

THE CHALLENGES FACING DEMOCRACY IN LATIN AMERICA: HOW TO GOVERN BETTER

Lecture given on receiving the Guillermo el O'Donnell Democracy Award and Lectureship 2017, of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA); LASA Congress, Lima, April 29, 2017

Sergio Bitar

I am grateful for the honor of receiving this award that bears the illustrious name of Guillermo O'Donnell. My words of gratitude for all those who decided to bestow this award on me; I note in particular Gabriela Ippolito, who has displayed the persistence and commitment to continue and to disseminate Guillermo's foundational work. I take it as recognition of so many thousands of Latin Americans who have struggled in times of dictatorship and are devoted now to improving and consolidating democracy.

Politicians and political scientists

I admire the magnitude of Guillermo's scientific and political contribution. One of his virtues was serving as a bridge between political science and political action. I also admire his human qualities. When we would talk, I did not feel as though I was talking with an intellectual who listened to my interpretations with an air of superiority, but with a person attentive to the facts and to the dilemmas, and with profound respect for those who were engaged in political action. Based on my own political experience I wish to highlight the importance of close collaboration between political scientists and political actors. I learned that the first require becoming familiar with the complexities, subtleties, and uncertainties of political action, and the second need to have rigorous frameworks for analysis and interpretation. This link is weak, perhaps weaker than before. Encouraging such joint work would be a contribution to thinking and action on behalf of democracy in Latin America. LASA is a privileged space for strengthening this nexus.

The value of testimony

Testimony helps to illuminate the past and therefore to learn from history. I wish to start by sharing some lessons that I have learned during my political life. Why did I get into politics? I confess that I never thought that democracy would collapse in Chile, nor had I imagined the great tragedy that ensued. Instead, I imagined, like many of my generation, that democracy was like the Andean range, unmovable. The facts showed me that democracy is like a garden, requiring day-to-day attention.

The paths that our lives took depended on historical circumstances; it was not a heroic decision. There was one moment, during the transfer of a group of ministers, senators, and deputies from Santiago to the dictatorship's concentration camp on Dawson Island, when I was convinced that

we were going to be shot. Your whole life comes together in an instant. At this very moment, I decided to devote my life to recuperate freedom and restore democracy in my country. I see that the same thing is happening today in Venezuela, when so many persons have turned to public action, risking their freedom and even their lives. I have also seen friends from the United States ready and willing to set aside their usual activities to organize to defend their democratic values. Circumstances end up guiding those who have this vocation.

I was held at three concentration camps for more than one year; the key was to survive. Then I was expelled and I lived in exile for 10 years, barred from returning to the country. Many suffered much more than I did, thousands were disappeared, killed, tortured, imprisoned and exiled, but most maintained their resolve to fight. This is attested to by trade union leaders, mothers, and relatives of persons detained and disappeared, who have not let up in their efforts to demand justice and truth. During those years, I learned another lesson: If you allow yourself to sink into the justified bitterness and let your spirit to become contaminated with a negative animus, you cannot persuade and help mobilize others to build a better society. Therefore, the task was to build a new political and social force, and to battle for a better world, in liberty, without dictatorship.

Memory and the Future

Memory is essential for building a better future. It must endure beyond the life span of those who experienced such tragic experiences. Oral transmission, the family, or the party are not enough. It is essential to record testimonies and keep memory alive through writing, poems, music, films, works of architecture, and museums. Oblivion brings despair. Knowing the truth is liberating and it helps to ensure that history is not biased in favor of the victors, for that would end up justifying the horrors and repeating the mistakes. I have learned to take historians very seriously.

I also understood that you do not learn from history if you only blame others. It is not enough to condemn the dictatorships; we must ask ourselves how and why we ended up with a dictatorship. Shortly after getting out of prison, by then in the United States, I wrote the book *El Gobierno de Allende. Chile 1970-73*.¹ Was Allende's program viable? No doubt, the lessons of the tragic experience of the Unidad Popular were decisive for the transition strategy led by the Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia and for sustaining the five center-left administrations from 1989 to date.

The harsh experiences of the peoples of Latin America yield lessons that are also useful today for improving what we have and offering valuable data to the citizens of so many countries that still live under authoritarianism.

Democratic dilemmas today

I will refer to two issues, future transitions and the new challenges facing today's democracies.

Transitions to democracy continue to be relevant in many countries. When many of us participated in transition processes, we thought that each situation was unique and we hardly asked ourselves about others' experiences. It would have been so useful to learn about them!

¹ Sergio Bitar, *El Gobierno de Allende. Chile 1970-73*, 4th edition, Pehuén Editores, Chile 2017.

Transitions are not processes of the past; they are latent in many nations today. While each situation is specific and inimitable, there are some recurrent characteristics. We learned this with Professor Abraham Lowenthal when we undertook an extensive and intense effort to draw out the lessons of nine countries by interviewing 13 presidents who led them. In the book *Democratic Transitions*, entrusted to us by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), translated into six languages, we dared to identify 10 recurrent characteristics.²

The transition from authoritarianism to democracy is still a crucial task, just as the risks persist of reversion to hybrid systems that are born of elections yet become authoritarian. Global circumstances have changed substantially for the new transitions. International conditions are more propitious for promoting free elections and guaranteeing respect for human rights than in the times of the Cold War. The international organizations – and specifically the International Criminal Court – serve to inhibit repression by authoritarian governments. Yet many countries that experience authoritarianism have unfavorable internal conditions: they may not have a prior history of democratic practices; regional and tribal struggles and religious disputes come into play; and the processes of change are becoming ever more complex. Therefore, the new realities demand new analyses and innovative approaches.

The new challenges to democracy

Numerous democracies are entering complex and unknown terrain. Many argue that the number of inhabitants living under democracies has stagnated or even fallen in recent years; and that the magnitude of the challenges to come will create risks of a democratic backsliding and even a return to authoritarianism. Fear and uncertainty encourage extreme rightwing positions that see nationalism and isolation as the solution to the problems. In every region, there is a growing debate around democratic resilience and democratic governance. But which phenomena are global and which are national? How much is there in common?

National governance and global ungovernability

It is evident that global phenomena will increasingly affect national political processes. The exponential explosion of modern communication technologies, education, and urbanization substantially bolster citizens' capacity for action. New expectations emerge. A variety of social movements, civil society organizations, companies and individuals acquire enough power to influence decision-making. There is a dispersion of power. None has the hegemony to impose its will alone.

A recent study carried out by the National Intelligence Council (NIC) of the United States called *Paradox of Progress*, looking prospectively to 2035, warns that global ungovernability may be the greatest threat.³ In its three scenarios, it describes a more volatile world with systemic changes whose consequences will surpass the capacity of the states and the international organizations. It foresees the influence of multiple actors and a dispersion of power that will

² See *Democratic Transitions. Conversations with World Leaders* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015) and *Transiciones Democráticas. Conversaciones con Líderes Mundiales* (Galaxia Gutenberg, Barcelona, 2016).

³ *Global Trends Paradox of Progress* (National Intelligence Council, 2017). www.dni.gov/nic/globaltrends.

create more risks. It asks three overarching questions. First: How to manage expectations in societies with empowered citizens and rapidly changing economies? Second: How can one negotiate an architecture of collaboration and competition among the major state powers, organized groups, and individuals with the capacity to influence? Third: How can one anticipate the impacts of climate change and disruptive technologies to act on time? In its three scenarios (Islands, Orbits, and Communities), the NIC emphasizes the risks of ungovernability due to the limited operational capacity of the states in the face of increasingly complex societies.

These findings warn us of the need to increase Latin America's global forecast capacity, and to improve the design of strategies and national policies

Discern the causes of democratic tensions in order to govern better

Numerous articles and debates in developed countries warn of new challenges to democracy. These reflections are useful, yet we should recognize that the causes of the phenomenon in those countries are different from the causes in the Latin American ones. Thus, for example, whereas in Europe fears abound over the exponential demographic imbalance between Europe and Africa, or over the differences in religious cultures, as between the West and Islam, in Latin America these are not relevant factors. The consequences of immigration and terrorism in Europe and the United States, awakening isolationist and xenophobia reactions, are not as compelling in our region either.

These distinctions are essential for a sound assessment, which is an essential requirement for improving government programs in Latin America. In the recent past, numerous Latin American nations have made progress valuing democracy, holding elections, protecting human rights, achieving independence of the judicial branch, increasing transparency, improving macroeconomic management, attaining more social inclusion, and protecting the environment. This recounting should give us the confidence that there has been the political capacity in the past to overcome crisis and to improve governance. The question is whether democratic institutions have today the resilience to channel the new and more complex problems.

Three challenges facing Latin American democracy

I will refer to what I consider the three greatest problems, highlighting the reforms that should be pursued to increase the capacity of the state institutions and civil society.

The first challenge is inequality. According to ECLAC, the reduction in poverty has stagnated at an average of 28% in the last four years, and has begun to climb in several countries. Inequality is also growing. It is not just income inequality; there is also social, territorial, ethnic, and gender discrimination, which is at odds with the new awareness of rights. There will be conservative proposals seeking to resolve this challenge by turning to the market, growth without inclusion, and authoritarian practices. How can we strengthen democracy? Tax reform, education reform, improving the coverage and quality of public services, health, urban development and housing, and citizen security. All should be part of an agenda for an effective democracy that accords priority to social inclusion.

A second challenge is the widening gap between the new demands, expectations, and behaviors that accompany the rapid expansion of the middle classes, and an elitist political system with a

fragile state apparatus. Economic, political and other power elites tend to constitute a cartel that acts in several interconnected areas. Citizen control and progressive disarticulation of these elites is a condition for affirming representative democracy. Democratic legitimacy erodes when governments are not capable of expanding political rights and delivering basic public goods to protect the most vulnerable.

If institutions are not prepared to channel new demands discontent will grow, with disaffection and electoral abstentionism, social mobilization in the streets, and even violence. This challenge requires successfully addressing two vital issues: providing institutional space for citizen participation, and strengthening the operational capacity of the state.

On participation, Guillermo O'Donnell already warned of the exhaustion of delegative democracy, which Rosanvallon calls democracy of authorization. O'Donnell said, "The power regime detests the institutions that serve as checks and balances of the Executive ... with the messianic idea that a majority vote gives them the right to do as they see fit." The deepening of democracy requires the development of complementary forms of participatory democracy, whether through O'Donnell's "accountability" or Rosanvallon's "*démocratie d'exercice*."⁴ Relying on electoral participation alone leads to disaffection. There is increasing criticism of "intermittent democracy," when voting is exercised every four, five, or six years. Citizens do not accept being merely "sovereigns for a day."

What to propose? First, put in place institutional mechanisms of participation and consultation, locally, regionally, and nationally; install new technological platforms to put out information; form citizen councils to debate relevant issues. Participation contributes to citizen control of the state and, in particular, of the government. Second, approve new laws and regulations and reinforce autonomous bodies to provide transparency, exert control, and apply strong sanctions against corruption. Two actors have played a decisive role combatting corruption: the social media and the attorney generals' offices that have autonomous prosecutors. Separating money from politics is a major issue to stop the plummeting confidence in political institutions that undermines the legitimacy of democracy. Now more than ever, we need to provide public financing of politics and guarantee its strict oversight.

Third, defend and ensure the separation of powers and increase citizen oversight of the state institutions, and the government. One recent deformation of Latin American democracies has been the trend of constitutional amendments allowing for re-election – and, worse still, allowing for the indefinite re-election – of the president. Fourteen of the 18 Latin American countries (not including Cuba) have adopted provisions that allow for re-election. Therefore, the region has been moving in the opposite direction, concentrating power instead of expanding political participation. Priority should be accorded to institutional reforms, for expanding participation, conducting citizen consultations, and strengthening oversight and transparency.

A third challenge is slow economic growth, unemployment, and social vulnerability. Democracy must be capable of lifting living conditions in a sustained manner. To "accountability" should be added "delivery," showing palpable results. (Interestingly, neither term has a straightforward translation to Spanish). Social inclusion will require growth, higher productivity, and job creation, especially for youth. Changing the productive structure has become the top priority in almost every country. Albeit at different paces, all should aim to

⁴ *Democracia Delegativa*, Guillermo O'Donnell et al., editors, Prometeo, Buenos Aires, 2011. *Le Bon Gouvernement*, Pierre Rosanvallon, Editions du Seuil, 2015.

invest more in infrastructure, improving technical education, science, and technology, promote digital development, and strengthen the nexus between technology and natural resources, giving impetus to small and medium enterprises, a culture of entrepreneurship, promoting public-private partnerships and Latin American integration. The goal must be to escape from the so-called middle-income trap. Inclusive and sustainable growth is a necessary condition for advancing democracy.

In sum, the convergence of inclusion, participation, and innovation, with a view to 2030, is the basis for political action to strengthen democracy in Latin America. Attaining the 2030 sustainable development goals should be a priority objective.

Institutional Reforms

Along with citizen participation, priority should be attached to reforming the state apparatus in order to improve its efficacy. Three dimensions need change. The first is preserving public order. Many countries have to confront violence, organized crime, corruption, and the lack of capacity on the part of the police and judicial systems. This is the essential task of the state; when not performed, governability is at serious risk. A second crucial aspect is ensuring the independence of the electoral and judicial authorities, and expanding the capacity for independent oversight. Third, in the economic and social area, the public sector must be endowed with powers and quality human resources to design and implement new policies for inclusion and productive transformation. Performing these tasks requires training leaders with technical knowledge and political skill, improving the quality of public servants, and establishing effective oversight systems.

Strengthening the political parties

The new stage of democratic development in Latin America requires strengthening the political parties and civil society organizations. Most of our countries have a fragile, fragmented, and unstable political party structure. If the State capacity is lagging and social complexity increases, the majorities needed in Parliament to sustain the government may disperse, therefore augmenting the risk of ungovernability

What actions need to be taken? Parties should better perform three essential functions: elections, governing, and helping organize civil society. Latin American parties usually focus only on the first role. The programmatic function is very limited, and without a program, there is no good government. A sound program is also an antidote to populism. The participatory function is the most relevant in the coming institutional phase.

Strengthening the political parties implies increasing their independence from business interests, building firewalls between politics and money, establishing strong regulations and tough sanctions. It also requires enhancing the quality of the education and training of young leaders, bringing them into the government, the local and regional administrations, social organizations, and election campaigns. The complexity of governing requires experts with political capacity and politicians with technical knowledge. We have plenty of business schools and so few schools of government.

Finally, we need to encourage the formation of networks and associations of political parties in Latin America, to share experiences and take common initiatives. The issues faced and solutions proposed coincide in many respects. When one looks at the press in the region one notes that the problems are similar, the debates touch on many of the same issues, and the political dynamics are alike. Nonetheless, there are no permanent Latin-American political party bodies for joint thinking and action. This is another priority. Personal relations will bring future leaders together and build trust among them, facilitating common action along a convergent path.

A powerful narrative that convenes citizens to build a better society

A political discourse that offers to satisfy specific demands of just certain groups cannot ensure coherent development in any country. Governance requires a collective vision, a sense of a community sharing a single purpose, an equitable social pact, and a common way forward.

Political programs generally lack a narrative that could bring diverse groups together and reconcile different interests. It is crucial to give collective meaning to each policy proposal. In my country, for over a decade the polls have revealed a dissociation in the Chilean mindset: Most say they are doing well personally and have an optimistic view of the future, while at the same time they say the country is doing poorly. Individualism prevails, along with a certain belief that personal progress does not depend on how society is organized, but on how one brings pressure to bear on those who hold power.

To be forceful, a compelling narrative should always reiterate democratic principles and values: the dignity of persons, freedom of conscience, of expression, of association, holding free elections, respecting human rights, ensuring transparency and direct accountability to citizens, and cultivating tolerance, diversity, and social justice.

The media play a key role in this undertaking. Strengthening democracy requires that the media assume greater responsibility for promoting democratic values, procedures and behaviors for ensuring civilized coexistence. In times of the so-called “post-truth,” the media must see to the rigor and truthfulness of their assertions, and help avoid the polarization of society.

Fear, insecurity, and divisionism are the breeding ground for populism and authoritarianism. Designing an optimistic horizon that encourages hope and confidence is a permanent requirement that should be taken up by democratic-minded persons. A long-term view facilitates strategic agreements and political understandings. The 2030 agenda is one of the great global initiatives for mobilizing society for these purposes.

Good governance to win democratic legitimacy

Deficient governance weakens democracy. Good governance strengthens it. When the government performs poorly and starts losing popular approval, government leaders and their appointees start looking for scapegoats who they can blame, or intend to cling tightly to an ideological interpretation at odds with reality. Due to ineptitude, discontent grows and protests spread. Some simplistic analysts quickly conclude that the demands are due to “structural” phenomena or attribute problems to imaginary enemies. In addition, they adopt radical proposals, they tend to control the media and restrict freedoms, when failures are actually the cumulative

effect of mismanagement over time. Contemporary Venezuela is one clear example of such a situation.

What requirements are essential for good government?

Some presidents come into government with just a general outlook, without the precision and rigor needed to implement measures and introduce good legislation. It is also very common for top government positions to be filled based on friendship, without considering competence. Good governance requires improving program design and selecting quality staffs.

It is essential for good governance to form and ensure a majority in the legislature. When the president has no party, or has a weak party, governing becomes a feat, and the ensuing process of attrition degrades the political ambience and discourages citizens. Good government requires institutional formulas that synchronize presidential elections with legislative elections to facilitate the convergence of forces that can form majorities in the Parliament.

The good example in politics

I end these remarks by summarizing a few lessons learned throughout my political life. I think that if we are to strengthen democracy we must prioritize four tasks.

First, perform **a sound assessment**, with data, with social, cultural, and economic analysis, and with attention to the historical experiences and the world trends that will condition us.

Second, develop **a good narrative**, which, based on the values that inspire each sector, provides a meaning to the strategic objectives, and leads to consistent programs and viable policies.

Third, have **good government**, ensure the quality of public sector management, harmonize expectations and promises with real possibilities, select persons who combine political capacity with technical background and deliver results.

A good assessment, a good narrative, and good government are essential.

But there is something more: be a **good example**. The main asset of a ruler and of a political leader is being an example of consistency in practice, displaying conduct that is at once austere, open, and serious.

Pope Francis's words are wise:

“I ask you not to underestimate the value of example because it has more strength than a thousand words, a thousand leaflets, a thousand ‘likes,’ a thousand ‘retweets’ and a thousand videos on YouTube. The example of an austere life at the service of one’s neighbor is the best way to promote the common good”. And I would add, the best way to strengthen democracy.