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## Latin American democracy after a year's pandemic

**Carlos Malamud** | Senior Analyst, Elcano Royal Institute | @CarlosMalamud 

**Rogelio Núñez** | Senior Research Fellow at the Elcano Royal Institute and visiting professor at the Institute of Latin American Studies (IELAT) of the University of Alcalá | @RNCATELLANO 

### Theme

This year the pandemic has triggered not only important one-off changes in Latin America, transforming political and institutional dynamics, but has also aggravated the magnitude of structural problems that were already afflicting some of Latin America's democratic systems, which are emitting new and alarming signs of weakness and indeed crisis.

### Summary

The pandemic has aggravated Latin America's historical problems –social, political and economic– and deepened the decline in the region's democracies. The increasing and renewed fragility of Latin American democratic systems stems first from the inefficiency of the administrative machineries in providing an adequate response to the public's longstanding demands, as well as from the current healthcare and socio-economic challenge deriving from COVID-19; and, secondly, the crisis of Latin American democracies stems from the problems the political and party systems have in channelling the claims of a society that is increasingly dissatisfied, polarised and fragmented, which in turn provides a breeding ground for the emergence of renewed versions of populism and charismatic, personality-based and authoritarian leadership.

### Analysis

The first case of SARS-CoV-2 in Latin America was officially announced in Brazil on 26 February 2020. Thus began a year that has accelerated trends, most of them pre-dating the pandemic, and has exacerbated the magnitude of many of the existing shortcomings, which have acquired even greater importance and urgency. One year on, foreseeably enough, Latin America has not only emerged without being strengthened by its travails, it has also seen its weaknesses accentuated across the board: these range from the political-institutional to the economic-social and include integration, which once again has shown its fault lines, limitations and inefficiencies.

Latin America is one of the world's regions that has been hardest hit by the pandemic, with almost 23 million infections and more than 600,000 deaths halfway through March 2021. With slightly more than 8% of the world's population, the region accounts for almost 20% of infections and almost 30% of global deaths. Moreover, the virus has triggered a sharp economic downturn, with an average fall in regional GDP of 7.7%, the closure of almost 3 million companies and a marked increase in unemployment,

particularly affecting young people and women. The social fallout from this crisis involves a 12-year reversal in poverty levels and a 20-year reversal in extreme poverty. While these had gone up between 2014 and 2019, when those in poverty rose from 162 million to 187 million and extreme poverty from 46 million to 47 million, in just one year of the pandemic the number of people in poverty jumped by 22 million, as much as in the whole of the previous five years.

COVID-19 has laid bare, and if anything made even more urgent, the need to implement far-reaching structural reforms to underpin the governability of some democratic systems in serious jeopardy. The virus has hastened [political-institutional decline](#) and heightened public mistrust in politicians and institutions. Indeed, the most recent protests have increasingly included a marked anti-elitist component, regardless of the origin and composition of the elites. So the main goal of this analysis is to shed light on the imbalances that the pandemic is generating in Latin American political systems, while also identifying the challenges and threats that face the already-fragile democracies in the region.

### The pandemic and disaffection with democracy

The coronavirus has affected multiple aspects of people's daily lives and also the economic and political foundations as well as the social balances of societies. Inevitably, all this is having its impact on peaceful coexistence, republican institutions and, in some cases, the very essence of democracy. This is taking place on both a global and Latin American scale. The storming of the Capitol in Washington (6 January) and the suspension of a session of the House of Representatives (4 March), while reflecting deeper problems relating to the operations and crisis of liberal democracies, also reflect other threats stemming directly from the pandemic, such as growing social exhaustion with lockdowns and other restrictions on mobility.

Although a global phenomenon, COVID-19 has struck Latin America particularly hard. It has [undermined its economic foundations](#), affecting societies that by the close of 2019, months prior to the advent of the virus, had already been giving clear signs for some time of disaffection with democracy. Public dissatisfaction with the way institutions were operating reflected a growing frustration of expectations, which had started to gain pace from the end of the raw materials super-cycle. On this occasion, the countries of Latin America, historically inefficient at implementing public policies, generally lacked sufficient tools (whether financial, material or in terms of healthcare and human resources) to address the pandemic.

The rapid spread of the virus forced Latin American governments to mirror imported measures: states of emergency, lockdowns and increased numbers of members of the armed forces and security services (police) on the streets. These policies, added to the fear of infection and the need to maintain social distancing, caused the undesired effect of flattening the curve of the vocal protests in the last quarter of 2019. The decline in street protests was misleading however, because it did not herald their disappearance so much as a temporary pause. Indeed, owing to the pandemic's acute impact on societies (increases in poverty and extreme poverty, black marketeering, dropping out

from school and infant malnutrition, etc.) tensions resurfaced between the close of 2020 and the start of 2021.

Many people perceived all these measures, with their tendency to restrict movement, as an authoritarian encroachment on individual rights, bringing the dichotomy between ensuring the right to life and the unrestricted enjoyment of freedoms into sharper focus. Such attitudes were of course much more prevalent among opposition groups than among those affiliated to governments, regardless of their position on the ideological spectrum.

The pandemic has laid bare the weaknesses of states and administrations in tackling the healthcare crisis, triggering an increase in disaffection with democratic institutions. A dangerous tendency to support populist, charismatic and demagogical personality-led leadership has also been evident. Mistrust of the state –so ingrained in Latin American political culture– has been superseded, after the economic bonanza, by this disaffection, which in some cases has become a wholesale rejection of the system.

Rather than creating a new problem, COVID-19 has accelerated many of the previously existing ones. Both the *Latinobarómetro* and the Americas Barometer of Vanderbilt University's Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) suggest that support for democracy has been in decline for over a decade. According to LAPOP, support fell from almost 70% in 2008 to less than 58% in 2015. It appears evident that the inadequate state response to the health crisis will do little to remedy the situation. Latin American states proved incapable, like virtually all other countries, of halting the spread of the virus. But in their case, their scant capacity for medium- and long-term planning and their lack of fiscal firepower prevented them, with the exception of Brazil and Peru, from offering cohesive aid packages for the most vulnerable sectors. Paraguay, which had considerable success in controlling the first wave, has recently experienced major protests culminating in a cabinet crisis, owing to the mismanagement of vaccine procurement and the failure to ensure the delivery of medical supplies to hospitals. Inefficiency is compounded by corruption and underlies what looks like being a new wave of protests, such as in Paraguay (March 2021), Guatemala (end of 2020) and Chile, where unrest in the capital is combined with the ongoing indigenous dispute in Araucanía.

The pandemic has not only accelerated institutional problems, it has also aggravated other political problems with harmful effects on the institutional democratic framework. In addition to the problems of management, with Chile as the main regional exception (in March 2021 it was the country that in relative terms was vaccinating fastest in the world), there were various scandals ('vaccinegates' or VIP vaccinations in Argentina, Chile and Peru), when political leaders or their families and friends were vaccinated early without waiting for their turn or satisfying the requirements laid down. In Venezuela, however, it was officially announced that together with healthcare staff and vulnerable groups, the other priority groups would be government figures and official political leaders, legislators and the security forces.

Clearly, these factors contribute to widening the gap between the general public and political elites that adhere to their privileges and the use of horse-trading, favouritism and corruption to sustain themselves in power. The rash of resignations (by the Argentine Minister of Health and various Peruvian ministers) failed to mitigate public mistrust of the institutions, or at least those who run them. This accounts for the fact that there are currently many governments striving to procure large batches of vaccines, regardless of their origin, so as to vaccinate the greater part of the population as soon as possible. The urgency surrounding the acquisition of vaccines is of course directly proportional to the proximity of elections.

Polarisation, the phenomenon that increasingly characterises Latin American political life, will harm coexistence and the institutional framework. The current form of polarisation exhibits a set of characteristics distinct from the traditional and even healthy electoral polarisation and divides societies into two sides, and even multiple factions. Each faction has its own vision of the country, not only different but also incompatible with the rest, preventing basic political consensus from being forged. The polarising tension spills over from election campaigns and extends beyond them. In Argentina, the famous 'crack' divides the country and society –including families– into two irreconcilable sides (*kirchneristas* and *antikirchneristas*), but in one form or another the same thing emerges across almost the entire region. In Bolivia, political revanchism is linked to pendular movements: the persecution of Evo Morales in 2019-20 was followed by a similar drive against the cabinet of Jeanine Añez, who was accused of 'terrorism' and subsequently arrested.

In some Latin American countries the pandemic triggered two initial impacts. First there were faltering, albeit fleeting, attempts to bolster public responses by means of dialogue between governments and opposition. In Argentina, the *kirchnerista* President, Alberto Fernández, appeared before the public in the initial months as the virus spread, flanked by a close political ally, the governor of Buenos Aires province, Axel Kicillof, and also by Horacio Rodríguez Larreta, leader of the city of Buenos Aires and one of the chief *antikirchnerista* figures. Such images of consensus were, however, short lived, to be replaced by mud-slinging and the health crisis being used as a political football. By the end of 2020 the consensus had evaporated and was replaced by an institutional war between the Casa Rosada and Buenos Aires city hall. In Chile, part of the opposition toyed with the temptation of exploiting the circumstances to impeach President Piñera during 2020. It was an option that came to pass in Peru, triggering the fall of Martín Vizcarra (in November 2020) and an institutional crisis that, amid widespread protests and marches, led to a succession of three presidents in less than a month.

The new scenario exacerbated the weakness of parliaments. This was due first to the concentration of power around the presidential office, but also the state of emergency and the growing tendency towards personality-based politics. Secondly, congresses and assemblies suffered operational problems due to the reduction or suspension of parliamentary activity, with the consequent loss of the ability to scrutinise executive power. In some cases the solution lay in introducing virtual or semi-virtual sessions. And thirdly, the fragmentation of some parliaments (those resulting from the Peruvian elections of 2020 and the Guatemalan election of 2019 being cases in point) condemned them to paralysis.

But it is not only legislative fragmentation and paralysis that is undermining the legitimacy of institutions. Elections of a populist nature are another equally damaging phenomenon for the democratic institutional framework. Such was the case in Mexico in 2018 and in El Salvador in February 2021. In both, a single political force achieved a domination of such magnitude that the opposition was severely weakened –almost wiped out– and with little ability to exercise oversight over the government. In El Salvador, Nayib Bukele won the backing of more than three quarters of the assembly, combining deputies from his own party and other allies. In countries such as Guatemala, co-opting resolves the problems produced by fragmentation and, ultimately, coalitions of interests that go beyond politics come together to form entities favourable to the President and his new and circumstantial allies.

Another factor that casts doubt on the solidity of the democratic institutional framework in Latin America is the protagonism of the military in the fight against the pandemic (healthcare roles, distribution of food, security oversight, etc). This phenomenon led analysts and pundits to talk about a growing militarisation of political systems, which had already been on the rise since the 1990s to combat a surge in criminality that police forces had been helpless to prevent. The argument goes as far as to state that ‘the armed forces never left Latin America’ and appeals to unedifying memories of the 1960s to 1980s and the ‘national security doctrine’.

However, the current role of the armed forces is notably different from the one they played 50 years ago, for two reasons. First, today’s armed forces no longer wield the financial clout they once did; with some exceptions they receive a smaller slice of the national budget. The second reason is the lack of a political strategy that would legitimise such interference in the eyes of societies and governments. The leading role that has been played in the last two decades by some armed forces results not from an institutional decision on the part of the armed forces themselves but is rather a role granted to them by certain Presidents who have harnessed the services of the military, citing the armed services’ greater social commitment to the national project, sometimes presented as revolutionary (witness Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Ecuador and even Argentina under Cristina Kirchner). It differs from the process of the 1960s and 70s, when the military apparatus took charge of steering the state, citing such notions as the ‘national security doctrine’. In the current scenario there are a limited number of leaders who, amid weak institutions, seek to consolidate their power by relying on one of the few organisations –the armed forces– that offer operational scope and presence across countries’ entire geographical extent.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> **Proof of these opposing opinions can be seen in the recently published ARIs by Román Ortiz and Rut Diamint: Román Ortiz (2020), “¿The return of the generals? Civil-military relations in Latin America at times of pandemic”, ARI nº 142/2020 (English version), Elcano Royal Institute, 10/XII/2020,**

[http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano\\_en/contenido?WCM\\_GLOBAL\\_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano\\_in/zonas\\_in/ari141-2020-ortiz-return-of-generals-civil-military-relations-in-latin-america-at-times-of-pandemic](http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_en/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/ari141-2020-ortiz-return-of-generals-civil-military-relations-in-latin-america-at-times-of-pandemic); **and Rut Diamint (2021), “Predilecciones autoritarias: el** (cont.)

The weakness of states, stemming from their lack of financial leverage to offer aid to the sectors hardest hit by the pandemic and the inability of administrations to manage the crisis, has favoured the emergence of personality-based leaders. The new *caudillos* convey a message that is more anti-elite than anti-system. Some 'COVID-populists' have emerged in the context of the pandemic, such as López Obrador, Bolsonaro, Ortega and Bukele. Despite their different ideological leanings, they all exhibit a certain disdain for the pandemic and, in some cases, denialist attitudes. In some countries, like Brazil (permission to carry arms), Nicaragua and El Salvador, the pandemic accelerated pre-existing authoritarian trends. Especially notable in this respect was Bukele, who in February 2020 went to parliament accompanied by soldiers and police officers to exert pressure on lawmakers to support his initiatives. The fight against the virus in El Salvador enabled anti-democratic measures, laws and rulings to be bolstered, in line with what is happening in other parts of the world, such as Viktor Orbán's Hungary.

COVID-populisms are illustrative of a new age in the region. They represent the fourth populist wave. The first, 'classic populism', manifested itself in the 1930s, 40s and 50s and had Juan Domingo Perón and Getulio Vargas among its chief proponents. The second ('neoliberal populism') was embodied by Carlos Menem and Alberto Fujimori in the 1990s. And the third was the 'Bolivarian neopopulism' of Hugo Chávez between 1999 and 2013. This fourth wave features figures unconnected to traditional parties or people who have deserted such groups. This was the case of the Honduran Salvador Nasralla in 2017, the Guatemalan Jimmy Morales in 2015 and, more recently, López Obrador, Bolsonaro and Bukele.

They tend to be leaders of personality-based movements, such as Bolsonaro and López Obrador. The latter, a former member of the PRI and PRD parties, set up MORENA, his current party, in his own image. They have a polarising and demagogical message that is critical of the political system and parties. López Obrador indiscriminately tars all his rivals with the brush of the 'power mafia'. His proposals have an authoritarian ring. The Chilean José Antonio Kast, who garnered 7.9% of the votes at the last election, lays claim to the legacy of Augusto Pinochet. The Uruguayan Cabildo Abierto 'party', under the former general Guido Manini Ríos, flies the flag of law and order. Bolsonaro has repeatedly praised the military regime since the 1990s ('the mistake of the dictatorship was to torture and not to kill') and hard-line rule ('police officers who do not kill are not police officers'). Rather than putting forward detailed political proposals, their main –and sometimes only– argument is the fight against corruption and the traditional political class. Morales became the President of Guatemala with the bald slogan 'neither corrupt nor a thief', which says more about the decline in the country's political class than about his own virtues. López Obrador promises that Mexico's other problems will be solved by tackling corruption.

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**papel de los militares en América Latina", ARI nº 37/2021,  
Elcano Royal Institute, 24/III/2021,**

[http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano\\_es/contenido?WCM\\_GLOBAL\\_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano\\_es/zonas\\_es/ari37-diamint-predilecciones-autoritarias-papel-de-militares-en-america-latina](http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_es/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_es/zonas_es/ari37-diamint-predilecciones-autoritarias-papel-de-militares-en-america-latina).

They are opportunist leaders, typically lacking parties or solid political foundations and devoid of a structured programme. They tend to rely on marginal political forces: Bolsonaro led the insignificant Partido Social Liberal (PSL) while Bukele created Nuevas Ideas from scratch. Relying on their charisma and simple messages, they exploit social resentment and frustrated expectations in order to channel disaffection with politics and politicians. They offer Manichaeic explanations and simple solutions to complex problems and their rhetoric, which is relatively unsophisticated, the better to reach all sections of society, is a catalogue of simplistic proposals. Like Trump, they are politically incorrect (even obscene in some cases) because they dare to express what part of the population thinks, but hitherto no politician would openly say. Whereas Trump bluntly came out with sexist and xenophobic statements, Bolsonaro declares that women ought to 'earn less because they become pregnant' and the Peruvian Rafael López Aliaga reaffirmed traditional and ultra-Catholic values in 2021.

The new populism, devoid of ideological content, is founded on nationalist messages and initiatives and on appealing to sentiments (demonisation of the opponent and the construction of an enemy who embodies, as classical Peronism would have it, 'the *antipatria*'). Bukele, having won the legislative election of 2021, convened national talks that excluded the traditional political groupings (FMLN and Arena), which, although greatly diminished, still represent one quarter of voters. They not only advocate protectionism, casting doubt on the rule of law and discouraging foreign investment (see López Obrador's energy legislation), they also block regional integration. The healthcare crisis has shown how each country has had to fend for itself when procuring vaccines and personal protective equipment. Having failed to draw up a united and coordinated strategy, Latin America has tackled vaccination in a highly heterogeneous way. Whereas Chile had vaccinated around 30% of its population in March and Costa Rica more than 4%, Guatemala had only vaccinated 0.13%.

The aspect of politics where the effects of the pandemic on democracy have been most prominent is on the electoral stage, both in terms of holding and taking part in elections, and in the organisation and execution of campaigns and the mechanics of voting. Various elections in Latin America had to be postponed in 2020: in some cases these were motivated by political convenience and in others by healthcare concerns, as in the presidential elections in Bolivia (postponed twice) and the Dominican Republic, the Chilean plebiscite and various local elections (Brazil, Chile and Paraguay).

**Figure 1. Elections postponed in 2020 due to the pandemic**

Country	Type of election	Initial date	Final date
Uruguay	Municipal	10/V	27/IX
Bolivia	Presidential	3/V 6/IX	18/X
Mexico	Local (Coahuila and Hidalgo)	7/VII	18/X
Chile	Plebiscite	26/IV	25/X
Brazil	Municipal	4/X	15/XI
Paraguay	Municipal	8/XI	10/X

Source: the authors.

There are rumours of possible postponements of legislative elections in Argentina and Mexico, where a protest vote could punish governments with a relatively poor track record against the pandemic. The very idea of postponing an election to secure an electoral advantage, albeit citing healthcare concerns as an excuse, is in itself profoundly undemocratic.

One constant question in any electoral discussion is how to ensure the safety of voters and the election organisers, as well as the participation of voters infected by the virus. SARS-CoV-2 has become a powerful disincentive to taking part, to the extent that there are growing concerns about electoral turnouts. From the technical point of view, the main issues are the organisation of voting queues, circulation at voting stations, the extension of the voting period (whether in hours or in days) and the casting of votes (by post, in advance, electronic voting), etc. In any event, the pronounced abstention in the legislative elections in Venezuela and El Salvador are more related to the particular political circumstances (the Venezuelan opposition's boycott) or reflect the national political culture (El Salvador). In Ecuador's presidential elections, by contrast, more than 80% of voters turned out to cast their ballot.

However, the question continues to be how the pandemic will affect the packed 2021-24 electoral cycle, when all the countries of the region, barring Bolivia (which went to the polls at the end of 2020) and Cuba (given its particular political system), elect or re-elect their Presidents. Apart from presidential elections, there will be a host of parliamentary, regional and local elections, as well as various plebiscites and referendums.

**Figure 2. Latin American presidential elections, 2021-24**

Year	Country
2021	Ecuador, Peru, Nicaragua, Chile and Honduras
2022	Costa Rica, Colombia and Brazil
2023	Guatemala, Argentina and Paraguay
2024	Mexico, El Salvador, Panama, Dominican Republic, Uruguay and Venezuela

Source: authors' own compilation.

As in previous years, protest votes will prevail over pro-government political supporters. On this occasion, however, the outcome will be determined by management of the pandemic, its human and economic toll and the speed and transparency of vaccination. However, the further that 2021 and 2022 recede into the past the less pronounced the electoral backlash is likely to be, depending on the date that the nightmare started to go into abeyance and the speed of the economic recovery. Protest votes will affect all governments, regardless of their ideological stripe, complicating the aspiration of the regional left, the self-proclaimed 'progressives', to regain power. Clearly, wherever the continuity of the ruling government takes priority over the rules of the electoral game (Venezuela and Nicaragua) the prospects of regime change are bleak.

Results such as those of the Bolivian local elections in March are proof of the above: MAS –which had swept to power in the presidential election of 2020, exceeding 55% of the votes in the first round and beating the main opposition leader by almost 30%– while it won the majority of rural municipalities and governments, saw its power in most of the main Bolivian cities (La Paz, El Alto, Santa Cruz and Cochabamba) reduced, and for the next five years these will be governed by opposition leaders. The response to the hegemony of Evo Morales and MAS has caused the emergence of new leaders with very different profiles, which range from the far right (Luis Fernando Camacho in Santa Cruz) to former MAS members (Eva Copa, female, young and Aymaran). Copa won in the symbolic city of El Alto. It seems likely that after the present cycle, regional fragmentation and heterogeneity will persist.

The democratic institutional framework has been both positively (with greater political participation and involvement) and negatively affected by the growing importance of social media. The economic slowdown and social decline fuel growing unease channelled through social media, which have become a hotbed of social agitation and political polarisation. The 2019 demonstrations showed how social media enabled the protests to be legitimately spread (Colombia) and, less legitimately, coordinate violence (Chile). In Colombia, the national police managed to establish the relationship between the vandalism of 2019 and 2020 and similar acts perpetrated in Chile in October 2019. A special intelligence group ascertained that at least 10 Colombians and an equal number of Chileans had been in contact to share experiences and intensify protests in which state property and the forces of law and order became the targets of attack.

The social media, which have become the main vehicle for demagoguery (Bukele) and denialist messages about the virus (Bolsonaro), also enable government to be conducted

in another way. This is the case of Bukele and López Obrador, who seem to be modernising the old tactics of traditional populism, based on scorn for institutions and direct contact with the masses, which is now conducted through WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook. An investigation run by the Salvadoran newspaper *Prensa Gráfica* suggests that institutional neutrality under Bukele has vanished and that Twitter has been turned into a partisan tool. During the COVID-19 emergency, Bukele's account was 'the main source of public institutional information', with constant updates on the development of the pandemic, but also news stories with highly polemical and proselytising content, which accentuated the differences between his government and the opposition, especially the legislative assembly.

This explains the importance of evaluating the role of the social media and disinformation campaigns. To achieve this it is necessary to draw up a balanced legislative agenda that bolsters stability and governability in the context of fake news, without curtailing the right to free speech and civil liberties. As Antoni Gutiérrez-Rubí has pointed out, the social media have become a breeding ground for mobilisation inasmuch as they channel pandemic fatigue. Thanks to the new technologies becoming widespread, communication between the various groups involved has been strengthened and the ability to pressurise and challenge the security forces has increased. 'Technopolitics' give rise to 'liquid protests', lacking any clear leadership or single claim, something that hinders negotiation. While legislating to control fake news could become a dangerous tool in the hands of authoritarian governments as a means of curtailing freedoms, it is no less true that the social media themselves –and even foreign governments– turn fake news stories into Trojan Horses capable of changing, if not damaging, democratic governability.

### A reform programme in paralysis and a social pact

The democratic institutional framework has been weakened by a lack of adequate responses from the state apparatuses and the political and party systems to people's problems and their inability to channel their demands. The current crisis has aggravated the socio-economic problems that have blighted the region since 2013 and have also reduced the scope for governmental manoeuvre to push through an agenda of structural reforms. Latin American countries continue to be trapped in a prolonged reform programme that has been paralysed for more than a decade: the civic dissatisfaction of 2019, the pandemic of 2020 and the renewed popular protests of 2021 have set back and made it even more difficult to get any type of transformation off the ground. The political fragmentation and polarisation hampered governability and the prospects of forging consensuses for achieving structural reforms. Moreover, the packed electoral cycle (2017-19) made it difficult to get compromise projects up and running, something that may be repeated in the current cycle (2021-24). Some governments that tried to instigate reform programmes, Mauricio Macri's being a case in point, failed for lack of resolve (2015-17) or because the changes were held up (2017-19).

The paralysis of the reforms and the socio-economic deterioration paved the way for the 2019 protests, symbolic of public disquiet and disaffection with increasingly detached elites and administrations incapable of re-establishing the path towards economic growth. In 2020, amid lockdowns and the other measures that had been imposed, the

pandemic halted the protests and led governments to address the twofold economic and healthcare crisis, while putting new reforms on hold. Today, the person who has gone furthest in implementing a reformist agenda is Lacalle Pou, in Uruguay, but the pandemic has caused his projects to stall, bearing in mind that his government came to power in 2020, when the virus started to spread through Latin America.

In 2021 the mass movements and protests have resumed, as shown by events in Guatemala at the end of 2020. Unrest is increasing owing to the social fallout from the pandemic. The worsening social situation acts as a breeding ground for possible new flare-ups. Michelle Bachelet, the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights, warned that the 'unfolding socio-economic and humanitarian crisis risks further deepening this discontent and could trigger a new wave of social unrest'. The latest events in the region seem to have proved her right. The worsening of the economic situation, the decline in expectations and governments with low approval ratings, which are reaching the ends of their terms of office devoid of energy and with little elbow room, help account for the outbursts of violence and protests in Haiti, Chile (in Araucanía and Santiago), Paraguay (disgruntled with public mismanagement) and some Argentine provinces, such as Formosa.

The political polarisation does not help so long as regional politics revolve around polarising leaders and programmes, each of which cancels out its respective opposite, as is the case with *kirchnerismo* in Argentina, *masismo* in Bolivia, *correísmo* in Ecuador, *chavismo* in Venezuela, *bolsonarismo* in Brasil, López Obrador in Mexico and Bukele in El Salvador. In the scenario that has been set out it is important not to lose sight of the particular circumstances of each government, bearing in mind that some are entering the final stages of their terms (Lenín Moreno in Ecuador, Iván Duque in Colombia and Juan Orlando Hernández in Honduras); others have one eye on the electoral calendar in the immediate (El Salvador, Peru, Chile, Argentina and Mexico in 2021) and near future (Brazil in 2022) and, lastly, there are those that lack sufficient support (Guatemala and Costa Rica) or are resistant to reforms (Bolivia, Nicaragua and Venezuela), although certain symptoms in the economic area are emerging in Venezuela and in Cuba with its monetary unification.

## Conclusions

The pandemic has laid bare Latin America's structural weaknesses (institutional, administrative, political, economic-commercial and social) and has hastened pre-existing processes. It has also reinforced the idea of addressing the post-pandemic future not as a return to the 'old normality' but as a chance to construct new institutional, political, economic and social frameworks, in what some call a 'new social pact'.

Latin American democracies, which have shown their capacity for resilience since the 1980s by coming through such critical moments as the 'Lost Decade' and the end of the economic boom since 2013, now face their most delicate and difficult moment of the last 40 years. They have entered the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century 'fatigued', as Manuel Alcántara has repeatedly argued, and in the wake of the pandemic emerge not only weaker but also challenged by the appearance of an illiberal alternative (personality-based, authoritarian and divorced from the liberal-democratic institutional framework).

This alternative germinates, grows and thrives because the democratic systems and the elites that steer them (or exploit them) have repeatedly shown themselves incapable of devising solutions to the problems that beset the electorate (civic insecurity, access to services, unemployment, poverty and inequality of opportunities) or of satisfying expectations in terms of social, individual and intergenerational improvement. The political polarisation, mud-slinging and fragmentation that bedevil Latin American democracies have aggravated the paralysis of governments and hindered the introduction of structural reforms to bolster administrations' fiscal leverage, a tool for designing more efficient and effective public policies and responding to the expectations of the populace.

Latin America's democratic systems are not only undergoing a process of fatigue and growing popular disaffection, they have also failed to read the compass of social, economic and technological change. The political elite carries on oblivious to the social reality in the sense that it continues to rely on favour-trading policies, party-political horse-trading and corruption to manage the public domain. These strategies distance it from the heterogeneous and put-upon middle classes seeking rapid responses to their pressing and immediate problems of socio-economics and political representation.

The illiberal alternative, represented on both the left and the right by figures like Bukele, Bolsonaro, López Obrador, José Antonio Kast and Rafael López Aliaga, promises instantaneous solutions and direct communication bypassing a liberal-democratic institutional framework that involves more complex processes and searching for arduous and at times difficult-to-fully-comprehend consensuses. The antiliberal agenda constructs a universe of new collective identities based on the creation of easily-delineated adversaries (the political class labelled 'traditional'), stoking the prevailing polarising tension while at the same time appealing to emotions and frustrated expectations to garner support.

For the first time since the 1960s, Latin American democracies are faced by an alternative model. Instead of military dictatorships based on the doctrine of national security they are now illiberal regimes (authoritarian and divorced from the republican institutional framework). Whether the region slides off towards the side or remains within the democratic parameters will depend on two circumstances: first, on the strength of the institutions themselves, which are much more solid in countries such as Brazil and Mexico than in El Salvador or Guatemala; and, secondly, its survival will be linked to the capacity of states, their political systems and their elites to change, to adjust to new times and reinvent themselves: for states, this means shedding their old vices (favour-trading and corruption) and committing themselves to constructing effective and efficient administrations capable of delivering long-term public policies founded on well-established public-private partnerships and ensuring respect for the rule of law; and for the political and party systems, it means improving their capacity to represent voters and providing an outlet for their demands.

It is highly likely that all these problems will continue to intensify when the pandemic starts to ebb and its catastrophic social, economic and individual effects are revealed in its wake. The need will then emerge to draw up a new social contract that enables better

management of the reconstruction and new legal, political and institutional frameworks to be created that foster social cohesion and strengthen the democratic institutional framework. It is necessary to underpin the link between the people and the state. To this end the elites must respond to people's demands in order to prevent a situation in which a loss of legitimacy, as reflected in growing public disaffection, imperils the system's continuity and stability. But for this to be viable a certain degree of foresight is required, putting to one side the improvisation, the old disputes and dichotomies (public vs private, for example) and the increasingly polarising climate of mutual recrimination, which are so endemic in Latin America. If this is to happen, the involvement of the elites, of all elites (whether economic, political, social, cultural, sporting, new or old), will be more necessary than ever.