

The power of poverty

In Latin America, militaries used to topple, install or prop up presidents. But when a president falls today, the populace likely did the pushing.

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It used to be the military that deposed governments in Latin America. Now it is armies of have-nots that are toppling presidencies.

The latest target of protesters was Bolivian President Carlos Mesa, although he managed to avoid resigning. Seven other elected presidents have been forced from office in part by protests and rioting in the past six years -- two in Ecuador alone -- prompting leaders and analysts increasingly to focus on how poverty and lack of economic opportunity is endangering democracy across the hemisphere.

President Bush alluded to the need to boost democracy when he recently offered his administration's prescription for the problem -- more free-trade agreements.

"By transforming our hemisphere into a powerful free-trade area, we will promote democratic governance and human rights and the economic liberty for everyone," Bush said in a May 17 pitch for the Central American-Dominican Republic-U.S. Free Trade Agreement, CAFTA-DR, which faces a tough battle for congressional approval.

Opinions vary on the best prescription to strengthen democracy and meet the rising expectations of the have-nots.

For economist Mark Weisbrot, the most serious problem is the sheer lack of economic growth in recent decades. "You can't find a 25-year period that is this bad in terms of growth for all of Latin America, even if you include the Great Depression," Weisbrot said.

"It's per-capita-income growth that allows countries to raise the living standards of their citizens," he said. "There's been hardly any per-capita-income growth for the last 25 years.

"This is a generation and a half that has lost out on the opportunity to improve its living standards. That is going to provoke a response."

The contrast is stark. From 1960 to 1979, per-capita income grew 80 percent in Latin America. But from 1980 to the present, the increase has been just a fraction of that, a mere 12 percent.

From Mexico, where 70 years of one-party monopoly ended with the election of President Vicente Fox in 2000, to Argentina, where a repressive military dictatorship gave way to a series of democratically elected governments, citizens have been expecting dividends from democracy.

In Mexico they're still waiting.

But protesters in Argentina, Ecuador, Bolivia and elsewhere refused to wait any longer: They have forced out seven elected presidents since 1999.

"You have to recognize the people in the streets," said Albert R. Ramdin, special advisor to the government of Suriname on affairs in the Western Hemisphere.

"What we are risking now is to lose all that we have accomplished because we have failed as a hemisphere to strengthen democracy," said Ramdin, who is a candidate for the No. 2 post at the Organization of American States. "I call it the connection between democracy and development. That is the OAS challenge."

Across Latin America, protesters and politicians blame the persistence of poverty, low economic growth and growing inequality on a series of economic reforms -- government deregulation, trade liberalization and privatization -- prescribed by Washington and institutions such as the International Monetary Fund.

In recent years, presidential candidates in Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador and Venezuela have won office on platforms rejecting these reforms.

The most recent president to depart, Lucio Gutiérrez of Ecuador, campaigned against economic reforms but ran his economic policies along the dictates of the IMF in the three years before he was ousted.

Political scientist Eduardo Gamarra calls the democratic impasse plaguing these countries the result of "the culture of mobilization," with dissatisfied youths simply taking to the streets to force government response.

"In the past 30 years, there has been a huge growth of the very young urban population," said Gamarra, director of the Latin American and Caribbean Center at Florida International University.

"They are not middle-class; they are washing windows on the streets," Gamarra said. "These democracies have no capacity to incorporate these people," he said, noting that in the hemisphere governments no longer deliver actual benefits such as healthcare, police protection or education to the majority of citizens.

Larry Birns, director of the Washington-based Council on Hemispheric Affairs, also cites economic problems as one of the major causes for what he calls "hydroponic democracies" -- elected governments that are not rooted in society and are extremely vulnerable to instability.

"Voters look upon a presidential election as a warranty," Birns said. "If elected and you don't fulfill your campaign pledges, the voters feel they have the right of instant recall."

"Ultimately it is the living standards that determine the country's political direction," Birns said.

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