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Democracy in Latin America

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In general, I'm not a big fan of leaders in Latin America eliminating or loosening term limits so that they can stay in office longer. I also believe that recent processes of constitutional reform in many Latin American countries have been sweeping enough to warrant careful and critical review. When I picked up the article by Forrest Colburn and Alberto Trejos in the Summer 2010 issue of *Dissent* ("Democracy Undermined"), I had hoped that it would provide such a review. Instead, the article is a broadside filled with careless generalizations, overblown rhetoric, and statements that are either misleading or factually incorrect. It is, sadly, so smug and smothering in its biases that it precludes any sort of constructive debate about the Latin American Left.

You know an article about democracy in Latin America is going to be bad when it starts off by coming within a hair's breadth of endorsing the coup in Honduras. The authors argue that when the Honduran military removed the democratically elected president from office, "What they did was wrong, and yet, there is an alarming trend in Latin America toward dismantling democracy by legal subterfuge under the cover of populist and even socialist rhetoric."

That hardly disapproving sentence ("and yet...") is as critical as Colburn and Trejos get of the coup leaders. Everything else they have to say about the coup is positive. In fairness, the authors do allow that the military action was "clumsy." But they then suggest that it was a "way to avert a very real threat to democracy—Zelaya's move to call an unprecedented special election to remove a term limit on the presidency."

This characterization of events differs substantially from more evenhanded assessments from news sources such as, say, the

British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). That agency reports, "Mr. Zelaya planned to hold a non-binding public consultation on 28 June to ask people whether they supported moves to change the constitution. Had voters supported it, a referendum on setting up a body charged with redrawing the constitution would probably have been held at the same time as November's presidential election. Mr. Zelaya's critics said the move was aimed at removing the current one-term limit on serving as president, and paving the way for his possible re-election. Mr. Zelaya repeatedly denied he was seeking re-election."

Let's grant that Zelaya's critics are correct. In most parts of the hemisphere, a leader's trying to create conditions for his or her "possible re-election" at some point in the future is not generally considered legitimate grounds for overthrowing a government.

Colburn and Trejos's treatment of Honduras sets the tone for the rest of their article. They note that it would be unfair to compare current elected leaders in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela with Adolf Hitler, who also came to power through democratic means. But then (apparently unable to resist themselves) they go right ahead and compare groups of Bolivian activists to Nazi "Brown Shirts," smearing with a type of innuendo they themselves suggest is irresponsible.

Colburn and Trejos charge the Venezuelan government with issuing "laws and edicts" that are "deliberately vague." But instead of offering any detailed analysis of constitutional reforms in the country, they provide an assessment that itself is deliberately vague. It consists of a list of broad generalizations ("Public administration... became less 'rule-bound,' less predictable"), followed by a quote from an anonymous critic, who finds the reforms "unnerving." Surely Colburn and Trejos could do better, especially considering that Venezuela is a country of more than twenty-five million people, many thou-

sands of whom are vociferous critics of the Chávez government and are willing to go on the record any time of day to express their distaste for the administration.

It is telling that in providing a summary history of recent Venezuelan politics, with an eye to how democracy there has been threatened, Colburn and Trejos manage not to mention—not even in passing—a coup by Chávez's opponents in 2002 that overthrew the elected government. A massive wave of national and international outrage (not led, as it turns out, by the Bush White House) was needed to restore democracy.

In Ecuador and Bolivia, large groups of indigenous people who have lived in quasi-apartheid conditions have argued that they had been largely excluded from national political life under previous constitutional regimes; thus, they have pushed for public processes of constitutional reform. Colburn and Trejos make no effort to examine their grievances. Instead, they give us another unnamed voice saying that democracy under an elected left-wing government in Ecuador is illusory. At this point, the authors are two for two in using random anonymous sources to make their accusations. But at least in this latter case they assure us that their Ecuadoran informant is "well educated."

You might ask, do Colburn and Trejos ever use a named source critical of these administrations in their article? Answer: they do not. On this point, I might note that an unnamed relative of mine believes that America under Obama has become worse than Stalinist Russia. However, I tend not to quote him when I write articles.

It is a fair, indeed vital, question to ask whether progressive governments in Latin America are delivering on their promises to better serve the poor. Yet, once again, Colburn and Trejos do not actually investigate this issue. Rather, they allow insinuation to stand in the place of evidence. Attempting to suggest that progressive leaders have mismanaged their economies, the authors write that "economic growth is flat in Ecuador and Bolivia and falling in Venezuela." In fact, in the four years after Evo Morales took office in Bolivia in 2006, annual growth averaged 5.2 percent, the

highest the country has seen in decades. Bolivia has also performed remarkably well in times of economic crisis. The IMF currently predicts that Bolivia's real GDP growth for 2009 was 3.3 percent—which topped virtually every other country in the region—and that in 2010 its growth will be nearly 4 percent. Even though Ecuador and Venezuela have been hit by the global economic recession, they too have seen impressive periods of growth under their progressive administrations.

Trying to slam the Latin American governments for being purveyors of patronage, the authors explain that "there is a wide gamut of social programs" in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia. But they choose to believe that "what has been gained" from such initiatives "has been largely symbolic." They provide no evidence to back up their statement. In contrast, the Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) reports that, in Venezuela, "the poverty rate has been cut by more than half, from 54 percent of households in the first half of 2003 to 26 percent at the end of 2008. Extreme poverty has fallen even more, by 72 percent. These poverty rates measure only cash income, and do not take into account increased access to health care or education."

Certainly, Colburn and Trejos have a right to challenge the data used by CEPR's economists. But they show no interest in entering this level of debate. They prefer to off-handedly dismiss all expanded social programs in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela as "*un show*" and to view the electoral majorities that choose to vote in defense of these programs as dupes of populist rhetoric. It is a sorry display.

At the end of their article, Colburn and Trejos tell us, "Democracy is more than a regime type; it is an ongoing practice." They then return to Honduras. In a classic use of the passive voice to flatten an incredibly politicized sentence, they state, "Elections were held in November 2009." They make no mention of the fact that a huge percentage of the country's population boycotted the elections, nor do they note that bodies such as the European Union and the Organization of American States refused to send observers. They say nothing about the frightening wave of human rights abuses against anti-coup critics that has continued into 2010. Instead, the authors

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perversely suggest that a new Honduran president should have “learned a lesson in democracy” from his ousted predecessor’s fate.

Of all the places to look for lessons in the ongoing practice of democratic politics, Colburn and Trejos have stumbled upon one of the very worst. Yet, given the litany of

prior disgraces in their article, maybe that is a fitting end to their argument.

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 Forrest D. Colburn and Alberto Trejos Respond

We are surprised by Mark Engler’s criticism of our essay, “Democracy Undermined,” in the Summer 2010 issue of *Dissent*, in which we lament the heavy-handed use of the law to dismantle democracy in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia, purportedly to build more progressive regimes. We join Engler in condemning the recent coup d’état in Honduras. And we would like to believe we share Engler’s commitment to broad-based economic development and socially inclusive governance. However, yes, we are concerned that a new authoritarianism is emerging in Latin America under the protective shield of “constitutional reform,” which is, in fact, constitutional subterfuge. The most egregious cases are Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia, where socialist rhetoric has been used to justify the centralization of political power. Our argument is essentially a political one; we don’t care if in the new regimes “the trains run on time.”

Engler suggests we are either not fair or adequately familiar with what is happening in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia. We both are fluent in Spanish, and have spent time in the three countries, where we have conversed with a wide range of individuals, studied the political systems, and examined economic data. We are worried. And we are not alone. Is it not revealing that university students are in the forefront of opposition to Hugo Chávez in Venezuela? And isn’t it troubling that erstwhile champions of social change in the country, such as Teodoro Petkoff, have broken ranks with Chávez?

Perhaps Engler has been misled by the progressive rhetoric of Chávez. It sounds good (though sometimes unbelievable—as when he

declared that the recent earthquake in Haiti was caused by the U.S. Navy). Where, though, is the inclusive, democratically run, political party that provides an orientation to the head-of-state, helps formulate public policy, and provides a check on malfeasance? What is the plan for reshaping the economy? How was it decided that Venezuela would offer generous aid to eighty-nine different countries amid blackouts and widespread shortage of industrial and consumer goods? Why the spending of billions of dollars in public funds on armaments? Just where is Venezuela going? These are necessary questions. Unfortunately, in Venezuela today, “It is all about Chávez.” He may well have noble intentions, but he is establishing a disturbing cult of personality, is capricious in his decision making, dismissive of personal liberties and of the independence of the media, presumptuous and rash in his management of the economy, and more interested in international grandstanding than in Venezuela’s prosaic problems.

Engler marshals economic data to assert that Ecuador and Bolivia are progressing (no such data can be found for Venezuela). Many South American countries, such as Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia, export oil, gas, and other minerals. The recent commodity boom, fueled in large part by Chinese demand, has brought healthy export earnings, which, in turn, have led to a surge in imports, which gets “counted” as economic activity. When one controls for population increases, looking thus at per capita incomes, growth rates in the region are less impressive. Even more important, though, is to disaggregate economic growth figures and study public and private investment and growth in

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