
A COUP
TOOK PLACE
IN BRAZIL

Where to, Latin America?

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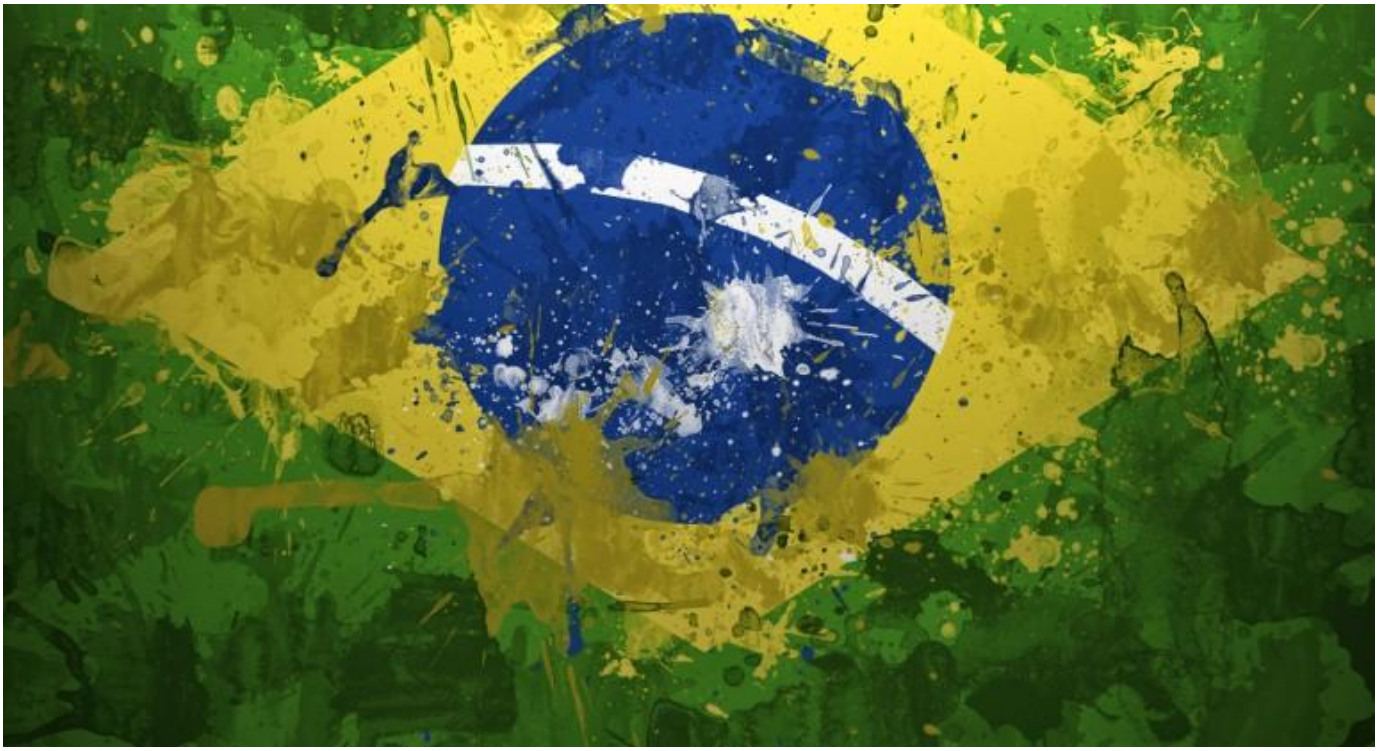
The first days of the Trump administration seem like a nightmare for most people with a genuine interest in politics, not only in the United States, but throughout the world. There is not a single day without some shocking news about immigrants, health care, trade agreements and the United Nations, just to name a few of them. “Perplexity” is the right word to define the state of mind of those who try to extract some logic from the course being followed. Egoism, national populism and, for some, fascism are the hallmarks of the ideology of the new US President. The collection of pronouncements—and now concrete steps—with sexist, racist or xenophobic content scares even the most experienced observers.

Yet one of the worst aspects of “Trumpism” is the bad example it represents for other countries. In Europe, Donald Trump’s victory (together with Brexit) is being quoted by the likes of Marine Le Pen as an indication that the Far Right can be victorious in upcoming elections in several countries. In South America—and especially in Brazil—one might be justified in claiming that a certain kind of Trumpism preceded Trump’s rise to power. The change in power engendered by the impeachment of the legitimate president of Brazil, Dilma Rousseff, was not a mere replacement of the Head of Government. It represented a U-turn in the political process, reversing the project of social reform that had been carried out by center-left governments with the aim of redressing the brutal inequalities that characterize Brazilian society. Reformers also implemented an independent, pluralistic foreign policy. A high point of this policy was the “Teheran Declaration,” whereby Brazil and Turkey extracted a commitment from the Iranian government to place its nuclear program under international control, some years before President Obama obtained a similar result with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.



A striking aspect of the Brazilian political élite—despite years of unstable governments and two decades of military rule—has been its capacity to present itself and its pattern of social domination in a somewhat disguised manner. The Michel Temer government installed after the impeachment of Rousseff did not proclaim itself to be against blacks, women, immigrants or other minorities, apart from the conspicuous and symbolic absence of representatives of those groups in its first cabinet (registered in an emblematic official photo). Instead it has focused on “practical steps” that will entail a deepening of the colossal social imbalances still prevailing in Brazil despite the effort made during the Lula and Rousseff governments. The most notorious of such “practical” measures was the freezing of the budget for twenty years by means of a constitutional amendment. If carried through this amendment will force severe cutbacks on health and education spending, to the detriment of the millions of poor families.

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In foreign policy, the shift of focus from South American integration and South-South cooperation to relations with developed countries (based on a traditional pattern of economic and political dependence) was illustrated by statements and attitudes

whose shortsightedness did not escape many observers in Brazil and abroad. Suffice to say, in this regard, that the Temer government is self-consciously excluding itself from playing any possible role in the Venezuelan crisis or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In both cases, the attitude now adopted represents a departure not only from the positions taken by the governments of the Workers Party, but even in relation to previous center-right administrations. By its words as well as its actions (not to speak of the mounting corruption scandals involving politicians in the inner circle of power), the present government in Brazil has clearly shown that both its domestic and its foreign policies are devoid of ideals, in a manner that is reminiscent of the famous dictum of St. Augustine that a government without lofty objectives is no different from a bunch of highway robbers. With Donald Trump at the helm of the world's most powerful nation—for many, the strongest bulwark of democracy—what would probably be seen by an increasing number of people around the world as an "anomaly" may become more "acceptable." This is in itself a tragedy.

So much for the bad example. In other respects, the impact of the rise of "Trumpism" in Latin America is more complex. If you are a native of Mexico, the famous lamentation of one of its presidents ("poor Mexico: so far from God, so near from the United States") would never have sounded so painfully true. The same can be said of other Latin American countries that are also dependent on the American market, especially those that have entered into Free Trade Agreements with Washington and often did so at a very high price (in terms of renunciation of policy space on issues such as investor-to-State disputes or patents and public health). On a strategic and political level, a reversal of the enlightened Obama policy towards Cuba is to be feared as one of the most ominous consequences of Trumpism.

Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu and the author in Ankara, 2011. Photo credit: author

For someone who is or was active in trying to render South America more integrated and less dependent on a hegemonic power, it may be tempting to see a silver lining at least in some aspects of these recent developments. Contrary to those who are experiencing great qualms about the demise of a supposedly “liberal world order,” I would claim that the American self-interest has always come first in the policies and preoccupations of other US presidents, from Kennedy to Nixon, from Clinton to George W. Bush. What is different is that the simplistic motto chosen by Trump and the absence of any effort to shape the pursuit of national interest in a way that is responsive to other nations’ needs or values create a political void. In theory, such retrenchment could be filled by some creative leadership in South America, leadership that might be keen to promote closer cooperation and integration among its countries. This is where the failures of Brazil’s current government will prove to be most telling.

Between 2003 and 2014, Brazilian foreign policy was guided by the idea that a more multipolar world was inherently desirable, not only from the point of view of Brazilian material interests and needs, but also as a more adequate foundation upon which a truly peaceful, non-hegemonic, world order should be built. Much of the political instability and the human suffering in recent years stems directly from misguided unilateral actions inspired by an alleged sense of mission, best expressed by the phrase often used by one of the US Secretaries of State, who often claimed to be “on the right side of History.” Disasters like the invasion of Iraq or the implosion of Libya, conducted by a Republican president in one case and by a Democrat in the other, are the best examples of the inadequacy of this train of thought. They also put in serious doubt the claim that, before Trump, the world order was the liberal Utopia some seem to believe in.

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In its effort to contribute to multipolarity (and multilateralism), Brazil had absolute clarity that it needed to have closer and genuinely friendly relations with its neighbors. And we decided “to put our money where our mouth was,” promoting trade agreements and pioneering institutions, like UNASUR (The Union of South

American Nations) or CELAC (The Community of Latin America and Caribbean States), sometimes making concessions that might seem contrary to short-term Brazilian interests. We were much criticized for that by the conservative media. We also pushed for more intense cooperation with countries of the South, through different mechanisms, such as the IBSA Forum (India, Brazil, South Africa), ASPA (South America/Arab countries) or ASA (South America/Africa).

One might perhaps argue that the return to the Nixonian approach of “benign neglect,” which is implicit in Trump’s motto, might be propitious to South America integration and fresh initiatives among developing countries, but given the current political situation, it seems unlikely that Latin American governments will seize the “opportunity” created by the partial abandonment of “soft power” by the US. For that would require a kind of leadership that is nowhere to be seen these days south of Rio Bravo (or should we say now, south of the wall?). Much less so in Brazil, where the government has become a mixture of blatant self-interest and a new brand of radical neoliberalism geared to destroy the elements of independence and justice fostered by preceding administrations. And there is another big risk: the “neglect,” implicit in the idea of “America First,” may be not be so benign after all. It can easily

become outright hostility or sheer bullying. “Carrying a big stick”—Teddy Roosevelt’s corollary to the Monroe doctrine—may yet again become a tenet of US diplomacy. This time, without any concern of “speaking softly.” Our brothers in Mexico are already bearing the brunt of this harder side of Trumpism and one can only imagine what the future holds for the rest of Latin America.

Celso Amorim was Foreign Minister of Brazil for nine and a half years under the administrations of Presidents Itamar Franco and Lula da Silva and served as Defense Minister during President Dilma Rousseff’s first term. His book *Acting Globally: Memoirs of Brazil's Assertive Foreign Policy* was just published by Hamilton Books (Rowman & Littlefield).

References

Image Credits

Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu and the author in Ankara, 2011.
Author’s private photo archive

View of the U.S.-Mexico border wall on January 25, 2017 in Tijuana, Mexico.
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