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Democracy without Citizens in Latin America

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Introduction

This Chapter examines the opportunities available to democratic regimes in Latin America and the threats with which they are faced. In particular, it looks into the role of the citizenry in shaping the emergence of the democratic developmental state in the sub-region. It focuses on the political party systems of the Latin American countries because they provide the framework for power and political competition. The comparison of the party systems of the countries, particularly that of Mexico, helps capture the most recent changes that have taken place in the electoral processes, where there has been a re-orientation of political trends with the emergence of leftist candidates that produced the change in the ruling party, but preserved a basic loyalty to neo-liberal politics.

In the South, though there are ample opportunities for the political leadership to deepen the democratization process, thereby helping to construct the sought DDS, they are hardly utilized because of the inherent problems the governments are faced with. One of such opportunity that the political leadership has missed is the role a critical citizenry should play in building the democratic process and the developmental state.

Bobbio has rightly argued that democracy is at risk in the absence of an active, critical and well-organized citizenry that continually puts pressure on the political leadership, 'as politics are sequestered by just a few citizens, the richest and the powerful, in order to satisfy their interests and perpetuate their mandate, making

the citizenry to lose interest in politics' (Bobbio 1986:25). Under such circumstances, democratic institutions are bereft of the necessary ideas and the will to further the democratization process, even when they exist in a formal sense.

Across the South, political culture has been characterized by the apathy of citizens and a discredited political leadership, especially the leaders of the political parties. This is particularly true of the younger generations of political elites who are seeking political office and power but not interested in consolidating the democratization process. In fact, the worsening trend of social conditions and poverty has increased the incapacities of most governments in the South to consolidate democratization – that is if democratization were on the agenda of the political leadership, because like counterparts in Nigeria and South Korea they despise or even dread democratization, as discussed in Chapter Three of this work.

Of the 18 countries included in the UNDP report of 1989 entitled *Democracy in Latin America: Towards a Citizens' Democracy*, only Colombia, Costa Rica and Venezuela were considered to be democracies. By 2006, the contrast was such that there was relative peace from the Rio Grande to Patagonia, as the authoritarian governments had gradually given way to elected regimes. Yet despite two decades of experimenting with democratization, the majority of the citizens in Latin American and Caribbean countries are dissatisfied with the poor performance of their governments, as evident in the deplorable social conditions of the people and the overall economic crises that have plagued the sub-region.

Within the subcontinent, regardless of the degree of democratic consolidation, all countries have had to endure the negative effects of poorly conceived economic policies formulated by the international financial agencies. These economic measures, known as the Washington Consensus, have led to the deterioration of wages and growing unemployment, the abandonment of agriculture, the decrease in welfare policies in health, education and housing sectors, and the attendant unequal income distribution across Latin American countries.

Worse still, the elected governments in Latin America have been confronted with problems that are similar to those of the relatively advanced democracies of the West, which can be termed as 'worn-out democracies' – in part, because the Western European and North American countries are faced with the majority of the citizens' loss of confidence in politics, parties and political leaders expressed through their growing indifference to political participation and withdrawal into private lives. The disparagement of politics has produced cultural changes at two levels. First, is the intensity of communication, which leads to a restructuring of social and political identities, and second, is the state's inability to mobilize resources and information instantly with the advent of globalization, which has resulted in the real dissolution of national borders.

In essence, globalization has broken down the sovereignty of the state and weakened politics at the national level. Institutional actors like the political parties have further alienated the people from active politics, partly because they no longer participate in taking political decisions.

Growth without Well-being

In the 1990s, a reasonable degree of stability and economic dynamism was achieved in the majority of Latin American countries. However, there was a major contradiction between these positive signs in politics and the economy and the deterioration in the material condition of the people. In particular, the increased productivity and relative economic stability did not lead to a rise in the well-being of most of the people in the past fifteen years. The decade of the 1990s was lost partly because the large majority of Latin Americans did not enjoy the benefits they had expected from the free and competitive electoral processes that most of the governments witnessed in the sub-region.

The UNDP report of 2004 clearly showed the disappointment and rejection of government policies and actions among the citizenry. For instance, while 44.9 percent of Latin Americans would have supported an authoritarian government if it could have solved their countries' economic woes, 41.9 percent would have accepted paying the price of some amount of corruption to ensure a better situation. In addition, during the past two decades, poverty had not been cut back significantly, but continued to plague 225 million people, representing 43.9 percent of the population (UNDP 2004:39). On the other hand, it could be argued that the Latin American countries did not post the worst poverty levels in the world, and neither demonstrated the greatest inequality in the South in the past twenty years.

Factors that Weakened both the New and Old Democracies

To begin with, Latin American countries evolved from the European colonial legacy that externally disarticulated the culture and social lives and the productive system of the people. In particular, the legacy had resulted in societies whose different cultures were poorly integrated into the nation building process since the countries attained political independence. This state of affairs still constitutes a profound and unresolved structural contradiction of contemporary Latin American states. The cultural legacy is crucial, because of its centrality in examining the experiences of countries of the South with democratization.

The UNDP report *Democracy in Latin America: Towards a Citizens' Democracy* had identified eight factors that could weaken emergent democracies in Latin America. First, was the dearth of social citizenship. The majority of the countries in the region are still plagued by greater inequality in income and wealth distribution than the world average. More than 25 percent of the citizens in 15 Latin American

nations lived under the poverty line, while in seven countries the proportion of the poor was over 50 percent of the population. There were 209 million people whose income was under the poverty line. Therefore, the status of well-being of the people was very fragile as evident in seven out of every new jobs created in the region since 1990 were in the informal economy, while only six of every 10 new jobs created were covered by some kind of social protection.

Second was the lack of civil citizenship. It means that, despite the progress made, the rights of the people were not fully implemented – that is, the right to individual liberty, freedom of expression, thought and religion, the right to property, and the right to enter into valid and legally secured contracts. Citizens perceived that there were serious shortcomings in the way that justice was administered. All these were an indication that the process was yet to be installed to attain reasonable conditions of equality before the law, as the rich always asserted their rights, while the poor, immigrant or indigenous segments of the population remained at a serious legal disadvantage.

Third was a deficit regarding political citizenship. Half of the population preferred economic development to democracy. These ‘non-democrats’ comprised 26.5 percent of the population, whereas those in doubt, that is, people who agreed with the concept of democracy but thought it valid for the government to make anti-democratic decisions when conducting its business, accounted for 30.5 percent. This implies that over half of the population was not committed to the true realization of a democratic system.

Fourth, was the fact that neo-liberal economic reforms did not meet people’s expectations. In the 1980s, for instance, a blueprint for development was devised in the form of a neo-liberal economic model, called the Washington Consensus. Even though the Washington Consensus had recommended budgetary discipline, financial and commercial liberalization, privatization and changes in public spending priorities, it excluded the people who are the means, agents and means of development from the kind of development it sought to bring about. In fact, the deregulation framework had, on average, placed the state as a referee between the different interest groups. That is, the stronger links to the market have borne fruit at the macroeconomic level but their effects have not reached many citizens in terms of an appreciable reduction in poverty levels. In fact, an increased inequality among the majority of the population had pushed more people into the informal economy due to the lack of jobs.

Fifth was the weakening of the state. Across Latin America, the state has lost its ability to influence, control, regulate and benefit from transnational processes. Also, the state has no capacity to withstand hegemonic tendencies in economic or political plans being prepared in the centres of financial power. The state has become so weak that it can no longer regulate and control local or international power on the ground.

Sixth was the emergent non-official power that various groups increasingly enjoyed. There has been a proliferation of interest and business groups that act as powerful lobbies essentially created to distort the forms of genuine democratic representation and limit the sovereignty of public institutions. For instance, the mass media, which are a part of such large business groups, are not subordinated to political power.

Seventh was the issue of corruption. Corruption is an endemic evil undermining the rule of law in Latin America. From a survey, 44.1 percent of the citizens accepted that bribes were an everyday unavoidable matter in order to expedite bureaucratic procedures. Such an unwholesome attitude has had devastating effects on public institutions and political leaders of the region.

Eighth and finally, was the state's loss of its territory. Literally, the state has lost 'pieces of its territory', which have been occupied by people conducting economic activities that are not only informal, but illegal. In the majority of Latin American countries, drug traffickers control significant amounts of resources, and such a group wields a level of power similar to that of the state. The extension of drug trafficking implies a dual challenge. On the one hand, it controls part of state apparatuses and territories, and on the other attracts the attention of the United States, generating new forms of external pressure.

Challenges of Consolidating Democracy

Latin American countries are facing the challenges of consolidating and legitimizing democratization. This explains, in part, the need to examine the extent to which the social factors involved in political processes in each country have helped to realize the aspirations of the people, and the sustainability of democracy – that is the ability of the state to endure stresses arising from the political system without the breakdown of its institutions or becoming stagnant. The case of Venezuela is quite instructive, in part, because the deterioration of a party system was formally democratic but it did not represent the majority of the population. This led to the virtual disappearance of traditional political parties, shortly before Hugo Chávez became President of Venezuela.

The state should create the institutional capacity and the political will to be able to effect change and to increase citizens' participation in the democratic process in order to achieve true consolidation of democracy. Thus, the state's political power and institutions should acquire legitimacy.

However, there is a kind of tension between the market economy and a democratic political system, which has implications for consolidating democratization. In this context, there is a great contrast in the opinions and historical experiences of different Latin American countries regarding the likelihood that a democratic regime may establish an efficient market economy but at the same time create a more equitable and just economic system (Offe 1992; Maravall 1995; and Przeworski 1995).

Further, tensions can be derived from the legal structure, based on the right to private property, because large companies are disposed to espouse liberal democratic theory (Pasquino 2000:17-18). Lastly, the experiences of many countries in the sub-region show that the relationship between democracy and the free market is not as linear and harmonious as some authors in the late twentieth century had argued.

The electoral rules in Latin America of today are a victory of the masses that burst into political life in the twentieth century for the purpose of ensuring the realization of their rights. Political democracy was a gradual conquest of the authoritarian regimes by the masses. But the limitations of political democracy have become more glaring than ever due to the failures of political parties, the use of marketing as a method for winning voters' sympathies, and the increasing inability of the elected representatives to formulate and implement policies that raise the living condition of the majority of the electorates.

That said, democracy still offers better possibilities for developing the citizenry. From this context arises the need to examine other countries' experience with democratization, as the process consolidates. Also, there is the need to compare the forms of representation, which entails restructuring political institutions and political parties, the incentives for setting off collective action that calls for reformulating political power structures, and new ways of participating that some authors have termed 'radical democracy' (Mouffe 1992).

However, globalization has reduced the capacity of the state to deepen democratization at the national level. This could partly explain why the hopes generated by the third democratic wave in the 1980s did not advance the civil and social rights of the people in keeping with the expectations that had been created, and why the right to elect one's rulers often did not translate into greater freedom, justice and progress. That is not to imply that the dilemmas now faced by the majority of Latin American countries should derail the focus on consolidating democratization in the South. For a poor democracy is better than a poor dictatorship. In this sense, Dasgupta had argued that democracy and freedom are as precious – in and of themselves – for the poor as they are for the rich. At stake, therefore, is how freedom impinges upon other aspects of the material well-being of the people (Dasgupta 1993).

Przeworski et al., in a study conducted on democracy, development and well-being in 140 countries, have shown that the correlation between development and democracy is strong, but not definitive. And that other historical factors that should be considered included a country's political and cultural heritage such as ethnic and religious heterogeneity, its institutional framework like presidential and parliamentary systems of government, and the world political climate, whose influence upon political change has not been adequately documented (Przeworski, Álvarez, Cheibub and Limongi 2000).

According to Przeworski et al., once a country has achieved a level of development of US\$2,500 to US\$3,000 per capita such as in Portugal, Mexico, Algeria or Costa Rica, democracy makes a difference, not so much because a democratic setting guarantees a higher degree of development, but because of the type of development achieved. Income distribution is more equitable and wages are higher in democratic countries than in non-democratic countries (Przeworski, Álvarez, Cheibub and Limongi 2000:164). In fact, dictatorships grow on the basis of greater capital investment and lower wages, because the workers can be repressed and labour is generally poorly remunerated. Even though there may not be major differences between a dictatorship and a democracy in their general level of development, democracy does make a difference in the specific characteristics assumed by the development process, for example with regard to employment, social policies and productive investment (Przeworski, Álvarez, Cheibub and Limongi 2000:168).

The Latin American Left and the Search for Alternatives

The failure of the Washington Consensus to raise the material condition of the people has prompted a significant shift towards the left in Latin America. The municipal, legislative or presidential elections held in Venezuela, Brazil, Chile, the Dominican Republic, Panama, Uruguay and Bolivia, with Hugo Chávez, Lula da Silva, Ricardo Lagos, Lionel Fernández, Martín Torrijos, Tabaré Vázquez and Evo Morales as presidents, respectively, were evidence of the overall trend towards the left in the sub-region.

In 2004, Kirchner and Lula, presidents of Argentina and Brazil, respectively, signed what has been called the 'Buenos Aires Consensus'. The document was intended to address citizens' well-being and the redistribution of income and wealth as priority goals for their countries' economic policies, without sacrificing basic macroeconomic stability. This policy has been implemented in Chile by the Gobierno de la Concertación and by Ricardo Lagos. In essence, the Buenos Aires Consensus has not only offered a kind of alternative to the Washington Consensus but represented a social democratic version of the latter. Unfortunately, the Buenos Aires Consensus has drifted into the oblivion.

State Globalization: An Opportunity or a Threat for Global Development?

Globalization is a complicated, multifaceted phenomenon, but it has become a fetish word in terms of being used to define scenarios, as an excuse to justify actions, denounce unjust situations, to support particular policies or simply to express alarm in the face of the intricacies of a given historical period. The term globalization began to be used in the 1960s as a prism reflecting the complexity and interdependence of the world capitalist system. Globalization involves a

process of instantaneous communications in terms of its control within the national space under the administration of the state, which has occurred due to satellite communication and other technological breakthroughs.

The cultural processes that have been unleashed should be viewed from an anthropological perspective. The processes go far beyond neo-liberalism, even though at this stage, big capital and other financial actors have taken the greatest advantage of this situation. The big companies have been the most disposed towards globalization. The major failure of the left has been its inability to deepen its thinking on the changes engendered by globalization and formulate strategies to harness its benefits to leverage economic development models, especially regarding political action. For that reason, not only socialist or planned economies have undergone a crisis, but also social and democratic economies, which were successful in the late twentieth century because they had mechanisms that facilitated the negotiation of interests of opposing political actors such as businessmen and unions in a national context.

Globalization has modified the fundamental concepts upon which the construction of traditional nation-states is grounded: power, sovereignty, territory and self-determination in the era of global capitalism. It is also crucial to consider the transformation of citizens' lives, changes in the family, and the modifications of gender roles and in the general lifestyles of the people. Globalization reflects the 'expanding scale, growing magnitude, speeding up, and deepening impact of transcontinental flows and patterns of social interaction' (Held and McGrew 2003:13).

New political actors emerged from the cultural changes, while old actors in new environment offered different opportunities. For instance, traditional actors on the left such as unions, parties, and the state itself, lost resources and strength; while others like the media or financial capital became very powerful. That partly explains why the left needs a different strategy to successfully reinsert itself into this new national space – so intensely linked to international affairs – the political agendas and demands of society's marginalized sectors.

Within the context of the nation-state, globalization has also spurred a process of decentralization, regionalization, and a reassessment of sub-national political units. In 1996, the OECD's report *Globalisation: What Challenges and Opportunities for Governments?*, outlined the dual direction to be taken by this change for governments and public services. The report did not only identify the need for adjusting governments' structures, making it feasible for them to govern in an increasingly interdependent world, but emphasized the necessity for a thorough analysis of the impacts of globalization on national and international policies all aimed at strengthening democracy.

Concluding Remarks: Agenda for Further Research

From all indications, the consolidation of the democratic process must face up to many unsettled critical issues such as security, drug trafficking, corruption, political leadership and institutions, the administration of justice, social and economic policies and the increased well-being of the people. The poor performance and outcomes of Latin American governments experimenting with democratization represent an obstacle for its consolidation.

Thus Latin America in particular and the South generally face intractable problems in grappling with democratization. Some of these problems centre on how neo-liberal styled- structural reforms can be reconciled with public demands, understanding the recent changes in the party system and the implication for democratic consolidation, corruption, political leadership and political institutions and drug trafficking and national security.

In Africa, one of the key concerns is whether democracy can really help to reduce the impact of poverty on the people and economy. Chapter Five takes the discussion further by interrogating these issues in Cameroon and Burkina Faso.

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