

Modernity in spain and latin america



History of Latin America II (Revolution & Dictatorship)

Why has it been so difficult to establish democratic political institutions in Latin America?

Introduction

Throughout history, Latin America has struggled with repeated clashes between politicians and citizens. The problems caused by these periods in these nations' history are still felt today and in order to understand the reasons as to why it has been so difficult to establish democratic political institutions in these countries, we must investigate distinct periods in their histories that have shaped the countries into what they are today.

Many of the countries in Latin America experienced their post-independence periods around the same time, with the majority of countries experiencing their 'Early Nation Period' between 1825 and 1850. These periods can be characterised by the struggles for independence and constant civil war and unrest as class systems operated in the countries and so political independence meant different things for different classes[1]. Because of this system and their vastly different needs that were to be met by governments, any attempts to unite the many sides and create democratic political institutions that represent the whole of society were, and are still, met with strong opposition.

However, it is to be noted that not all of the problems in the country were as a result of government opposition: many of the problems arose due to the countries being so vast and infrastructure being so poor, meaning it was hard to communicate with, and so govern, the people living outside of the

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main cities[2]. The majority of these people were indigenous and did not speak Spanish[3] and this added to the issues: if the people could not understand what they were hearing from the government, and not respond to this because of a language barrier, no democratic system would represent their views, no matter how hard it tried. For these marginalised groups, it did not matter which group of creole elite were in power this time, it was simply another political party who did not understand their views in order to represent them.[4]

For ease of illustration, we shall look more closely at two specific countries and two different but defining periods in their histories.

Mexico

Focussing firstly on Mexico; Mexico's "Early National Period" spanned from 1821 to 1876[5]. During this period, it was clear each region had strong affinities with their own area and so from the outset the political parties who formed the apparent systems of democratic government had to not only convince the people that they were the best party to be in power, but also, and arguably more importantly, that they should replace their ties with the caudillo[6] who ruled their area with an affinity to the country-wide leader who, for many, was nothing more than a name.

This problem of the people's reluctance to embrace a democratic political system for the whole of Mexico was exacerbated by the fact the caudillos were strongly averse to such a big change: these leaders had ruled their area for over a decade and were not going to submit to a national governing system easily. Indeed, such a system was entirely antithetical to the

interests of the caudillos who would inevitably suffer in these systems[7]. Thus, they led coups and revolts of their people against the government and since domineering caudillos ruled the people, if the caudillo did not agree with the new system of government, then the people should submit to the views of the caudillo and not agree with the new system of government either[8].

During this time, not only was Mexico attempting to create a democratic political system amidst unrest from its own citizens, but Spain attempted to reconquer Mexico (1829), France blocked their Atlantic coast (1838-41) and the United States seized half of Mexico's land (1846-49). Great Britain also seized the Falkland Islands as Las Malvinas in 1833. Clearly, then, this unstable political environment did not encourage people to embrace the haphazard attempts at creating democratic political institutions in Mexico's Early National Period. Uprisings inspired by caudillos, language barriers preventing understanding and poor infrastructure preventing communication all contributed to the difficulties of the time.

It is clear to see that Mexico's early attempts to create democratic political institutions were thwarted by international attempt to reconquer the country and by internal attempts to overthrow new governments by caudillos and their supporters. The people felt alienated and isolated from central government, and so when their caudillo whom they knew and with whom they could communicate told them what to do, they understood his rules and followed those rather than follow rules made by the government who did not represent them.

Bolivia

Moving on to investigate a different time in Bolivia. The causes of the difficulties in establishing democratic political institutions in more recent times in Bolivia were less intra-national and more international, due to countries becoming more reliant on international trade and the world economy. Thus, when this crashed in the 1970s the relatively new democratic governments could not withstand the pressure and the countries reverted to past authoritarian ways.[9]

One school of thought reasons that this was due to the extremely high poverty rates in the country: citizens were more concerned about fighting for their lives by ensuring they had sufficient necessities in order to live than they were about fighting for political democracy. Indeed, in 1976 85% of the Bolivian population were living with unsatisfied basic needs[10]. This was caused by constant changes in ruler since 1964 and almost antithetical policies of successive leaders,[11] meaning people could not rely on the government as policies introduced by one party were overturned and directly opposing policies introduced by the next[12]. The people became apathetic to politics as their participation was limited and they knew that military leaders and dictators would not represent their views. No matter which military regime stormed their way to power, they would continue to suffer.

When General René Barrientos orchestrated a coup in 1964, the following 18 years in politics saw uninterrupted military rule, and General Hugo Banzer's dictatorship between 1971 and 1978 was the longest spanning of the different regimes[13]. This time was filled with unrest and violence: the

military regimes did not appreciate criticism or opposition. Things were done how Banzer wanted them to be done and opponents simply “disappeared”[14]. Clearly this is not democratic since a dictatorship is the exact opposite of democracy and the people’s views are irrelevant in such systems. Banzer did not seek to redistribute wealth and the people were, again, the ones to suffer. They did not want Banzer to be in the position he was, but he forced his way to power and there was nothing a normal citizen could do about it.

Even after the end of Banzer’s rule, extreme political instability meant people distrusted the government. The succeeding governments seemed to forget about the country’s internal problems and focussed so much on international spending and borrowing[15] that the people continued to suffer. It wasn’t until 1982 when the country elected Siles as president did the people begin to have a say again and attempts to restore democracy were made.

Bolivia remains one of the poorest countries in Latin America[16], generally seen to be a result of the past authoritarian dictators and their regimes creating insurmountable debt. These leaders did not care about the country’s internal affairs and sought to boost international trade at the expense of their people. The people, therefore, suffered undeniably at the hands of these leaders. It is impossible to create democratic political institutions if the leaders do not care about the citizens of the country and seek only to benefit themselves. Bolivia is a prime example of a country who experienced great difficulty in establishing democratic political institutions as the military ruled the country for a long time, and any change in government

was not as a result of democratic election but violent coup. The people simply had to accept what was happening in the politics of their country, or risk their lives trying to change it.

Conclusion

It is clear, then, that establishing democratic political institutions has not been easy in Latin America, specifically in Mexico and Bolivia, for many reasons. From the outset, Mexico had to tackle both international opposition to their ruling of their own country, and internal resistance from caudillos and their supporters, while Bolivia continued to struggle until very recently with dictatorship and extraordinarily high levels of debt preventing development of democracy.

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[1] Will Fowler, *Latin America Since 1780* (Hodder Education, 2008) p34

[2] In 1950 only 40% of the Latin American population lived in urban areas.

Atlantic Council, *Urbanization in Latin America*. (2014) Available at:

<http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/articles/urbanization-in-latin-america> [accessed on 30/11/16]

[3] Fowler, *Latin America Since 1780* p36

[4] *ibid*

[5] BBC, *Mexico Profile- Timeline*. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-19828041> [accessed on 30/11/16]

[6] *Caudillos* is most accurately translated as chieftain, deriving from the Latin *caput* meaning head. See Eric R. Wolf, Edward C. Hansen 'Caudillo Politics; A Structured Analysis' in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Volume 9, Issue 2 (January 1967) pp168-179 at p169

[7] Wolf, Hansen, p170

[8] John Lynch, *Caudillos in Spanish America 1800- 1850* (Oxford University Press, 1992)

[9] Fowler, *Latin America Since 1780* p134

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[10] Republic of Bolivia, Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (La Paz, 2001) p16

[11] Juan A. Morales, Jeffrey D. Sachs ' Bolivia's Economic Crisis' in *Developing Country Debt and the World Economy* (University of Chicago Press, 1989) pp57- 80, table 3. 2 p59

[12] BBC, *Timeline: Bolivia* . Available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/country_profiles/1218814.stm [accessed on 30/11/16]

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