

The Spanish Democracy in a Time of Pandemic.

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The topic of this year Estoril Political Forum is New Authoritarian Challenges to Liberal Democracy. In addition, the main goal of the Adolfo Suárez Memorial Lecture is to render public the Spanish and Latin-American perceptions of the future of the world order. Therefore, in this spirit I would like to say that, seen from Spain, the world is, as Larry Diamond wrote, “under a democratic recession”. Moreover, this global climate of democratic recession is perceptible even in Spain.

Certainly, it is true that Spain is one of the most democratic countries in the world, a “full democracy” according to the last *The Economist* Democracy Index. In fact ranking 16th among the most democratic countries of the world, a distinguished group of just twenty nations. However, the prospects for the future are dark because both the preconditions and the context of democracy are deteriorating along this Covid-19 crisis: democratic institutions are being discredited; political life is more polarized than ever; political stability is fragile, given the limited parliamentary support of the government and the unreliability of its partners; and economic and social forecast are sombre.

Many of these problems of the Spanish democracy were already present before the pandemic, but the Covid 19 worsened the situation and triggered an unprecedented economic and social crisis. This is happening so fast that the Spanish society is still in the stage of negation and incredulity.

Paraphrasing Isaiah Berlin, liberal democracy is a fragile plant that needs very specific conditions in order to grow and prosper, and the Spanish liberal democracy is being plagued today by a variety of diseases.

Moreover, when a society feels that diseases are many and the government performance is seen as limited and constrained in order to cope with them, the temptation of authoritarianism emerges easily.

Authoritarianism belongs neither to the right or to the left, and its main attribute is to defend “strict obedience to authority at the expense of personal freedom”. In a time of crisis, authoritarianism promises an easy solution: “politics is too noisy and creates many problems, so forget politics during the crisis and obey the government to overcome present predicaments. We cannot afford politics by the time being”.

Of course, the authoritarian temptation is always present in liberal democracies but, under normal conditions, it is always constrained by checks and balances; the parliament; and public opinion. However, the disease of authoritarianism is such a threat today because the Covid 19 pandemic is such an unknown illness, so extremely contagious and lethal, and with a global reach, that people is prone to surrender liberty easily. This unprecedented situation creates, even in a full democracy, a window opportunity for authoritarianism.

For instance, the government of Pedro Sánchez (a coalition of Socialists, Communists and Populists) demands everybody to pitch in but to him, collaborate in the process of health and economic reconstruction, is synonymous with silent obedience to his decrees. So, in Spain, we are hearing all days and at all hours, in the public media, that in order to cope with the health and economic crisis, we should remain silent; that all criticisms are inappropriate, that the opposition has to shut up, and that it

is not necessary, under present circumstances, to enact accountability in Parliament. The ready obedience of the people is presented as civic virtue.

In a sense, the pandemic has shown the authoritarian culture of the Spanish left: when facing difficulties, a strong authority is more efficient than liberal democracy.

However, this vision neglects what is really at stake: the pandemic can be devastating because there were many previous illnesses in the Spanish democracy that, in order to be healed, demand more politics and no less. To mention just a few: corruption and lack of political and economic performance. In addition, from these illnesses came the plagues of anti-political ideologies: populism, communism, and nationalism.

Unfortunately, this anti-liberal vision of what politics is, is now embodied in the Spanish government and the democracy understood as a device to protect individual liberty and social coordination is challenged by a plebiscitarian understanding of politics where democracy is presented as the will of a collective being, the people, that speaks through the voice of the leader.

These authoritarian challenges to the Spanish liberal democracy are as old as the history of modern liberty. What is new today is that an unexpected pandemic opened room for an equally unexpected authoritarianism.

Nevertheless, the remedy is as old as the authoritarian disease: to protect, defend, and reinforce democratic institutions and individual liberty is what this challenge demand. In this sense, there is room for hope as far as we do our job in defending democracy.