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POPULAR CONSERVATISM RISING IN LATIN AMERICA

Francisco de Santibañes

SEVERAL major changes have been observed taking place both within states and in the way countries interact with each other, with multilateral cooperation becoming more difficult to achieve. At first, most of the arguments advanced to understand these changes were related to the spread of both left-wing and right-wing populism in the West. The reason was popular anger, caused *inter alia* by growing income inequality, the 2008 economic crisis, and recent migration waves. But these explanations are either wrong or do not explain the magnitude of the transformation that is taking place.

In this essay I will discuss the emergence of a new political movement that is behind many of the challenges and opportunities the world is facing today. I call it popular conservatism and, as its name indicates, it forms part of a larger

conservative tradition. The second part of the essay will examine how popular conservatism is shaping Latin American societies. Finally, I will consider whether the emergence of leaders such as Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil may be marking the beginning of a new era in this region.

POPULAR CONSERVATISM

In many ways, popular conservatives resemble traditional conservatives. They value family unity and community, want religion to play a relevant role in public life, and support their nations above universal notions such as multiculturalism or human rights. What makes them different from their predecessors is their lack of what the Greeks called *phronesis* (translated as prudence or practical wisdom)—their message tends to be assertive, almost violent—and their disdain for the ruling classes

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Jair Bolsonaro, Latin America's most impactful popular conservative

(the much maligned “elites” or “deep state,” as they are sometimes called).

Popular conservatives oppose the elites because they perceive there is a liberal and cosmopolitan bias among their members. They have more in common, as the argument goes, with the elites of other countries than with the majority of their respective national populations. In short, so the argument goes, the liberal and progressive establishment of our days does not represent the values and the interest of the people anymore.

Popular conservatives support democracy, but they tend to be illiberal. While the concepts of democracy and

liberalism are usually used together, they are not synonymous. Democracy is the government of the people, while liberalism is a philosophy that promotes ideas such as individual freedom and individual rights. As a matter of fact, one of the main arguments popular conservatives use against liberalism is that some of its members advance this agenda in an undemocratic way.

According to this view, policies are nowadays decided either by judges, supranational organizations, or a culture of “political correctness” that restricts public debate. Instead, popular conservatives advance referenda and the figure of the strongman (as virile as possible). In this way, they advance a more direct form of democracy.

Popular conservatism's lack of support for liberalism can also be seen in the way it tends to disregard republican institutions and individual liberties. There are many examples of conservative leaders trying to dismantle judicial systems or banning NGOs. In some cases, their speeches even target local minorities or foreign nationals. As the prime minister of Hungary Viktor Orbán famously put it: his model is illiberal not liberal democracy.

Moreover, whilst the economic agenda of popular conservatism supports capitalism it distrusts the most ambitious form of globalization. There seems to be a fear that the free movement of people and the displacement of jobs to other countries, to cite some examples, could hurt community life. Its leaders are thus willing to implement protectionist policies, regulate markets, or ban immigration if such measures help to raise the income of workers.

Popular conservatives also promote cultural wars. They not only defend family values and a stronger presence of religion in the public square, but they also tend to

oppose gay marriage, abortion, and various gender mainstreaming policies. This helps explain the strong alliance that exists between popular conservative leaders and religious

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groups. Some examples are Jair Bolsonaro and Donald Trump with evangelical churches, Vladimir Putin with the Russian Orthodox Church, Recep Tayyip Erdogan with Muslims groups, and Benjamin Netanyahu and Ultraorthodox Jews.

Finally, this new generation of leaders tends to be skillful users of social media. In part

they promote their agenda by Twitter and Facebook because they distrust the traditional media. Indeed, most of them (Netanyahu, Trump, Bolsonaro, and Italy's Matteo Salvini, amongst others) accuse the newspapers and television networks of favoring the elites and the progressive values they represent.

WHEN NATIONS REVOLT

The evidence of the rise of popular conservatism is overwhelming. The most important case may be that of the United States because Trump's victory gave a certain degree of legitimacy to popular conservatism across the globe.

Trump's triumph not only took place in the most powerful country of the world, but in the nation that once led a liberal international order that is now in danger of disappearing. The President of the United States not only restricts immigration, supports a conservative agenda in the judiciary, and promotes a more nationalist agenda in economic matters; he also blames America's political and cultural elites for the country's decline.

The other major event that signaled the rise of popular conservatism is Brexit. In the movement that supporting this policy—personified by British prime minister Boris Johnson—we identify some of its central themes. These include the rejection of (unelected) European elites—that, as the argument goes, take decisions that affect the lives of British citizens—and the fear that immigration is not only hurting the income of British workers but also changing the country's culture.

Popular conservatives already govern or have governed approximately half the world's population. In Europe, this is the case with Italy, where Salvini's party La Liga, Eurosceptic in orientation, has called for a return to

Catholic traditions, and favors imposing restrictions to immigrants. The case of Italy is indicative of broader changes that are taking place around the world. It started as a regionalist and secular party, but with time it began adopting

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a more conservative and nationalistic agenda. Although Salvini is no longer in power, he remains the most popular politician in Italy and may be back quite soon.

In Austria, the government of Sebastian Kurz is also Eurosceptic and warns against the loss of cultural homogeneity due to the influx of immigrants and refugees

from the Middle East. Other well-known cases of popular conservatism can be found in Poland and Hungary. Their respective governments have endangered not only judicial independence but the separation of powers in general. Their nationalistic and social conservatism rejects the multiculturalism of the elites that, in their view, run the European Union.

Public discourse is also influenced by popular conservative parties even in those EU member states where they do not (yet) govern. France and Germany are two cases in point. In France, the National Front of Marine

Le Pen has positioned itself as one of the leading political forces while forcing the center-right Republicans to adopt a more conservative agenda. Emmanuel Macron, maybe the best representative of progressive liberalism, has in fact suffered a drastic fall in the polls, in part due to the perception that, being a member of the country's elite, he does not understand (or pays insufficient attention to) the problems faced by average French citizens. The yellow vests movement is a product of this.

In Germany, the Alternative for Germany—a popular conservative party—is the main opposition force in the Bundestag. It feeds on and is fed in turn by the popular outrage regarding the arrival of refugees from Syria and other Middle Eastern countries together with Chancellor Angela Merkel's decision to move to the political center. Even in The Netherlands and the Nordic countries—usually associated with progressive views—popular conservatives have made important electoral gains.

A GLOBAL MOVEMENT

However, popular conservatism is not just a Western phenomenon; it is in fact a global one. The best known case of popular conservatism

may indeed be that of Putin in Russia. His nationalist and traditionalist views have positioned him as an important reference point for popular conservatives around the world. Shortly after obtaining power, Putin established an alliance with

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the Russian Orthodox Church and took steps to reconstruct the military. He also imposed restrictions on “foreign” NGOs and concentrated power in the executive branch, hurting in this way the burgeoning independence of the country's judiciary.

With Narendra Modi popular conservatism has also attained power in India. Modi, a Hindu nationalist, has accused the elites of the Congress Party for being too liberal and multicultural. He has also tried to reform the judiciary, the education system, and the national bureaucracy in ways that reflect a new set of values.

Similar processes have taken place in Turkey and Israel. Erdogan and Netanyahu blame their respective liberal establishments for not representing the values and interests of the people. Erdogan, for example, is dismantling the secular state that Atatürk established nearly a century ago; Netanyahu has passed a law that

declares Israel the home of the Jewish people and downgraded Arabic (which is spoken by an important minority in Israel proper as well as by the majority inhabitants of the West Bank and Gaza Strip) as an official language.

One of the most important examples of the surge of popular conservatism lies in China. This may sound counterintuitive at first due to China's official communist ideology. But in recent years Beijing's public messaging has become more nationalistic: for instance, it has given a more central role to Confucianism, a traditional teaching that among other elements calls for citizens to respect tradition and family unity. The other key element of popular conservatism—rejection of elites—is also present in a way.

It was the Chinese Communist Party that itself realized the degree of frustration citizens felt due to the corruption (nepotism) of a part of the elite, with particular ire focused on the “princelings”—the sons (and daughters) of public officials. Cleverly, President Xi Jinping broadened this discontent (decreasing the likelihood of deepening it), spearheading an anti-corruption campaign that has so far sanctioned more than one million public officials. The

Chinese president has also concentrated more power in his hands by eliminating term limits and including his own “thought” in the Chinese canon.

But as important as the power that popular conservatives have gained in recent years is the weakness of the leaders who promote progressive liberalism. This is the case of Macron and Canada's Justin Trudeau. As Barack Obama, Bill Clinton, and Tony Blair before them, they favor immigration, globalization, secularism, and the expansion of the rights of ethnic and sexual mi-

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norities while at the same time rejecting nationalism. Their respective popularity is not only at record lows, but they each face growing challenges from popular conservatives too.

THE END OF THE LIBERAL ORDER?

Popular conservatism is not just a movement that affects domestic politics in various countries. It also shapes the foreign policies of states, and by so doing, it is changing the liberal international order that emerged in the wake of the end of the Cold War.

What are the main characteristics of popular conservatism in foreign policy? First, it is nationalistic. This means that

it prioritizes the interests of nations and is not comfortable making sacrifices for abstract principles or universal values. As a matter of fact, one of the outcomes that the reemergence of nationalism is producing is the weakening of those international institutions that to work properly need states to renounce some sovereignty.

In this sense, Trump and other popular conservatives have reduced their countries' support for the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the International Court of Justice, among other multilateral institutions that are being increasingly marginalized. This rejection of international organizations is reinforced by the perception, common to many popular conservatives, that their respective national bureaucracies tend to promote a liberal and progressive agenda

This change of behavior presents some obvious dangers but also a few opportunities. Among the dangers is the fact that solving international problems like global warming and terrorism has become a more difficult task. Truly global problems truly need truly global solutions. With the possible exception of health, most forms of collaboration are suffering. Moreover, the United Nations, European Union, and World

Trade Organization, among many other international organizations, are each going through similar crises.

A positive development might come from another characteristic of popular conservatism: its realism. Their leaders neither seem to favor expansionism (as fascism did during the first half of the twentieth century) nor promote military interventions to advance regime changes abroad (as some liberals did after the Cold War). Instead, they seem to care about

protecting their nations' own interests and to value the logic that lies behind a balance of power approach to the conduct of foreign policy—a logic that may bring more stability to the international system. Trump and Putin are thus less likely than some of their predecessors to initiate foreign conflicts for the purposes of expanding any particular ideology.

A more restrained foreign policy may then help to avoid unnecessary conflicts and create the conditions for a more stable international system. This would be a welcome development, especially if we consider the kind of tensions that the growing strategic rivalry between Washington and Beijing might produce in following years. This, however, does not mean that military conflicts will not take place. It only means that by following the

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logic imposed by a balance of power approach, the actions of states will be easier to predict than if their behavior were to be the result of other motivations such as ideology. And this would in turn help to reduce the uncertainty and misunderstandings that are always present in the international system.

THE LATIN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

It did not take long for popular conservatism to reach Latin America. Indeed, one of the first signs of popular conservatism took place in Colombia during 2016.

That was when conservative evangelicals, with the support of other groups, played an important role in preventing the ceasefire accord signed by President Juan Manuel Santos and the guerrilla organization Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) to be implemented. They believed it was associated with gender ideology and the weakening of traditional family. The peace accord ended up being rejected in a referendum.

Something similar happened in Costa Rica during the 2018 presidential election. Fabricio Alvarado, a former evangelical Christian singer, led a campaign with one clear objective: to prevent the legalization of same-sex marriage.

While this is a traditional conservative theme, Alvarado, who eventually lost the election in a balloting, denounced the interference of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. By virtue of one of its rulings, the court (so the argument went), was attempting to “impose” this norm onto Costa Rica and likeminded states.

The case of Argentina is also relevant. In 2018, the most progressive sector of the administration of Mauricio Macri promoted a legislative debate regarding the possibility of legalizing abortion. As a matter of fact, the president himself made a public commitment not to veto the law.

At first, the abortion legalization campaign was successful: the law was approved by the lower house of parliament and gained political momentum. But then those opposed to the law began to organize in earnest: they began advancing an increasingly sophisticated message—one that was more in line with some of the main themes of popular conservatism.

First of all, the country's pro-life advocates associated the proposal to a campaign by foreign NGOs that were promoting views and interests that have little

to do with Argentina. Thus, organizations such as Amnesty International were denounced due to their involvement in the debate. Another theme of the campaign was the dispute between urban centers and the heartland. It went along these lines: whereas many politicians represent the interests of the elites in Buenos Aires, the country's main city, the values of the inhabitants of the provinces and rural areas are being abandoned. Sound familiar?

Armed with such arguments, a coalition led by evangelicals and the Catholic Church (one important point to mention is that Pope Francis is Argentine) was able to gain both political and social support. Eventually, the upper house of parliament rejected the law.

As we can see from these examples, one of the particularities of popular conservatism in Latin America is the growing involvement of Evangelical Christians (many of them part of the Pentecostal Movement) in politics. This group, in what has been traditionally a catholic region, nowadays represents more than 20 percent of the population.

But besides their growing numbers, evangelicals have also become more active in politics. This resembles what happened in the United States at the end of the 1970s, a time when the evangelical vote became a key factor explaining the rise of Ronald Reagan and the onset of the so-called conservative Reagan Revolution.

But the Evangelical Movement is not the only cause that helps us understand the rise of popular conservatism in Latin America. As in other regions of the world, there is also here a growing rejection of the elites and social moodiness. The reasons that explain this are diverse.

On the one hand, there is insecurity. In 2017 murders in Brazil reached a record of 63,880; a similar process is taking place in Colombia, Honduras, and Guatemala, among others. The economy is not helping either. Big countries such as Argentina and Brazil have been suffering long recessions.

The growing social discontent we are observing in Latin America is also associated with the perception that the establishment is corrupt. In Chile, truly massive demonstrations have brought the country to a standstill, led President Sebastián Piñera to reshuffle the government, and even resulted in the cancelation of two major international conferences: the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Leaders' Week and the annual UN climate summit known as COP25. In Perú, most former presidents and now in jail or under investigation, with one opting to commit suicide to avoid arrest. The country's legislature has lost credibility and is opposed by a majority of the population.

According to *Latinobarómetro*, the portion of Latin Americans who are

unsatisfied with the way democracy works in their country has risen from 52 percent in 2010 to 71 percent in 2018. A study by Gallup shows that the percentage of Latin Americans who want to emigrate went from 19 percent in 2010 to 31 percent nowadays.

It should not surprise us then that politicians are unpopular. This is particularly the case of liberal progressives, such as Nobel Peace-prize winner Juan Manuel Santos in Colombia or Mauricio Macri in Argentina, who either lost their reelections or left office with low approval ratings.

BOLSONARO DEFIES THE STATUS QUO

And this is what is also happening in Latin America's biggest and more influential country, Brazil. After a couple of left-wing governments and a transition period led by President Michel Temer, a major change took place: in 2019 a popular conservative became president.

The surprise caused by Jair Bolsonaro's rise to power was in part a consequence of how fast this process took place. As was the case with Trump in the United States, in just a few months Bolsonaro passed from being a radical to a major contender for the Brazilian presidency. Moreover, he did not change his discourse. It simply became part of the mainstream.

What is Bolsonaro agenda? Among other subjects, he defends Christianity and family values, rejects abortion and gender politics, and advocates for the repression of criminals without much consideration about individual rights or due process. He also attacks, as other popular conservatives do, the traditional media outlets and supports a foreign policy that promotes, above all, the national interest (a sort of "Brazil First" approach).

Bolsonaro's nationalism can be seen, for example, in the way he confronts those who believe the Amazon belongs to all humanity. Indeed, his administration has rejected the interference of international institutions in domestic affairs. In terms of his relations with other leaders, Bolsonaro is a close ally of other popular conservatives, such as Trump and Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu, while regularly attacks left-wing regimes such that of Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela.

The new Brazilian president also denounces the existence of compromised institutions, most of which has been discredited due to a major corruption scandal (*Lava Jato*) that ended with many politicians and members of the business community in jail. This is the case of Lula Da Silva, the charismatic left-wing leader who was president from 2003 to 2010.

Bolsonaro's main sources of support comes from the heartland (associated with agrobusiness, a rising sector in

Brazil's economy), the military, and the evangelicals. As a matter of fact, the rise of evangelical churches (evangelicals represent today around 30 percent of the country's population), together with the growth of violence in the streets, has resulted in society's adoption of a more conservative set of values recently. Bolsonaro's victory is thus not accidental, but the result of important social changes that began to take shape long before his election.

As in other countries, many Brazilians simply got tired of an establishment that, in their view, was unable to obtain results either in economics or in the security camp. Corruption and the appearance of a progressive agenda (political correctness, gender theory, and the like) that seemed to represent the interests of a distant elite but not necessarily those of the people only helped to intensify this feeling.

One aspect of the rise of popular conservatism in Brazil that may help us understand what could happen in other countries is the position that the economic elites adopted there. While at first most of its members supported more moderate candidates for president, when facing a second round between Bolsonaro and a left-wing opponent, Fernando Haddad, they chose to support the former. Since then, a more pro-free market sector became part of Bolsonaro's coalition, represented by his economic minister Paulo Guedes.

Something similar may happen in other Latin American countries, where a majority of the traditional establishment could choose to surrender part of its liberal agenda (probably in political matters) to avoid losing economic ground.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

Many of the trends that favored the growth of popular conservatism in Latin America will probably continue and even accentuate in the next years, giving in this way more power to the movement. Among these are insecurity and the growing political influence of evangelicals.

A successful Bolsonaro presidency may also be an important factor in the rise of popular conservatism. Not only because he may come to serve as an example to be emulated in other Latin American countries, but because Bolsonaro could decide to actively support other popular conservatives in the region.

An institution that will play a major role in this process is the Catholic Church. So far, its position about popular conservatism has been skeptical. Pope Francis embodies the more progressive sector of the Church—one that promotes diversity and the protection of the poor above other considerations. In countries such as Italy, Francis has opposed many of the initiatives (like restrictions to immigration) promoted by popular conservatives including Matteo Salvini.

But this may change. Another sector of the Church (probably a majority) is more conservative and is worried about the moral decline of societies. It gives priority to subjects such as opposing same-sex marriage and abortion, where the overlap with popular conservative's agenda is more obvious. The support of the Church would help to legitimize the movement, increasing its chances to reach power throughout Latin America.

Thinking about the future, there are at least three dangers related to the rise of popular conservatism in the world and in Latin America in particular. The first one has to do with the weakening of multilateralism and international collaboration in general.

One of the most positive developments in South America has been the strategic alliance that its main countries, Argentina and Brazil, established at the end of the 1970s, ending in this way many years of political conflicts. To take one case, as part of this process their respective nuclear programs—originally associated with the military in each country—became part of a bilateral regime of controls that assured their civilian use. This agreement became an example for the broader international community.

But there already signs that this may be changing. Bolsonaro's government seems to be reverting to a more nationalistic

strategy—one that sees the development of nuclear weapons as a strategic opportunity for Brazil. The logic behind this is that the country needs such weapons to become a major power on the world stage—as is the case of the permanent members of the Security Council of the United Nations. Simply put: having nukes would increase Brazilian power. This, however, would not only create uncertainty in a region that so far has been quite pacifist but also make Argentina's authorities consider the possibility of following the same path.

The second danger relates to the possibility that popular conservatism turns into some kind of contemporary version of fascism. In principle this would be unlikely because the two represent very different schools of thought and government.

Conservatives tend to distrust the state and instead promote intermediate groups like family, church, and community. While religion plays a key role for conservatives (and by so doing provides a clear moral code on how to keep the leader's power in check) the more nationalistic and ethnic oriented right-wing movements tend to promote a powerful state as the sole legitimate representative of the people and a very different set of values. Finally, while conservatives tend to be realists in terms of foreign policy, the last ones have traditionally been expansionists.

That being said, one can easily conceive of the possibility that—as was the case for many European intellectuals at the beginning of the twentieth century, such as the German jurist Carl Schmitt—many conservatives, afraid of domestic and foreign threats, conclude that an all-powerful state should be established.

A third danger related to the rise of popular conservatism is the possibility that by fighting liberal elites, popular conservatives simply eliminate them without creating a new establishment to take its place. Then a strategic vacuum may emerge by which none will think and act in ways that take into account long-term considerations.

This is in fact what happened in Argentina after the rise of Peronism to power. During his first terms in office, between in 1946 and 1955, Juan Perón transformed the nation in ways eerily reminiscent of the themes that are central to the agenda of today's popular conservatives. Indeed, Perón may be seen as a predecessor of the popular conservatives of today.

Perón defended the “people,” whom he avowedly represented, from the cosmopolitan elites made up of ranchers and oligarchs. He changed the constitution, bypassed many republican institutions, attacked mainstream media outlets, and called for a more direct form

of democracy. Sound familiar? Although Perón was an anti-communist, he also took on the United States with his nationalistic rhetoric. As many popular conservatives are doing today, Perón also got close to the religious institutions (in his case the Catholic Church) and was able to take away from the socialists their political base: the workers. In fact, he gave unions enormous power.

What was the reaction of the elites? They decided to confront Perón in a zero-sum battle that they believed was over when the president left power. But after his demise the establishment quickly exhausted itself and consequently forsook the public sphere.

It should not surprise us then that since that period, no one in Argentina has been able to successfully defend strategic national policies like fiscal responsibility, public education, and defense policies. What a century or so ago had been one of the most richest countries in the world has since suffered recurrent financial and political crises that have impoverished an important and growing part of the population.

A similar phenomenon may be taking place nowadays in other countries where popular conservatives are fighting the liberal elite while not taking into consideration the harm the latter's retreat may cause to the wellbeing of society if new, more capable elites, fail to take its place. ●