

# Lula's Victory, the *New Left* and the Future of Latin America

by Rafael Ramírez

The election of Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva as the new president of Brazil, consolidates the advancement of a *New Left* in Latin America: a progressive movement, with strong popular and democratic content, promoting an agenda where the fight against poverty, inequality, climate change and respect for human rights is key.

## *A victory against lawfare*

The narrow margin of Lula's electoral victory, however, is evidence of a highly polarised society and the result of a campaign marked by political intolerance and the inflaming narrative of outgoing President Jair Bolsonaro. Lula, former president of Brazil and historic leader of the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores* – PT) and the Latin American left, was able to overcome not only the fierce campaign of discredit against him via social networks and media, but also the legal ruse, known as *lawfare*, which was used to send him to prison for alleged acts of corruption.

Lawfare consists in the instrumentalisation of justice as a weapon for political purposes (*judicialisation of politics*), which has been used by right-wing and authoritarian governments in the region for the political persecution of their opponents.<sup>1</sup> In Brazil, Lula was falsely accused of corruption because of Petrobras and imprisoned in a politically manipulated process;<sup>2</sup> something similar happened in other Latin American countries too, such as Argentina, Ecuador and Venezuela.

## *The agenda of the New Left*

In his electoral proposal, Lula insisted on the fight against poverty and inequality as fundamental problems

<sup>1</sup> "Lawfare in Latin America", abstract for the 2020 ICON•S Conference, <https://www.icon-society.org/?p=8181>.

<sup>2</sup> Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Brazil: Criminal Proceedings against Former President Lula da Silva Violated due Process Guarantees, UN Human Rights Committee Finds*, 28 April 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/node/102520>.

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of Brazil and strongly criticised the denialist attitude of the Bolsonaro government throughout the Covid-19 pandemic with a balance of over 688,000 Brazilians dead.<sup>3</sup> The President-elect also advocated for greater gender equality and the democratisation of society against the growing militarism and authoritarianism imposed by Bolsonaro.

As far as foreign policy is concerned, Lula promised to break the country's isolation and place Brazil back on the international stage, to return to multilateralism and the Paris Agreement on climate change and, a central point in his agenda, to stop the burning and deforestation of the Amazon that soared under Bolsonaro's government.

Lula's political agenda does not differ substantially from those of President Gabriel Boric in Chile, or President Gustavo Petro, recently elected in Colombia. One could argue that in Latin America a *New Left* is emerging with a common focus on issues such as the democratisation of society, the fight against poverty, social justice, gender equality, consideration for the environment and, above all, respect for human rights.

### *The New Left vis-a-vis authoritarian governments: The case of Venezuela*

The birth of this *New Left* in Chile, Colombia and Brazil heralds a political alternative to authoritarian

governments in the region, some of which even call themselves "socialist government", as in the case of Venezuela, where the violation of human rights is a state policy and the economic shock policy has ended after years of economic advances, social conquests and democratisation of the country, under President Hugo Chávez's government, between 2000 and 2012.<sup>4</sup>

In the case of Venezuela, indeed, the use of "lawfare" as an instrument of political persecution by the government of Nicolás Maduro has been well documented in the reports of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights<sup>5</sup> and the International Independent Fact-finding Mission of the UN Human Rights Council<sup>6</sup> as one

<sup>3</sup> WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard: Brazil, <https://covid19.who.int/region/amro/country/br>.

<sup>4</sup> Statista, *Venezuela: Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Current Prices from 1986 to 2023*, April 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/370937>; Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), *Social Panorama of Latin America 2021*, Santiago, United Nations, 2022, <https://hdl.handle.net/11362/47719>; "Venezuela: el paquetazo de Maduro" [Venezuela: Maduro's package], in *Semana*, 25 August 2018, <https://www.semana.com/amp/nicolas-maduro-impone-medidas-economicas-que-agravararon-la-crisis/580591>.

<sup>5</sup> OHCHR, *Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the Situation of Human Rights in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela - Comments by the State (A/HRC/41/18/Add.1)*, 5 July 2019, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/node/71769>; OHCHR, *Situation of Human Rights in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela - Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (A/HRC/47/55)*, 16 June 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/node/78545>.

<sup>6</sup> Marta Valiñas, *Report of the Independent International Fact-finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (A/HRC/48/69)*, 28 December 2021, <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/48/69>; Marta Valiñas, *Report of the Independent International Fact-finding Mission*

of the mechanisms for repression of political dissent, in addition to arbitrary detentions and the kidnapping of family members of political targets of the government, which is reminiscent of the Nazi persecution method known as *Sippenhaft*.<sup>7</sup>

Also economically, today Venezuela is confronting the worst crisis in its history. Since 2013, the government of Nicolás Maduro has reverted most of Chávez's policies, imposing with violence an economic shock policy that included the denationalisation and collapse of the strategic oil sector,<sup>8</sup> which has led the level of poverty in the country to increase from about 33 per cent in 2012 to over 90 per cent today.<sup>9</sup>

The economic model promoted by the Maduro government is the restoration of a backward and dependent capitalism, extractive as never before, which has been based on the transfer of the country's natural resources and public assets to the power groups that sustain it, the exploitation of the labour force,<sup>10</sup> and deeply predatory mining

on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (A/HRC/51/43), 20 September 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/node/103600>.

<sup>7</sup> Marta Valiñas, *Report of the Independent International Fact-finding Mission... 2021*, cit., p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> See Venezuelan section in Rafael Ramírez, *Boletín petrolero*, n° 55 (3 de Junio 2022) [Oil Report, No. 55 (3 June 2022)], 4 June 2022, <https://www.rafaelramirez.net/?p=8333>.

<sup>9</sup> Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, *Condiciones de vida de los venezolanos* [Living conditions of Venezuelan people], September 2021, <https://www.civilisac.org/?p=15751>.

<sup>10</sup> "Salario mínimo de Venezuela se sitúa por debajo del umbral de pobreza extrema" [Venezuela's minimum wage is below the extreme poverty line], in *Analítica*, 27 October 2022, <https://www.analitica.com/?p=956876>.

activities in the Amazon, in the so-called "Arco Minero" (Mining Arc).<sup>11</sup>

Incredibly, such an authoritarian government promoting a profoundly reactionary and predatory programme has been supported by traditional left-wing parties in Latin America and in Europe using the excuse of the fight against imperialism and the US economic sanctions, without properly understanding that there is no continuity between Chávez and Maduro, to the contrary, the Maduro government has opposed and reverted Chávez's economic and social policy. The emergence of a *New Left* in the region is therefore of great political importance to unmask the real nature of Nicolás Maduro's government in Venezuela.

### *The New Left and the future of Latin America*

The birth of a *New Left* in Latin America that leads the battle against poverty and fights for economic sovereignty, human rights, the democratisation of society and respect for the environment should counterbalance the authoritarian governments in the region.<sup>12</sup> The victory of such a New Left in a country so crucial for Latin America as Brazil, together with Chile, as well as

<sup>11</sup> FundaRedes, *Arco Minero del Orinoco refugio de crímenes ecológicos* [Arco Minero del Orinoco is a shelter for ecological crimes], 14 July 2022, <https://www.fundaredes.org/?p=5878>.

<sup>12</sup> International Monetary Fund (IMF), *Western Hemisphere Regional Economic Outlook, October 2022: Navigating Tighter Global Financial Conditions*, p. 18-19, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/REO/WH/Issues/2022/10/13/regional-economic-outlook-western-hemisphere-october-2022>.



in Colombia – which is historically a sister nation with Venezuela – should buttress and renew calls for respect for human rights and full political liberties, as well as the return to the rule of law, in Venezuela. This will be fundamental for Latin America which cannot allow a country so important as Venezuela to remain under the control of a dictatorship.

Without interfering with Venezuela's sovereignty, the countries of the region, especially those led by the *New Left*, should insist on respect for human rights, political freedom and fair elections to resolve the deep crisis in the country, with the people as the main actor of that change.

More generally, Latin America – one of the most unequal regions in the world – needs to emerge as an important region in the international scene with strong independence, sovereignty, economic development and social justice, as well as promoting full respect for human rights and the fight against climate change.

In this new regional political framework, integration initiatives such as Unasur<sup>13</sup> and Celac<sup>14</sup> will surely be revived. This will allow Latin America to have its own voice and identity and provide renewed leadership, at the international level, where political experience will be

combined with the transforming power of the people, reflecting the popular aspirations and political principles.

Thus, Latin America may emerge as a region with full sovereignty and an identity where peace and regional stability are combined with social justice and full democracy, setting a valuable example in the fight against authoritarianism and war in the current complex and dangerous international scenario.

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<sup>13</sup> See, *Tratado constitutivo de la Unión de Naciones Suramericanas* [UNASUR Constitutive Treaty], Brasilia, 23 May 2008, <https://web.archive.org/web/20161009121928/http://www.unasur.int/images/descargas/DOCUMENTOS%20CONSTITUTIVOS%20DE%20UNASUR/Tratado-UNASUR-solo.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> See the official website: <https://celacinternational.org/celac-international>.



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