

Democratic Backsliding amid COVID-19: The Latin American Case



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The COVID-19 pandemic is taking a toll on everyday lives of Latin Americans. The economic disruption caused by the pandemic has certainly been devastating and many have attempted to evaluate the economic impact of the ongoing health crisis across countries in Latin America. However, what the pandemic is doing to the region's immature democracies does not seem to be receiving the attention that it deserves.

Long before the outbreak of the health crisis, a number of Latin American countries had already been experiencing a drastic erosion or breakdown of their democratic institutions. The most dramatic cases would be Venezuela and Nicaragua, which had ultimately become the examples of what is called "competitive authoritarianism." Although less severe, cases of notable democratic setbacks since the turn of the century also abound.

Then the pandemic came, and it did at a moment when the quality of democratic institutions in Latin America was deteriorating overall. Although country experiences vary across the region, the health crisis appears to be accelerating the erosion of democratic institutions in a number of fragile democracies and consolidating authoritarian regimes.

Governments that were already authoritarian have certainly taken advantage of the unexpected external shock as a pretext for cracking down on political opposition and further strengthening executive power. Venezuela is a case in point. The Venezuelan government declared a state of emergency in March last year, invoking the need to contain the COVID-19 epidemic, which was extended until June. The measure allowed the government to impose abusive limitations on some key civil rights and further political persecution. Opposition leaders, doctors, and journalists were imprisoned for questioning the government's responses to the health crisis. In a country where no meaningful legislative and judicial checks on the executive are present, the pandemic is certainly consolidating the autocratic regime.

The situation is also quite alarming in countries whose leaders had been moving in an authoritarian direction before the outbreak of the COVID-19. In El Salvador, democracy is under increasing pressure, as Nayib Bukele has been capitalizing on emergency conditions created by the pandemic to tighten his grip on power. Arbitrary detainments became frequent in the name of preventing the spread of the virus, effectively jailing thousands in containment centers with dreadful conditions. At the same time, Bukele's party, with an overwhelming majority in parliament, managed to oust the attorney general and five judges of the Supreme Court, further exacerbating concerns about his intention to erode checks and balances. Bukele accused these officials of hindering the government's COVID-19 management efforts. In Bolivia, the former caretaker government led by Jeanine Áñez politicized the pandemic to influence the outcome of the scheduled presidential election in its favor, which Áñez herself was planning to run for. The interim president imposed a number of decrees that criminalized dissent, repressed political opponents, and restricted freedom of expression. She also postponed the presidential election twice last year, prompting nationwide protests.

The Bolsonaro administration in Brazil, which had widely been criticized for its attempts to attack democratic principles, also stepped up assaults on democracy during the health crisis. However, Brazil's democratic institutions have proved harder to undermine. The judiciary and legislature have held the executive in check, showing that democracy is still at work in the largest country in South America. Meanwhile, there seems to be little room for COVID-19 to negatively affect democratic institutions in countries like Costa Rica, Uruguay and Chile. Democracy remains intact in these countries, and they have been praised for responding to the pandemic in an efficient and transparent manner. Nevertheless, except for some outliers, it is hard to deny that COVID-19 is fostering democratic regression across the region.

Will the end of the health crisis help reverse such trend? What are the prospects for democracy in a post-pandemic Latin America? The majority of Latin American democracies are like-

ly to face twin challenges after the pandemic: worsening socioeconomic conditions and rapidly declining popular confidence in democracy. Evidence from public opinion research shows that popular support for democracy across the region has been eroding due to widespread corruption and growing polarization in politics. When the public begin to feel that existing democratic institutions cannot resolve aggravating socioeconomic problems, they may well turn to non-democratic options: populists. The economic and social disruption that the pandemic has left will certainly be providing a fertile breeding ground for political outsiders that denounce democracy.

The process of democratic consolidation preceded by the post-1978 wave of democratization in Latin America has been far from successful. Since the turn of the century, democratic institutions across the region have deteriorated, and in some cases, broken down. The pandemic arrived in difficult times, providing authoritarian-leaning governments with excuses to consolidate executive power and erode checks and balances. The bad news is that the negative socioeconomic consequences of the health crisis are yet to fully uncover. Real tests to the region's democracy will come after the COVID-19 pandemic. There is every reason for concern that its outcomes will put most of fragile Latin American democracies in a danger they have not faced since democratization. **KIIP**