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Latin America: Life after Chavez (and Lula)

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Dr Francisco Panizza, Head of the Latin America International Affairs Programme at LSE IDEAS and Reader in the Department of Government at the London School of Economics.

For most of the second half of the 2000s, the grand narrative of Latin American politics was that the region was turning to the left and that the left was divided between those who followed the "Chavista model" and those who were closer to the "Lulista" one. While very different in their politics and personalities, Chávez and Lula were highly successful politicians. The two presidents changed their countries' political landscape (admittedly Chávez more than Lula). They set up innovative social programmes ("Misiones", "Bolsa Familia") that led to drastic falls in poverty and indigence, consolidated a popular base of support and comfortably won re-elections (Chávez more than once, Lula once while securing the triumph of Dilma Rouseff after his second term in office).

Regionally, Chávez and Lula were major influences in the rise of the left and in the process of South American political unity. One has only to remember the condition of the left in Latin America in the 1990s to realise the impact of Chávez's victory in 1998 and of Lula's election in 2002. The very different social and political models that the two leaders represented gave way to analyses of the "two lefts" encapsulated in Jorge Castañeda's much cited dichotomy[1] between the "responsible" (Lula) and the "populist" (Chávez) left. There were, of course, significant differences in the political projects of the two leaders and between left governments throughout the region that can be seen as closer to one or the other model. But what proponents of the "good left/bad left" argument miss is that neither Chávez nor Lula (nor, for that matter, the other left and left of centre governments in the region) saw their differences in these Manichean terms. Absent from this divide has been the kind of bitter politico-ideological civil wars that have historically characterized splits within the left with the divisions; for instance, between "reformists" and "revolutionaries" or between communists and social democrats. While competing for regional leadership both Chávez and Lula regarded themselves as part of a broader process of regional change and politically they supported rather than denounced each other. Arguably, this broadened rather than narrowed the appeal of the left in the region and allowed the two leaders to both compete and collaborate in the promotion of regional unity, as seen in the creation of UNASUR.

The death of Chávez and the succession of Lula by Dilma Rousseff in Brazil leaves a big vacuum in the Latin American left. Even if, as likely as it is, Nicolás Maduro wins the presidency in Venezuela in April, he is no Chávez and will not have the resources that Chávez had to promote his petro-diplomacy. Three years into her first term in office, Rousseff remains highly popular in Brazil and will be a strong candidate for re-election in 2014. But she does not have the same presence as Lula in Latin America and her foreign policy priorities are rather different than those of her political mentor. Moreover, Venezuela is in a dire economic situation and Brazil's economic growth has been lacklustre over the past two years.

The death of Chávez and the absence of Lula from frontline regional politics do not mean that the Pink Tide is necessarily coming to an end. But together with the retake of economic growth and the election of Peña Nieto in Mexico, the strong economic performance of Colombia, Peru and Chile and the emergence of the Alianza Pacifico as an alternative to Mercosur, suggest the unfolding of a much more complex and diverse process of regional change than encapsulated by the narrative of the rise of the left.

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Image Caption: A painting of Hugo Chávez on a wall in Sabaneta, Barinas (Source: AFP).

[1] Jorge Castañeda developed this differentiation in 2006 in his article "Latin America's Left Turn" in the journal *Foreign Affairs*, 85 (3), pp. 28-43, doi:10.2307/20031965. Since then, his conceptualization of the different *lefts* in Latin America has been subject to vivid academic debate.