

The political expansion of evangelical churches in Latin America

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Theme

The presence of evangelical churches in the political life of various Latin American countries has increased significantly in recent years.

Summary

The presence of evangelical churches in the political life of various Latin American countries has increased notably in recent years, clearly seen in the outcome of the many elections held in the region. Among the most prominent elections contested in 2018, particularly striking developments in this respect include the victory of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Fabricio Alvarado's progress to the second round of voting in Costa Rica and the role played by the Social Encounter Party in Mexico, which has allied itself with Andrés Manuel López Obrador and helped his election as President.

The decline of politics, traditional parties –especially those on the left– and democratic institutions, together with the retreat of the Roman Catholic Church in the greater part of the region, have contributed to this development. Another factor is the emphasis placed on a values-based discourse and support for the family as central strands of the evangelical rhetoric. Thanks to this, and with considerable popular endorsement, they have succeeded in boosting conservative prospects in large parts of Latin America.

Analysis

The boundary between religion and politics, or between divine and temporal power, has never been clear and remains blurred to this day. The conflict between the two powers has been a recurring feature throughout history and at times has been accompanied by acute tension and even violence. Christian democratic parties in both Europe and Latin America were a permanent feature of the 20th century, and they frequently succeeded in securing power, as in Chile, Venezuela, Costa Rica and Guatemala. In our own day, certain strains of radical terrorism take on an Islamist cloak, while a range of religious fundamentalisms vie to increase their presence in the most varied parts of the world. A simultaneous development in Latin America has been the emergence of political movements of an evangelical nature that have acquired considerable heft in the political affairs of their countries and have even become a phenomenon of wider regional significance.

These days it is possible to find an evangelical church or place of worship in virtually any part of the continent, however poor or marginalised it might be. The strong and permanent bond between the pentecostal and neo-pentecostal churches on the one

hand and the popular sectors and the poorest strata of their societies on the other has enabled them to impinge on regional politics in a way that no other party or movement has been able to achieve. If this is combined with their particular ideological orientation it may be concluded, as Javier Corrales has done, that evangelical churches are 'giving conservative causes [in Latin America], and especially political parties, new strength and new constituencies'.

Indeed, Corrales goes further in asserting that 'the rise of evangelicalism is politically worrisome. Evangelicals are fuelling a new form of populism. They are supplying conservative parties with nonelite voters, which is good for democracy, but these voters tend to be intransigent on issues of sexuality, which feeds cultural polarisation. Intolerant inclusion, which is the classic Latin American populist formula, is being reinvented by evangelical pastors'.

The advent of evangelicalism in Latin America

Marta Lagos, the Director of Latinobarómetro, has been unequivocal about the rise of evangelicalism: 'there is a tremendous influence of the evangelical church, especially among the poorest people... the candidates are going for the evangelical vote'. We are thus witnessing a wholly novel phenomenon in Latin America, the growing spread of evangelical churches, essentially pentecostal and neo-pentecostal.

The latter have managed to increase their political presence in a range of countries while also making inroads as institutional representatives, both in executive and in legislative positions, starting with national and regional parliaments. It is important, however, to distinguish between the more traditional and longstanding evangelical churches, such as the Methodists, from the more modern pentecostalist and neo-pentecostalist churches, especially those linked to the 'charismatic movement', as the former have a different approach to politics.

The origins of this expansion can be traced to the many proselytising campaigns of certain US protestant churches in the mid-20th century that ended up establishing themselves mainly in Central America. In South America, meanwhile, the evangelical churches' nucleus of expansion was Brazil, to such an extent that these days it is possible to find Brazilian pastors preaching in all Latin American capitals and in many of the larger cities.

As pointed out above, however, the combination of religion and politics is nothing new and nor is the combination of evangelicalism and politics. Alberto Fujimori, when he was virtually unknown to the general public in Peru, secured the support of some evangelical churches for his presidential bid. Pastor Carlos García, the leader of the Baptist Church, was his running-mate on the ticket that Cambio 90 presented for the 1990 presidential elections and was elected as Second Vice-President.

The support given by García and other evangelical church figures in Peru was essential in ensuring Fujimori's success. It was they who collected the signatures needed to register Cambio 90 as a political party, enabling it to take part in the elections. They also collaborated in setting up local committees throughout the country as a way of securing

greater public support. In addition, some 50 evangelical supporters ran as Cambio 90 candidates for election to Congress, of whom 14 were elected as deputies and four as senators. Disappointment with the new President soon set in, however, given that he not only failed to achieve the levels of development that he had promised but also failed to secure for his congregations the same benefits as the Roman Catholic Church enjoyed.

A more recent event clearly illustrates the incessant rise of the evangelical influence in the political life of Latin American countries and the favourable treatment they regularly receive from politicians, from both left and right. In 2014, two months prior to the most closely-fought elections in the country's history, numerous politicians attended the opening of the Temple of Solomon in central São Paulo, a mega-church covering 100,000 square metres with a capacity for over 10,000 worshippers.

Among those present, despite her past as a guerrilla and her self-professed agnosticism, was the then President of the country, Dilma Rousseff, from the Brazilian Workers' Party (PT). Also in attendance was the Vice-President Michel Temer (currently leader of the national government but preparing to hand over to Jair Bolsonaro). They were joined by a significant group of Ministers in his cabinet, plus Geraldo Alckmin, the governor of São Paulo, and Fernando Haddad, the city's Mayor. These were the highest elected officials of the state and the city of São Paulo and later became the respective presidential candidates for the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB) and the PT in the general election of 2018. The inauguration was also attended by numerous governors and some of the most prominent members of the National Congress. The unveiling of the temple, which became a sort of multi-party convention, was a revealing portrait of the political importance that the evangelicals had succeeded in acquiring over the preceding years in the country's politics.

This ambitious project was masterminded by Bishop Edir Macedo, head of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God and, apart from being one of the main evangelical figures in Brazil, an extremely wealthy individual. Macedo, who had previously endorsed Lula, was on this occasion one of Bolsonaro's main backers to win the election. The most influential tools deployed by the latter, a former army officer-turned-politician, include social media and the powerful network of audio-visual media led by TVRecord, owned by Macedo.

In Mexico, the *Movimiento de Renovación Nacional* (Morena, or National Regeneration Movement) and the PT forged an alliance with the evangelical Social Encounter Party as it sought to build broader support for Andrés Manuel López Obrador in the run-up to the decisive presidential elections of 2018. Although the election results show that López Obrador would have won anyway, the alliance proved to be a very useful means of achieving his goals and tipping opinion polls in his favour. Thanks to the partnership he was able to secure an overwhelming win and comfortable majorities in both chambers of the federal Congress.

Proof of the importance López Obrador places on his proximity to the evangelicals is the fact that, over the course of six months, the man who is now President-elect swung from saying he would never associate himself with Social Encounter to proposing, on the very day the ultraconservatives announced his candidacy, a 'moral' constitution for the

country. At Easter 2018, in the middle of electioneering, López Obrador said that he was 'a Christian in the broadest sense of the word, because Christ is love'.¹

Guatemala now has an evangelical President, Jimmy Morales, despite the little-to-no political experience he had at the time of being elected. Costa Rica was on the point of having another evangelical as President, Fabricio Alvarado. In Chile Sebastián Piñera courted the evangelical vote at the last election, to the extent of inviting four evangelical bishops to join his campaign team. In Venezuela and Colombia the evangelical pastors Javier Bertucci and Jorge Antonio Trujillo ran as candidates in the presidential election, in spite of little likelihood of success. More recently, Jair Bolsonaro was elected as the new Brazilian President with the full backing of the evangelical churches.

The evangelical insertion into politics

In order to put their political aspirations into practice, there is one factor that evangelical groups can count on that traditional parties, especially the most conservative, lack: proximity to the masses, people who are tired of elites and who were traditionally drawn to left-wing groupings. They also rely on an extensive network of places of worship widely distributed throughout the countries in which they operate and on a powerful system of media outlets, comprising hundreds and indeed thousands of radio and TV stations, many of them focusing on the local community, plus a strong presence on social media.

The evangelicals are thus not only exploiting the spaces vacated by the Roman Catholic Church but also the widespread public disenchantment with politics and governments. With their strong presence in the most densely-populated neighbourhoods, evangelical churches provide all manner of services to a wide range of people, especially the least advantaged, from healthcare to childcare to help in seeking work. The fact that they offer a broad variety of services to the community provides them, in return, with a more than notable degree of popular support, something that no party –certainly no left-wing party– no NGO and no other political or social movement is capable of matching.

In general, there does not tend to be any regional pattern to the political and campaigning strategy adopted by evangelical churches. In some countries they may take to the street in opposition to particular legislative proposals that they deem contrary to their beliefs. In others they have their own political groups making their point. Sometimes they even put forward their own presidential candidates.

Going beyond particular national circumstances, however, manifestations of evangelical involvement in politics are emerging more and more stridently in the Latin American political landscape. Up until recently, most of the aspirations of the evangelical churches that participated in politics and the parties they supported focused on the local and provincial levels and in gaining a parliamentary foothold rather than fighting for executive power. In light of recent election results, however, this seems to be changing rapidly.

¹ This phrase is reminiscent of Lula's 'Lulinha, peace and love' slogan devised just before the 2002 election, in his fourth attempt to become President of Brazil, aimed at overcoming the antipathy of traditional sectors, something he easily succeeded in doing thanks to his alliance with the right and the incalculably valuable collaboration of Edir Macedo.

The situation provides a fair portrait of the goals and limitations that characterise evangelical political efforts. What is clear, however, and this is one of their main characteristics, is that they tend to exert increasing pressure on political debate in terms of their values-based agenda: the family, gender and sexuality. And although, as Javier Corrales argues, the 'ideology of evangelical pastors is varied', when it comes to subjects such as gender and sexuality, they usually make much of their 'conservative, patriarchal and homophobic values'.

As pointed out above, evangelicalism's moral and political agenda focuses on the defence of family values, which fundamentally entails opposition to abortion, *in vitro* fertilisation, same-sex marriage, divorce and euthanasia. Apart from issues related to the defence of Christian family values, their platform tends to centre more on the rejection of particular proposals than on support for any specific policies. Among the raft of things that they reject, the mis-named 'gender ideology' plays a prominent role. The war they wage on this has enabled them to win substantial kudos among their followers. It is not, however, an area where evangelical leaders enjoy exclusive dominion, since the Roman Catholic hierarchy and a large section of the priesthood have openly voiced their opposition to it too.

This definition, stemming from profoundly conservative roots, is typically used to discredit any attempt to defend sexual diversity or gender variation, indicating that it is fundamentally ideological in nature rather than a scientific approach to the problem, consistent with the approach of psychologists and other medical and behavioural professionals. As Corrales points out, 'the ideology of gender allows them [the evangelicals] to call for the protection of children as cover for their homophobia'.

Another core strand that has mobilised the followers of pentecostals and neo-pentecostals has been the fight against corruption and outrage at the role played by politicians in corruption cases. With all these issues it is possible to discern a remarkable convergence between the evangelical churches, the Roman Catholic hierarchy, certain social-Christian movements and political parties of a conservative hue. This proximity is much more visible on certain specific occasions, especially when the degree of scandal turns them into media *causes célèbres*.

Up until now, however, evangelical leaders, their political associates and their spokespeople in the news media have not tended to make pronouncements on other issues at the heart of government, such as the economy and international relations. It remains to be seen whether this trend will continue, given their greater institutional presence in the highest echelons of their respective countries' administrations,

Worshippers who follow the evangelical denominations are highly disciplined. They take a lead from the opinions of their preachers, even in terms of voting. Regardless of the candidates' profiles, when voters get to the ballot box what counts is not only their political allegiance but also the recommendation of church elders. It is a mechanism similar to the one that has existed for decades in communist parties dominated by the idea of democratic centralism.

In light of its recent surge and the discipline exercised at the ballot box, the evangelical vote has been highly sought-after by almost all candidates, irrespective of their political or ideological leanings. It is a phenomenon that Colombia, Brazil and Mexico are each acquainted with, as are other Latin American countries with elections looming. In 2019 elections are due to be held in Guatemala, El Salvador, Panama, Argentina, Uruguay and Bolivia, providing fresh opportunities to assess the influence of the evangelical vote in these countries.

In Brazil, the evangelical power in parliament centres around the so-called Bible Group. In the previous legislative term, the evangelical churches mustered 81 congressmen (out of 513) and three senators (out of 81). It is a question of having a cohesive and highly-organised parliamentary group that enables them to block initiatives against the church. Coming under this heading are all attempts to legalise abortion and same-sex marriage, which has been sanctioned by the Brazilian Supreme Court since 2014. Showing its support for Bolsonaro has been a group known as 3B (standing for *bíblia*, *bala* and *buey* or bible, bullet and ox), which includes advocates of carrying weapons for self-defence (bullet), large-scale agricultural producers and the meatpacking industry (ox).

The pressure exerted by evangelical churches has even led to the closing down of some art exhibitions on the grounds of immorality. This occurred with the exhibition titled *Queermuseu, cartografias da diferença na arte brasileira*, run by the Santander Cultural Centre in Porto Alegre, which was forced to close a few days after it opened in September 2017. Arguing that Banco Santander was sponsoring an exhibition that fostered 'paedophilia, zoophilia and pornography', both the Free Brazil Movement (MBL) and a range of evangelical groups orchestrated an unremitting campaign on social media that forced the organisers to shut down exhibition.

The evangelical churches' social presence

The presence of evangelical churches in Latin America and the number of their followers has grown steadily in recent decades, although their growth has been uneven. There is a twofold dynamic underlying the phenomenon. First there is the incessant growth in the number of non-Roman Catholic Christians, something that presents an enormous challenge to the various episcopal conferences; secondly, politicians and parties have been increasingly discredited, paving the way for new options to emerge.

The number of evangelical worshippers currently accounts for rather more than 20% of Latin America's population. The figure is all the more striking when considering that only 60 years ago they barely represented 3% of the population, according to statistics from the Pew Research Center. More than 10% of the population in Mexico is evangelical; in Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Argentina and Panama it is said to be in excess of 15%; in Costa Rica and Puerto Rico it is as high as 20%; the figures cited for Brazil fluctuate between 22% and 27%; and in some Central American countries, such as Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, the figure exceeds 40%.

As pointed out, the rise of evangelical churches needs to be seen in relation to the parallel process of Roman Catholicism in retreat. Instead of 'liberation theology', which in the 1960s and 70s brought the widespread involvement of revolutionary priests,

workers and peasants, evangelical preachers have had a great deal of success in introducing their faithful to so-called 'prosperity theology'. This is a concept that clearly illustrates the principles and interests that motivate their faithful.

Roman Catholics in Latin America currently number 425 million, which according to the latest Latinobarómetro accounts for 60% of the regional population. It is a significant figure, because it means that 40% of the world's Roman Catholics are Latin American. Another important consideration in this context is that Pope Francis (Jorge Mario Bergoglio), elected in 2013, is an Argentine. Despite their dominance, however, there is no denying the fact that the Roman Catholic majority has shrunk significantly since recording a figure of 80% in 1996.

The question that arises from this twofold process of a falling Roman Catholic population and a growing evangelical one is how far it can be attributed to the systematic attack on liberation theology ordered by the Vatican and the various regional ecclesiastical hierarchies. In a sense, abandoning the 'preferential option for the poor', which was characteristic of liberation theology, entailed the abandonment of the masses by the Roman Catholic church.

In some evangelical churches, alarming signs of a certain degree of paramilitarisation are starting to be seen. One of the clearest examples is the so-called 'Gladiators of Christ', affiliated to the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, which involves the faithful receiving training with military overtones. While this is by no means a new phenomenon, either within or beyond Latin America, as shown by the activities of the Peruvian Roman Catholic organisation Sodalitium of Christian Life, which sought to persuade its followers to live communally as 'soldiers of Christ', it needs to be closely monitored.

The Sodalitium, a group run by laypeople, was recognised by Pope John Paul II in 1997 as a Society of Apostolic Life under Canon Law. Another association of Roman Catholic laypeople is Tradition, Family and Property (TFP), which was founded in Brazil after the Cuban revolution and later spread to large parts of Latin America, engaging in an active crusade against liberation theology.

The main question thrown up by the ever-growing presence of the Gladiators of Christ is: what will happen if the neo-pentecostalist churches at a certain juncture go from staking their claims through the ballot box and decide to move on to direct action? As Javier Corrales has argued: 'There is a return to the classic Latin American polarisation of the 19th century between conservative and anti-clerical groups, which produced a great deal of political tension even up to the mid-20th century'.

Conclusions

In recent years evangelical churches have been acquiring an increasingly central role in the political life of Latin America. The growing dissatisfaction with democracy and the marked deterioration of traditional political parties and democratic institutions is one factor that has speeded up the process, but not the only one. Other elements to be borne in mind are, first, the strong presence of pentecostalist and neo-pentecostalist

denominations among the masses, helped by the withdrawal of left-wing parties and the Roman Catholic church, and secondly, the inclusion in their rhetoric of a unwavering defence of the so-called values-based agenda, which includes the rejection of same-sex marriage, abortion and divorce, among other issues.

Although these churches initially restricted their involvement in politics to the local and regional levels, their new-found protagonism has encouraged them to set their sights higher. Thus a greater presence in national politics has become evident, with notable breakthroughs such as those that have recently been secured in Guatemala, Brazil, Mexico and Costa Rica. It is not a self-contained phenomenon, however. Such is the extent of their power and influence that traditional politicians, of all political and ideological hues and persuasions, are trying to win their blessing as endorsement for their own causes.

That said, their value-based rhetoric has caused all the societies in which they operate to become more polarised. Theirs is a black and white view that does not countenance nuances and therefore excludes any kind of compromise or negotiation. This Manichaeism, with its populist appeal, has served to strengthen conservative prospects in Latin America, hastening the decline of left-wing parties and even Bolivarian viewpoints. At the same time, if the growing influence of the evangelical churches in regional and national politics continues unchecked, the possibility cannot be ruled out of serious reversal as far as the separation between church and state is concerned, although the former would no longer be represented by the Roman Catholic hierarchy but by these newly-ascendant religious groups.