

Latin lessons: what South America can teach the rest of the world

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Members of the Unidos da Tijuca samba school perform at the Sambodrome, during the first night of Rio de Janeiro's famed carnival parades, in Brazil on February 14, 2010. AFP PHOTO/VANDERLEI ALMEIDA (Photo credit should read VANDERLEI ALMEIDA/AFP/Getty Images)

Amid much global gloom, PAUL KNOTT finds an area of the world which much to be confident about.

Anyone despairing about the rise of extremism in Europe and the US can look to Latin America for encouragement.

For all its ups, downs and Venezuela, the region has progressed remarkably since the dark days of the 1970s and early 1980s. Its experiences show that even the worst political dysfunction can be overcome.

Just a few decades ago, Latin America was mired in a seemingly endless cycle of coups, right-wing military dictatorships and left-wing guerrilla uprisings.

The original 9/11 tragedy took place in Chile on September 11, 1973. The democratically elected socialist government of Salvador Allende was overthrown in a coup led by the neo-fascist head of the army, General Augusto Pinochet. The coup had – at least – the tacit support of senior US government figures. Allende died during the takeover. Thousands more people were subsequently tortured and murdered by Pinochet's regime.

Chile today is emblematic of how far Latin America has advanced since then. On December 17, the centre-right candidate, Sebastián Piñera beat his centre-left opponent, Alejandro Guillier, in the race to replace Michelle Bachelet as president.

The election was a model of modern democracy. Since Pinochet was levered out of office in 1989, power has regularly and peacefully changed hands between responsible politicians with clear, sensible programmes for government.

For all that Chile is in the vanguard of post-dictatorship political development, the pattern has been widely replicated elsewhere. Peru, for example, has emerged from decades of military and autocratic rule. Those years were worsened by the activities of the bizarre but deadly Maoist 'Shining Path' guerrillas. Since their defeat and the restoration of democracy, Peru has become better governed and more prosperous, although corruption remains a problem. Like neighbours such as Bolivia, Peru has elected heads of government from its long marginalised indigenous communities, a notion that would have seemed impossible for most of Latin America's post-colonial history. The policies of such presidents have often led to impressive reductions in poverty too.

Even countries where the transition from dictatorship has been the most difficult have positive achievements to report. Argentina has not always been a model of good governance and sound economic management since democracy was restored in 1983.

But its occasional travails are preferable to the preceding era when a despicable military junta 'disappeared' more than ten thousand of its alleged opponents.

The abductees were subjected to the most appalling forms of torture. Some were thrown to their deaths from air force planes into the River Plate. Pregnant women had their babies taken away and given to military families. This scandal had terrible psychological consequences for the now adult victims, who had hitherto lived their lives unaware of their true origins.

But the rule of law is finally triumphing over the culture of impunity for crimes committed by the military during the 'Dirty War'. In November, 48 former military men were sentenced to long prison terms. These included a life sentence for the most notorious perpetrator, former Navy Captain Alfredo Astiz, who was known as 'the Angel of Death' because of his cherubic looks and sickening sadism.

Alongside political dysfunction, Colombia had the additional nightmare of powerful drugs barons to conquer. Gangsters such as Pablo Escobar have been glamorised by popular culture over recent years. In reality, he and his rivals wreaked death, destruction and misery on a massive scale. Amidst the carnage, a collection of brave political leaders, law enforcement officials and everyday people battled successfully to create a stable country where democracy and the rule of law is prospering.

The drug barons have mostly gone. And the left-wing FARC guerrillas have ended their 52-year campaign of violence. The peace agreement that concluded this conflict earned President Juan Manuel Santos the 2016 Nobel Peace Prize. The deal converted FARC into a democratic political party that will contest elections for the first time in March 2018.

The Colombian elections are one of a series of pivotal polls that will take place across Latin America over the course of 2018. These include crucial campaigns in two of the giants of the continent, Mexico and Brazil.

Mexico, notoriously, has inherited Colombia's role as the epicentre for drug trafficking. Its early 20th Century President Porfirio Diaz once famously opined "poor Mexico. So far from God, so close to the United States". This saying remains apposite because the US provides the cartels with a gargantuan demand for illegal narcotics and an illicit supply of lethal weaponry.

The trafficking fuels horrific violence south of the border, as gangs battle for control of the trade and the uncompromised units of the security forces try to stop them.

But the problem cannot entirely be blamed on Mexico's overbearing northern neighbour. Mexico is vulnerable to the drugs gangs because its public institutions were corrupted and weakened during seven decades of authoritarian rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Successive governments since the return of real democracy have struggled to rebuild a fully functioning state.

There have been successes though. Away from the gory headlines about horrific drug cartel violence, politics is mostly peaceful and stable. Dynamic cities such as Monterrey have used their proximity to the US, solid infrastructure and levels of education to build an economy and standard of living comparable to their North American counterparts.

The front runner for the presidential election in July 2018 is the veteran left-winger, Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Should he be elected, López Obrador will seek to administer a radical jolt to further wrest control of the country from its frequently corrupt elites and to enact policies to tackle poverty.

The impulsive López Obrador would clash royally, and popularly, with the Trump administration next door. But his domineering personality would also risk alienating the allies he will need within Mexico to get things done.

Brazil's general election in October 2018 will choose a new president, congress and state assemblies. It comes after a fraught period during which the previous elected president, Dilma Rousseff, was deposed by congress for failing to block a corrupt scheme involving members of her governing coalition and Petrobras, the state petroleum company.

Another massive corruption scandal surrounding the Odebrecht construction company has also shaken Brazil. The ongoing 'Car Wash' investigation into these multiple malpractices has embroiled Rousseff's predecessor, Lula da Silva, her successor, Michel Temer, and no less than 40% of the current members of Congress.

Ex-President Lula is running again anyway. But he faces an uphill struggle following claims he received under-the-counter payments to purchase an apartment. Failure would be a sad end to an inspiring political career that saw him rise from a poor working-class childhood to the presidency. Lula's administration achieved several major successes too. The 'Bolsa Familia' initiative combined welfare payments with measures to keep children in school and access to decent healthcare. It is now widely copied in poverty reduction programmes worldwide. The entanglement of lifelong campaigners for a fairer society, like Lula, in the corruption that blights Latin American politics partly explains why faith in democracy is slipping across the region. According to the latest AmericasBarometer survey, strong support for electoral democracy declined from 69% in 2012 to 57.8% in 2017.

Brazil, for one, badly needs a renewal of the system developed after the military dictatorship fell in 1985. It facilitates the presence of far too many parties in Congress, many of which have essentially become ideology-free coalition partners for hire.

The disillusionment generated by this shady set-up presents an opportunity for the far-right populist former military officer and Congressman, Jair Bolsonaro. Bolsonaro is rising in the opinion polls. He is pitching himself as a Brazilian Donald Trump and promises his own version of "drain the swamp". Like Trump, Bolsonaro is short on coherent policy proposals and spends much of his time making abusive remarks about women and his opponents.

But even in currently troubled Brazil, there are positive signs. Younger Brazilians are becoming increasingly engaged in politics. Programmes to support their participation are springing up, such as the RenovaBR initiative, which trains and supports young candidates of all non-extremist political persuasions.

The 2018 election will probably come too soon for the new generation to make a major impact at the national level. But, as long as budding autocrats such as Bolsonaro are seen off, they will be well-placed to revitalise Brazilian democracy by the next time around in 2022.

For all the challenges that Latin America still faces, the overall outlook remains positive. Whilst its long-standing inequality problems can be manipulated by populists, other rabble-rousing issues exploited by European and US politicians, such as immigration, are not factors.

Perhaps as a result of being bombarded with propaganda during the decades of dictatorship, surveys suggest Latin American voters are also less susceptible to false stories from dubious sources. The bitter experience of authoritarianism means messy democracy and inconsistent increases in prosperity are still accepted by many Latin Americans as achievements to build on. Indeed, given current global trends, the free and fair elections taking place in 14 Latin American countries over the next two years are grounds for celebration.