

Input for the meeting of the Progressive Alliance in

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Risks, degradation and alterations of democracies in Latin America

It is not enough to denounce the conservative and extremist political shift that has affected a wide range of countries throughout the world as "new fascism". The urgent issue is to understand and describe what it means and under what political and emotional conditions the degradation of democracies occurs. In what context does it take place? Which forces drive these processes? How do their supporters communicate with societies? What are their methods?

1. Crisis of government, of parties and of representation, without open ruptures in the democratic consensus.

One of the greatest difficulties that arises in terms of analysis and particularly with respect to political action under the current circumstances is that the regressive alterations of democracies occur without open ruptures of the democratic consensus. For Latin America, this consensus is the most significant in the political history of the region, and no one appears ready to abandon it. In addition, actors need not have openly rejected democracy to nonetheless pursue policies that degrade democratic quality.

During the first two decades of the 21st century, the societies of the Americas have experienced an unprecedented democratic expansion. This has been achieved through the higher profile and participation of previously neglected and marginalised actors and social interest groups (oligarchies always existed and controlled the democratic game). Democratic expansion brings new parties, new agenda items and new national issues to a central place in politics. In the realm of political parties, democratic expansion manifests itself as changes in power, through the broad success of old and new challenging parties. Obvious



examples are the Workers' Party (PT) in Brazil, Broad Front (FA) in Uruguay, and National Action Party (PAN) and Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) in Mexico. With certain distinctions and differences, this movement of political and electoral orientations also includes the victories of the Movement for Socialism (MAS) in Bolivia; United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV); Citizen Revolution Movement in Ecuador; and Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) in El Salvador. Although the Concertación in Chile cannot be considered a challenging party, it constituted part of the wide range of movements that became known as "Latin American progressivism". The triumph of Peronism, which became Kirchnerism, also contributed to some extent to restoring the legitimacy of the Argentine political system, which had declined during the 2001 crisis, recreating a political option that was a reaction to the Menemist neo-liberalism of the 1990s.

In the second decade of the century, a political change that removed most of these government parties from office occurred, inaugurating more than a change in political orientation. In all cases, the crisis of governance overlaps with the loss of the parties' ability to provide political representation, in a spiral that shows signs of being a systemic crisis. The crisis of representation does not appear solely in the loss of elections. The electoral defeats are most likely a consequence of the inability of the progressive parties (which increased during their years of governing) to engage in dialogue with the most dynamic sectors of society, such as youth, feminist movements and environmentalists.

In post-progressive Latin America, different forms and degrees of degradation of democracies are attained without traditional coups d'état, through elections and other resources available to the system (judiciary, media, etc.). The winners capitalise in an antidemocratic manner on the ills of societies that were empowered by democracy, freedom of expression, the conquest of old and new social rights, and higher educational levels. In most cases, their rhetoric is based on anti-political and anti-system arguments, even if the advocates of those arguments are members of the system and elites of long-standing. It is well-known that they theoretically act within the democratic consensus. Both the means of access to power and the way of exercising it, however, involve regressive transformations of the robustness and culture of democracy in these societies. The most obvious example in South



America is Brazil, although it is far from being the only one.

As for the profile of the winners of this political turn: They are fundamentalist advocates of the market, meritocracy, order and family; and extreme nationalists, xenophobic and hostile to the poor. They man the global trenches in the fight against "gender ideology" and feminism. They build political hegemony through a rhetoric of crisis and moral and material panic, as well as the promise of bringing back the ideal former order that has been disrupted by their political enemies¹. The promise of violence is part of their rhetoric for gaining power, and the use of institutional, symbolic and material violence is part of their governing repertoire.

Other variants of democratic degradation, without changing the political orientation of a government, are occurring in Venezuela and Nicaragua. In both countries, the state has not formally broken the political contract of its respective constitution but has implemented spirals of state violence (including irregular forces at the service of the government parties), restriction of basic freedoms, and closure of legitimate avenues for other political forces to access the government. The government parties in both cases also rely on the rhetoric of fundamentalism, crisis and panic.

2. Rhetoric of order, faith, crisis and degradation of democracies.

The processes we mention here as degradations of democracies are considered by Latinobarómetro [*a polling organisation*] as marking the end of the third democratic wave. For that reason, its director defines 2018 as *Annus Horribilis*². With the perspective provided by subsequent events, it is possible to recognise signs and trends that fuelled such drastic political and cultural changes and the fact that the elites could not or would not see them. The beginning of the 21st century brought warnings about "the syndrome of democratic consolidation with the growing instability and illegitimacy of politics"³. Latinobarómetro presents a long series of surveys at the continental level that shows a

¹ We refer to fundamentalism as a suspension of the culture and power of deciding, based on the crisis caused by moral and material panic in a society, in the sense given by feminist theologian Nancy Cardozo, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bcy78w-RAg0>

² See Marta Lagos in <http://www.latinobarometro.org/lat.jsp>

³ See also "Political parties in Latin America today: consolidation or crisis?" by Marcelo Cavarozzi and Esperanza Casullo, 2002.



sustained trend toward what we might call a cultural reconciliation with authoritarianism. It is exemplified by a growing preference for non-democratic solutions, and especially by the sustained decline in the prestige of political parties, governments, parliaments, unions and other institutions of democracy. By contrast, the prestige of military, police and faith-based actors has increased⁴. In other words, the rhetoric about faith and order had extended its influence in societies before important political players used that rhetoric as a tool for winning. The winners of the political shift challenged the establishment, which was mainly progressive, and defeated it through rhetorical escalations that combined both violence and cynicism. The routes to power went through the explicit and brutal breakdown of the shared political correctness in addressing the main issues on which hard-won consensus had been reached: women's rights, anti-racism, peace, indigenous populations and concern for the environment, to mention the most obvious. Against these agendas, right-wing extremists responded with violence at a level that matched the prestige previously achieved by these issues and their advocates. They always did so in rhetorical terms focused on highly sensitive issues such as the privileges and corruption of elites in contrast to the needs of the most vulnerable groups of the population, and crime and insecurity, in a mix both sophisticated and cynical. For example, attacks on quotas granted for various reasons for access to higher education or employment suggest that these are privileges comparable to the most glaring social inequalities. Advances in the field of rights for women at different levels are recast as forms of destruction of morals and the family, that is, of society. In particular, the fight against gender ideology is a theme common to the pronouncements of all extremist variants worldwide.

The degradation of democracies is above all a violent and moralistic rhetorical process, which relies on fragments of reality and symbolically reorganises their meanings. In all cases, its success is linked to the widespread involvement of the mass media as notable disseminators of rhetorical violence.

⁴See 2018 Report at <http://www.latinobarometro.org/lat.jsp>



3. Perplexity and opportunistic and short-term responses to the signs of democratic crisis

The parties and elites, in general, swung between denial and the illusion of capitalising on social ills for their own immediate interests through "politics". They reacted more competitively than collaboratively; dominated by the short-term considerations (winning elections), and without undertaking a critical analysis of the process and their own performances. As parties they began to act according to a market rationale, one of consumption and of providing good government services, rather than as intellectual and political leaders⁵.

In the absence of a democratic critique of democracy, emotional and subjective conditions will be oriented toward democratic regressions of democracies. The social unrest produced by contemporary capitalism was redirected as criticism and discrediting of political actors. It flourishes through anti-political rhetoric used to capture the scenarios of democratic politics. The progressive parties in particular, when in power, occupied a key position during the processes of regression and decline of democracies in the region. The availability of political power at the national and regional levels was significant, and collective expectations were commensurate with that power. As was the frustration. Overall, it can be said that progressivism developed downward adjustment processes for the expectations and promises of its platform, and this had repercussions in many fields. These included two very important ones: a) the dispersion of their social and political bases and, b) the strengthening of the power (in every sense) of the adversaries of their transformative programs. The global crises of the early 21st century triggered new rhetoric in terms of the restrictions and adjustments that confronted societies where both awareness of inequalities and expectations of improving actual living conditions were growing. The frustration of the expectations of improvement (change) in times of vital importance to people and their families provoked a radicalisation of the intolerance for

⁵"Neoliberalism turns the citizen into a consumer. The freedom of the citizen yields to the passivity of the consumer. Voters, as consumers, have no real interest in politics, in the active configuration of the community. They are neither inclined to nor qualified for joint political action. *They only react passively to politics, grumbling and complaining, like consumers confronted with goods and services they find unsatisfactory.* Politicians and parties also follow this logic of consumption. They have to *provide*. In this way they are degraded to suppliers who have to satisfy voters as consumers or customers." (Byung-Chul-Han; Psychopolitics. 2018. Italics are those of the author)



old and new inequalities. Intolerance in the face of injustice is by no means a conservative feeling. In the absence of a clear political strategy of progressivism, however, malaise with the system grew and was capitalised upon by conservative, extremist and fundamentalist actors.

4. Corporate captures of democracies.

In the current period, corporate power acquired structured and organised forms that incorporate levels from the transnational to that of people's most ordinary daily life. This includes the power of government.

- a. It expanded the power of *lobbies* thanks to the financing of increasingly expensive and less issue-oriented political campaigns; captured the legal sphere; took control of information and academic output; and eroded the privacy of all people living in societies with multiple channels of communication. The new map of corporate financial power is manifested in the acts of capture [one by one] of the most relevant fields, either using existing frameworks or the "creative interpretation of the law". Transnational corporations are the most efficient political lobbying agencies, with power that is consolidated with every act of expanding their real power to exploit natural resources and income from land without regard to borders.
- b. Tax havens represent territorial enclaves that isolate the state within the confines of a hypothetical territorial and legal sovereignty. The growing dependence on the profits flowing from these financial enclaves for both carrying out state policies and renewing electoral credits constitutes two central features of corporate capture.
- c. The [almost total] loss of sovereignty emerges as a [natural] consequence of the new rules of democracy. Market discourse almost completely replaced political power, making political leaders unable to implement alternative projects, because their capacity for action is stifled within the rules of a democratic game that is now financial.
- d. The capture of politicians becomes rapid and efficient whenever politics became a phenomenon of marketing,



image and entertainment (TV and networks). This capture is operationalised by: a) co-opting and buying the parties, giving them guarantees of competency through the enormous economic resources that are necessary to make policy and; b) the power to institute the framework within which "what is possible" is situated, through processes of the media, judiciary, and other coalitions⁶.

5. New coalitions of power

While the traditional political class distracted itself by contesting areas of power according to traditional forms and rationalities, new actors and coalitions were building the scenarios and circumstances where societies opted for the political course that is the subject of these comments. These coalitions are unstable, or at least very flexible. They achieve their impact through interventions on issues that dominate the contemporary agenda, or that some of the actors in these coalitions place on the agenda. Issues that seem to be uniform across global conservative agendas are antifeminism, the fight against gender ideology and familism (the traditional family as the basis of society). The issues also include the widespread corruption of the elites (theft and inefficiency) and individual and collective insecurities (crime, employment, disease, and the environment as a threat and not as a shared responsibility). Together these coalitions are structured around sensationalising corruption and abuses of power, fear, fomenting hostility and cultivating contempt for everything different. These emotions are used to feed a collective subjectivity prone to radicalisation, excess, quick solutions, intolerance of differences, and contempt for reasoned debate and measured deliberation. In sum, this is the emotional framework necessary and sufficient for the triumph of actors disseminating rhetoric that is hostile to politics and degrades the attributes of mature democracies. In these coalitions, the media (transnational and concentrated entities, with a prominent place for large platforms) are key and irreplaceable actors. Other players that identify themselves as key animators of the emerging anti-politics are transnational corporations, religious institutions and

⁶ The example of Odebrecht clearly emerges when one thinks about this subject, but it is nevertheless merely a conspicuous example of Latin extravagance, of a global phenomenon.



agents of legitimate or illegitimate violence (regular and irregular forces and judicial authorities). It is necessary to emphasise that these are not formal coalitions, but that they become viable in the context of complex processes, where the action of some in their own spheres of action and interest strengthens the power of the others. These are processes where the victory of the electoral manifestations of anti-politics seems to be the consequence of other transformations previously effected in the field of contemporary power, especially in the cultural and emotional realms.

6. An open agenda

1. Understanding: Understand what is happening (rethink, debate, try new paths without fear of being wrong - once again)
2. Narrative: Prepare a progressive narrative of the conservative political turn
3. Initiative: Regain the political initiative on key issues for democracy (reform of political, judicial, and media systems and freedom of expression)
4. Alliances: Openness to dialogue. Search for collective actors who in theory and in practice propose democratic innovations.
5. Democracy: Democratisation of party life