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LATIN AMERICA

'Lurch to the left' oversimplifies the story

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Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's long-winded diatribes meant to promote his "Bolivarian alternative" and provoke the United States do little more than embarrass his government. Unfortunately, he has become a caricature of the state of democracy in Latin America -- as demonstrated by the recent elections in Bolivia and Peru.

In the April 9 presidential elections in Peru, one-time military coup leader Ollanta Humala surged ahead of a field of traditional democrats to earn a berth in the second round against either former President Alan García or centrist Lourdes Flores. The race for second place remains tight, with some votes yet to be counted. Humala is running as a maverick outsider, spending much of his time distancing himself from accusations of human-rights abuses and his family's radical racism. His polarizing campaign has served up little but nationalist populism. So if Peruvians choose him as their president, they will likely get a government that is neither able nor inclined to preserve the recovering economy and democratic institutions that are the legacy of Alejandro Toledo.

Humala's success is in the Chavista mold, as was the election of Bolivian President Evo Morales. Morales' use of political violence helped topple two governments and his zealous advocacy of the traditional coca grower's cause has led many to conclude that he is doing the bidding of the cocaine traffickers. Since taking office in January, Morales has appointed a radical leftist team and wasted precious time pretending to be victimized by the United States and energy companies that have invested billions in Bolivia.

Are Chávez, Humala and Morales the best that Latin America can do? Representative democracy means that people are getting the leaders they choose. That's the good news. But as in any democracy, people do not always choose wisely.

Recent history in the region teaches many lessons. If voters have to settle for political parties whose only principle is holding on to power, then politicians should not be surprised when populists manage to convince people that ideas don't matter. If voters are taken in by empty populist rhetoric, they should not expect government that can deliver practical results or a constructive vision. If voters choose a coup leader as president, they should not expect someone who can make democracy work. When they elect candidates who rail against the "neoliberal" model, they have no one but themselves to blame when socialist solutions strangle their economy.

But, of course, it doesn't have to be that way. Countries that choose serious and sound democrats to lead them -- regardless of where they fall on the political spectrum -- usually get accountable and responsible government. Leaders like Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil, Ricardo Lagos of Chile, Elías Antonio Saca of

El Salvador, Alejandro Toledo of Peru, Martín Torrijos in Panama, Alvaro Uribe of Colombia, Tabaré Vázquez of Uruguay and others prove that democracy can produce able and even remarkable leadership.

Many observers have been huffing and puffing about the "lurch to the Left" in Latin America. In fact, what we are seeing is democracy working. Left-of-center leaders Lula and Vázquez are committed democrats who competed for the presidency more than once before winning. Torrijos is proud of his father's populist legacy, but he also is making tough decisions to modernize Panama and put it, quite literally, in the middle of the global economy. Michelle Bachelet was elected Chile's first woman president after a spirited and close contest, leading a coalition that is more center than left. Dominican president Leonel Fernández is out to prove that free market policies and social development go hand-in-hand.

Each of these leaders from the left is governing responsibly by building accountable coalitions, respecting the rule of law and hewing to free-market economic models. The notion that they are led, let alone inspired, by Hugo Chávez's campaign to revive a Castro-style revolution is absurd. Castro, Chávez and Morales are cheerleaders for a pathetic school of Latin American politics whose central tenet is blaming the United States for every problem, hoping to escape accountability for their own incompetence and failure.

As representative governments take the reins of power in the Americas, some will be from the left, others from the right. Some will be good presidents, and others will embarrass themselves and those who elected them. All must accept responsibility for what happens in their countries. Blaming Washington may get a few hapless Latin American leaders through a given day, but that is a road to nowhere. And, Latin voters who get taken for a ride have no one to blame but themselves.

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