

# The Changing Face Of Latin American Democracies Is the “Democratic Boom” Over?<sup>1</sup>

Rosario Green\*



Marcos Haupt/Reuters

Argentines commemorate another anniversary of bloody riots.

*Latin America staggers today under a new dictatorship: that of no alternatives, absence of powerful ideas and lack of imagination.*

ROBERTO MANGABEIRA

Fourteenth Meeting of Ambassadors and Consuls of Mexico  
Mexico City, January 6, 2003.

\* Current Mexican ambassador to Argentina, former minister of foreign affairs of Mexico and assistant secretary general of the United Nations.

## INTRODUCTION

It is a fact that Latin America's so-called “lost decade for development,” the 1980s, was also a time for the rebirth of democracy in the region. The Central American countries went from civil war to peace negotiations, while authoritarian military regimes in South America handed over power to civilians.

The 1990s reconciled most Latin American governments with political and economic liberties. They committed themselves to abide by the rule of law,

to respect human rights and to allow for the free market economy to flourish. The adoption of the policy reforms recommended by the Consensus of Washington and the holding of free and fair elections by universal suffrage became the foundations of the “democratic boom” in Latin American at the end of the century. Unfortunately, democracy and development did not grow at the same pace and soon this gap, together with other political and social issues, resulted in a profound dissatisfaction of Latin Americans with the function-

ing of democracy and its institutions in the region.

Three main reasons explain what is considered the current crisis of democracy in Latin America. These are: the weakness of civil society in most countries, the high level of corruption in both public and private sectors and the accumulation of an enormous social debt that has put half of the region's population below the line of extreme poverty.

#### CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRACY

The 2002 Latinobarómetro annual opinion poll measured Latin America's support for democracy. This survey, conducted by the Chilean organization regularly since 1996, covered 17 countries. Some of the report's most important findings are as follows:

First, even though Latin Americans are becoming somewhat more supportive of democracy, citizens have little trust in government policies, politicians and political parties.

In Argentina, for instance, support for the government at one point fell from almost 25 percent in 1996, to near zero in 2002. The slogan "*que se vayan todos*" or "they should all go" in reference to the ruling class was probably the best expression of Argentines' rejection of their politicians.

Chile, considered the most democratic country in Latin America, shows a very low level of trust in many of its political institutions. According to Latinobarómetro, while in 1996 nearly 30 percent of the people interviewed responded that they had confidence in political parties, in 2002 this figure was barely above 10 percent. Marta Lagos, head of this organization, recog-

nizes that these results anger and are rejected by Chilean politicians who do not want to face the fact that citizens are unhappy with the functioning of some of the most obvious icons of democracy.

Paraguay, however, is the country where the drop in confidence in political parties is most alarming. Their acceptance went from almost 40 percent in 1996 to 5 percent in 2002. It is very possible that the assassination of Vice-President Argaña in 1999 played an extremely important part in explaining this outcome.

Even in Mexico, where after more than 70 years in power the PRI lost the 2000 presidential elections to the PAN, trust in political parties fell to almost half, going from 20 percent in 1996 to 10 percent in 2002.

From these figures, one can conclude that a very important task lies

Even though Latin Americans are becoming somewhat more supportive of democracy, citizens have little trust in government policies, politicians and political parties.

ahead, since without political parties, among other requirements, democracy cannot take root. It is therefore imperative to ensure in civil society the drive to either reform or create the political institutions that truly represent its ideals and concerns.

Second, although most Latin Americans continue to believe that democracy is the best system, a significant percentage say that they would be willing to sacrifice some democratic achievements in favor of better economic results.

As a matter of fact, today more citizens in countries like Paraguay, Peru,

Panama, El Salvador and Bolivia think that under certain circumstances an authoritarian government can be preferable to a democratic one. According to Latinobarómetro, the citizens of three of these countries, El Salvador, Paraguay and Panama, have shifted somewhat to the right, which would explain this position. However, in the cases of Peru, the explanation lies in the disarray of the Fujimori government, and in Bolivia, Sánchez de Lozada's crisis, linked to the opposition to some of his policies, in particular his proposal to sell natural gas to the United States. But they also have to do with the demands of important sectors of the population, mostly very poor peasants who demand better living conditions or "the heads" of national leaders.

This does not imply that authoritarian regimes are coming back to Latin

America, however. In fact, one can expect quite the opposite, not only because memories are too recent and too painful, but also because the American continent has developed a new set of legal instruments to prevent and even penalize deviations from democracy. One has only to remember the unanimously approved Inter-American Democratic Charter adopted by the extraordinary meeting of the OAS, gathered in Lima the very same tragic September 11, 2001 to ensure that the members of the regional organization will not allow the return of dictatorships to the Americas.

Third, there is profound dissatisfaction with issues such as the general performance of the Latin American economies and the consequences of the process of privatization.

Because it is a fact that citizens have a tendency to identify support for democracy with the improvement of their economic situation, it is no wonder that in most of the Latin American countries this support was higher in 1996 than in 2002, when their economies were doing poorly. Perhaps the most striking example is Argentina, where in 2002 and 2003 almost 100 percent of the population thought that both their personal economic situation as well as that of their country were a major disaster. These results however, did not differ much from the rest of Latin America. For instance, only in Brazil, the Central American countries, Mexico and Venezuela did around 10

the population consulted by the public opinion survey firm Ipsos-Mora y Araujo agrees with the privatizations implemented by the government, the rest believe that either the state should re-acquire the privatized enterprises or it should at least enforce a very clear set of rules, particularly regarding prices of services and future investments.

#### CORRUPTION AND DEMOCRACY

One of the most important shortcomings undermining trust in democracy in the Latin American countries is the citizens' perception that corruption, both public and private, has worsened and become widespread in recent years.

Across the region some eight out of ten respondents to the Latinobarómetro poll believe that corruption has increased in the last three years. This

Today more citizens in Paraguay, Peru, Panama, El Salvador and Bolivia think that under certain circumstances an authoritarian government can be preferable to a democratic one.

percent of their citizens answer that their personal economic situation and that of their countries could be described as good or very good.

As far as privatization is concerned, the figures are even more impressive. Practically none of the Latin Americans interviewed think that the state should leave the economy wholly in the hands of the private sector. Furthermore, except for Mexico, there appears to be specific discontentment about the way public services have been privatized.

Coming back to the concrete case of Argentina, while only one-third of

result is very much linked to a general unhappiness with some of the matters discussed before: economic policies, in particular privatization of public services.

Although everywhere except in Uruguay a majority of respondents still believe that the market economy is best for their country, there is general concern about some of the results of the so-called neoliberal reforms implemented throughout Latin America. An important number of citizens believe that some of these reforms have favored both the leaders and the corporations more than the people.

According to former Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Otto Reich, when Latin Americans voice their loss of appetite for reforms, "They are actually expressing their frustration with the imperfect implementation of market economies and with the persistence of corruption, rather than with the models themselves." Paraphrasing Winston Churchill and Reich himself, one is tempted to say that "democracy and free markets are the worst systems of government and resource allocation, with the exception of all the others."

Of course corruption —both public and corporate— is not a monopoly of Latin America. Notorious scandals in the United States, such as those of Enron and WorldCom speak for themselves. However, it is a fact that in its 2003 Corruption Perception Index, the World Bank states that one of the most worrisome trends in Latin America and the Caribbean over the past two years was the notable erosion of honesty, transparency and good practices.

What is more, Transparency International has produced research that indicates that the cost of corruption in some South American countries amounts to U.S.\$6,000 per capita annually, an extraordinarily alarming figure when one considers that a third of Latin Americans live on less than U.S.\$2 a day. The chairman of this organization, Peter Eagan, goes even further, saying, "In parts of South America, the graft and misrule of political elites have drained confidence in the democratic structures that emerged after the end of military rule." No wonder Latinobarómetro published a figure according to which 80 percent of those surveyed said that corruption has increased in

recent years. No wonder either that this view has been accompanied by growing dissatisfaction of the citizens with their leaders, their businessmen and even their system of government.

A recent poll by Transparency International according to which the cleanest country of the world, Finland, approaches 10 points and the most corrupt, Bangladesh, is placed near to zero, shows that in Argentina, for example, the citizens' perception of corruption has gone from 2.8 in 2001 to 2.5 in 2002, rating the country as number 92 among the 133 nations included in the survey. This deterioration is worst in Bolivia and Honduras with 2.3 points each, and in Paraguay and Haiti with only 1.6 and 1.5, respectively. Other countries in the region such as Brazil, Colombia, Peru, El Salvador, Mexico, Panama and the Dominican Republic, are in a slightly better position showing figures between 3.9 and 3.3 points. Only Chile, located in twentieth place, receives an acceptable rating: 7.4 points.

#### SOCIAL DEBT AND DEMOCRACY

In a recently published book, *The Interaction between Democracy and Development*, Boutros Boutros-Ghali states that for a long time both concepts remained foreign to each other in the eyes of analysts. However, "with the end of the bipolarization of the world, the decline of centralized State systems, the demise of most authoritarian governments and the emergence of new organizations spawned by civil society, the democracy/development dialectic finally became a central subject of contemporary debate." Today, everyone agrees that there is a close relationship between democracy and development.

Therefore, if the latter is not fair and good enough, the first suffers.

According to Latinobarómetro, support for democracy may have bounced back in line with a slight improvement over the past few months in how Latin Americans see their economic situation. Concretely, in the case of Argentina, if today's support for democracy is higher, it is due to the so-called "economic summer" that took place at the end of 2002. However, when the time span is enlarged, in all but four countries included in the poll (Chile and Mexico among them), this support was lower at the end of 2002 than in 1996, probably because of Latin America's generally poor economic performance over that specific lapse of time, proving once more that weak economies breed political frustration.

It is a fact that in the last few years, Latin America accumulated a gigan-

A well-known scholar, Tulio Halperín, maintains that this political crisis was linked to the inability of the ruling class to design a project for the new Argentina, sticking instead to the old model based on the export of traditional goods, such as staples and raw materials, and import substitution. However, the previous ways could no longer ensure the social mobility that in the past created and fortified the middle classes and their access to education and culture, health and food, employment and housing.

According to another expert, Ernesto Semán, because Argentineans believed both that the first constitutional government had brought back "civility", and that the long years of Menem's presidency had offered them "stability", they had expected De la Rúa's administration to provide them with "all the rest", meaning the reduction of the social

There is profound dissatisfaction with issues such as the general performance of Latin American economies and the consequences of the process of privatization.

tic social debt that injured faith in democracy. One of the immediate consequences was the gathering of crowds on the streets demanding prompt changes and even the fall of their government leaders. An extreme example was indeed Argentina. All through 2001, popular discontent against President Fernando De la Rúa took thousands of people to the *plazas* to protest, banging pots and pans in actions that were called "*cacerolazos*", while thousands more who were unemployed and called themselves "*piqueteros*" jeopardized access to the city of Buenos Aires, making traffic a nightmare.

gap and the elimination of corruption. Frustration was therefore in order. By June 2001, Menem was in jail; "Chacho" Álvarez had resigned the vice-presidency; De la Rúa's popularity after only 18 months was in the single digits and continued to fall; and Cavallo, Menem's "financial genius" brought back by De la Rúa in an attempt to get hold of the economic situation, was considered a "failure". The end result is well known: on December 20, 2001, De la Rúa was overthrown and three presidents (Puerta, Rodríguez Saá and Camaño) were sworn in before finally, on January 1, 2002, Eduardo Duhalde

committed himself to “administer the emergency” until May 25, 2003 when, not without complications, Néstor Kirchner was elected president of Argentina for the next four years.

Several analysts strongly believe that, without diminishing the importance of social claims, the participation of other political actors played a significant role in what they consider a “civil coup d’état” against De la Rúa. Whether that was so or not, a number of issues should be underlined.

First, the seriousness of the socio-economic indicators cannot be underestimated when explaining the crisis in Argentina. Fifty-seven point five percent of Argentineans are poor; 17.8 percent of the work force is unemployed; and 30 percent of the most affluent population enjoys 65.3 percent of national income, while the 30 percent considered the poorest has to make do with only 7.8 percent.

Second, regardless of any justification for action based upon such inequality, the 2001 crises in Argentina created a very dangerous non-alternative to the democratic path marked by free and fair elections and respect for the powers of the state. With or without political manipulation, the people took over the streets and together with this, in a way beheaded the institutions. And although it may be true that since the beginning of social revolutions, the “spirit of freedom” is also born in the streets, if it is not soon translated into constitutional ways forward and parliamentary actions, it will lead indeed to chaos and anarchy.

Third, the Argentinean crisis gave birth to an example that could be copied by other countries and peoples in distress, making the prospect of a “domino effect” something more than mere

speculation. As a matter of fact, “*cacerolazos*” also took place in Uruguay very much around the same time as the crisis in Argentina. In Bolivia, as mentioned above, thousands of people marched against its president a short time later. And in Argentina again, the “*piqueteros*” continue to block traffic and cause all kinds of disturbances, prompting national newspaper editorials to maintain that although “democracy enshrines freedom of expression, assembly and protest, those rights cannot be exercised without taking into account the rights of others as well as the existence of institutional channels

lic policies truly designed to distribute income with equity amongst the population. An alternative in which the state stops being the autistic partner while citizens are forced to stray from the formal sector of the economy and survive only on their own means and communal solidarity. An alternative with a credible system of checks and balances that translates into rewards for those who comply and punishment for those who do not. An alternative, finally, where democracy is equal to participation and social well-being.

A culture, on the other hand, that while giving priority to democracy and

One of the most important shortcomings undermining trust in democracy is the citizens’ perception that corruption, both public and private, has worsened.

to address demands” (*Clarín*, 26 September 2003).

#### CONCLUSIONS

Last year, at a Mexico City conference, Roberto Mangabeira said that Latin America staggers today under the dictatorship of no alternatives, absence of powerful ideas and lack of imagination. And although this may be so, it is also true of the world in general, particularly after the war against Iraq and its consequences on multilateral institutions as well as on regional cohesion. Maybe that is why today more than ever, Latin America has to imagine a way to make both political and economic freedom compatible. In order to do so, it has to build up an alternative and a new culture. An alternative founded on the implementation of pub-

fostering its activist defense, enhances respect for legality, alerts against any influence that may corrupt its claims and rejects the use of violence of any kind. A culture that encourages civil society to increase its involvement and to be more vigilant of the functioning of governments and institutions. A culture that reconciles political participation, economic affluence and social equity. A culture, finally, where freedom has only one meaning: the fulfilling of all needs and the respect for all. **MM**

---

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This paper was prepared for the Third Annual Latin America Conference of the Americas Society, held in New York, October 17, 2003.