



A new shift to the right in Latin America?

Ezequiel Fernandez

Abstract: Public and political influence of the extreme right has grown exponentially in Latin America. Jair Bolsonaro has already held power in Brazil while paleolibertarian Javier Milei was recently elected president in Argentina. What dangers does this pose for democracy?

A spectre is haunting Latin America. After the progressive cycle at the beginning of the 21st century followed by a period of contrasting but generally more conservative governments and an interregnum in which the old has not yet died and the new is yet to be born, a new actor has entered the stage, posing a threat to democracy in the region: the extreme right.

Although they vary from country to country, these right-wingers have the [common denominator](#) of breaking the consensus of three or four decades of democratic processes, formed after the fall of military dictatorships. Their emergence echoes the recent advance of right-wing politicians in Europe and the United States, and they have gained strength in the second half of the last decade. In Brazil and Argentina, right-wing regimes came to power in 2019 and 2023 respectively, while in Chile far-right extremists reached the final stages in the 2022 election. What is new and what is old about the right-wing in Latin

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America? What characterises them in these latitudes? Who are their main references and how do they operate in the region?

In all cases, the influence of international parties and actors is visible: not only as an ideological reference, but also through transnational economic, ideological and political networks. As elsewhere, they promote authoritarian behaviour, anti-minority discourse and a socially conservative agenda, but in Latin America they are particularly characterised by their reactionary policies undermining improvements achieved during the progressive cycle of the previous decade. In Brazil and Argentina, for example, there are clear examples of combinations of libertarians (in the tradition of the most extreme economic liberalism) who advocate labour deregulation and indiscriminate financial liberalisation with philo-fascists and defenders of dictatorial processes who identify 'cultural Marxism' as a bitter enemy to defeat. One point that unites these different philosophies is their permanent attack on progressive circles, which they regard as privileged elites.

While they have been able to garner support in the streets, another element that distinguishes them is their strong presence on online social media, the hate speeches they proclaim there, their quest to install fake news and viralise speeches that promote intolerance. Their influencers have created a niche on these platforms in which to build themselves as network figures, influencing the digital conversation and media agenda.

The pandemic was a watershed in terms of its relevance in public discussion. In Brazil the government's pandemic denialism resulted in the deaths of 700,000 people, while in the rest of the region, far-right radicals in opposition promoted a discourse against restrictions on movement, in favour of a supposed individual freedom, disregarding health policies and even going against scientific evidence which recommended protective measures.

Three years later, they have capitalised on social discontent, distrust of professional politics and a prolonged economic crisis to establish themselves as an option with a thirst for power and real prospect of forming governments in various countries in the region.

Brazil and the bullet holes of the machine gun salute

Jair Bolsonaro, who so recently served as Brazilian president, is an advocate of the classical right. A career military officer who, on the [impeachment of Dilma Rousseff](#), testified for the former president's torturers, he was the first representative of this movement to reach the presidency in 2019. Although he lost in the final stage of the 2022 presidential election to the renowned political and trade union leader Luiz Ignacio Lula da Silva, [he won](#) more than 51m votes in the first round.

Despite this defeat, he [gained strength](#) in the legislative arena: his party's representation grew to 13 out of 81 senators, and 99 deputies making it the

largest minority party today. In addition, his party currently holds nine governorships.

Bolsonarismo has dabbled with various supporters in order to sustain its electoral base: the military sector, evangelical leaders, arms manufacturers, agribusiness entrepreneurs, as well as those who espouse a rabid anti-Petista (Workers' Party) stance and a deep moral conservatism that rejects feminist and gender agendas. His dismal machine-gun salute synthesises authoritarianism, violence and an anti-democratic attitude, which left 33m Brazilians [facing hunger](#), more than 15 percent of the population.

Chile and Pinochet's vivid shadow

Jose Antonio Kast burst onto the Chilean political scene as the highest polling candidate in the [November 2021 elections](#). It was the second time he had run: in 2017 he had obtained fourth place with 7.93pc of the vote. In 2021 he obtained 20 percentage points more, 27.9pc. Although he lost the last round to the centre-left candidate Gabriel Boric, Kast, a lawyer and several times deputy, has accumulated power and revived the ghost of dictator Augusto Pinochet.

In almost two years, Boric's government underwent several crises upon which the extreme right was able to capitalise. Perhaps the most acute [was the setback](#) of the rejection of the new constitutional plebiscite (62pc of the population voted against it) and the subsequent election of new constituents. In that instance, the Republican Party, the far-right party led by Kast, swept the board, winning almost 3.5m votes nationwide, the highest number of votes won by a political party since the return to democracy in 1990. [His party](#), which opposed reform of Pinochet's constitution, won 22 out of the 51 seats, with other right-wing parties winning another 11 seats. Kast has time and again extolled [Pinochet's 'economic legacy'](#), and called for rewriting history from his point of view. An [ally of Bolsonaro](#), of Vox, with close ties to Argentinian president Javier Milei and other proponents of the new right, he has fought his battles on the socio-cultural plane; he opposes 'gender ideology', promotes a [strong anti-immigrant campaign](#) and has spoken out time and again in favour of 'freedom' - which is nothing more than the non-regulation of the state. Boric is halfway through his mandate and there are still two years left before new presidential elections. But the shadow of Kast is becoming more and more present in Chilean territory.

Argentina in the teeth of the chainsaw

Before becoming a presidential candidate, [Javier Milei](#) was a football goalkeeper, rock singer, teacher, economics communicator, theatre performer and TV panellist. His rise was meteoric: he stopped frequenting television screens to assume legislative functions in 2019, when he won a seat in Congress. Today, his party, La Libertad Avanza, has [7 senators and 38 deputies](#) and recently triumphed in the second round of elections defeating Sergio Massa, from the ruling *Unión por la Patria* party.

Unlike Bolsonaro and Kast, who despite being labelled have an extensive political track record and have attempted to build political structures, Milei has no experience in government management positions and [no solid party structure](#). The economist's latest alliance with former president Mauricio Macri and the most radicalised sectors of the centre right represented by the *Juntos por el Cambio* coalition is both a symptom of this lack and of a rejuvenated rightwing strength in Argentine politics, unheard of since 1983. His presidential victory marks a rupture in Argentina's [democratic consensus](#), as demonstrated by his vindication of the last military dictatorship and his questioning of the number of people who disappeared during that period.

Milei, a self-confessed supporter of Trump and Bolsonaro, has gained ground among [young people disenchanted](#) with party politics through a sustained presence on social networks, mainly TikTok. Notorious for using a chainsaw at public events - symbolising his desire to minimise the state - and for his call to end 'the political caste', his most extreme economic proposals have been to dollarise the economy and eliminate the Central Bank.

Countering the new right

Civil society organisations have warned and taken action in the face of these developments. Perhaps the [feminists](#) of the region have been the most relevant actors in this task, on the streets, in parliament, in the digital world and in [international bodies](#). Beyond highlighting and denouncing human rights violations, there is an urgent need to build a democratic political agenda capable of inspiring societies battered and disenchanted by years of crisis and economic stagnation. Unfortunately, in the present political climate, everything on the debit side of democracy is fuel for the ever-growing fire of the extreme right.