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Democracy and its Enemies: New Threats, New Possibilities

Adolfo Suarez Memorial Debate: Democracy and its enemies – Contemporary Challenges

The fragility of democracy in Latin America

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Latin America has not been a fertile ground for democracy. Its history is largely the history of its dictators and *caudillos*, of military coups, corruption, patronage and political violence. However, in the last decades we have seen several processes of democratization and a decline of political violence that certainly should be celebrated. Competitive elections are held regularly and the nightmare of coups seems to belong to the past.

We can say that we are living in an exceptional era in Latin American history: never democracy had prevailed in so many countries and for so long time as during the latest 35 years. In 1975 only four of the twenty Latin American nations could be classified as democracies: Colombia, Venezuela, Costa Rica and Dominican Republic. Today, the vast majority of them are democracies. Cuba, of course, remains as a remarkable exception. And countries like Venezuela and Haiti are in a grey area between tyranny and anarchy, using the words of Simón Bolívar. Military coups and conventional dictatorships have become old-fashioned methods, which is of course a very significant progress in a region that since independence until the mid-1970s experienced more than 360 successful coups and countless failed attempts.[2]

This positive evolution has caused a major change in the Latin American political scene. The main political conflicts have been displaced from a struggle between democracy and dictatorship to a struggle *within democracy* –between two radically different conceptions of it. The first one has liberal roots and is based on individual freedom and the limitation of power. The other is represented by regimes based on the subordination of the individual to a political power that tends to grow without limits. This power is embodied in the civilian or military *caudillo*. This evolution towards a political scene dominated by a conflict within democracy was accurately predicted in 1997 by Fareed Zakaria in his famous essay about the rise of what he called "illiberal democracy".

Authoritarian or illiberal democracy is by no means a new phenomenon in Latin American history. The regime established in Argentina by Juan Domingo Perón in 1946 is indeed the perfect archetype. This disciple of Mussolini became, in turn, the greatest source of inspiration for the leader that would by far exceed him in the art of destroying liberty and legality using electoral means: Hugo Chávez. With him, and thanks to the vast Venezuela's oil wealth, the anti-liberal conception of democracy reaches its consummation in the region and could be transformed into a political model, which many other populist leaders would try to imitate in countries like Ecuador, Bolivia and Nicaragua.

In this way, an old Latin American tradition was renewed: the tendency of its political and military leaders to reinvent or *refound* their nations. To fulfill their dreams, they usually promote new constitutions validated by referendums and use them as sources of legitimacy and uncontested power. The

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[2] Paul Drake (2009) gives the figure of 351 successful coups between 1823 and 1966. According to the same author at least 167 successful coups took place during the 20th century.

aim of this mechanism is to create the illusion of a sharp break with the past and the beginning of a new and glorious era in the history of the country. The clearest expression of this tendency are the more than 250 constitutional charters that have been issued in the region since the early 19th century, according to the data provided by Paul Drake in his remarkable history of democracy in Latin America.[3] These numerous –and sometimes radical– contrast sharply with the United States and its unique constitution, but also with Western Europe, whose average is, according to the calculations of Gabriel Negretto (2013), of just over three constitutions by country from 1789 onwards. For Latin America the average is of almost 13 charters per country. However, it is noteworthy that recent decades show, on this matter, a much more moderate degree of "constitutional creationism", which on average has decreased since 1977 to less than half of the Latin American historical norm.

These figures confirm the depth of the change that occurred in Latin America after the 70s: despite all its shortcomings, tensions and illiberal tendencies it is undeniable that we live not only in a democratic era but also in an era of greater political and constitutional stability, compared to what was common in the region. This, unfortunately, does not mean that the progress of recent decades is irreversible. For that to be true, it would be necessary to overcome the historical sources of political instability in Latin America and this is far from being a reality. It is important to avoid an exaggerated optimism in the wake of the recent electoral defeats of the more aggressive and anti-liberal populist regimes in countries like Argentina, Venezuela and Bolivia. No doubt that today we have reasons to celebrate, but also to worry about the future of the region.

The first thing we should keep in mind is the significant change in the economic cycle experienced during the latest years: once again, –and this has repeatedly happened in the history of Latin America– the region has leaved behind the dream of sudden progress and easy money provided by primary exports, to be replaced by a hard awakening that will not be short-lived. This is particularly true in South America, where strong dependency on the export of commodities becomes a serious problem when their prices decrease.

This change has been of key importance in demonstrating the fragility of populist projects, either of the wildest and more strident type, such as in Venezuela, Argentina and Ecuador, or those more discreet, such as in Brazil and Chile. Unfortunately, the structural weaknesses of the Latin American development are much deeper than the problems related to the mismanagement of populist regimes. The economic development of the region remains hampered by the low levels of human capital that are related to widespread poverty, blatant inequality and discrimination, and the huge deficiencies of the education systems. The fundamental vulnerability of the region –and this must be stressed– does not lie in the volatility of commodity prices, but in the lack of fair opportunities for many Latin Americans to realize their full creative and productive potential. This is, as well, the basis of the lacking social cohesion that is at the bottom of the political instability that has been so characteristic for Latin American countries.

The changing economic cycle will have, especially in South America,[4] significant and far-reaching political effects, that go far beyond the recent defeats of populism. The era of economic trouble we have entered will not only frustrate the great expectations raised during the years of the export boom, but will also condemn many Latin Americans to return to that poverty that they so recently left behind. According to the *Social Panorama of Latin America 2015*, published in March 2016 by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC 2016), poverty began to increase once again in absolute terms after 2012, and in terms of percentage after 2013. Thus, after a decline of more than sixty

[3] The account of Paul Drake (2009) ends in 2006. Gabriel Negretto (2013) report a figure of 194 constitutions until 2008. The difference is mainly due to the exclusion in Negretto of Cuba and Haiti plus a substantial difference in the number of constitutions of the Dominican Republic (31 in the case of Drake and 13 according to Negretto).

[4] According to the World Bank's *Global Economic Prospects* from June 2016: "South America, the largest sub-region, is expected to remain in recession this year with output contracting 2.8 percent, significantly steeper than last year's 1.9 percent drop. In contrast, Mexico and Central America will see output continue to expand in 2016 at 2.7 percent, while the Caribbean will grow by about 2.6 percent." (World Bank 2016: 119)

millions of poor people between 2002 and 2012 we noticed an increase of eleven million between 2012 and 2015, and the number of indigent people went up by nine million in those years.

This increase occur in a region where absolute poverty has always been and remains a fundamental problem. Today it affects about 175 million Latin Americans, and about 75 million of them live as indigents or in extreme poverty. But these figures are far from reflecting the true extent of poverty in Latin America, since they only refer to absolute poverty and leave out that relative poverty which can be, in political terms, much more explosive and difficult to handle than absolute poverty, especially when a significant part of the new emergent middle class sees their recent conquests threatened. This issue will be the very key of the political development of the region.

These circumstances tell us that a future of much more frustration and discontent will be felt regardless of the political colour of the government. This also coincides –and this is a crucial feature– with a huge increase in public distrust of the ruling elites of any type, fueled by shocking scandals of corruption and abuse of power. In this context, there will be plenty of opportunities for the rise of new populist leaders offering some kind of magical quick fix to the popular demands.

This situation will not be reversed easily. Beyond the circumstantial impact of these scandals, what we are witnessing is a dramatic change in the relationship between rulers, increasingly watched and questioned, and ruled, more vigilant, empowered, dissatisfied and demanding than ever. This change, which is essentially very positive, not only put an end to the impunity enjoyed by many members of the ruling elite but also is impacting heavily on the institutions and traditional mechanisms of representative democracy. This phenomena is not exclusive for Latin America,[5] but considering its pressing problems and lack of social cohesion the result can be a very troublesome political development.

In short, democracy as an ideal that advocated a broad citizen participation in political life seems to be stronger than ever in Latin America, but, at the same time, the actually existing democracy is experiencing a particularly critical time.

This complex situation brings out one of the most significant historical causes of Latin America's political instability. I am referring to the endemic and well-known institutional weakness of the region. With certain exceptions, such as Uruguay, Chile and Costa Rica, corruption, venality, mafias, clientelism and the personal power of caudillos has characterized Latin American institutional development. In general terms we can say that the average Latin American state has never ceased to belong to the type of state that Max Weber (1922/1978) called "patrimonial state" and that Octavio Paz (1978), much more suggestively, called "*el ogro filantrópico*", that is a system where rulers "consider the state as their personal asset".

Available international indices show clearly the deplorable situation of the institutions in the region. A good example is the *Global Competitiveness Report 2015-2016* of the World Economic Forum (2015), that assess, among other aspects, the institutional quality of 140 countries. According to this source, more than two thirds of the Latin American nations are among the 40 countries with the worst institutional quality, and four of them are among the ten worst-rated countries, including Argentina, in 135th place, and Venezuela, which occupies the last position of the 140 nations surveyed. Only Uruguay, Chile and Costa Rica are among the 50 countries that top the list, although none of them exceeds rank number 30. The *Corruption Perceptions Index 2015* of Transparency International (2016) is another good example of the institutional fragility of the region. Only Uruguay, Chile and Costa Rica are ranked among the 40 less corrupt nations of the 168 surveyed.

In sum, with some exceptions, Latin American institutions have not been impersonal, professional and honest, but owned by local or national caudillos and used to their personal advantage as well as to favour their circle of relatives, friends and subordinates. That is why democracy in the region tends to approach what Max Weber defined as *Führerdemokratie* or "leader democracy", especially in the

[5] For a general analysis of the rise of this new kind of citizen see Dalton & Welzel (2014). Especially relevant is the essay of Hans-Dieter Klingemann: "Dissatisfied Democrats: Democratic Maturation in Old and New Democracies".

form of a *plebiszitären Führerdemokratie* or "plebiscitary leader democracy", in which a charismatic leader gains popular support distributing bread and circuses.

The institutional corruption generated by this form of exercising power has been a historical characteristic of the political systems of the region, but it has also penetrated economic life, deeply intertwined with and dependent on the favours of political power. The result has been a notoriously damaging combination of mercantilist state and *crony capitalism*. This has always been so, but today scandalizes people more, it is less accepted and leads citizens to the streets in a way never seen before. And this is something that we have all reasons to celebrate.

In short, Latin America has entered a critical stage of development, where the growing delegitimization of the ruling elites coincides, particularly in South America, with a very difficult economic situation. For this reason, its old problems, such as poverty, inequality, crony capitalism, *caudillismo* and institutional corruption, will again be present with great force. And this is even more so considering that in many parts of the region not only the rule of law does not prevail but even the state monopoly on the use of force has ceased to exist. The fact that nine of the ten most dangerous cities on the planet with 300,000 or more inhabitants are located in Latin America is a sad testimony of this reality (Consejo Ciudadano 2016).

It is under these complex and demanding circumstances that we must give new life to our increasingly anemic and delegitimized democratic systems. This is the horizon of challenges that face Latin American democrats and the outcome will depend of our capacity to successfully confront these challenges, making democracy and freedom able to resist the assault of populism, authoritarianism, crime and anarchy.

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