

## Bello An adiós in troubled times



*In his final column, Bello reflects on how Latin America has changed*

IN HIS MIND'S eye as he writes, Bello can see the limitless expanse of the Pacific at Lima, the tiny fishing boats that plug across the bay in search of *corvina* and *chita*, the pelicans skimming inches above the waves, the vultures circling on the cliff-top. He can glimpse, too, the sinuous roads that snake beside heart-stopping abysses as they endeavour to connect towns in the Andes, landslides permitting. He can feel the clammy heat of the dark floor of the Amazon rainforest and the arid scrub of the Brazilian *sertão*. He can see the flat emptiness of the Argentine pampas with their solitary *ombú* trees, and the soaring volcanoes of Mexico and Central America. Latin America has always been, first and foremost, about geography—stunning, bountiful, impossible and treacherous.

The books that offer a single explanation—dependency, colonialism, Iberian culture or institutions—of Latin America's relative failure are invariably wrong. Its difficulties stem from the interplay of all these factors and more. But geography, often ignored, is one, as Sebastián Mazucca, an Argentine political scientist, explained in a book published in 2021. It conspired against strong states that control their territory, obliging governments to strike pacts with local potentates at the expense of the rule of law and impartial administration.

Latin America's rich endowment of natural resources has powered booms and busts, attracted covetous foreigners and provided the broth for the red meat of populism—a blame game about why people are poor if the earth is so rich. Another geographical factor, remoteness from the main centres of the world economy, has hurt trade and investment.

When this column began almost nine years ago Latin America was advancing.

Poverty was falling steadily and so was (still wide) income inequality. The lower-middle classes were expanding and democracy seemed to be putting down roots.

But this progress was flattered by a commodity boom. It soon waned. Over these past nine years the region has seen no growth in GDP per person. Investment has fallen, productivity languishes and poverty has risen again. Discontents have erupted. Political instability is increasing while seemingly immovable dictators rule Venezuela, Nicaragua and now El Salvador. Organised crime has extended its bloody tentacles, from Mexico to Chile and Paraguay.

Take a longer view, and not everything is as gloomy. Your columnist began to live in Latin America exactly 40 years ago and has done so for almost half of the period since then. Over these decades the region's societies have in some ways become more egalitarian. Nowhere else in the developing world is the idea of human rights now so widely shared.

Culturally Latin America thrives. The world is swaying its hips to Latin music.



Latin American literature has moved into the mainstream, led by a cohort of young writers, many of them women. Latin American food, from Peruvian *ceviche* to Mexican *tacos*, has carved its way onto menus around the world.

The region is more resilient than headline-writers allow. Socially that owes much to the strength of family networks and to the informal economy, although this is a drag on productivity. Macroeconomically the reforms of the 1980s and 1990s produced lasting benefits. Inflation-targeting and independent central banks have proved their worth. The region has bounced back from the pandemic slump much more quickly than, for example, Europe, even if social scars remain.

As always, the prospects are tantalising, shimmering like the mirages on the salt flats of the Bolivian Altiplano. Latin America, so vulnerable to natural disasters, will be one of the main theatres in the battle against climate change. It is set to be a key supplier for the green economy, with two-thirds of the world's lithium reserves and 40% of those of copper. It is an abundant source of food and fresh water. Nearshoring of supply chains offers plenty of opportunities. Some of geography's obstacles could now be overcome, digitally. And those imposing landscapes form identities and attract tourists.

Despite everything, Latin America remains the developing region where democracy is most widespread. Missing still are the virtues that geography has hindered and that Andrés Bello stood for: the rule of law, better public education, openness and regional co-operation. That is where the battle lies. With a heavier heart than when he picked it up, Bello is replacing his pen in its inkwell.

▶ as many Peruvians would like. A third motion, with more support, was due to be put to a vote on December 7th, hours after Mr Castillo's ill-fated announcement.

Mr Castillo's move was "a desperate gambit by a scared and incompetent man", says a former minister. Unlike Mr Fujimori, Mr Castillo lacked support from the army and the streets. No tanks rolled in to shut down Congress. No angry mobs swarmed the chamber. Even his supporters condemned him. The armed forces, some of whose commanders went to jail after Mr Fujimori's regime ended, said in a joint

statement with the police that they would not back the president. Instead, Mr Castillo provided Congress with the incentive it lacked to remove him if they want to keep their jobs. Similarly, the left would have suffered by associating itself with a move so similar to Mr Fujimori's.

There exists another precedent for Mr Castillo's actions. In 2019 Martín Vizcarra, then president, shut down Congress when it appeared to deny him a confidence motion. That was ill-advised, but there was a difference. He did not seek to tamper with the judiciary and he called an immediate

election for a new Congress.

Ms Boluarte becomes Peru's sixth president since 2016. She is not widely known by the general public, but neither was Mr Vizcarra when he took office. He went on to become one of Peru's most popular presidents, only to be impeached himself in 2020. The new president is another leftist but appears to be a more competent one. Ms Boluarte would do well to form a broad-based government if she wants to see out the rest of Mr Castillo's term until 2026. Most Peruvians are relieved that this time the coup attempt failed. ■

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