

DEMOCRACY IN LATIN AMERICA: The Way Forward

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IT IS A GREAT PLEASURE FOR ME TO examine the challenges facing democracy in Latin America at the celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of one of the most prestigious centers for Latin American Studies. Democracy has been the great cause of my generation. It is the only way forward to overcome the burdens of the past and build an open, powerful and participatory society, both as a set of rules and procedures and as the process through which people influence the decisions that affect their lives. Democracy requires, of course, the respect of basic political rights and civil liberties, such as a multiparty political system, free and fair elections, freedom of expression and organization. But this is what we might call a “thin” or minimalist concept. Democracy is more than the sum of its institutions and procedures. Substantive democracy is embedded on society. It is nurtured and enhanced by a vibrant civil society and a civic culture of participation, responsibility and debate. That is why democracy is, always, a work in progress, an unfinished journey. It is a process rooted in the history of any given society. It cannot be imposed from the outside and is never achieved once and for all.

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The topic of our conversation today is democracy in Latin America. Let me start by saying that, in my view, democracy is very much alive in our continent – confronted with challenges and threats, yes, but also going through processes of deep change and renewal. It is true that democratic institutions have been put to severe test in the region over the last five years. In this short period of time, Paraguay, Perú, Argentina, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador – and, to a certain extent, also Brazil in 2005 and Mexico in 2006 – experienced situations of acute political risk. In several cases, widespread public discontent led to the removal from office of elected presidents. The recurrence and intensity of these political crises are a clear indication that something is seriously amiss.

With the exceptions of Chile, Uruguay and possibly Colombia, there is throughout the region a widening public disaffection vis-à-vis political institutions. All opinion polls corroborate the deficit of trust and the pervasive sense of fatigue affecting political parties, parliaments and governments. Latin America, I believe, has entered into a new historical phase, fraught with risks and opportunities. My sense is that the best way to safeguard democracy –in our part of the world and elsewhere- is always by strengthening and deepening its substance. This is the way forward. Democracy must be made to work or apathy, cynicism and disaffection will facilitate the resurgence of authoritarianism under old or new disguises.

There are several reasons behind the increasing signs of fragility in Latin America's democracy. Let us briefly review them together.

Over a ten-year period starting in the early eighties, fourteen countries made the transition from military dictatorship to democracy. Each transition process took place within a specific national context. And yet, taken together, they reflect a broader pattern, a demand for freedom that swept the whole continent. The restoration of democracy went hand in hand with the promise of a better life for all. However, political freedom coincided with hard times for most countries of the region. The combination of rampant inflation with economic stagnation threatened the very fabric of social life.

Globalization led –so to speak- to a second drastic process of change: the reform of the state and the opening up of closed economies to foreign trade, privatization and fiscal adjustment.

My conviction is that the legacy of political and economic reforms was broadly positive in Latin America. Growth resumed after the lost decade of the eighties. Yet wealth remained unevenly shared. Inequality persisted and there was an increase in the levels of unemployment and informality. Many of our young people live in despair, with no sense of future. We all know that no one lives forever on unfulfilled promises. The frustration with the incapacity of democracy to improve –quickly and significantly- people's standards of living is at the root of today's sense of hopelessness. This perception is compounded by the proliferation of corruption scandals and the rising levels of criminal violence, especially in our large cities. Impunity and insecurity

combined with the persistence of poverty and inequality explain the profound sense of disconnection between people's aspirations and the capacity of political institutions to respond to the demands of society.

Mistrust of politicians, political parties, parliaments and the judiciary system is paving the way for the resurgence in several countries of forms of authoritarian populism that seemed relegated to the past. Looking at the growing role played by President Chavez of Venezuela and the recent electoral results in Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua, many speak about a turn to the Left in Latin American politics. My sense is that reality is far more complex. For sure, the door has been opened to demagoguery, and to a kind of populism that is heavily tinged with nationalism. Political speech has dangerously shifted from the rational debate of issues and problems to the vagueness of grand rhetoric and empty phraseology. Populist leaders speak to people's hearts and mobilize powerful symbols and emotions in response to real or imaginary grievances.

This direct association of a charismatic leader with "the people" and "the nation" undermines the institutions of democracy. It also carries with it the inevitable propensity to impose controls by the state over society. Always for the good of "the people" and the "nation". This is what is happening in Venezuela, where civil society and the mass media are already submitted to interferences and restrictions. Populism does represent a clear risk to democracy that we cannot fail to ignore. It builds on the climate of frustration and disillusionment that makes people think that the way to the future is a return to the past –even though it is a romanticized past that, in fact, has never

existed. We must certainly be aware of this danger but without falling into simplifications or exaggerations.

First of all, let us remember that Latin America is a huge and complex continent with a very diverse political landscape. There are more differences than commonalities between Hugo Chávez and Michele Bachelet, Evo Morales and Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, Nestor Kirchner and Tabaré Vázquez. Second key point: let us not fall into the trap of equating populism with the Left. Populism is an authoritarian and regressive trend that has little to do with a contemporary progressive vision for the future of our societies. It directly contradicts the building and strengthening of open and complex societies in our countries.

Our societies have changed drastically – and for the better – in the last decades. NGOs and social movements were at the forefront of the struggle for democracy in Latin America. This ‘organized’ dimension of civil society, however, today no longer accounts for the range and diversity of citizen action. As an expression of the capacity of citizens to act by themselves, the hallmark of contemporary civil society is freedom and autonomy. Civil society is also a contested political space, crisscrossed by the controversies in society. It cannot be appropriated by any single political project. Citizen participation is as diverse as the social issues and causes that mobilize people’s energy.

There is no longer a grand narrative underpinning uniform strategies of change. This spontaneity and fragmentation is a source of strength, not of weakness. This is very important point to be stressed. Citizens, today, have multiple, overlapping

identities and interests. Ethnic origin, age group, religious creed, sexual orientation, consumption patterns, lifestyles may be a more powerful source of identity than social status. Individuals tend to be more “intelligent”, “rebellious” and “creative” than in the past. This is for a very simple reason: they are constantly called upon to make value judgments and life choices where previously there was conformity to a pre-established destiny. Enjoying a sense of greater personal autonomy in their daily lives, they want a new relationship with power. People make up their minds based on what they live and what they see. If their knowledge and experience bears no relation to the message of politicians, the outcome is disbelief and mistrust.

Informed citizens also give rise to a public opinion with a growing power to shape and influence public debate. Blogs, emails, cell phones and sites are becoming enabling tools for a new type of communication: personal, participatory and interactive. Empowered citizens no longer accept the role of passive audience. They want to speak and be heard. Consider the example of Brazil. Ours is an unjust and yet vibrant society, marked by high levels of social mobility and new forms of citizen participation. The dynamism of such a society calls for more efficient and less arrogant actions by the State. Dialogue not monologue, partnership not imposition, argument not empty rhetoric, autonomy not bureaucratic centralism. Interests and identities are fluid, diverse and fragmented. Society is apparently less organized but more connected and interactive.

This combination of individual autonomy and new spaces for participation and debate is, in my view, the best antidote to

authoritarian regressions. In complex systems order cannot be imposed from the top down by a center of command and control. Neither does social change occur according to uniform and pre-established strategies. Change is an on-going process that occurs simultaneously at multiple points. Pioneering actions, innovative experiences, exemplary projects generate a critical mass of new ideas and messages that communicators amplify and retransmit throughout the system. So far these new forms of citizen action and communication have not revitalized the political system.

If the gap between politics and society remains unabated, they may –paradoxically– contribute to further undermine representative democracy. On the other hand, as the source of a vibrant civic culture, new forms of participation and communication are re-framing democracy as the process through which people influence the decisions that affect their lives. These new drives of change make the interaction between citizens and political institutions much more unpredictable and complex. We are in Latin America at the threshold of a new historical cycle in which the fault-lines will oppose old models and new ideas, authoritarian regression and deepening of democracy. The challenge modern democracies are faced with is precisely how to adapt to the changes in society.

Democracies have become a space for collective dialogue and deliberation, rather than simply an organized framework of institutions where the general will would emerge and be enforced. We must ask ourselves: does it make any sense to speak of “general will” in complex and reflexive societies. I think not. What we have now, as the outcome of the democratic process,

are decisions or rules reflecting the give and take of conflicting interests and values. The more open and transparent the process, the more legitimate it is. What matters today is not a fluid “will of all”, but the participation of all concerned in the deliberation. This reality calls for a radically new style of political leadership. The democratic leaders will be those really open to dialogue and prepared to translate what they hear into concrete action.

If I learned one lesson in my eight years as president of Brazil is that, in today’s world, political leadership is never gained once and for all. It must be constantly nurtured and renewed. It is no longer possible for the leader to impose without negotiating, to decide without listening, to govern without explaining and persuading. Votes in an election, even dozens of millions of them, are not enough. The day after, one has to start almost from scratch. Either the leader inspires and mobilizes around a vision of the future or the loss of power is inevitable. We must heed the call for truth, respect and transparency. The responsibility of the democratic leader is to grasp the challenges, break new ground and show the way forward.

In conclusion, let me reaffirm my conviction that democracy is alive in Latin America insofar as it is embedded in vibrant societies and empowered individuals. Deepening democracy in Latin America may well be our best contribution to the cause of promoting substantive democracy at the global level. We are, all of us, confronted with a great intellectual and political challenge: the reframing of a democratic agenda for the twenty-first century.