

# *Hemispheric Perspectives: The Rise of Neo-Populism*

A Colloquium Co-Hosted by The George Washington University Center for Latin American Issues and The Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College

The George Washington University School of Business  
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## Summary

Collected by Romel José Lira\*

On September 21, 2006, The Center for Latin American Issues at The George Washington University (CLAI) and the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College held the first in a series of jointly-hosted colloquiums dealing with hemispheric perspectives on Latin American issues. The conference, held on CLAI premises in Washington, DC, and entitled “The Rise of Neo-Populism,” brought together over 100 attendees who listened and asked questions of the select panel of experts. Panelists Julio A. Cirino of Argentina, Gustavo O. Coronel of Venezuela, and Jaime Aparicio Otero of Bolivia (see speaker biographies, attached) presented their papers and comments on the rise and spread of neo-populism through South America in recent years. After their



Dr. Julio Cirino presents his views on the rise of populism. Listening (left to right) are fellow panelists Gustavo Coronel, Jaime Aparicio, and Alexander Crowther.

formal remarks, the speakers responded to points raised by the various presentations and then entertained questions from the audience. Common points of the presentations were the rise of the mass media as the principal vehicle for the spread of populism; the importance of patronage and hand-outs to the populace; and the significance of a central charismatic leader to inspire the people. Interestingly, none of the speakers cited the military as a source nourishing this phenomenon, except as a tool under the leader’s control and thus a vehicle for institutional supremacy within the state. The spread of neo-populism is a result of an underrepresented political left which, combined with the recession of the 1980s, has resounded throughout

the various political systems of the Andean region into a broad-reaching failure of the existent political structures. As the various structures set up by neo-populist leaders collapse, it will be the responsibility of the next political class to deliver sound policy to assist the overwhelming populace living on the borderline of poverty.

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\* Romel José Lira is a junior at The George Washington University, majoring in Economics and International Affairs with a concentration in Conflict and Security. He is an intern at The Center for Latin American Issues.

## The Rise of Neo-populism

The origin of the modern wave of revolutionary populism is the collapse of the alternative ideology of leftist thought with the implosion of the USSR and the lack of a clear consensus of how Latin America's democracy should be implemented. Because of this uncertainty, corruption has become increasingly prevalent in the region.



Professor Douglas C. Lovelace, Jr., director of the Strategic Studies Institute, flanked by conference guests Margaret Hayes and Lloyd Crowther.

Fundamentally, the cause of this application of democracy is the cultural appreciation of the *caudillo* or *él jefe*. The central leader creates or exacerbates the situations that demand.

This leader, operating above the law, is a father-figure who rules with impunity. He is the incarnate figure of justice within the state. Because of this, the regular courts of law are made largely irrelevant. Also, the revolution must be under constant threat. More importantly, the appearance or perception of constant threat must constantly be made apparent to the population. There are no political opponents, just “enemies of the state” who must be punished and suppressed

for the protection of the state and its populace. As long as the idea of revolution is under threat, the people must understand that they are living in exceptional times which demand exceptional sacrifices, including exceptional powers for the leader. Through the stability offered by the populist leader, the people are led to believe that he will provide for them in ways that the past system could not.

## Violence

The enforcement of populist regimes relies on controlled violence against the people. In previous revolutions, the military played a role in the violence against the civil population, but those days are over. Instead, roving gangs of the leader's supporters roam the street masked and armed with mass-produced cudgels. A photograph presented by one of the speakers marked the striking similarities of the cudgels carried by the masked demonstrators. The police are seen in the background, rendered impotent and reduced to the role of observers while violence is imposed by leftist mobs. Journalists, sympathetic to the populist movement, are placed nearby so as to report on the demonstration. They report saying that while violence is sad, it is understandable considering the circumstances. This type of violence against elected government has been baptized “mob revolution”. Staged by organizers, the use of force is crucial. Legitimate elected democracies are rendered defenseless against coups of civil movements.

Revolutionary populism demands expansion beyond state borders. Chavez in Venezuela has, contentiously, altered some political realities of the Andean Region. The election of Evo Morales in Bolivia has given rise to the possibility of regional conflict and threatens stability outside Bolivia and Venezuela. Situations such as strengthening relationships with the Islamic Republic of Iran as well as encouraging the expansion of Hezbollah in Argentina and Venezuela have been planned as a counter to the perceived empire-building of the United States and its hegemonic influence in the world, specifically in

South America. As is Iran, North Korea is escalating connections with Caracas and Chavez. Purchases of arms and munitions from Russia and elsewhere threaten to undermine the overall stability of the region. Revolutionary populism is a severe threat to the current global power structure and is not going to go away on its own.

### **Failures of Neo-populism**

One of the many failures of neo-populist or revolutionary populist governments in some countries is the extreme instability incurred by tying the ability to create a welfare state to the oil market price. As long as hydro-carbons are selling for a high market price, nations such as Venezuela are capable of providing handouts to the poor people and marginalizing the private sector. Another failure is the inability to attract foreign investment. As private firms are nationalized, multinational corporations will cease investing in the economy. A main concern in the case of Bolivia is nationalization of oil and gas, having suffered the negative repercussions of nationalizations three times. This is what Chavez has done in Venezuela, and as such, Venezuela has not been a democracy since 1999. It is feared that this will happen in Bolivia.

Venezuelan infrastructure is collapsing. As Chavez works on spreading the message of anti-imperialism and anti-Americanism, bridges are collapsing and people are dying from lack of appropriate medical care. Chavez has circumvented any legitimate check to his power by maintaining two separate budgets, one reported to the Venezuelan congress and the other solely answerable to himself. Using funds from both the oil windfall and the central bank, he has drained his nation's financial resources to defeat threats to his regime. By doing so, he has forced the people to re-organize political opposition to his government.

### **Conclusion**

The rise of neo-populism has been the result of a combination of political failure, undefined policies, and a restless populace. It is the responsibility of the political elite in Latin America to understand that revolutions based in the populace are not begun solely by a charismatic leader, but begin because of a political hole in the political and social landscape that demands filling. It was an ineffective left, predominantly isolated within the universities, and economic instability that led to a need for change from outside the system.

When democratic institutions are demolished by illegitimate forces, it is the responsibility of democracies and institutions such as the Organization of American States to do something about it. This applies not just to mob overthrow of legitimate governments as in the case of Bolivia, but of unconstitutional measures by states against their own people.

Economically, populism is following an upward trend. As hydrocarbon prices are high, charismatic figures such as Hugo Chavez in Venezuela are flush with surplus cash and are able to dictate powers and policy to an extent not seen before. There is another side to the coin: the oil market will eventually fall. How these governments provide for their people and maintain power as monies evaporate will be pivotal to future regional stability.

With some dispute amongst the presenters, in much of Latin America, western democracy does not exist. For some, implemented Latin American democracy revolves



Dr. Coronel comments on Dr. Cirino's presentation.

solely around the act of voting. There are two problems with this construct. First, the concept of citizenship in populist Latin American nations is fragile to non-existent. A core problem and cause of revolution is frustrated ethnic and social groups who do not see themselves as belonging to the state, but who perceive the state as a vehicle for political suppression of whole segments of the population. An alternative view is that yes, there is a

problem with democracy, but it is not in the implementation, but in the core ideals surrounding the concept in Latin America. Latin American statesmen have to deal with systemic failures to provide a real choice to the populace and to do this requires a trust and faith in the democratic process that avoids manipulation by strongmen and ideologues. There is agreement that there is a problem with encouraging citizenship. Democracy works when minority voices can make a difference in policy; when a singular voice is able to overpower the remaining voices, democracy has failed.

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### **View Speaker Presentations:**

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