

IS STABLE DEMOCRACY IN LATIN AMERICA A UTOPIA?

*A Historical Review*¹

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Achieving democracy in Latin America is not simple: it involves a set of very complex problems. There are many reasons to be pessimistic about the perspectives for democracy in the current context of permanent unsolved disputes and political and social struggle. Likewise, the historic and deep economic and political constraints which operate in Latin America draw a generally negative picture of what democracy could look like and how it could be brought about in both the short and long run.

However, in analyzing the present and future of democracy in Latin America one must observe the specific context and trends in those countries where it already exists or where it is beginning to develop new features.

Thus, democratic evolution—if we can talk in these terms in reference to societies with an enormous lack of democratic experience—has very different characteristics depending on the country and the specific conditions under which its main political and social features have developed.

The purpose of this article is not to analyze the case of each country separately, but mainly to point to some general historic trends in current perspectives for democracy as well as the central remaining constraints for its attainment in those critical cases in which only recently has there been a return to relative democratic stability in the Southern Cone. Although countries like Brazil or Argentina are two of the most critical cases in the region, this in no way means that they are the only places where democracy has periodically been seriously threatened. The other Latin American countries have, more or less, very similar political, social and economic vacuums which in one way or another determine severe

restrictions in their social and political development.

THE OVERVIEWS

Many analysts (Cammack 1985, 1986; Rouquié 1986; Stepan 1986; Przeworski 1986) have tackled the problem of democracy in Latin America and to some extent have tried to define (whether successfully or unsuccessfully) its meaning in the past and present. Although their notion of democracy reflects their own “Western” experience and they look at the problem from a Western liberal perspective which defines democratization as a move toward a political system of competitive elections, civil liberties and the toleration of significant “loyal oppositions” (Kaufman 1986: 100), all of them agree that the future of democracy is of necessity linked with the economic (Herman-Petras 1985), military (Rouquié 1986, Stepan 1986) and social constraints still present within Latin American societies.

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¹ This essay, part of a major research project, looks at the governments of two very representative countries of the Southern Cone that have undergone historic changes.

Nevertheless, their theories, whether pessimistic or optimistic, even when attempting a general explanation of what is involved in achieving democracy in Latin America, are not accurate at all in explaining why it has not been attained in the past and, more importantly, in the present. Thus, some analysts, for example Cammack (1985), stress, mostly based on wishful thinking, that democracy has “better long-term prospects” than it did in the past. However, the same analyst, in trying to explain the difficult processes that some Latin American countries have undergone, emphasizes that its immediate result is the emergence of a new “civilian elite” which would eventually substitute the old “political incapacity of the bourgeoisies” (Chile, Argentina and Brazil) in achieving a stable political system. At this point, it would be important to define who this new “civilian elite” is and whose interests it represents when in power. Moreover, what would the risk be of letting power rest in the hands of civilian elites who would eventually be responsible for going back to antidemocratic political and social relationships?

We should stress that even when this kind of new civilian elites could represent an immediate formal opportunity for democracy, mainly in those countries where it has just been achieved, they are not necessarily a direct outcome of a radical transformation of society. They are the result of the agreement from above among the few members of the political and economic elite. What perspectives for democracy exist in such a critical frame-



Photo: Luis Humberto González

U.S. interventionism has been a constant constraint for democracy in Latin America.

work? What kind of democratic features, if any, are possible when the economic and political establishment, the core of the problem, remains the same, and in some cases the military still takes part in political decisions? The cases of Brazil, Chile (with Pinochet as head of an army reluctant to stop trying to influence the political arena even today with President Frei in power) and to some extent Argentina (even under President Menem) are of central importance.

Herman and Petras (1985) are right when they refer to the potential international and economic constraints for democracy in Latin America. Highlighting the international aspect of democratization, these analysts review the historic behavior of Washington vis-à-vis the military overthrow of civilian governments and the return of civilians to government. They argue

that Washington's recognition and support for the democratic processes in the Southern Cone in the 1980s were used to justify U.S. anti-Sandinista policy in Nicaragua. Thus, at the same time that it encouraged alleged demilitarization of countries like Brazil, Argentina or Peru, Washington supported the “Contra's” so-called fight for democracy in Nicaragua. Meanwhile, Washington guided and watched over the political processes of countries such as El Salvador and Honduras without any criticism at all.

On the other hand, they stress the economic aspect by arguing that the rapid growth of 1968-1974 was fueled by massive foreign credits, and when the “miracle” petered out in default and increased dependence, none of the countries' basic problems had been addressed. In the early 1980s the direct result was a system of economic growth

which involved borrowing to pay interest on previous loans. Thus, real GDP in Latin America increased from U.S.\$257 billion to U.S.\$336 billion between 1975 and 1984, a growth of 31 percent. But, in the same period the gross foreign debt rose from U.S.\$89.4 billion to U.S.\$360.2 billion, while net interest and profit payments rocketed from U.S.\$5.6 billion to U.S.\$37.3 billion (Herman-Petras 1985: 85). To this critical picture we must add the impressive net capital outflow which totalled more than U.S.\$23.3 billion for Latin America as a whole (Herman-Petras 1985: 86).²

At this point it seems necessary to emphasize that the continual failure of democratic experiences, apart from other major constraints such as the militarization of political life, must be explained taking into consideration the economic limitations in the Latin American countries. Needless to say, then, there is a strong connection between this economic constraint and the ineffective and incomplete democratic development in those societies.

² These authors give 1983 figures. Recent financial reports indicate that the outflows represent about 40 percent or even more than the total debt, of the major debtor countries. According to FED financial reports, in 1995 Latin America exported to the American banking system U.S.\$89.303 billion of which 27.52 percent (U.S.\$24.582 billion) came from Mexico. Capital exports that year were as follows: Mexico: U.S.\$24.582 billion; Brazil: U.S.\$23.816 billion; Argentina: U.S. \$17.203 billion; Venezuela: U.S.\$11.812 billion; Colombia: U.S.\$3.666 billion; Chile: U.S.\$2.825 billion; Uruguay: U.S.\$1.835 billion; Ecuador: U.S.\$1.325 billion; Guatemala: U.S.\$1.275 billion; Peru: U.S.\$974 million. See the Mexican daily *La Jornada*, November 12, 1995, pp. 1 and 57 and June 19, 1996, pp. 1 and 43-44.

In effect, there seems to be a vicious cycle in which democracy is almost impossible. On the one hand, we find the aforementioned economic constraints, which mean a real inability to control the economy. On the other hand, there is a clear historic inability to control the polity. In light of this, it seems that the main threat to democracy comes from within the system itself; democracy seems to have been undergoing a series of irregular cycles for several decades. Furthermore, we must stress that there is no structural stability³ to make democracy possible in the short run.

The Latin American experience from the 1970s on has been much more a reorganization of national states carried out by civilian rather than democratic governments.

Even though some countries have achieved some degree of democratic change (whether a transition from militarism or just as a result of the development of democratic institutions), there are no solid reasons to guarantee that democracy is safe from some of the potential structural convulsions inherent to Latin American political life. Hence, democracy is a fragile item in most of the countries of the continent, but particularly in those countries which have undergone a critical return to democratic rule, such as Argentina or Brazil, or to those like Colombia, which has a civilian gov-

³ I understand structural stability as the basic balanced conditions needed for coherent political development.



"It's part of the primitive art that still exists!"

ernment but where nevertheless the polity has been taken over by the extraordinary autonomy of the military from the executive branch and the impressive strength achieved by the Mafia in the last two decades. Mexico has begun to undergo a similar process in the last five years.

At this point militarism appears as a major and recurrent constraint for any democratic effort as well as for managing the social crisis. The historic role of the military has made demilitarization of the society and the state impossible to the extent that there are still many signs of its strong involvement in countries such as Chile, Brazil and to some extent Argentina. As Rouquié and Stepan have stressed (1986), "demilitarization" has not been translated into a "civilization of the [former] military State," and thus there is not yet a real "demilitarization of power." Therefore, along with the

great concentration of power in few hands, the institutional militarization of society remains the major obstacle for a real democratic transformation of political and social life. At this point we should ask along with Rouquié whether the military is in reality the alternative for power in Latin America.

BRAZIL

The indirect election of Tancredo Neves in 1985, the original Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB) candidate, and after his death, that of José Sarney, occurred within a context of massive grassroots mobilizations, economic crisis and a deep need to legitimize the new democratic process. Despite the Sarney government's difficult beginnings, the president seemed able to maintain social equilibrium and withstand some of the most critical pressures that existed in 1984. However, questions regarding the

Events during his administration seemed to turn the democratic omens into negative ones for the future of the so-called "New Republic": at the same time Sarney's government was facing a critical moment; the administration appeared to be under siege by public opinion due to allegations of corruption against governmental officials; cohesion of the official party underwent severe setbacks; civil society seemed to disapprove of Sarney's continuation in power; and the military remained deeply involved in national politics.

The government was criticized by some important political figures as unable to control national affairs. Two senators, José Richa and former-General Jarbas Passarinho (who had taken part in the military coup of 1964 and was still linked to the military), used the expression "ungovernable" to describe the political turmoil and said that the crisis could lead to solutions involving the use of force.

Likewise, in the last stage of Sarney's term the government's image sharply

funds were distributed on the orders of Sarney's advisers and relatives, among them, his wife. These accusations undermined the government's popularity a great deal, to the extent that some journalists, such as Carlos Castelo Branco, compared the political crisis to that prevalent before the coup of 1964 (*Latin American Weekly Review* [LAWR], February 18, 1988).

Sarney lobbied successfully to convince congressmen (some say using clientelist tricks and military pressures) to ensure the vote of the Constituent Assembly was in his favor and extended his mandate for five years: so, Brazil retained a presidential system rather than the parliamentary one which was the PMDB aim. Nevertheless, the gap between the government and society and, of great importance, the critical split within the PMDB (the *históricos* wanted to break with the party and the government) notably increased the risk of more extensive unrest. For instance, before the vote, 85 percent of the population had rejected a five-year term for Sarney; 85 percent of business managers and workers favoured only four years; and in strategic Rio de Janeiro, 60 percent of businessmen wanted a four-year term. Moreover, a survey showed 77 percent of the population expected elections in 1988, and 55 percent would reject any candidate backed by Sarney.

Although the approval of a five-year term turned into a constitutional mandate, it is interesting to note that the military backed the president for the five-year term arguing that elections in 1988 would "exacerbate" the prevailing economic and political

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return to democracy remain today. Was Sarney "legitimate" enough as an *indirectly elected* president to call his government democratic and to rule the country in peace?

declined due to the spectacular case of corruption involving Anibal Texeira, his former planning minister. Furthermore, Texeira made a public statement to the effect that government

turmoil (*LAWR*, March 24, 1988). However, the idea of a military coup remained in the minds of many Brazilians and was reflected in a 1988 report, based on a survey by a public relations communications firm called RH. The report stated that the public perceived a small but active and well-defined military group able to intervene in the political process at any moment. It reflected to some extent the heterogeneity of the armed forces, dividing them into three tendencies: 1) one, cited as the majority, interested in professionalization of the army; 2) another, which had *political concerns* and identified itself with the political transition, backed by Minister of the Army General Leonidas Pires Gonçalves; and 3) the “hardliners,” mainly from the intelligence services.

It also established three conditions under which military intervention would be possible at the time democracy was restored: a) a “radicalization” of either the left or the right, which would endanger the political transition; b) a power vacuum (one example given was Sarney’s resignation) which would lead to “chaos” or situations leading to anarchy; and c) further development of the conspiracies which always abound in intelligence services. The report concluded that the first hypothesis was the most likely.

The above seemed to coincide with Alfred Stepan’s postulate that Brazil was on the verge of no longer being a democracy and that its National Assembly would fail “out of fear” to limit the autonomy of the military which exercises “growing functions” within the government. To emphasize

his argument, Stepan remarks that no other contemporary democracy in the world had six military men in the cabinet, all generals in active service; the military involvement in political issues was “always with the argument that it is necessary to guarantee the stability of the regime;” in its first three years in office, the Sarney government never proposed—or even suggested—new ways for civilians to increase their power over the military (*LAWR*, April 7, 1988).

There are indeed some critical aspects of the Brazilian process which make it likely that military intervention could have occurred at any moment if the political instability had continued. First, the Sarney government seemed to have lost both the public trust and political initiative over domestic affairs. Moreover, faced with a split within the official party, the government was playing a dangerous game by making profound alliances with and picking the military as its best bet. For instance, Sarney appeared to have taken a further step by seeking out civilian businessmen as intermediaries to negotiate military support for his five-year governmental term. In return, Sarney would give them amazing economic concessions such as the elimination of “right-to-strike” legislation and the suppression of the 44-hour work week, six-hour shifts and additional holiday pay (*LAWR*, April 21, 1988).

One may ask how long such a measure would have lasted until it became clear that the government was no longer able to rule, or until these civilians agreed to knock at the military’s door.

Today, we can say that the weakness of the government could have turned into a weakness of the state that could have been used by the military to intervene again.

It is pertinent to conclude the discussion of the democratic features in Brazil by quoting Stepan. “Because direct presidential elections [had] not yet been held in Brazil, because the military retain[ed] so many prerogatives and powers and because the civilian, President J. Sarney, use[d] the military as a critical part of his power base, the Brazilian transition [from authoritarianism to democracy] is in fact far from complete. Indeed some people question whether the ‘New Republic’ that began in 1985 yet warrants classification as a democracy.” He adds that the return to democracy in the region “has not been accompanied by a full ‘de-militarization’ of society” [because] “since a monopoly of the use of force is required for a modern democracy, failure to develop capacities to control the military represents an abdication of democracy” (*Latin American Regional Reports [LARR]*, Brazil, April 28, 1988).

ARGENTINA

In Argentina the strong legitimation achieved by Alfonsín at the beginning of his term (December 1983) became a sort of “new weakness” of the government alongside with that of the official party, the Radical Civic Union (UCR). On the one hand, the extreme polarization of Argentinian society has been a major factor in the continuous imbal-



The historic role of Latin America's armies must change if democracy is to consolidate.

ance in the social and political process (the Peronist victory September 6, 1989 is one example). On the other hand, the energetic demand that the government try the officers responsible for the deaths of thousands of Argentines during the dirty war (1976-1983) placed the regime in a difficult position both vis-à-vis the military and civil society.

Alfonsín was subject to conservative pressure from within the state and the military to decree the so-called Appropriate Obedience Act and the End-of-the-Question Act which exonerated a considerable number of officers directly involved in the torture and murder of civilian members of the opposition during the dictatorship. This political decision looked like a sign of weakness

on the part of Alfonsín at a moment considered decisive for democracy by many civilian sectors.

The political process in Argentina showed signs of vitality in the 1989 elections, in which the Peronists demonstrated that they could be the first electoral force from then on (as shown by Menem's recent re-election for a second term). However, the number of disputes among the members of *justicialismo* over who the candidate would be considerably weakened it. The Peronists had two strong candidates who represented two political outlooks: Antonio Cafiero, governor of the province of Buenos Aires, supported by the *peronista* renovators, represented in Congress by the *Justicialista* (Peronist) block; and

Carlos Menem, former governor of the province of Rioja, seen as surrounded by certain leaders blamed for their association with Isabel Peron's unsuccessful government. Cafiero supporters favored measures such as the moratorium on the foreign debt, while Menem and his group backed Argentina's economic compromises. Cafiero seemed at a disadvantage when the pre-electoral polls showed he had 14 percent of the voters behind him and Menem had 27.7 percent. In the last stage of his campaign, Menem had to face the embarrassing support from National Alert, the ultra-right paramilitary group which is a self-styled Peronist faction. Several surveys showed that the *Justicialistas* held an important advantage (64 percent) over

the UCR (19.6 percent) and the Democratic Civic Union (UCD) (with only 6.5 percent) (*LAWR*, May 12, 1988). How would the military respond to any of the Peronist factions in power? Though it remained a mystery for some time, this question has been answered by the relative political stability achieved by Menem in the last six years.

Huntington asserts that most of the coups in Argentina—which he calls “veto” coups—have been the result of the military’s discontent with electoral results (Huntington 1968: 222-226). This happened in 1962 when the military removed President Frondizi, canceling the results of the election in which the Peronists had won 35 percent and elected ten out of 14 provincial governors and almost one-fourth of the Chamber of Deputies. Thus the turning point for Argentina was indeed very likely to be the election of 1989. Since then, the survival of *civilismo* (civilian rule)—especially now that social unrest is increasing because of Menem’s austerity measures—will be the determining factor in whether Argentines are on their way to consolidating a strong democratic system.

However, whether the Peronist victory jeopardized the democratic process or not is less relevant than the strong support the new government actually received at the beginning from society, substantially modifying the balance of forces. Moreover, this was not regarded as a great threat [by the military] because it was an indication of the strength of ultrarightist groups such as National Alert, the paramilitary Iron Guard and the

secret army Movement for Patriotic Restoration (MRP) or the National Opposition Army (ENO). Even when these groups’ actions were generally rejected by society and caused a violent response from the government, they remained a major threat to the democratic process.

Alfonsín appeared to control the various crises he had to face, and unlike Sarney, was able to contain the military’s demands after Rico’s two uprisings. Apart from the government’s success in defeating Rico’s uprisings in Holy Week 1987 and later, press reports pointed to some signs that Colonel Mohamed Ali Seineldin—later sent on a military mission to Panama—and Rico himself were working to replace Alfonsín with Vice President Víctor Martínez, considered more likely to open the doors wide to the military. In this context it was not by chance that Armed Forces General Commander Dante Caridi visited his counterparts at the Pentagon in Washington in 1988. This encounter was to set up an exchange of officers and some other cooperation accords between the two armies, which had been suspended

after the Malvinas War. Did it also ensure Washington’s support to the military and/or to the Alfonsín government? Did Caridi impose his position on the conspirators?

According to Enrique Gorriarán, former chief of the People’s Revolutionary Army (ERP), who is in exile in Venezuela, both factions of the army wanted to carry out a military coup. The difference between the two, however, was when it should take place. Rico and Seineldin, he believes, wanted it right away, during Alfonsín’s term, whereas Caridi thought that conditions were not yet sufficiently mature (*Proceso* No. 600, May 2, 1988).

Without going so far as to assert that the military coup was or is likely to happen, it is relevant to note that some of the historical conditions which have provoked former coups continue to exist in Argentina. Likewise, and despite great efforts for the demilitarization of the society, particularly by Alfonsín (Menem has been discrete and even tolerant with some of the positions of the military regarding the political process), this still remains the great task to be carried out. Moreover, the

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Imagenlatina-Marco Antonio Cruz

Militarism has always been an obstacle for democracy in Latin America.

major factors that enabled the military to intervene in the past remain the central issues in Argentina and in people's daily lives today (which to some extent reflects the degree of fear and rejection of civil society of military intervention). Now that Menem is in his second term in a reasonably, though

only relatively, stable political process, the consequences of the critical confrontation between the economic "shock" program and the political process are still in doubt.

In short, the inability and to some extent the unwillingness of the civilian government to *modify the balance of*

forces, which provided the military with some extraordinary and critical advantages, and the general characteristics of the social struggle—heightened due to the economic crisis—give the observer the impression that general unrest is liable to break out at any moment. Needless to say, this kind of situation bodes ill for democratic transformations.

However, in the meantime it is preferable to critically agree with Alfonsín. After Rico's second military uprising in 1988 he was quoted as saying, "This is not Easter. When this gentleman mutinied last Easter, we had no loyal troops. Now we do, and they are the overwhelming majority. Caridi will suppress this rebellion, and a new phase will begin. For four years we have always had to do a delicate balancing act. Now, for the first time, we are in a position of strength with a high command committed to constitutional order" (*LAWR*, January 28, 1988).

CONCLUSION

Whether stable democracy is a utopia in Latin America today or not is mostly a matter of defining what kind of democracy civilians are able to make possible and thus what utopia they aspire to. Moreover, the future of democracy depends a great deal on the extent to which civil society and political circles are able to press for radical changes, and the extent to which the "cooperation" (Stepan 1986: 74) between the new civilian governments and the opposition might bring about new opportunities to improve current democratic achievements.

Nevertheless it is rather complicated to bet on the success of democracy if some basic conditions to make it possible are not created: independence from U.S. interventionism; development and economic growth; social justice and/or economic democracy; political opportunities for all representative sectors of society; and, most difficult, civilized ruling classes who agree to sharing wealth and power and decreased military involvement in national politics. These two last preconditions alone are utopian: a ruling class disposed to "sharing" considerable wealth and power and a military disposed to renouncing its "historic" task of defending the armed forces, social order and stability and to a great extent

the interests of the ruling classes seems unthinkable. Therefore, we conclude with Lamartine that since "utopias are but premature truths," it is too soon to speak of democracy in a continent in which any single truth is relative. ❧

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