‘elite’ establishment and past administrations, stating that “in 40 years of the neoliberal period, not a single refinery was built” while calling it “a great irresponsibility” of past governments.[63] Furthermore, according to AMLO, if Pemex is honestly and efficiently managed, instead of corrupt management by past leaders, the company will perform better and create profits for the Mexican people. On an international level, AMLO claimed that “in our country with the support of international financial organizations a policy of submission was imposed, of impoverishment to the majority of the people”,[64] framing the international and national ‘elite’ as working together to undermine the ‘common people’ in Mexico. AMLO framed the national elite to be the past right-wing governments who, with support from international financial organizations, deprived the Mexican population through corruption and lack of oil-producing policies. AMLO, on the other hand, framed himself as trying to restore Mexico to its past greatness, when the economy was growing thanks to Pemex, portraying himself as the saviour Mexico needs.

Similarly to AMLO, Bolsonaro emphasised the importance of extractive industries for Brazil’s development, focusing on agricultural activities and oil production.[65] Bolsonaro’s administration claims that oil is an essential part of

Populism and Extractivism in Mexico and Brazil: Progress or Power Consolidation?

Written by Ian Granit

Brazil's development and stresses increasing oil production.[66] Bolsonaro pledged to abolish indigenous rights reserves and allow commercial exploitation of otherwise restricted land areas in the Brazilian Amazon rainforest for agricultural expansion and planned to invest over US\$ 84 billion into the oil sector.[67] Bolsonaro stated that the Amazon belongs to Brazil,[68] and it is, therefore, in the country's best interest to deforest as much of the rainforest as they need for economic development.[69] Bolsonaro claimed that the past governments "have led Brazilians to a chaotic situation, with poverty, violence, and unemployment", stating that "the establishment wants the usual", which Bolsonaro claimed is chaos and deprivation of the people of Brazil.[70] Bolsonaro, on the other hand, stated that his plans for the Amazon will help "more than 20 million Brazilians who for years have been waiting for economic development", referring to the Indigenous communities, which Bolsonaro claimed he wants to help become integrated into the Brazilian society through development.[71] Bolsonaro framed the past governments as the 'elite' who deprived Brazil's 'common people' and ruined their country. The Brazilian President, however, framed himself as a man of the people, who knows what the 'common people' want, which he will achieve through developing the Amazon.

Over a year into Bolsonaro's presidency, both agribusiness and oil production has increased substantially.[72] Part of the success is due to Bolsonaro's strong political will and political support, where 50 per cent of the parliamentarians and 39.5 per cent of the seats in the Senate belongs to business people with links to Brazilian agribusiness.[73] With great support from the parliamentarians and the Senate, Bolsonaro has been able to drastically reduce funds for forest control and inspection agencies, make freer use of pesticides and agrochemicals, loosen environmental licenses, and transfer Indigenous lands to the Ministry of Agriculture.[74] Simultaneously, Bolsonaro cut the Brazilian Institute of the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources budget by almost one-third more in 2020.[75] Despite criticism of large increases in deforestation, Bolsonaro continued to make extractivism easier in Brazil, and in November 2019, Brazil repealed a ten-year-old ban on sugarcane cultivation in the Brazilian Amazon rainforest and wetlands to increase production.[76]

Bolsonaro's environmental policies in the Amazon have faced a huge national and international backlash.[77] To defend his extractive development plans, Bolsonaro resorted to a populist discourse, framing the national and international 'elite' as working together to undermine Brazil. Responding to accusations of destroying the Amazon, Bolsonaro claimed that the left 'elite' "surrendered the country to violence and corruption"[78] and neglected to take a stance against "attacks on Brazil's sovereignty".[79] Continuing, Bolsonaro stated that he wants to build a Brazil for the 'common people' "that affirms its sovereignty over our forests, our wealth and, above all, our values".[80] Bolsonaro framed himself as taking a stance against the attacks on Brazil's sovereignty by developing the Amazon as he wishes, claiming that past administrations surrendered to wishes of reducing deforestation in the country, which threatens Brazil's sovereignty. On an international level, Bolsonaro claimed that foreign powers "will launch unreasonable and gratuitous attacks on the Amazon",[81] framing the international community as a threat to Brazil. On Twitter, Bolsonaro wrote that "in the last 22 years Brazil was looted and made a dwarf in its international relations", linking a video talking about foreign powers' interest in Amazon's natural resources, and the lack of interest in Brazil's 'common people' by this international elite.[82] Bolsonaro accused countries opposing deforestation in the Amazon of having a "colonial mindset"[83] and that "the fake news campaign built against our sovereignty will not work".[84] Bolsonaro's administration asserted that aid towards protecting the Brazilian Amazon, and international agreements towards better environmental protection for the rainforest, is "an international campaign against Brazil" by countries involved in neo-colonialism.[85] Bolsonaro, thus, asserted that Brazil is under attack from foreign powers, whom themselves want to have Brazil as a colony and use Amazon's natural resources to their advantage while undermining the 'common people' in Brazil. The Brazilian president effectively framed the national 'elite' AMLO and Bolsonaro both consolidate power in their countries, while their promises of progress through the extractive industries have thus far been barely effective — the past leftist government — as a part of the international plot against Brazil since they "surrendered the country" to attacks on Brazil's sovereignty. Bolsonaro, on the other hand, framed himself as trying to save Brazil's 'common people' by taking a stance against the 'elite' and continuing his development plans despite criticism.

Decreasing Inequalities or Consolidating Power?

For decades Mr López Obrador has followed the populist notion of proclaiming himself as a 'messiah' or saviour of

Populism and Extractivism in Mexico and Brazil: Progress or Power Consolidation?

Written by Ian Granit

Mexico, as the de-facto person to abolish the corrupt 'elite' establishment while possessing the right solutions for the country's poor.[86] AMLO prefers to govern based on his perception of right and wrong since,[87] according to him, he already knows what is best for the Mexican people.[88] Thus far, AMLO's reliance on oil for development and the ineffectiveness to increase production has, however, led Mexico into economic stagnation.[89] Mexico's stagnation makes it hard to fund new welfare programs,[90] and AMLO has instead taken away or reduced previously established government welfare programs and redirected the resources into his newly created programs.[91] Since he took office, AMLO has cut funding for NGOs, including women's shelters, day-care facilities, and groups working on health issues.[92] The Mexican President has severely cut spending for the government, causing over 20 000 public workers to lose their jobs while abolishing Mexico's childcare program to give parents money directly.[93] AMLO's spending on health care was 10 per cent smaller in May 2019 compared to May 2018 and in 2019 he ordered healthcare workers to cut spending by 30 to 40 per cent.[94] In the 2020 budget, AMLO ordered a 50 per cent budget cut in general services and organisations.[95] AMLO defended these cuts by stating that organizations created by past governments are "front organizations", where he claims previous governments "dedicated themselves to looting, doing juicy businesses under the protection of public power".[96] The Mexican President claimed that cutting the budget will, thus, undermine the 'elite' since with less money in the budget, they cannot steal as much money.⁹⁵ AMLO justified his need to cut government spending in certain areas, which he promised to increase, by claiming that they were never there to help the 'common people' in the first place and that AMLO now makes sure that the 'elite' cannot steal money from the public.

AMLO's ability to cut budgets in certain departments and redirect resources where he deems them more appropriate has been made further possible through the 'Austeridad Republicana' law.[97] The new law allows the government to redirect resources directly to groups and people instead to different departments. The Ministry and the Ministry of Finance and Public credit can expand on the assumptions made in the law if deemed convenient,[98] thus giving AMLO's government more power to interpret when and where spending of public resources should occur. The legislative and judicial powers, the state's production companies, and autonomous constitutional bodies must abide by the new law.[99] AMLO's administration, however, stated that they have not cut budgets; instead, their website states that they "redirect public resources to the neediest people", [100] thus justifying their new laws and budget cuts by claiming that the new law is there to benefit the 'common people' while denying that the budget cuts exist. Faced with backlash from the media, NGOs, academics, and civil organizations in Mexico, AMLO claimed they also belong to the elite, stating that "they don't have communication with the people" and have the same mindset as past administrations.[101] Instead of addressing his failed development plans, AMLO justified budget cuts for essential services by blaming past 'elitist' governments for stealing money that AMLO's new policies will fix. Justifying the 'Austeridad Republicana' law which gives AMLO further power, he claimed that the law will give him the ability to help the poorest in Mexico while claiming that his criticsers co-conspire against him with the 'elite' establishment.

Since he took office, Mr López Obrador has started to appoint his political allies to important positions in Mexico to consolidate further power. In Mexico, the new Prosecutor General dealing with the most substantial corruption allegations was the former security advisor to AMLO's 2018 Presidential campaign and was the acting attorney general under AMLO.[102] AMLO has appointed delegates from his party in several Mexican states, which AMLO has given control over allocating and overseeing the state's funds, hence circumventing the mandate of locally elected governors.[103] When faced with criticism, AMLO stated that this is normal in times of transformation, but that the people ask him all the time when he meets them "that we must move forward to transform Mexico, let us not stop", [104] proclaiming that his actions are needed for Mexico's transformation and that AMLO is simply doing what the people want. AMLO has combined appointing his allies to vital positions with strategically cutting funding to agencies that can undermine his power.[105] The budget for the National Anti-Corruption System in Mexico, which has helped unveil past administrations' corrupt actions, has been drastically cut in Mexico's federal budget.[106] When asked about corruption in the country, AMLO answered that he is not supported by any vested interest or receives money from businessmen stating "I came here with the support of the people, my only master is the people of Mexico. That is why I am free." [107] AMLO, thus, failed to fulfil his campaign promises of dealing with corruption and inequality, while consolidating further powers in his Presidency. In addition, the Mexican President proclaimed himself not being able to be corrupt since he only has one master, the 'common people' in Mexico.

Like AMLO, Bolsonaro has long been outspoken against past regimes.[108] A few months after taking office,

Populism and Extractivism in Mexico and Brazil: Progress or Power Consolidation?

Written by Ian Granit

Bolsonaro continued his strong anti-establishment stance by stating that “usual Brazil, with its old vices, has led Brazilians to a chaotic situation, with poverty, violence and unemployment. The establishment wants the usual because it does not feel the consequences of its ambitions. We are going to change Brazil because we are not part of the establishment!”.[109] Furthermore, Bolsonaro emphasised the benefits of the past Brazilian dictatorship compared to the left's rule while claiming that he embodies the people's will and can create real change.[110] Contrary to AMLO, Bolsonaro had better prospects of achieving his campaign promises with an increase in economic growth and a drop in unemployment.[111] Bolsonaro and his administration's discontent with social welfare policies, such as the Bolsa Familia program, and their views about poor people, however, raise doubts about whether the President aims to fulfil his campaign promise of reducing Brazil's inequalities.

The Bolsa Família program in Brazil supports more than 13.9 million families in poverty or extreme poverty, with a monthly income of less than R\$178 per person.[112] Between 2003 and 2014, more than 30 million Brazilians escaped poverty thanks to Bolsa Familia and the commodity boom.[113] The program has created improvements in rural towns through better housing, food security, and less child labour. 114 Bolsonaro, however, referred to the Bolsa Familia beneficiaries as lazy and “ignorant wretches”, 114 while Brazil's Economy Minister identified the cause of poverty in Brazil as the poor's inability to save.[114] Bolsonaro claimed that creating further economic growth and development in Brazil will decrease inequalities instead of welfare programs.[115] Bolsonaro framed the left in Brazil as an elitist establishment and states that his administration has “distanced ourselves from communist dictatorships”, and welfare policies, which Bolsonaro associates with the left.[116] After six months into Bolsonaro's presidency, the Brazilian government severely slowed down the acceptance rate to Bolsa Familia, from 275 000 to 2500 people per month, while cancelling payments to existing Bolsa Familia beneficiaries, causing the number of people already receiving benefits to fall with one million. 114 The 2020 budget for the Bolsa Familia saw further cuts with over R\$500 million compared with the previous year, which already severely undermined the program.[117] While the Bolsa Familia program accounts for 0.4 per cent of Brazil's GDP, Bolsonaro has allowed the police and army officers to keep their generous pensions while not addressing the large tax breaks for industries and the rich, worth 4 per cent of Brazilian GDP.[118] Bolsonaro justified his new policies by aligning with what he views as the ‘common people’, stating that he takes “positions aligned with the values of our people, who are, for the most part, conservative”. [119] Bolsonaro, therefore, justified his lack of addressing Brazil's large inequalities by framing past welfare programs as part of the “communist dictatorships”, which, according to Bolsonaro, are past leftist governments. Instead, Bolsonaro justified the cuts by claiming he embodies the people's views, who are conservative and would, thus, support such changes. Bolsonaro framed his budget cut as doing it for the ‘common people’ of Brazil, who he does not want to be undermined by communism.

Moreover, instead of addressing the root causes of inequalities while undermining current welfare programs, Bolsonaro consolidated further power in his presidency by appointing his own family to his administration. The President's three sons, Flavio, Carlos, and Eduardo, all play important roles in his administration while facing criminal charges.[120] Flavio Bolsonaro was detected by a Brazilian government agency receiving millions of R\$ to his accounts and Bolsonaro's wife's account.[121] The scandal became more serious when secret chats revealed that the chief prosecutor of the anti-corruption Car Wash investigations and Bolsonaro's Justice Minister Sergio Moro protected Flavio.[122] The Supreme Court has since blocked the investigations of Flavio's corruption allegations.[123] At the same time, Carlos Bolsonaro is under investigation for alleged improprieties in his council office, while Bolsonaro's youngest son, Eduardo Bolsonaro, has been identified as one of the critical members of a fake news criminal rack in Brazil.[124] Bolsonaro claimed that since he took office, he has not taken an authoritarian turn. Instead, he stated that he and his government are working “towards freedom, working for necessary reforms” and “adopting a market economy”. [125] Facing backlash from the corruption charges against his sons, and being accused of nepotism, Bolsonaro alluded to the ‘elite’ in Brazil, stating “the abuses witnessed by everyone in the last few weeks were received by the government with the same caution as always”. [126] Bolsonaro defended his sons, and his authoritarianism, by claiming he is instead working towards freedom, and that his policies are necessary reforms for such freedoms. The Brazilian President framed the accusations as abuses and referred back to his election campaign when Bolsonaro was stabbed, claiming that a “leftist militant, a former member of an opposition party” was responsible for the stabbing.[127] Bolsonaro, thus, framed the current accusations of authoritarianism and corruption as the Left's way of attacking him once again, while he tries to work towards a free Brazil.

Populism and Extractivism in Mexico and Brazil: Progress or Power Consolidation?

Written by Ian Granit

Further Power Consolidation Through Armed Forces

In 2019, AMLO created a new National Guard in Mexico, composed of a mix of military personnel and former federal police.[128] Compared to the military and navy, which are controlled by two separate government departments with two independent chains of command,[129] the command of the national guard is Alfonso Durazo, a minister appointed by AMLO from his political party MORENA.[130] Accompanied by the new National Guard was the new law on the Use of Force, which sets out how the National Guard and Police can use force in Mexico. The law does not clarify when a security force can take another person's life while failing to set out restrictions for electric shock batons and belts. The law does not require the use of minimum force, while only allowing demonstrations for lawful purposes.[131] Unlimited force may, thus, be used against individuals and groups if their demonstration's purpose is deemed unlawful by the government. A leaked draft of a proposed bill by AMLO furthered the powers of the state by making it possible for citizens who are accused of any crime to be detained for 80 days without charge, allowing evidence obtained by torture to be used in court, reducing the number of judges supervising cases, while proposing 14 constitutional amendments.[132] AMLO claimed the National Guard is important and serves as a "benefit for the people", while the chief executive stated that constitutional reforms have made it possible to focus on "addressing the causes that originate the violence, that is, guaranteeing opportunities for the people and combating marginalization".[133] AMLO and his administration, thus, followed an authoritarian populist leadership style — justifying their consolidation of power through the National Guard and constitutional changes by claiming they do it in the name of the 'common people'.

Mexico's 2020 budget focused on creating more considerable funds for the different social welfare programs created by AMLO's administration but did, in addition, focus on consolidating further power for the National Guard. Without facing any outside threats to the nation, the 2020 defence budget in Mexico was 16 per cent larger than the 2018 defence budget,[134] while stating that the Ministry may authorize the granting of financial compensation for the National Guard and complementary systems of social security when deemed appropriate.[135] Furthermore, resources from the Federal Police may be transferred to the National Guard, and the budget demanded that the National Guard must be integrated into all preventative crime activities and may take help from the civilian population if needed. Even though not highlighted in the 2020 budget, Security Minister Alfonso Durazo expected that the budget should set aside 56 billion pesos for the National Guard.[136]

AMLO justified the increased power and resources of the armed forces through a populist discourse and authoritative measures. The Mexican president stated that "the soldier is a uniformed people" and that "there are no officers who belong to the economic elites".[137] On the other hand, when facing backlash from journalists, AMLO claimed that Mexico now has "a journalism very close to power, especially economic power, and very distant from the people" while claiming that "it is a journalism of the elite, which does not defend the common people".[138] Hence, AMLO effectively framed people opposing his authoritative turn as belonging to the 'elite' who tries to undermine the 'common people' in Mexico. On the contrary, armed forces were framed as part of the 'common people' and not belonging to the 'elites' and could, therefore, be trusted. Demonstrations and protests against AMLO's plans to build the Dos Bocas oil refinery in Tabasco have led AMLO to support anti-protest laws, including 20-year prison sentences for blocking access to businesses, and 13 years in prison for delaying public work projects.[139] AMLO has militarized extraction zones to repress indigenous and environmental activists who protest against oil, mining, and logging industries in Mexico while threatening journalists who oppose his reliance on extractive industries.[140] Days after the energy regulator's boss, Guillermo Garcia Alcocer, complained about unqualified officials that AMLO had appointed to the energy regulator, investigations were opened up against Alcocer, causing him to resign.[141] The Mexican President justified his increasingly populist and authoritative rule by claiming that he does it in the name of the 'common people' by stating that "if supporting the poor, if supporting the youth, if supporting the peasants, if supporting the fishermen is being a populist, let them sign me up on the list".[142] Hence, AMLO tried to silence the voices that have and could potentially continue to speak up against his potentially adverse policies by framing them as 'elites' while claiming he does it in the name of the people. AMLO continued to circumvent democratic institutions and rights by creating further power for his National Guard while justifying such measures by framing the National Guard as an army for the 'common people' against the 'elite'.

Like Mexico, Brazil does not face any immediate outside threats to the nation. Bolsonaro has, however, shown strong

Populism and Extractivism in Mexico and Brazil: Progress or Power Consolidation?

Written by Ian Granit

support for the military while emphasizing its importance. A former army captain himself, the military is the central pillar of political support in Bolsonaro's government.[143] Bolsonaro's Vice President, Hamilton Mourão, is a military general,[144] while several military figures have, since Bolsonaro took office, been appointed to various state apparatuses, ministries, federal banks, municipalities, and strategic state enterprises, such as Petrobras. The armed forces now occupy six out of 22 ministries.[145] The military budget significantly increased from 2018 to 2019 and still went over its budget by US\$ 1.46 billion,[146] and the armed forces experienced large salary increases in 2020.[147] Moreover, Bolsonaro's administration has shown tendencies to support paramilitary groups involved in several corruption allegations. Investigations have shown ties between Bolsonaro's family and paramilitary groups that control the majority of Rio's favelas.[148] Flavio Bolsonaro, Jair's eldest son and the representative of the state of Rio in the Senate, employed the mother and wife of a former police officer, who allegedly is a leader of a violent urban militia, to the Bolsonaro administration.[149] Bolsonaro justified the expansion and increased budget expenses on the military by stating that "the mission of the Armed Forces, is to defend the country, it is to defend democracy," and stated that "we are at the service of the will of the Brazilian population".[150] Bolsonaro claimed that nothing is more authoritarian than attacking the freedom of your people,[151] which the military tries to defend. Bolsonaro, thus, framed criticsers of expanding the military as against the freedom of the people of Brazil, which Bolsonaro claimed he tries to defend through the military.

Bolsonaro aimed, just like AMLO, to use the law to legitimize the actions of the paramilitary groups and the military. The Law and Order Guarantee (LOG) legislation allows the President of Brazil to send the Armed Forces on missions, whether or not Governors or Presidents of other constitutional branches consider it necessary.[152] Bolsonaro claimed that police and military actions on the President's order, according to the LOG legislation, should be granted immunity against any illegal actions they commit during their mission.[153] Moreover, a new anti-crime law was created under Bolsonaro's administration immunity to police officers and paramilitaries who have killed civilians if they show that they were subject to "violent emotion, excessive fear, or surprise".[154] As a result, Brazil's military police gains further presence and power in the country, launching illegal strikes and killing at record numbers since Bolsonaro took office.155 Bolsonaro has continued his authoritative rule by waging crackdowns on environmental activists who oppose the large deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon, accusing them of being responsible for the fires in the Amazon forest, while severely undermining indigenous rights and encouraging opposition against indigenous peoples in Brazil.[155] Opposition to the Bolsonaro administration's adverse policies has led to threats from Eduardo Bolsonaro to revive the past Brazilian military rule's Institutional Act Number Five, which indefinitely outlaws freedom of expression and assembly while closing down Congress.[156]

Bolsonaro justified these measures by stating that criminals should die in the street like cockroaches, while heavily emphasizing the need for a strong military and proclaiming subsequent security and speaking in favour of killing people he deems a threat to effective rule and closing Congress.[157] Faced with backlash from other branches of the Brazilian government, , in 2020, Bolsonaro called for his supporters to mobilize against Brazil's Congress and Supreme court, claiming that they inhibit the executive branch from making decisions, and therefore, undermine the Brazilian people[158]. During protests against Brazil's Congress and the Supreme court, Bolsonaro showed strong support and joined the protesters, claiming that people within the government who oppose him are part of a dictatorial 'elite' undermining his constitutional rights in the executive. Bolsonaro arrived at the protest on horseback, portraying himself as a man of the people by joining the protests and as a saviour of democracy since he wants to stop the dictatorial elite. Addressing the crowd in that same rally, Bolsonaro said: "[w]e are not going to tolerate interference — our patience has ended. We have the people on our side, and we have the armed forces on the side of the people".[159] Bolsonaro, thus, framed the Congress and Supreme Court as trying to inhibit Bolsonaro from executing his constitutional rights and oppose the people's will, since Bolsonaro possesses the will of the people. The Brazilian president framed the military as being on the people's side, who will help Bolsonaro and the people from interfering in Bolsonaro's decisions. Hence, Bolsonaro used a typical populist leadership style, portraying himself as on the same side of the people against the corrupt 'elite', claiming the 'elite' undermines his right to rule Brazil in favour of its country's 'common people' while circumventing democratic measures to achieve change.

Conclusion

Due to public dissatisfaction with the past corrupt and inefficient governments, Mexico and Brazil experienced

Populism and Extractivism in Mexico and Brazil: Progress or Power Consolidation?

Written by Ian Granit

political shifts in their respective countries' elections in 2018. Mexico has seen the rise of AMLO, a left-wing populist, while Brazil has experienced the rise of Bolsonaro, a far-right populist. The two new Latin American presidents might differ in their stance on the political spectrum, but AMLO's and Bolsonaro's authoritarian populist leadership style makes them increasingly similar. Their respective countries' natural resource extraction is framed as a way toward national sovereignty, against either an international elite, national elite, or a co-conspiracy between the national and international elite. AMLO and Bolsonaro frame their respective countries' extractive industries as helping the 'common people' in their countries which both leaders claim they can speak for. Moreover, the 'common people' in Mexico and Brazil are, according to both AMLO and Bolsonaro, undermined by international powers who have a neo-colonial mindset and deprive the citizens in their respective countries. Both AMLO and Bolsonaro promise to solve this deprivation through natural resource extraction, which they claim will benefit the 'common people' in their respective nations. The two Latin American leaders have had differing effects on increasing their respective countries' extractive industries. AMLO has largely failed in his plans, leaving Mexico's economy stagnant since he took office, facing him with considerable criticism. Bolsonaro has succeeded in increasing agribusiness and the oil industry, making the possibility of achieving his campaign promises better but faces a backlash due to the environmental degradation his policies cause. Both leaders claim that the backlash is due to the corrupt 'elite' establishment, both at home and abroad, who want the Brazilian and Mexican people's resources for themselves.

AMLO and Bolsonaro have had differing abilities to achieve their campaign promises since their development plans' success has differed. Both leaders, however, direct substantial efforts towards consolidating power during their respective presidencies. Through a typically authoritative populist leadership approach, AMLO considers himself the sole person who can make good choices for Mexico and has given himself control over Mexico's welfare programs while undermining the NGOs, departments, and private enterprises that have previously worked towards social welfare, while cutting their budgets, blaming them all for working with the corrupt 'elite'. Bolsonaro has severely cut the budget and acceptance rate for Brazil's largest welfare program, Bolsa Familia, severely undermining Brazil's poor people, stating that he will not follow the same path as past dictatorial communist governments. Both AMLO and Bolsonaro have taken questionable stances toward corruption, one of the main problems in both Mexico and Brazil. AMLO has reduced the budget of the major anti-corruption agency in Mexico while placing people of his party in the top position to oversee corruption charges since AMLO claims he can resist corruption because he represents the people's will. In the case of Bolsonaro, all his sons are part of his administration as well as charged with either corruption or disinformation charges, which Bolsonaro responds to by referring to the left 'elite' who abuses Bolsonaro's administration.

Security, or the lack of security, is another main problem in both Mexico and Brazil. AMLO has created a paramilitary group, the National Guard, which he and his political party has the sole power over. Since AMLO took office, he has given the National Guard further power through legislative means while expanding the paramilitary group's budget, claiming that the armed forces are part of the 'common people' while people opposing his focus on the National Guard are part of the 'elite'. Bolsonaro has given the military, his main political support, a substantially increased budget while giving out a large portion of Brazil's important political and business positions to military officials. Moreover, Bolsonaro has given the military and police more power to use force while creating laws that increase power over where and when to use the military. Subsequent developments have led Bolsonaro to join protests against his opponents in government, claiming that he possesses the will of the people who elected him, with the support of the armed forces, and that his opponents belong to a dictatorial 'elite'.

In certain aspects, the left-versus-right difference is present in AMLO's and Bolsonaro's presidencies, such as embracing or cutting welfare programs and favouring state-owned or private enterprises. However, their authoritative populist leadership style increasingly makes the Mexican and Brazilian Presidents' rules comparable. It guides the way AMLO and Bolsonaro conduct decisions and the justification they use to justify their increase of power in their respective Presidencies.

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Populism and Extractivism in Mexico and Brazil: Progress or Power Consolidation?

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