



September 15, 2020

LET US TAKE CARE OF DEMOCRACY LEST IT FALL VICTIM TO THE PANDEMIC

Since we are experiencing an inflection point in terms of the future of the world and our region that is giving rise to both threats and opportunities, we raise our voice to make an appeal: **in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, let us take care of the present and future of democracy.** There are latent risks to democracy that require our attention and quick action without which we may see a serious deterioration of democracy. Today, more than ever, Latin America needs resilient and quality democracy grounded in a politics with a vision for the future, and leadership capable of overcoming the deficits in representation and effectiveness that have been undermining support for and satisfaction with democracy in the region.

At the root of the weaknesses of Latin American societies are the various dimensions of social inequality and the still-high levels of poverty. Despite the gains of the last 30 years, inequality and poverty continue to require attention. The pandemic has laid bare and intensified these issues, increasing the risk that the region will suffer another lost decade in economic terms and a major setback in social conditions. The crisis sounds an alert that requires that measures be adopted aimed at overcoming the present-day levels of inequality, poverty, and informality, which constitute not only the main obstacle to development but also the seedbed of populist and/or authoritarian "solutions." They also constitute the seedbed of organized criminal violence, a real and growing threat that should be fought with the legal instruments of democratic government under the rule of law.

One common denominator in the face of the crisis brought about by the coronavirus pandemic is that the Executive branch has greater responsibility but also enhanced powers. In numerous countries of the region the exercise of these powers has led to the issuance of emergency laws to fight the pandemic. The executive branches should make responsible use of these exceptional measures to make sure they do not lead to human rights violations and arbitrary restrictions on liberty. The same applies to the exceptional use of the armed forces during this period; those forces should make their contribution with professionalism and without getting involved in any tasks entailed in maintaining public order.

It is fundamental that the separation of powers and the checks and balances that exist to preserve democracy be respected. The legislative branch – effectively representing social aspirations – and the judicial branch – applying laws independently – should continue performing their functions and guaranteeing the dynamic institutional checks and balances normally found in a democracy. The emergency should not be seen as a *carte blanche* for weakening checks and balances and accountability, nor for undermining anti-corruption efforts. If anything, the urgent challenges to democratic governance in the current moment demand that they be shored up.

If the pandemic forces the postponement of certain elections – as has been happening in several nations – such decisions should be made based strictly on health considerations and should be based on a broad social and political consensus. In that context, both state institutions and civil society organizations should foster oversight mechanisms when allocating government aid and subsidies to make sure they are not subject to pressures and clientelist practices during the coming or future elections.

All this is happening at a time when various paradigms are becoming irrelevant. Democracy was already confronting turbulent social dynamics and complex governability, with citizens demanding better quality of life and public services; women rightly calling for equality and respect; the severe problem of climate change, that requires consistent mitigation and adaptation policies, and a paradigm shift towards low-carbon emissions in production processes and consumption patterns; and the expansion of the internet making political and social debate universal, but also spreading fake news and various forms of hate speech.

The political future of the region will be marked by new communications practices. In the new environment it will be even more essential to improve the quality of citizen education for receiving as well as disseminating messages. It will be equally necessary to see to it that the ever greater amount of data in the hands of the state to address the health emergency is not used by governments as an instrument of control and authoritarianism.

The role of the public sphere will be strengthened. For this aspiration to be achieved the oversight capabilities of the state must be strengthened. A state is needed which, in addition to being solvent, is effective in redistributing income and opportunities; and that is capable of acting with a keen strategic sense, one that is not prey to the short-term or captured by corporatist interests.

There are market economies, but not market societies. Social protection is not the enemy of economic freedom. The legitimacy of a market economy requires a robust offer of quality public services, as has been demonstrated so dramatically by this pandemic.

The role of politics can be strengthened. It is time to rethink the value of politics and democracy for the times that lie ahead, and to review our notions of government and government practices so as to update them and endow governments with new tools that make it possible to democratically and effectively govern the complex societies of the 21st century. Representative democracy can and should be improved upon – including improving political parties – but not replaced.

It is also time to rebuild forums and mechanisms for coordination and cooperation among the Latin American countries as a baseline for strengthening the regional capacity to resolve conflicts and not import mounting global tensions.

The times ahead, with an economic crisis greater than all those experienced since the last century, imposes an arduous task on us all, which is to take advantage of this moment as an opportunity to redefine the horizon of what is possible.

This is our appeal, to think, to propose, to bring forward new ideas, and to give impetus to actions for an agenda imposed by current circumstances: not only keeping democracy from falling victim to the pandemic, but also moving towards a new-generation democracy. For if one is to govern to shore up and strengthen democracy, we must understand how democracy has to evolve along with the citizenry. That is why there is no time to lose.

###

[View the list of signatories](#)