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Latin American Politics at the End of the Twentieth Century: While Democratization Has Almost Been Achieved, Its Foundations Remain Unstable

Lorenzo Meyer

An old and difficult problem

When Latin America obtained its independence at the beginning of the nineteenth century, its great political problem was to transform into nations what were, until that moment, mere colonies of an empire in decline. To confront such a monumental task, first the former Spanish America and then Brazil rejected the current institutional model and turned their eyes towards another, nearer and more attractive one: that of North America. Indeed, the first new nation of the modern age — the United States of America — had emerged in 1783 in the northern part of the continent. By the time that the Latin American elites took up the job of national political construction, the United States was already a political and economic success which Latin America intended to copy.

The American institutional framework was partly a product of the English heritage and partly pure invention (e.g., the President and the political parties) design to address the very particular needs of American society. The use of the American political system as a guide meant for Latin America the adoption of a blueprint for its political life which was totally new and contrary to its past: that is, democracy. This particular democracy was based, among other things, on federalism, the division of powers, the presidential system, political parties, and the separation of church and state. Latin American society, however, had a background very different from the Anglo-Saxon one. Unlike the United States, Latin American society was not relatively homogeneous either racially or culturally; it was not based upon a fully capitalist economy, but rather a mercantilist one; it was marked by a remarkable concentration of land owner-

ship; and it possessed no tradition of self-government.

The sad history of the attempts in the former Spanish America to create State and nation along democratic lines in the nineteenth century is well known: prolonged civil wars between centralists and federalists, and between liberals and conservatives, racial wars, struggles between the Catholic Church and the State, military dictatorships, oligarchies, and so forth. This political failure was accompanied by an economic one, since (in the words of Professor John Coatsworth) the region passed from economic backwardness to underdevelopment. Ultimately, even in the most successful case, that of Argentina (which enjoyed racial homogeneity, a significant middle class and a successful agro-exporting economy), neither self-supporting development nor stable democracy could be established.

The challenge in the twentieth century was not only to press ahead with the task of national construction, but also to incorporate into a political process dominated by oligarchies not only the middle classes, but also the incipient working class and the enormous rural majority. Mexico and Bolivia attempted to do so by revolutionary means, which in the first case resulted in an authoritarian regime and in the latter in failed revolution and repeated military coups d'état, much like those which would characterize the rest of the countries in the region.

The end of the long authoritarian cycle

At the end of the Second World War, Latin America was unarguably within the United States' zone of influence. The paradox here was that while Washington had waged the war against Japan, Germany and Italy in the name of democracy, democracy was the exception in this region where American domination was indisputable. Countries like Chile, Uruguay and Costa Rica could only barely qualify as more or less stable democratic systems, and over time the first two would lose that qualification. At the end of the 1940s, the Cold War made the United States prefer solidly anticommunist but authoritarian governments south of the Rio Grande rather than experiments in political and social democracy, such as that attempted in Guatemala in the 1950s and attacked by Washington. When the Cuban Revolution triumphed in 1959, the American government

did not hesitate to react against it, just as in the case of Guatemala. When Washington's Cuban policy failed, however, the revolution led by Fidel Castro sought and found support from the other great power of the time: the USSR. The "Cuban Problem" planted the Cold War in the Western Hemisphere. One of its consequences was that the United States supported military coups and bureaucratic authoritarianism in the 1960's, and in 1973 encouraged the destruction of the Chilean democracy for having elected Salvador Allende, a socialist, to the presidency. At the center of these restrictive authoritarian governments, whether in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Paraguay or Uruguay, were the armies of the region, supported by technocrats and big business and guided by the doctrine of national security and the elimination of "internal enemies", communists, socialists, or simple unionists and democrats.²

When the so-called wave of world democracy began in Europe with Portugal's "Revolution of Carnations" in 1974,³ it was an antidemocratic wave which continued to swell in Latin America. After the triumph of the Sandinista uprising in Nicaragua in 1979 and its transformation into a socialist regime, the American government reacted by openly supporting a counter-revolutionary anti-Sandinista movement, as well as the military or militarily supported governments of those countries surrounding Nicaragua which faced revolutionary movements of a socialist or Marxist stripe, as was the case in El Salvador and Guatemala.

In economic terms, the 1980s was a "lost decade" for Latin America. Paradoxically, however, those years were profitable ones politically since this was the moment when the great democratic wave lapped at the shores of Latin America. In fact, in 1979 the Brazilian military began the gradual process of abandoning its power, which ended in 1988 when a new democratic constitution took effect. Something similar occurred in Peru, which returned to democratic government in 1980. The same phenomenon took place in Argentina in 1983 when, after losing in the Malvinas (Falklands) War with the United Kingdom, the generals had to give up their power and call elections. Two years later, in 1985, the Uruguayan army also withdrew from power and returned authority to civilian, electoral government. In 1988, to his surprise, the Chilean dictator General Augusto

Pinochet lost a referendum and had to accept a return to the democracy that he had destroyed fifteen years before. Finally, in 1989, after eight successive re-elections General Alfredo Stroessner was finally overthrown, and democracy took its first halting steps in Paraguay.

The end of the "Cold War", the self-destruction of the USSR, and the end of so-called "real socialism" in Eastern Europe had a direct impact upon the civil wars in Central America. In the first place, the United States and local oligarchies no longer could justify dictatorship and authoritarianism in the name of anticommunism. Moreover, free from the fear of socialism, those same conservative forces could speed up negotiations with insurgents who had had to give up the idea of constructing socialism in that part of the world. At the end of this process, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua were defeated electorally and gave up power. In El Salvador, the government and the guerrillas concluded a peace agreement and began an all-out struggle for power through bloodless means: the electoral process. In Guatemala, a civilian and elected government recognized the political rights of the indigenous communities and, after more than thirty years of civil war, the rebels and the government began to negotiate about terms for a definitive peace.

Haiti, the first Latin American society to obtain its independence (in 1804) and currently the country with the most serious poverty in the region, again has a civilian government as a result of the electoral process. In 1994, President Jean-Bertrand Aristide—the first Haitian President, elected in free elections in 1990—was restored to power by American military intervention, which forced into exile the military leaders who had seized the country in a 1991 coup. By 1996, only two countries in Latin America had not taken decisive steps towards a formal democratic system: Cuba and Mexico. Both regimes, born in revolution, have resisted change. After 37 years in power in Cuba, the charismatic figure of Fidel Castro, sovereign head of the Cuban Communist Party, continues to occupy the center of the political process. In Mexico, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) has monopolized power since its establishment in 1929, meaning that it has held power longer than any other party in the world. Both the Cuban and Mexican governments are under pressure

to transform their political institutions and to open them to the true competition of democratic pluralism. It is possible that Mexico, before the end of the twentieth century, might successfully attempt something never before seen in its history: the alternation of political parties in power as a result of elections. In Cuba, the situation is less clear. Finally in Peru, President Alberto Fujimori, elected in 1990, has expanded his power by a series of acts directed against the legislative power which, despite popular support, have been less than democratic.

The foundations of Latin American democracy

Political democracy is not an end in itself, but a means for achieving a common life in which conflicts can be resolved without violence, and in which legal, economic and social institutions can function within legitimate and predictable limits. The great promise of Latin American democracy is to achieve sustainable economic development marked by less inequality and by respect for the rule of law. Nonetheless, up to this point the material consequences of the new Latin American democracy have been slight and have kept its future in doubt.

It is paradoxical that just as the process of Latin American democratization (or redemocratization) began during the 1980s, the systems of economic protectionism and import-substitution in Latin America underwent a structural crisis. As a result, the return to democracy would take place in an atmosphere of economic and social tension. The structural economic reform required by the worldwide process of globalization—the opening of the economy to international trade and investment, privatization, and diminished public expenditure and state intervention—has caused an obvious decrease in people's standard of living. In fact, the economic restructuring destroyed a segment of the Latin American industrial sector, caused the failure of tens of thousands of small companies, increased unemployment, expanded the informal economy, and bolstered the large domestic and foreign export companies as well as financial speculation. All of this ended up producing an enormous concentration of wealth, as well as a larger marginal class.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the most difficult part of economic

reform was already over. Its social cost, however, is still being paid, since the economic growth is relatively weak due to a lack of savings and investment. Between 1982 and 1990, Latin America was simply drained of capital, because Latin America was required to make an annual net transfer of resources to its creditors—the developed countries—equivalent to 3.2% of its GDP.⁴ Today, domestic savings in Latin America are less than they were at the beginning of the 1980s, and foreign investment has decreased in the wake of 1995 Mexican crisis.⁵ While it is true that the export sector today is more dynamic than ever before, it nevertheless has been unable to pull along other areas of production. By 1994 the indicators of social well-being were better than in 1980 in a number of countries, such as Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, and Uruguay. In most countries, however, social well-being had worsened as was the case in Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Venezuela, and Panama.⁶

As a matter of fact, only in Chile was there a satisfactory combination of economic growth, resulting from the aggressive opening of the economy to outside markets, with an improved distribution of income, caused by wage increases and better education. The segment of the Chilean population classified as poor in 1990—33.3%—had decreased to 27.8% by 1994, and the population in extreme poverty to 6.6%. Peru is the other example of success in the struggle against poverty in the last few years.⁷ In both cases, this struggle has enjoyed greater success in urban rather than rural areas (where the poor are surrounded by even poorer people). Nevertheless, the general situation in Latin America is one of increasing disparity between the poor and rich. Consider, for example, the change in the percentage of revenue received by the poorest 40% of urban households in the most important countries of the region: decreases in Argentina from 18% to 15.2% between 1980 and 1992; in Brazil from 11.7% to 9.6% between 1979 and 1990; and in Mexico from 20.1% to 16.6% between 1984 and 1992.⁸

In addition to Latin America's weak economic growth in the last 15 years, other problems have complicated the situation in the region: First of all, the rate of demographic growth, although lower than in the past, continues to be high—1.9% in 1994—and is especially acute in the poor-

est segments of the population. In 1995 the Latin American population grew to 481,000,000 more than half of which was concentrated in Brazil and Mexico. Ecological destruction — the pollution of rivers, underground aquifers and the air, the destruction of the forests, and the erosion of arable land — continues unabated. In the area of administration and justice, corruption is a commonplace made more acute by the drug trade, which although present to differing degrees in all the countries of the region is particularly remarkable in Colombia, Bolivia, Peru and Mexico.

Conclusion

In political terms, Latin America is closer than at any other time in its history to realizing the democratic form of government found in its constitutions since the nineteenth century. In order for this democracy to establish solid foundations, however, it must produce tangible results for the majority of voters: the diminution of the vast distance between rich and poor, economic systems which generate rather than destroy jobs and produce hope for the future, more efficient services, a more trustworthy justice system, and so forth.

For now, the generals are back in their barracks, and the insurgents have been pacified in Central America. On the other hand, however, guerrilla activity has reappeared or intensified in some countries of the region, such as Mexico, Colombia and Peru. Violence as a political tool is still very much alive in Latin America. In order for democracy to take hold in Latin America, this form of government quickly needs to show that it is an effective tool for development, social justice and legality. Otherwise, the temptation for some political fighters to take shortcuts — such as violence and a return to authoritarianism — in order to reach their goals will soon become irresistible in those countries with serious problems, and the waves of democracy will ebb away.

Notes

1. Coatsworth, John, *Los orígenes del atraso. Nueve ensayos de historia económica de México en los siglos XVII y XIX*, (México: Alianza Editorial Mexicana, 1990).

2. The concept of *autoritarismo burocrático* (Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism) was developed by Argentine sociologist Guillermo O'Donnell in *Modernization and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism: Studies in South American Politics*, (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1973).

3. Huntington, Samuel P., *The Third Wave. Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma, 1991).

4. Rosales, Osvaldo, "Política económica, instituciones y desarrollo productivo en América Latina", en *Revista de la CEPAL*, agosto de 1996, p.15.

5. *Idem.*, p.20.

6. *Idem.*, p.23.

7. Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, *Panorama social de América Latina*, 1995, (Chile: Naciones Unidas, CEPAL, 1995), p.20.

8. *Idem.*, pp.147-148.