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Five centuries after the European conquests, Latin America is reasserting its independence.

In the southern cone especially, from Venezuela to Argentina, the region is rising to overthrow the legacy of external domination of the past centuries and the cruel and destructive social forms that they have helped to establish.

The mechanisms of imperial control – violence and economic warfare, hardly a distant memory in Latin America – are losing their effectiveness, a sign of the shift toward independence. Washington is now compelled to tolerate governments that in the past would have drawn intervention or reprisal.

Throughout the region a vibrant array of popular movements provide the basis for a meaningful democracy. The indigenous populations, as if in a rediscovery of their pre-Columbian legacy, are much more active and influential, particularly in Bolivia and Ecuador.

These developments are in part the result of a phenomenon that has been observed for some years in Latin America: As the elected

governments become more formally democratic, citizens express an increasing disillusionment with democratic institutions. They have sought to construct democratic systems based on popular participation rather than elite and foreign domination.

A persuasive explanation for this has been offered by Argentine political scientist Atilio Boron, who observed that the new wave of democratization coincided with externally mandated economic “reforms” that undermine effective democracy.

In a world of nation-states, it is true by definition that decline of sovereignty entails decline of democracy, and decline in ability to conduct social and economic policy. That in turn harms development.

The historical record also reveals that loss of sovereignty consistently leads to imposed liberalization, of course in the interests of those with the power to impose this social and economic regime.

It is instructive to compare recent presidential elections in the richest country of the world and the poorest country in South America.

In the 2004 U.S. presidential election, voters had a choice between two men born to wealth and privilege, who attended the same elite university, joined the same secret society where young men are trained to join the ruling class and were able to run in the election because they were supported by pretty much the same conglomerations of private power. Their programs were similar, consistent with the needs of their primary constituency: wealth and privilege.

For contrast, consider Bolivia and Evo Morales’ election last December. Voters were familiar with the issues, very real and important ones like national control over natural gas and other resources, which has overwhelming popular support. Indigenous rights, women’s rights, land rights and water rights were on the political agenda, among many others. The population chose someone from its own ranks, not a representative of narrow sectors of privilege.

Given its new ascendancy, Latin America may come to terms with some of its severe internal problems. The region is notorious for the rapacity of its wealthy classes, and their freedom from social responsibility.

Comparative studies of Latin American and East Asian economic development are revealing in this respect. Latin America has close to the world’s worst record for inequality, East Asia the best. The same holds for education, health and social welfare generally.

Latin American economies have also been more open to foreign investment than Asia. The World Bank reported that foreign investment and privatization have tended to substitute for other capital flows in Latin America, transferring control and sending profits abroad, unlike East Asia.

Meanwhile, new socioeconomic programs under way in Latin America are reversing patterns that trace back to the Spanish conquests – with Latin American elites and economies linked to the imperial powers but not to one another.

Of course this shift is highly unwelcome in Washington, for the traditional reasons: The United States expects to rely on Latin America as a secure base for resources, markets and investment opportunities.

And as planners have long emphasized, if this hemisphere is out of control, how can the United States hope to resist defiance elsewhere?