

CAF

Report Annual Forum 2022

Democracy and the New
Progressive Wave in Latin America.
From the Bolivian
Experience to the
Brazilian Elections





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CAF

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"Constituent processes are moments of collective and sovereign re-foundation."

"The far-right has appropriated the epic and praxis of rebellion."

Introduction

Under the title “Democracy and New Progressive Wave in Latin America, From the Bolivian Experience to the Brazilian Elections”, the Common Action Forum 2022 was held in September 2022 at the Círculo de Bellas Artes in Madrid (Spain). Divided into two sessions, it was attended by former top government officials, academics, researchers, activists and representatives of organised civil society.

The forum addressed the reactionary surge currently sweeping through Latin America, where the old coups d'état have once again become part of the political landscape, albeit with updated methods. Growing social polarisation, the weaponisation of public power and justice, disinformation and political violence are among the tools the far right uses to undermine and challenge the democratic system.

Brazil and Bolivia are paradigmatic cases of how regional integration and re-articulating various struggles are key to countering this renewed (and increasingly aggressive) reactionary offensive. Relevant actors from both countries and their respective historical developments analysed at CAF_2022 the opportunities for the region's new progressive governments in the face of growing social tension, dangerous narratives delegitimising democratic institutions and a far-right that has seized the epic and praxis of rebellion. In this context, constituent processes take on special value as times of collective and sovereign re-foundation.

Democracy and the New
Progressive Wave in
Latin America.
From the Bolivian
Experience to the
Brazilian Elections.

**Common Action
Forum**

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1st session

Brazil at a Crossroads:

Democratic Crisis and Electoral Scenarios

"The far-right realised that these technologies were essential in controlling the narrative and, therefore, the public imagination of political emotions."

Jean Wyllys

The first session of the Common Action Forum 2022 took place within the context of a campaign promoted by various Brazilian civil society organisations, which, alongside CAF, toured Europe to warn of the risks posed by the upcoming presidential elections in Brazil. The delegation of representatives of organisations and social movements visited Belgium, Switzerland, France, Portugal and Spain, and some of its members participated in the Common Action Forum 2022 held in Madrid.

Paulo Abrão, former executive secretary of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Washington Brazil Office (WBO) executive director, moderated the first session, introducing the "democratic resistance framework" that led to the meeting. "This international championing of democracy we are doing today in Madrid seeks, in parallel with the actions that Brazilian society is carrying out inside the country, to ensure that our electoral process is upheld, that our democracy does not suffer further setbacks, and that it answers to the popular will of Brazil's broad social segments."

Abrão introduced the panel members, beginning with **Denise Dora**, regional director of Artigo 19, "who has been coordinating with other human rights organisations in the country to understand what disinformation means as a strategy of democratic destabilisation".

She was followed by **Izadora Brito**, international advisor to the Brazilian Homeless Workers' Movement (MTST), whom Abrão described as "a social fighter and reference point in the popular arena in Brazil". The MTST is undoubtedly one of the most important social movements in the country, responsible for placing "the part that the urban revolution left uncovered" on the agenda, as **Rafael Heiber**, vice-chairman and co-founder of CAF,

explained. Heiber emphasised that the MTST does not seek to abolish private property but precisely "that the social purpose of private property be respected".

Finally, **Jean Wyllys**, a journalist and activist, was introduced as a former federal congressman in Brazil. Abrão pointed out that he was "one of the first representatives who denounced the rise of the far right in Brazil and alerted the international community; and that he not only played a starring role but also had an avant-garde political understanding of the whole process".

How Did We Get Here?

How is it possible that a country like Brazil, which has played a historical role equivalent to its geographic and demographic size, that has been a global benchmark in economic development and in social and cultural terms, has become the international platform for the far right? How is it possible that today the country faces a very real risk of a coup d'état and the consolidation of an authoritarian system?

Paulo Abrão posited that, before analysing "the tremendous impacts on the lives of the Brazilian working class segments" that Bolsonaro's government has brought about, the participants should go back to the rise of Bolsonaro himself to understand how Brazil has reached the catastrophic situation it is in today.

And so Jean Wyllys clarified that the rise of the extreme right is a worldwide problem (see leaders such as Trump in the United States, parties such as Vox in Spain, or phenomena such as Brexit in the United Kingdom). "And this rise of the far right is a result of the impact of what we could call platform capitalism or surveillance capitalism," Wyllys said.

"Bolsonaro reached power through a process of profile-building by the Brazilian media."
Izadora Brito

"A Brazilian distinctive feature is that this rise of the extreme right happens to be coincidentally at the time when a woman is elected President of the Republic and when, in the same elections, an openly homosexual man, coming from the LGTBI movement, is elected as an MP", explained Wyllys. In other words, the rise of the far right in Brazil would also be the fruit of a conservative reaction to an identity and gender agenda gaining ground both in public opinion and the spheres of power. For Wyllys, "2011 is the year in which Bolsonaro moves from a traditional agenda based on military demands and strengthening the criminal justice system to focus on habits, behaviour, sexuality and gender issues".

This shift from an agenda more focused on punitivism and militarism to an agenda that is blatantly homophobic and misogynist would have brought together all the traditional right-wing forces, making the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff possible. "All the ruling classes, both the most educated elites and those others who are ruling class only because of money, joined with the vandalism of criminal organisations and mafias and perpetrated in 2016 a coup against Dilma," explained the former federal MP.

However, Rafael Heiber recalled that "the first coup" dates back to 2014, when Aécio Neves, contesting the country's presidency against Dilma Rousseff, did not recognise the election results. "Coup number two was the impeachment against Dilma Rousseff, and that is when the persona of Jair Bolsonaro reached national prominence," Heiber continued, recalling how Bolsonaro took to the podium in that parliamentary coup against Dilma and made an explicit homage to General Ustra, who had been her torturer. "In any other country, this barbarity would have meant that the MP in question would have gone straight to jail from Congress, but in Brazil, it meant that Bolsonaro was

propelled into stardom for good, and two years after that atrocity, he became president," regretted the CAF co-founder.

Izadora Brito added that, although "already since 2014 Bolsonaro was making speeches advocating torture, extremely militaristic and misogynistic speeches, and extermination statements against the LGBTI community; he was considered by most of the left as an irrelevant, childish, inconsequential person, a madman". In other words, for the activist, Bolsonaro was undoubtedly underestimated by the progressive camp, because in a very short time, "he went from being a ridiculous character to capturing and captaining the whole feeling of anti-politics". Anti-politics is the widespread disdain for the political class, which seeks to equate all parties and all leaderships, casting suspicion of corruption upon them. It is a favourable breeding ground for the rise of outsiders. Disruptive characters thrive in the heat of the media and social networks and manage to attract the mass of voters dissatisfied with "traditional politics". Moreover, in this case, the anti-politics was preceded by a long anti-PT campaign promoted by the country's elites. Bolsonaro, who capitalised on this sentiment, was neither an objective outsider nor an example of honesty, considering his handling of public resources and closeness to the Carioca militias.

Jean Wyllys explains the phenomenon with a concept stemming from physics: "Bolsonaro had become a kind of conductor. Because he is neither the most intelligent person nor a charismatic leader who would have known how to capitalize people's discontent on his own. He was turned into a conduit by the segments of the right and the far right, that had no other candidate. Since 2006 the armed forces have invested a lot in him. A lot of money, time and resources, to turn him into the leading name of the far right", he affirmed. That is to say, Bolsonaro is a product, manufactured

"In Brazil, Bolsonarism created an environment similar to the pre-nazi phase before World War II."

Rafael Heiber

"Controlling the Amazon is equivalent to holding the key to the balance of the world's climate."

Denise Dora

by sectors of the financial and media oligarchies, who quickly prospered thanks to the context of radicalization that Brazil was going through. "And it is important not to mistake radicalization with polarization," Wyllys clarified. "Polarization we had when politics in Brazil was divided between PT and PSDB", he explained.

Rafael Heiber went further, warning that the radicalisation tearing Brazilian society apart is "an environment similar to the pre-nazi phase before World War II." A less-than-democracy¹, in which the powerful gain more and more ground, leaving popular sovereignty as a purely nominal space.

Finally, in this first part dedicated to understanding the causes of the rise of Bolsonarism, Denise Dora pointed out another factor: "Having less democracy is good for business," she stated. "Brazil has proved it". And she cited as an example the fact that several international corporations have been able to take over land in the Amazon during Bolsonaro's government, dispossessing indigenous peoples.

In other words, behind "this freedom-hating global and national alliance, which brought to presidential power a man associated with militias and Rio's organised crime, who championed the dictatorship, who even tried to carry out a terrorist bombing while in the military..." there are undoubted economic interests, as Dora exposed. The abhorrent rise of an extremist such as Bolsonaro could not have happened if there were no companies and business people directly favouring and benefiting from the fact that a country like Brazil is sliding into the abyss.

Technologies of (Mis)Information and Defamation

Despite the broad and multi-causal analysis of the path that has brought Brazil to the troubling position it currently finds itself in, all CAF_2022 participants agreed to point to a particularly relevant element: information and communication technologies. These should rather be called "technologies of (mis)information and defamation", as Jean Wyllys, currently researching the phenomenon of the so-called fake news, pointed out with irony. "After a period in which social networks were used for social protest by progressive movements such as Occupy Wall Street in 2008 and the Arab Springs, the far right realised that these technologies were essential in controlling the narrative and, therefore, the public imagination of political emotions," he explained.

Linking this to the fact that Bolsonaro was selected as the leader on whom all the financial and media investment was to be placed, Izadora Brito explained that "with a lot of funding, but also with video and image manipulation, with the use and building of WhatsApp and Facebook groups, and especially bots, Bolsonaro began to attract first an elite, but then a popular following". And so he began to dominate the digital arena which, as Denise Dora pointed out, is currently more decisive than the public arena: "Before, if you organised a demonstration, the key thing was the number of people you managed to get together. Now it doesn't matter if there are only 15 or 6 people because what matters is the impact that this demonstration has on a virtual environment that is very easily manipulated. It is private, controlled by algorithms and designed to exclude historically marginalised communities and victims of discrimination".

¹ MIGUEL, Luis Felipe. In the collective book *Lula, the truth will win*, CLACSO, 2018.

The fact that public debate is now so heavily conditioned by social networks and online hoaxes is perfectly embodied by Bolsonaro himself: "Brazil is a living example of how destructive digital militias can be, constructing false narratives and instigating hatred," lamented Brito. She added that these digital militias became strong "with the sponsorship of the big Brazilian media, which are rooted in Brazil's cross-cutting structural issues: racism, misogyny, LGBTIphobia and hatred towards the most dispossessed population".

Jean Wyllys elaborated on his analysis, explaining that "the information process is not only carried out by apocryphal or anonymous profiles or by digital ecosystems that propagate fake news. The hegemonic press also perpetrates disinformation". The same mainstream media gave a lot of space to Bolsonaro "because he was the only one who dared to say things that others did not say, against sexual and reproductive rights, against the feminist and LGBTI movement's agendas", explained Wyllys.

To the journalist, a clear example of disinformation carried out by the hegemonic press was the coverage of the 2016 demonstrations against Dilma Rousseff. A "coverage with a calling", in Wyllys' words, "since, under the excuse that they were covering the protests, the media belonging to the Globo group summoned people to the streets and spread the idea that the PT was corrupt and that Dilma had to be kicked out of power".

Wyllys suffered defamation first-hand by the evangelist churches and MPs from the so-called "bancada de la bala" (a group of parliamentarians supported by the weapons industry). "They worked to destroy my public image, and the threats against me grew," said the former federal MP, who eventually had to leave the country as his life was in danger.

This climate of media intoxication led to Dilma's impeachment and has been in crescendo until today, when, as Paulo Abrão denounced, "we see the President of the Republic using official channels to attack democratic institutions and to undermine confidence in the electoral system through a disinformation network". The main concern of CAF_2022 participants ahead of the presidential elections in Brazil is that these pro-Bolsonaro digital militias, together with the official media, will generate "the noise they need to challenge the outcome of the elections", as Denise Dora put it.

Finally, Izadora Brito denounced that today in Brazil, "there is rampant censorship, not only against independent media but also against many women journalists, even from right-wing media, who are also being attacked for the fact of being women". And she explained that the challenge for the Brazilian working class today is to "survive in a country where there are digital militias, but also militias in the territories, and where civilians are also increasingly armed".

The "Bolsonaro Project": Plunder and Extermination

Certain numbers also explain Bolsonarism. "Brazil has been the 5th country in the world in violence against women and girls for 15 years. Today, it is the second country in the world that murders the most human rights defenders. It is a country that practised nearly 300 years of enslavement of African people and that perpetrated genocide against indigenous peoples through the occupation of their territories. A country with 220 million inhabitants, half living below the poverty line. A deeply unequal country that has always ranked among the worst in the Human Development Index", explained Denise Dora. In her opinion,

"We need to push from different instances so that our democracy is not further destabilized. We need international solidarity to neutralize the ongoing coup."
Paulo Abrão

all these indicators constitute "a territory of inequalities, of absent freedoms, fertile ground for the extreme right to settle and grow".

Izadora Brito provided other worrying statistics: "In Brazil, in three years, we have had an increase in arms purchases of over 475%. In other words, the Brazilian population is armed", she warned. "Bolsonarism today has a widely armed popular base, armed with firearms but also with hate speech."

The MTST activist recalled how Jair Bolsonaro's son, "one of the key operators of his presidential mandate" openly called armed groups to join his presidential campaign; and also recalled that Jair Bolsonaro's neighbour had Marielle Franco, a black councilwoman who represented the working class, the LGBTBI community and the Brazilian working class, murdered.

"As long as we continue not to know who ordered Marielle's murder, Brazil cannot be called a full democracy. It is unacceptable that in a democracy, an elected representative is brutally murdered," he denounced. In this sense, Rafael Heiber revisited the issue of coups d'état since what happened in 2018 was also a kind of coup: "They took Lula, the leading candidate in the polls, out of the way. They cleared the way for Bolsonaro to win the elections. And the day they recognised that Lula owed nothing to the courts, it didn't even cross their minds to rerun the elections. The day they legally and juridically declared Lula innocent, after unjustly spending 580 days in prison and not being able to run in elections he would surely have won, those elections should have been immediately rerun," he said. "I am not saying that the presidency should be handed directly to Lula, but that the elections should have been repeated. Because they were blatantly illegitimate, and therefore we are now, still with Bolsonaro in power, under a completely illegitimate government."

That last coup, which removed Lula from the electoral race, shows what journalist Luis Fernando Verissimo interpreted as a sort of carelessness of the elites: "The oligarchy, in eternal vigilance against the birth of a functioning left, noticed its distraction and now rushes to fix it"². And that hasty and forced reversal in Brazil meant throwing away all the social progress achieved to date, returning to the dire predicament of having no less than 19 million families without food security today, as Izadora Brito condemned.

"This is a project of extermination by the extreme right. Not extermination by sheer force, but rather by starvation, by lack of access to food and housing programs," the activist asserted. "The Brazilian people are suffocating, literally dying, from bullets and starvation."

In addition to a project of extermination, the Bolsonaro era in Brazil is entailing a project of plunder. A form of contemporary dispossession "very similar to what happened 500 years ago, when countries like Brazil exported all their wealth to other nations, concentrating economic growth among the dominant powers, at the expense of their population's extermination," explained Denise Dora.

Brazil "is not only a country with those same patterns of inequality and lack of freedom, it is also a very rich country. It has mining deposits, gold, and the Amazon itself. The latter is equivalent to holding the key to the balance of the world's climate", explained the lawyer. She lamented that

² VERISSIMO, Luis Fernando. In the collective book *Lula, the truth will win*, CLACSO, 2018.

the plundering carried out by Bolsonaro consists precisely in “using the land for production and to concentrate wealth in the hands of the world's largest economies”. In other words, Bolsonaro's project consists of siphoning off Brazil's wealth through a sort of neo-colonialism that would strengthen the global far right.

For all these reasons, the participants of CAF_2022 were part of the delegation of Brazilian organizations that sought to warn the international community about the possibility of a fourth coup in Brazil. Because Brazilian democracy, due to the magnitude of the country, its influence in the world economy and the global importance of the management of the Amazon, has a direct impact on the future of the planet and the future of democracy, making no distinction between nations.

Conclusions

Dark Times as a School for Hope

After reviewing the series of events that led Brazil to the democratic and institutional degradation in which it currently finds itself, Izadora Brito wanted to clarify that it is not true that it has reached this point due to inertia or inaction on the part of Brazilian social movements: "It is decisive to understand that throughout this process the black movement never stopped mobilising, the homeless movement did not stop carrying out occupations and did not abandon the streets, the LGTBI+ movement did not stop raising its voice, and the women's movement did not take a single step backwards in demanding rights," she said. "In Brazil, popular mobilization against this whole democratic involution never stopped."

This "process of extermination of dissenting thought" found ideal victims in leaders such as Jean Wyllys, who became the focus of the extremists as one of the first voices to expose the unfolding process, and who, before fleeing the country, had already escaped lynching in Rio de Janeiro. or like Marielle Franco, who died, as Jean himself recalled again in CAF_2022, "in a very well-planned assassination, committed by Rio hitmen whose military intervener was then Colonel Braga Netto, who is now a candidate for vice president with Bolsonaro".

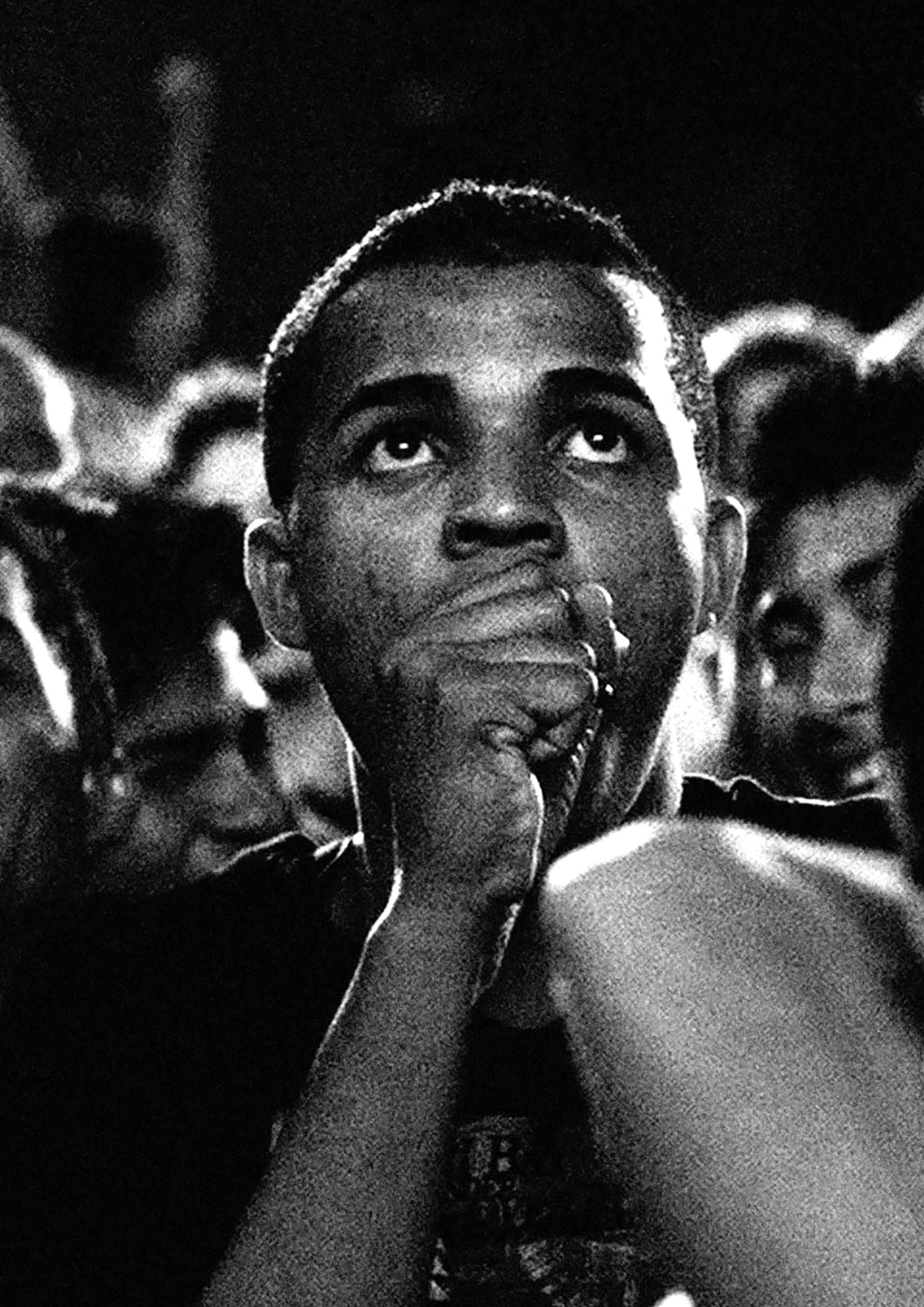
Denise Dora agreed that popular mobilisation has been "resisting Bolsonaro's brutal government in the streets for four years", focusing on the defence of the democratic rule of law. The novelty lies in the fact that "while we had always criticized liberal democracies for being racist and non-inclusive and for not complying with the human rights agenda, we have shifted the focus of social mobilization towards the defence of those same institutions because at least under liberal democracy we had the chance to have elections, participation councils, an independent justice system..." explained the lawyer. In other words, the

Bolsonaro era has forced organisations, community associations and the progressive political sector to confine themselves to defend basic concepts like democracy, the democratic rule of law and human rights. Such has been the involution and de-institutionalization of the country.

Rafael Heiber pointed out the paradox by which the left, with a subversive and revolutionary heritage, has now become the defender of the institutional order (previously criticised as conservative); and explained that this is precisely because the right "has become radical and anti-system, ultra, forcing us to recover the basic defence of democracy as a vehicle for equality and social justice".

In turn, Paulo Abrão concurred that during Bolsonaro's government, the citizens have not stopped demonstrating, and recalled that "there are horrible things that thankfully did not come to pass because civil society organisations prevented them". An eloquent example of this is the case of the decree to reduce the Access to Information Law in Brazil, which Bolsonaro launched in March 2020, at the same time that the Covid-19 pandemic broke out. This decree sought to limit access to information precisely when access to accurate and reliable health information was needed the most, and it was paralysed thanks to the joint work of progressive MPs and organised civil society.

So even in the midst of Bolsonaro's ominous mandate, there was still room for hope and even valuable lessons learned. As Denise Dora pointed out, "the popular communication field has been strengthened by Bolsonaro's government, paradoxically, because by being forced to resist, all civil society organizations have learned to coordinate better, to work together, and to think creatively". It could be argued, as a conclusion of this first session of the CAF_2022 annual forum, that difficult times can teach us to resist. Dark times are a school for hope.







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2nd session

They Came Back, and They Are Millions, The Process of Change in Bolivia and Its Regional Implications

[A discussion based on the book *Volvieron y son millones, El proceso de cambio en Bolivia (2005-2020)*, Akal]

"The 2019 coup d'état showed that the old order of the white, rich and powerful always seeks to restore its privileges."

Álvaro García Linera

The second session, "They came back, and they are millions: Political Change in Bolivia and its regional implications", owes its title to the book by María Lois published by Akal: *They came back, and they are millions: Political Change in Bolivia (2005-2020)*. This essay, with a foreword by former Vice President of Bolivia, Álvaro García Linera, structured the conversation, intended as a dialogue between the two sides of the Atlantic.

Jesús Espino, Deputy Director of Publishing at Akal, introduced the event by recalling that the Bolivian Constitution elevated to constitutional status "the defence of native populations, indigenous peoples, and respect for nature". The latter, now so often disdained "with that hurtful, insulting word, *Pachamamamismo*".

Bolivia was thereby a pioneer in challenging modern constitutionalism. That notion is based on the idea of a sovereign state, a united nation, a standardised law, a bureaucratic and institutional structure, and a homogeneous culture and identity. "This model proclaimed to be supreme and of universal interest has survived the processes of political decolonisation and has been propagated by means of a Eurocentric legal canon³." That is why the experiences of Bolivia and Ecuador ushered in a new constitutionalism of the Global South, defined by "the political, social and economic knowledge of peoples who for centuries have been silenced," as Jesús Espino explained.

THE BOLIVIAN PROCESS: Changing the Passwords to the Locks of Power.

Former Vice President Álvaro García Linera defined the process that carried the Movimiento al Socialismo party (MAS) to power as "the most important upheaval in the history of Bolivia since its foundation". He explained that it was not only a political transformation, not even a socio-political one, but it affected the deepest layer of culture, conventions, common sense, and ideas. "The moral order of society". A moral order that, for more than 500 years, distinguished people by the colour of their skin, their surname, their clothing... thus excluding 90 to 95% of the population from decision-making and the spheres of power.

A common tale shared by most Latin American countries, as Guillaume Long, former foreign minister of Ecuador, pointed out: "Until 25 years ago, when presidential elections were held, the top ten candidates were representatives of the different oligarchic sectors in our countries. Chieftains or representatives of the chieftains, i.e., elites who fought among themselves to seize the state's central power". The indigenous peoples were, therefore, completely left out of the electoral contest and relegated to subordinate posts within the social order. This is why the Bolivian process meant, as Raúl García Linera explains in the afterword to Professor Lois's book, "the rupture of the ethnic privilege of governance⁴."

³ DE SOUSA SANTOS, Boaventura, ARAÚJO, Sara and ARAGÓN ANDRADE, Orlando. *Decolonizing Constitutionalism*, Akal, 2021.

⁴ LOIS, María, *They came back, and they are millions: Political Change in Bolivia (2005-2020)*, Akal, 2022.

Then, in the words of Álvaro García Linera, "the codes that unlocked the gates of government offices are modified. The codes of those who can make decisions about the common good change. And suddenly, they have a different skin colour. There are many surnames, other textures, languages, colours, and skills...". For the first time, Bolivia had an indigenous president, but not only that: all state institutions and public administrations were assumed by the segment of the population that up to then had been marginalised and scorned.

"Evo Morales Ayma is the first indigenous president elected in South America. A Westerner cannot fully gauge what this event meant for the Andean people. 500 years of humiliation and suffering seem to end this morning in Tiwanaku," wrote Jean Ziegler during Morales' inauguration after his first presidential victory⁵. In this book, Ziegler explains that the transition from a colonial state to a people's government had to do with the fact that the native communities, once in power, transformed every structure, infusing them with their own ways of doing things. Their particular know-how.

However, as María Lois explained in this session, the radical importance of the Bolivian transformation process has not only to do with "the centrality of the indigenous-native-peasant person" nor Evo Morales Ayma's becoming President. "What lies beneath all these changes

is a quake, an upheaval coming from below the situational, and which has modified not only the electoral geography but also the very geography of power," the author explained. Thus we are not only talking about a shift in government or a change in the form of politics but a total reshaping of the State. Bolivian social democracy was the result, according to Lois' explanation, of a constituent process that "overturned the foundations of the republican order, generating a new statehood, building a new type of state altogether".

This "changing of the keys" not only allowed the indigenous peoples to enter offices that had always been closed to them but also brought with it an inevitable re-examination of history and of the past. For, as Rafael Heiber pointed out, "sometimes the past is easier to change than the future since it is a matter of generating a new narrative." The CAF co-founder recalled Walter Benjamin's thesis that history is always narrated by the winner, by the victor, and pointed out that Bolivia managed to reverse that: "Bolivia managed to re-found its Republic precisely because it managed to reverse the narrative of the victors".

An Uprising of the Mind

"For the first time in history, the masses voted for one of their own, for the first time the candidate resembled a nation looking in the mirror, he was one of their own, he was one of their masis⁶", writes

⁵ ZIEGLER, Jean. *Hatred of the West: The wounded memory of the peoples of the South*, Atalaya, 2017.

⁶ LOIS, María, *They came back, and they are millions: Political Change in Bolivia (2005-2020)*, Akal, 2022.

"Including the excluded, even if it does not mean total revolution, always transforms the system. In inclusion there is always change."

Guillaume Long

Raúl García Linera in Lois' book. Ziegler, in his own work, emphasised the importance that this fact had at an Ideational level: "Consciousness has won the elections"⁷, he expressed.

This is what Álvaro García Linera defined in CAF_2022 as "an uprising of the mind". "A shift in the common sense of society, a new moral order of things". For traditionally in Bolivia, the children of peasants were condemned to be labourers or domestic workers, while those with foreign surnames or whiter skin seemed to be born predisposed to be authorities.

The rise of MAS subverted that order and made the popular take over the structures of power. And that meant a complete revolution of the *mind*. "An insurrection of consciences, identities and ancestral memories"⁸ in Ziegler's words. It meant as Lois explained at CAF_2022, "banishing years of practices, years of history, years of specific constructs of things, and above all, years of thinking and acting like the ruling class." It meant overturning the schemes rooted in centuries of domination, behind which indigenous belonging, so battered and disdained, ended up becoming a refuge of identity⁹.

That is why, as Álvaro García Linera explained, "common sense is not transformed in just one or two generations. Perhaps it takes five or even ten generations to consolidate a common sense of equality that accepts that white and brown people are equal". This is a long-term battle. By striking

the deepest foundations of a society's hierarchical structure, racial stereotypes and customary roles, it is already hard for the changes to just take hold, so we can't expect them to do it fast, either.

This intellectual uprising has much to do with cultural hegemony and, therefore with the media, as Guillaume Long pointed out. The former minister explained that Latin America is afflicted by "an extremely aggressive media that plays a very powerful role in the construction of hegemony", and highlighted this problem as one of the challenges to be addressed. In the cases in which the progressive governments in the region have tried to check their power of intoxication with regulatory frameworks, they have been accused of violating freedom of expression; and in the cases in which the working class governments have adopted the strategy of generating greater plurality, the new public media have often ended up becoming a government platform. "In other words, we have not found a real solution to the very serious issue of the oligarchic media, which are propaganda mechanisms of the old colonialism in our countries", concluded Long.

Permanent Mobilisation as a Democratic Principle

As the moderator of the session, Rafael Heiber, recalled, "At the inauguration of the Bolivian Republic, actual citizens were only 5% of the population; the other 95% were not". This means that change in a common sense had to do precisely with the majority of Bolivian society understanding "that the State belongs to everyone, not only to that old elite". Furthermore, it had to do with that 95% of people not only becoming citizens with rights but, as García Linera put it, "citizens with power".

⁷ ZIEGLER, Jean. *Hatred of the West: The wounded memory of the peoples of the South*, Atalaya, 2017.

⁸ Idem.

⁹ Ibidem.

Nevertheless, another aspect that was addressed in CAF_2022 was the reversibility of these achievements. The fact that the triumphs of common sense “are fragile; they are not something that can ever be taken for granted,” as Lois expressed. “When there are transformations of common sense, of the moral order of the world, these are not irreversible transformations, nor are they absolute ones; they can be temporary,” explained the former Bolivian vice president. “This idea of absolute equality that emerged from the roots of the Bolivian process is going to take time to consolidate,” he admitted.

And the fact is that the Bolivian process, like any process of transformation and social levelling, clashed with the direct opposition of the privileged classes, reluctant to lose their privileges. “One of the great political problems of Latin America is its elites”, said Guillaume Long in this sense. “Latin American elites are pre-modern, feudal, and do not tolerate that the plebs (to use the term they prefer) acquire rights and equality. They are more fond of inequality and their relative position within society than of prosperity with egalitarianism,” he explained.

This is due, according to María Lois, to “Bolivia’s own insertion in the world economy: always dependent, always peripheral, always excluding popular majorities”. That is to say, due to the traditional, colonial and neoliberal scheme itself, which produces a majority of subordinate classes versus a minority of wealthy ones unwilling to share their spaces of power and privilege. “And that is a serious problem linked to our countries’ productive model, the historical rentierism,” Long explained. “Our elites have lived off the bounties of nature, be it the mines or the fertile land of our subcontinent. To change that is to change the productive matrix in our countries so that we are not exclusively producers of raw materials so that we can have an industrial middle class (to put it in

capitalist terms) so that we have a more diversified economy. In other words, so that we change our pattern of capital accumulation”.

This historical rentierism, commodity monocultures, latifundism... would be, in Marxist terms, the *infrastructure* that hides behind the behaviour of the Latin American oligarchies, which not only reject equality and resist losing their privileged position but also “prefer chaos and instability”, so as to maintain their dominance.

Thus, García Linera explained how not even a process like Bolivia’s is capable of “completely overturning the old structures” entrenched in social hierarchies and in the ruling classes’ aspirations. For the former Bolivian vice president, Trump exemplifies how old racial prejudices can be reborn under certain circumstances, despite modernity, technology, the Internet, etc. “So, I believe that the Bolivian, Latin American, and global societies can never the principles of justice and equality for granted”, he warned.

In order for victories not to be so easily reversed and for achievements not to be so fragile, “society must always be alert. It must always be mobilized to defend the principles of justice,” concluded García Linera. Because a society always mobilised, always on the watch to safeguard equality, is not only a democratic principle: it is the only way to consolidate a common sense of equality in the long term.

Neoliberalism Is Ageing in a Violent Manner

This became apparent with the coup d’état perpetrated in Bolivia in 2019, when, as María Lois recalled, “we witnessed how universities, the Church, the media—that is, the State’s apparatus of coercion, and of compliance production—suddenly became avant—gardized around hating the natives; and also the police and the army—the State’s

bodies of repression, the raw nature of State power —once again exposed their binding relationship with the traditional ruling class." In other words, the violence of 2019 challenged exactly what was regarded as firmly consolidated. Many analysts and players in the Bolivian political process had already presumed that the "cultural battle" was won after the successive electoral victories of MAS; and yet the events of 2019, in Lois' opinion, demonstrated that this hegemony was "contextual, not because they did not put all their efforts into achieving such changes, but because the nature of State power is perverse."

2019 also evidenced what Guillaume Long sustained in CAF_2022 about Latin American elites: "they prefer to have Banana Republics, in which they are in charge, rather than egalitarian modern, democratic states, in which they must share power with other social classes". Proof of this is that they did not hesitate to destroy, burn, vandalise... They did not mind rampaging through the Government headquarters, Parliament or the streets of La Paz as long as they ousted the indigenous-popular government of Evo Morales and illegitimately installed a representative of the white elites.

"In the U.S. and in Bolivia, it was evident that if for the right wing, and their purposes, democracy becomes a nuisance, they are more than willing to go over it, either by bringing out the tanks or burning down Congress," said former Vice-President Linera. To this, Guillaume Long added a geopolitical factor: the fact that Latin American elites have always been protected by the United States since the Second World War, throughout the Cold War, with their National Security doctrine and all the way to the configuration of the current world-system. "One of the prerequisites of the conditions to exercise its power at the global level is a pacified hemisphere, a docile one," the former foreign minister explained. "The United States prefers formal democracy, with elections, since

it looks better. But when there is a real threat to their interests, they can also embrace dictatorships", he declared.

Álvaro García Linera's core analysis points out that "the conservative forces and the dominant ideas, the great paradigms that organised the political life of society for the past 40 years, are in decline. In slow decline". He refers to globalisation, the free market, the minimal State, and entrepreneurship. Ideas that "continue to prevail, but no longer have the effect of captivating people. Linera, therefore, considers that right-wing forces are becoming tougher because of the loss of their seductive power: "When you lose historical optimism and cling to what is yours, you no longer persuade; you impose. You no longer convince; you quarrel. You scold, you insult. And from there, some very conservative elements become violent".

Trump, again, is an example of this: "He sent his people to burn the very symbol of democracy. And not in a Banana Republic: at the pinnacle of contemporary world democracy... To me, this is the symptom of a structural decline, of ideas that may still take decades to disappear but that already have entered the declining phase of their legitimacy", García Linera said. The ideas of the current right are becoming more violent and more authoritarian precisely because they see themselves in decline.

Another example is Bolsonaro's Brazil, where a president can afford to say that if there is anything about the dictatorship that he can criticise, it is that it did not exterminate all the insurgents. "There is a factory of hatred and fear installed in a very pervasive way within the social fabric, carrying all the symbolic weight of neo-Pentecostalism," explained Rafael Heiber, expanding on the analysis of the Brazilian case. "All this seasoned with that moralism that drives new reactionary movements in some Latin American countries."

"A constituent process is a meeting for consensus-building. One to address what and how to change. A time of dialogue where beliefs are suspended in order for other things to arrive."

María Lois

These are direct attacks on democracy promoted by supposedly formal democracies, which end up unleashing violence that prompts thousands to storm their parliaments and "hang the congressmen". Álvaro García Linera called this angry and frenzied phenomenon of those who believed themselves to be the masters of the world and now seem to be giving their last desperate breaths in order not to lose their hegemony "violent neoliberalism". "A degeneration of its late phase", he described it. "And I believe that this will continue and will also be a European problem, as it is already a North American and Latin American problem".

Hence, "violent neoliberalism" would be trying to keep by force what it won by persuasion in the 90s. It would be something like the old age of the neoliberal model, which, precisely because of its decadence, adopts increasingly vulgar forms and cannot persuade as it did in the past.

Against this backdrop, in "such convulsive and uncertain times, of defeats and short-lived victories", former Vice-President García Linera encouraged those who defend equality and social justice to distinguish themselves precisely through democracy: "Progressivism and the left have to hold high the banner of democracy". This must be the distinctive element so that the decline of the neo-liberal paradigm ends by effectively extinguishing an outdated and unjust world order.

Cunning and Audacity: The Performative Power in Constituent Processes

One of the other major topics discussed at CAF_2022 was the Chilean constituent process since the results of the constitutional plebiscite had only just been announced a few days before. With a panel composed of speakers who had first-hand experience of the Bolivian and Ecuadorian constituent processes, we had the opportunity to

learn of their impressions of that recent Chilean experience and of the implications of constituent processes in general.

"To me, a constituent process is a meeting for consensus-building. One to address what and how to change. A time of dialogue where beliefs are suspended in order for other things to arrive", defined Professor Lois. She explained that, in the Bolivian case, the campaign for the new constitution was driven by momentum: "the excluded, the social movements of the underclasses and even a segment of the middle classes dissatisfied with the neoliberal trend" provided the critical mass necessary for the transformation to happen. So that the process could flourish and be sustained. However, "we must not mistake the engine driver with the train," warned the author, referring to the leadership that MAS had in the Bolivian process.

"The State was not only a regulator, but also a conductor," added Álvaro García Linera. And he pointed out that, precisely, one of the reasons for the failure of the Chilean Constitutional Convention was probably the "orphanhood" of the new constitution. "The constitution in Chile is an orphan," he explained. "Latin American societies are profoundly presidential. You cannot move forward with a constitution if you lack presidential leadership and direction".

Another mistake Guillaume Long pointed out, from the standpoint of political pragmatism, is that "perhaps the constitution itself was too radical: there were articles that were taken out of context and quoted by the media with all the ill faith imaginable to scandalise the Chilean people". Thus, the former foreign minister argued that the Convention's members should have tempered their aspirations in favour of reaching a text that could be supported by a majority. "This is what we Ecuadorians and Bolivians did in our constituent

"Bolivia managed to re-found the Republic because it was able to reverse the narrative of the victors."

Rafael Heiber

exercises: There are things that I would have liked to see in my constitution that just aren't there. But we understood that if we put certain things in the text, we would lose the plebiscite," he explained.

This cunning Long spoke of had to be complemented with the audacity described by Linera: "You get to government, you take action. You nationalise. You redistribute. You seize land. That is what you came for. And then you say: this is what we are doing; the constitution is going to defend this and expand it. You prove in practice what the new constitution is, even if it has not been adopted. Decision making, audacity".

For the former vice-president, "a first weak starting point" of the Chilean process was "that ambiguity". The lack of leadership on the constitutional text, which was not clearly sponsored by the Executive. "There was also a lack of awareness work", added María Lois, who recalled that in Bolivia there were around 90 proposals for a constitutional text and that all those documents "were circulated, systematized, shared, popularized, talked about, and workshops were held with flip charts in all the towns so that everybody could read them...". So another of the errors pointed out in CAF_2022 was the lack of "ownership of the process".

That is the difference between "a practical constitution and one designed for PhDs in Constitutional Law," as García Linera pointed out. "Lawyers can argue but how does that constitution touch me? What does the constitution have to say to my daily woes? If I am asphyxiated by inflation and everything is getting more expensive by the week, what does the constitution have to say about that?" the former vice-president asked. And he explained that a new constitution, as well as a new government, has a lot to say about the daily problems that affect large majorities: it can impose taxes on the rich and, with the revenues collected, freeze the prices of basic goods, for example. It is

practical actions like that that would have made the majority of the population interested in the promises made. That way it would have been a constitution that answered the citizens' concerns instead of "a text for lawyers in which specialists debated the value of a word and its origin in Hobbes or Montesquieu...". Issues that clearly do not matter to most citizens.

This lack of citizen self-identification with the text could have been the root cause of the overwhelming rejection of the plebiscite. Since the vote was mandatory, the potential abstentions of those unhappy with the campaign or with the first months under the new government turned into votes to reject it. "It is an abstentionism of the 'no', it is a disdain, a denial of the political", affirmed Guillaume Long. Agreeing again that this generalised disaffection reveals that the members of the Chilean convention did not know how to involve the citizenry in a promising and mobilising project.

María Lois cited Bolivian territorial forums as an example. In them, "the Convention's members were required, at least every two months, to visit their constituencies and report on what was being discussed in the other side". Thus, one of the main differences between the Bolivian process and the Chilean one would be that the former did manage to involve the citizenry, that they made the constitution their own; and this imbued it with a legitimacy visible even during the coup d'état of 2019: "It is interesting how in 2019 the constitution is not called into question. That is, the coup plotters try to dismantle the state, but the constitution stood still all along," he pointed out. And it is certainly surprising that those who wanted to overthrow the Evo Morales government, attacked and burned indigenous symbols but seemed to respect the Bolivian constitution instead. This shows, in the opinion of María Lois, "that in spite of everything it has a legitimacy based on the time and work that was put into it".

Lastly, Álvaro García Linera described the performative power of the Government: "The Executive creates what it says. It has the power to produce the very things it enunciates", he explained. In this sense, he insisted that the Chilean government could have turned the constitutional project into political fact if it had supported the process with "governmental decision-making".

When Stopping Means Moving Backwards

Regarding governmental decision-making, Álvaro García Linera explained that the logic is different depending on whether the government is progressive or conservative: "For a progressive government, to stop is to go backwards. To stabilize is to advance. While for a conservative government, to stabilize and do nothing is to consolidate". In this sense, he said that "a progressive government is obliged to take a new step, and then another step, and then another step, and then another step, and then another step. Otherwise, it will be swallowed up by traditional common sense, traditional and conservative practices and traditional powers".

Guillaume Long spoke of the Ecuadorian case, in which the arrival of the Citizen Revolution to office brought about a process of modernization and inclusion in capital-labour relations that had not been seen in decades: "The purchasing power of people who had been in poverty increased... but we fell into the trap of creating aspirational middle classes", he explained. This lack of identification of the new middle classes with the working class government was probably one of the factors that led the right wing back to power. And with it came a neoliberal agenda that wrecked social progress and the prosecution of progressive political leaders that forced many into exile.

This lawfare, which led to the imprisonment of several of the leaders in Rafael Correa's

government, is what Long described in CAF_2022 as the "Anti-Correists' own neo-Macarthysm", which ties in with what Álvaro García Linera explained in relation to the media battle and the disinformation campaigns that also intervened in the recent Chilean constituent process: "Progressive governments are always in the minority and never have the resources to disseminate ideas. We lack networks, we lack radio, we lack television. Their ideas and their commentators, and their influencers are always more influential than ours. But if you have the Government, you have the power of the Executive to speak with facts over radio, television, networks and bots and all that apparatus that will always be against you", he said.

In other words, he once again defended governmental decision-making as the best possible form of propaganda. Actions implemented by the Executive as the best campaign. To which Maria Lois added that when it comes to human rights violations, "conditional disapproval cannot be tolerated, nor can silence and media blackouts. The destructive power of the media when they become an instrument of the far-right was evidenced in the coup d'état in Bolivia, in the recent campaign for the new Chilean constitution, and in other episodes of violence in the region, such as the assassination attempt against the Argentinean vice-president, Cristina Fernández Kirchner. "It seems that violence is becoming a kind of petty habit, an idiom in today's politics," she regretted, recalling that the Bolivian constituent process was also marked by hoaxes and fake news.

"What did they say about us in the constitutional campaign? That we were going to take away people's houses, that we were going to turn churches into union headquarters. That we were going to ban religion, that we were infamous communists. That was on the radio, on television, on posters. I remember a picture of Evo with devil horns pasted all over the rural regions. The right

wing has always done that. You can't go into that fight naively, talking about Montesquieu or the Rule of Law..." explained Vice President Linera. And he lamented that this was not an experience that the Chilean Convention members benefited from since the lessons learned from the Bolivian experience could have helped the Chileans to better prepare for the difficulties they would encounter in the process.

"That country, Ecuador, and that country, Bolivia, tiny, almost insignificant... they learned a lot that could have been picked up by our comrades in Chile", lamented Linera, on the basis that both Andean countries had previously faced similar problems, and that this baggage could have undoubtedly been very useful to face the constitutional campaign with less naivety and with more audacity. "Each one is on his own, and each one reinvents history once again. What happened in Ecuador helped us, and in the same way, what happened in Bolivia would have been useful as a guide for the Chilean comrades", he concluded.

Thus, one of the pending challenges for the left in the region would be to learn how to share knowledge, exchange experiences and draw lessons from the mistakes and successes of neighbouring countries. Guillaume Long put it clearly: "South-South Integration is fundamental, one of the major tasks that the new left in power has not yet tackled. We need integration in order to integrate in a democratic and sovereign way within the world".

And, as García Linera pointed out, "The left is too weak in the face of such a powerful right-wing apparatus. It is not possible for us to continue living in sealed and feudal spaces. Social energies have to intercommunicate". In this sense, it is essential to work for a Latin American perspective that shares the lessons learned, that in some way shares the victory and not only defeat. Because losses

already have, de facto, regional consequences. As Vice President Linera explained, the defeat of the constitutional plebiscite in Chile "will embolden the right wing and strengthen social conservatism". That is to say, it will not only affect Chile, but the whole continent. Therefore, Latin American integration must be a priority for the new wave of progressive governments, as Guillaume Long stated; and to make it possible it is imperative "that Brazil looks at Latin America and not only at the G-20", as Linera added.

As Maria Lois stated, to work seriously for Latin American integration, it is necessary that "there are places for words, for expression and also for disagreement". CAF_2022 was intended to be one of them, a small vessel for the exchange of valuable political experiences, common knowledge and diverse struggles.

Conclusions

The Triumphant People: Historical Optimism Against Reactionary Hatred

To conclude, María Lois summarized what she defends in her book: that the process of change in Bolivia meant a “reconfiguration of social protagonism and a multiplicity of collective subjects that made possible a context from which to reverse History and the histories of the country”. Diversity became a structuring factor and a defining value for the new Bolivian social democracy.

For Guillaume Long, diversity was possible because the marginalised population (the majority) was integrated and recognised. “Including the excluded, even if it does not mean total revolution, always transforms the system,” he said. Extrapolating this to international relations, he also pointed out that “the biggest revolution in the international system was when we went from having 40 United Nations members to having 190. But the inclusion of post-colonial nations radicalised the international system. In inclusion, there is always a change”.

He also highlighted, as another hopeful element, the fact that progressive forces in Latin America are already a permanent electoral contender. “I don’t know if we are hegemony, I don’t think so, but we are the counter-hegemony. And when we do not win, we made it to the second round, we have legislative majorities, or we control many local or autonomous governments,” he said. And he pointed out that, if the Latin American elites understood “that they have to redistribute not only wealth, but also power”, undoubtedly everyone would live better, in societies with less disparities and more social justice.

Lastly, Álvaro García Linera recalled the violence of the 2019 coup d’état: how the coup perpetrators trampled on the Whipala, the indigenous flag; how they spat on the symbols of the native peoples and how they tried to dehumanise them, calling them “savages”. This atavistic, anachronistic violence, we have seen it again recently in the Brazilian case, as Rafael Heiber recalled: “In the middle of 2022 they have taken from the city of Oporto, in Portugal, to Brazil, the heart of the emperor Don Pedro first. A symbol of barbarism, an anachronism that we thought had been overcome,” he regretted.

But against this, against the violence that denies humanity, against the regressions that the far-right tries to impose, against the uncertainty of these times, against a neoliberalism ageing fanatically and aggressively, against hatred and pessimism... Álvaro García Linera pointed out that the progressive forces should imitate the indigenous peoples: “The indigenous people, who took 500 years to see one of their equals enter the Presidential Palace, did not do so in a climate of hatred. They all entered the palace dancing. They entered with their colourful, cheerful attires. That’s their world,” he explained. It was proven for the first time with the rise of MAS to power, but it was reaffirmed with its return after the coup d’état and exile.

In that sense, one of the main lessons of the Bolivian process is that “the triumphant people are never revengeful”, as Vice President Linera said. “The ones on the defensive and have lost the historical optimism are the others, that is why they hate and are violent. The victories of the left must be joyful. What is popular is always festive”.



Paulo Abrão
1st session
Moderator

Paulo Abrão is a Brazilian lawyer and former Executive Secretary of the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights. Ph.D. in Law, he was also Executive Secretary of the Mercosur Institute of Public Policies on Human Rights, as well as National Secretary of Justice, President of the National Committee for Refugees, and of the National Committee against Human Trafficking in Brazil. He currently directs the Washington Brazil Office (WBO).



Izadora Brito
1st session
Panelist

Izadora Brito is a Brazilian lawyer, National Coordinator of the Homeless Workers Movement (MTST). National Secretary of Social Movements of the PSOL party, she is a member of the Parliamentary Front for Urban Reform in the National Congress, and is a member of the National Executive of the Brazilian Association of Jurists for Democracy (ABJD). He is a member of the Advisory Council of the Washington Brazil Office (WBO).



Denise Dora
1st session
Panelist

Denise Dora is a Brazilian lawyer and human rights campaigner. Regional Director of Artego19, an organization dedicated to freedom of expression and information, she is also co-founder of THEMIS, an organization that develops projects on gender, justice, and human rights. From 2015 to 2017, she was the Ombudswoman for the State of Rio Grande do Sul (Brazil).



Jean Wyllys
1st session
Panelist

Jean Wyllys is a Brazilian journalist and activist. He was a federal congressman in Brasília for two terms, and resigning from his third for security reasons, after receiving death threats from President Jair Bolsonaro's entourage. An LGBTI activist and award-winning writer, he went into exile in Europe. He is currently a Ph.D. candidate, researching in Political Science and fake news at the University of Barcelona.

Participants

Once again this year, CAF would like to thank all the people who enriched our forum with their presence, ideas and hopes.



Rafael Heiber
2nd session
Moderator

Rafael Heiber is the Co-Founder and Deputy-Chairman of the Common Action Forum. Geographer and Climatologist with a MSc in Territorial Planning and a PhD in Sociology, his expertise includes the political links between technology, space and citizenship. He participates in academic activities and publishes in the international media.



Álvaro García Linera
2nd session
Panelist

Álvaro García Linera is a Bolivian politician and intellectual, Vice President of Bolivia during the governments of Evo Morales. A Marxist theorist, prolific essayist and columnist, he was a member of the Ayllus Rojos guerrilla and the Tupak Katari Guerrilla Army during the 1990s. He spent five years in prison for ideological reasons, and since his release he has been a member of the MAS-IPSP, serving in the popular government that transformed Bolivia.



María Lois
2nd session
Panelist

María Lois holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from the Complutense University of Madrid. She has been a teacher and researcher in the area of Political Geography, Cultural Geography, and Geopolitics for over 20 years. Author of several books and scholarly articles, she has recently published rigorous research on the process of political reform in Bolivia that led to the first indigenous person in the country's history to be elected president.



Guillaume Long
2nd session
Panelist

Guillaume Long is a French-Ecuadorian academic and politician. He served as Foreign Minister, Minister of Culture and Heritage, and Coordinating Minister of Knowledge and Human Talent during the governments of Rafael Correa in Ecuador. Historian and expert analyst in international relations, he also served as Permanent Representative of Ecuador to the United Nations. He is a member of CAF's Advisory Board.



Photo gallery





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