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## Latin America. La Bella (historian): "The Church is struggling to be a reference point amidst the present crisis"

The social uprisings of autumn 2019 - replicated in various countries when the lockdown was lifted - were followed by the outbreak of the pandemic, which brought the economies and societies of Latin American countries to their knees, plunging into poverty tens of millions of people who earned their living on the streets. *This is the backdrop against which a very delicate two-year electoral period is unfolding in Latin America, with presidential elections taking place in most parts of the continent.* Bolivia was the first to hold elections less than a year ago. The two-year period will end in Brazil at the end of 2022. With the electoral process now almost halfway through, a tendency is emerging: *The conservative or neo-liberal wind that ended a long season of left-wing hegemony on the continent at the end of the last decade, would appear to have waned - or even died out.* In fact, in the wake of protests and growing poverty, we are seeing a comeback of the *izquierda* in an uncoordinated, contradictory, emotional - and unplanned - fashion. It can be found in the well-established left-wing MAS party in Bolivia, in the impressive victory of Pedro Castillo in Peru, and in non-traditional left-wing parties that won the Constituent Assembly elections in Chile, in the run-up to the forthcoming presidential elections. Even in otherwise conservative-ruled Colombia, the 2018 runoff loser Gustavo Petro is odds-on favourite. The only exception in South America is Ecuador, led by Liberal President Guillermo Lasso, who defeated by a handful of votes in the run-off election the anti-establishment indigenous leader Yaku Pérez. Central America, characterised for the most part by very weak democracies, should be considered separately, as it braces for the sham elections controlled by the Ortega regime in Nicaragua and the presidential elections in Honduras, a country set adrift - albeit for different reasons. "It's hard to say if what we're seeing is a revival of left-wing sentiment throughout," remarked **Gianni La Bella**, Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Italy. However, what is emerging for sure, he said, is that this sentiment *"stems from extreme inequalities that Latin American countries are struggling with, without making any progress"* Unlike in the past, young people today are no longer willing to accept this reality. It reminds me of what could be defined as a *'blind 1968 protest'*, where everything is being questioned, and every now and then churches or statues of Christopher Columbus are set on fire." But in fact it lacks a long-term vision. **The unknowns in Peru.** This is especially evident in Peru. "Here, the radical breakdown of society and politics is striking, marked by rampant corruption, with four presidents in four years. Ethnic issues are more serious than in the rest of the continent, and despite the Country's deep Catholic roots, the episcopate is struggling to achieve unity," La Bella said. "Two worlds are confronting each other, with no room for intermediate bodies or mediation. *Now one might be tempted to say to Pedro Castillo, the new president, 'you made your bed, now you must lie in it'.*" But his Neo-Socialist programme lacks sufficient parliamentary support to be implemented. For this very reason, greater caution was expected in the contradictory first steps of Castillo's presidency, whose cabinet includes radical left-wing ministers - some of whom are alleged to have been involved with the murderous terrorist group Sendero Luminoso. Speaking at the UN Assembly, Castillo reiterated his firm opposition to all forms of terrorism and violence. However, in the meantime, a new front was opened in the relations with Venezuela's President Maduro. The two leaders went so far as to mention a "mass repatriation" operation of the countless Venezuelans who sought refuge in Peru over the past few years. **The urge for revenge in Bolivia.** High tensions are also present in Bolivia. Less than two years ago, at the time of the 'flight' of Evo Morales, nobody would have imagined a rapid return to power of the MAS party - the Socialist party now led by President Luis Arce, victorious in the presidential elections at the end of 2020. But Evo's indirect revenge, having returned to his country and still influencing MAS party decisions, soon turned into an uncontrollable drive to politically wipe out all those who had played a role in the interim period. As a consequence, former interim president Jeanine Áñez was arrested and has been in prison for months, charged with

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orchestrating the "conspiracy" that caused the fall of Morales, with no way to defend herself. A few days ago, MAS circulated a list of 35 politicians deemed to have been involved in the alleged "coup", demanding that they be indicted, including presidential candidates Carlos Mesa and Luis Camacho. *"At the time of Morales' ousting they threw the baby out with the bathwater,"* La Bella remarked. "He certainly was no example of democracy, but it must be said that Bolivia changed under his rule. The excesses of two years ago fostered the current excesses, something that has been seen on the continent before." This does not detract from the fact that the current political purge is an undue and unfortunate development. The Bolivian Bishops' Conference is trying hard to explain this, with repeated calls for national pacification, and has recently provided an accurate account of the events of November 2019, listing dates and decisions. For example, the 25-page report shows that Áñez became president only after Morales "fled", and with a parliamentary vote in which MAS had two-thirds of the votes. The report also recalls the efforts of the dialogue panel (with the participation of MAS in all its stages) which managed to avert a civil war, with the fundamental contribution, among others, of the Church and the European Union. Also for this reason, the accusations from sectors of left-wing parties in the European Parliament against the EU ambassador, León de la Torre, accused of "interference" for having worked for reconciliation, seemed surreal. **The Church is called to action.** With regard to the situation in Latin America, La Bella reiterates his concerns: "I see the same pitfalls of the past, it seems that people have no desire to make progress". There are signs of hope, however, such as the first Latin American school for popular leaders, promoted by the American Academy of Catholic Leaders in conjunction with a number of organisations, including ecclesial ones, in the wake of Pope Francis' Magisterium:

**"Indeed, in the present crisis, the Church is struggling to act as a point of reference,"**

concludes the historian. "When I was young, I knew the names of two Latin American politicians, but I knew at least ten bishops. Figures like Dom Camara or Card. Lorscheider, in fact, represented Latin America. The youths of the time identified with these people. This is not happening now, *young people are protesting but, with a few exceptions, where is the Church?* Bishops, priests, as well as the laity, are called upon to participate. The most Catholic continent in the world is not able to have its own movement, president or mayor. That's why new initiatives, with long-term prospects, are so important. \*journalist, "La voce del popolo"

Bruno Desidera\*