

Mariano de Alba: “The international community is not capable, and will not be, of halting authoritarianism in Venezuela”

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The lawyer, an expert in International Law and advisor to the Crisis Group, warns that the weakness of institutions, freedom of expression, political parties, and the rise of corruption threaten democracy in the region.

–How would you describe the current state of democracy in Latin America?

It is evident that we are in a period of democratic recession. Recent assessments show that most countries in the region are experiencing a significant decline in respect for civil and political rights and in upholding democratic principles. In Latin America, we face a dual challenge: in authoritarian regimes, this trend is solidifying, while in democracies, the quality of democratic governance is declining.

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The problems are diverse and go far beyond the lack of electoral conditions or the disregard for results. The rise of social media is not contributing to generating constructive debate to solve the issues affecting the majority but rather fuels populism and more emotional rather than rational positions.

To this, we must add a very concerning issue: the growing role of international actors meddling in the internal affairs of other countries to take sides with a particular political faction. Finally, I would also highlight corruption as a problem affecting democracy, especially because citizens are increasingly skeptical of the democratic model as they perceive that it fails to improve their quality of life. Rather, the perception is that certain elites come to power democratically only to gain personal and political benefits for themselves.

-Democracy in Latin America has at least three open wounds: Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. However, Nayib Bukele's actions in El Salvador also raise alarms, and what will happen with Javier Milei in Argentina is a mystery. Is it confirmed that authoritarianism is not an issue of ideologies?

If we review the history of the 20th century, it is evident that authoritarianism is not a matter of ideologies. Authoritarianism in Latin America, especially in Venezuela, was not an overnight event. Instead, the country experienced a progressive and pronounced deterioration of its democratic guarantees, starting with the system of checks and balances due to the increasing political control over the Judicial and Electoral

branches and other institutions, but also the weakening of the press and the right to freedom of expression.

The alarms ringing in El Salvador and Argentina are justified. Bukele's security policy has indeed been successful so far, but at this point, it is unknown how sustainable it will be in the long run and whether the gangs will eventually regain their strength. Meanwhile, the country has experienced a significant weakening of its democratic guarantees, as evidenced by the lack of transparency and clarity about the results of the recent legislative elections. Here, we come back to a growing phenomenon in the region, especially among the younger population: as long as there are concrete results in improving quality of life, a significant portion of the population shows indifference about whether this is achieved through authoritarian methods. In the case of Argentina, it is still too early to draw definitive conclusions, largely because it is a country with a much more robust institutional framework than El Salvador.

A key element of democratic systems is the possibility for society to be represented by different political parties. In Latin America, however, political parties have experienced a significant decline as they are now perceived less as representatives of societal sentiments and needs and more as organizations serving the interests of elites.

A growing and concerning phenomenon in our region is that political parties, meant to be the seeds of the democratic system, are internally operating with less transparency and democracy. Leadership cannot be imposed. A democratic

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system is meant to convince the citizens; and democracy is strong to the extent that different political parties can act democratically and build consensus with other parties.

There is an urgent and profound task in the region where, in recent years, and perhaps Hugo Chávez was the paradigmatic case, we've witnessed a surge of leaders in the region who, claiming to embody popular representation, impose their will without convincing others.

-The recent case in Ecuador has shown to what extent organized crime can jeopardize democracy in the region. In your opinion, what are the main threats democracy is currently facing in Latin America?

If I were to highlight three, they would be the following: Firstly, the weakness of our institutions and the lack of a State vision. Respect for a system of checks and balances is fundamental for democracy to exist and be in good health. We still have a long way to go in building independent and capable institutions to address the issues of citizenship and avoid being the instrument of a party or a specific group that holds power.

Secondly, I am very concerned about the weakening of freedom of expression and the spaces for constructive and respectful debate. For democracy to function, it is crucial to be able to build consensus with those who think differently. Populism, although not exclusively a Latin American phenomenon, I believe is causing a lot of harm. The objective of many politicians is no longer to build solutions but to seize

power to enrich themselves when they achieve it, and for this, they are capable of promising mirages.

Lastly, I would highlight corruption and the weakening of political parties. Part of the reason for the rise of organized crime in Latin America is how easily these organizations can corrupt public officials, authorities who were supposed to combat crime. And, in the case of political parties, they are weakening institutions: citizens are more focused on what a specific leader says than on an organization that reaches conclusions and defines a course of action after deliberation. This makes it much more difficult for society to progress together.

–It seems that Latin America abounds with strong leaders and weak institutions. What should be done to control the former and strengthen the latter?

To control strong leaders, what is needed is precisely strong institutions. However, as long as the population perceives that these strong leaders achieve tangible results in improving people's quality of life, controlling them becomes much more difficult. Another element I have already mentioned, but that is worth developing further, is the State vision. In most of the region, we are used to seeing that when a new government comes to power, it starts from scratch. They believe they have a blank canvas to advance their project. That is a serious mistake. Perhaps Chile is the only country in the region that has achieved this through sustained success.

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The development of a nation and achieving results is impossible if there is a change every four, five, or six years and we start from scratch. Latin American societies must be able to set medium and long-term goals and not derail due to a political change. To strengthen institutions, it is key to build greater civic participation, achieve results in educating the population, and ensure public officials' specialization and fair remuneration.

Citizens must be able to trust the institutions, and that is only achieved through transparency, when citizens perceive that institutions are at the service of the people, always striving to act within the rule of law and with the intention of protecting the public interest.

–Although democratic charters are signed, the region lacks institutional mechanisms to intervene efficiently in safeguarding freedoms in Latin America. How can we progress in this direction with governments that are so protective of their independence and autonomy?

Indeed, it looks very challenging at the moment. It will require governments in the region to understand the usefulness of such institutional mechanisms, which could result from greater pressure from Latin American societies.

The recent trend is that the interest in an institutional framework aimed at safeguarding freedoms is frankly minimal. Therefore, it might make sense to start with issues that have a greater impact on the lives of citizens in the region. For example, establishing institutions to enable the region to

respond collectively to diseases or a new pandemic and presenting a united front on how to address climate change.

On the other hand, I believe that, given the collapse of regional institutionalism, it would be worthwhile to rethink which international commitments the countries in the region are truly willing to undertake and go forward with them. It is evident that there was no actual willingness to respect and fulfill most of the commitments made in the 20th and early 21st centuries. They were signed with little sense of responsibility, more as a mere formality. That never works and requires maturity and State vision from governments.

–Focusing on the Venezuelan case: Presidents Petro and Lula, as well as former president Mujica of Uruguay, have questioned the Maduro regime's decision to prevent the opposition candidate from running. How do you interpret these statements? Could the intensification of authoritarianism break these political alliances?

Naturally, these are positive statements in response to very evident violations, including of specific commitments that the Venezuelan government itself signed just a few months ago in Barbados. However, it's clear that statements alone won't achieve anything.

The governments of Brazil and Colombia should leverage their access and dialogue with the Venezuelan government to try to persuade it to allow competitive elections that can be recognized by the region. At the same time, they could serve as a bridge to listen to and convey the interests of Chavismo to the

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rest of the international community, helping to build a negotiated solution to the Venezuelan conflict.

I'm skeptical whether the escalation of authoritarianism could break those political alliances because, given the recent experience in Venezuela, even if the Maduro government manages to prevail in the presidential election, there will be significant inertia to recognize him as president and continue working with him due to the control he exercises over power. At the end of the day, Colombia and Brazil, as well as other Western countries, have their particular interests and will seek to defend them, even above what may be in the interests of Venezuelans.

–When confronted with Maduro's abuses, there's often discussion about the response of the international community. However, it's evident that this international community has been unable to halt Chavista authoritarianism. What can be expected from the governments of the region, and to what extent can they contribute to the transition in Venezuela?

From 2016, approximately, the Venezuelan opposition mistakenly began to build a narrative that hoped for the international community to resolve the serious issues Venezuela has been facing. Even today, there is still an excessive tendency to expect too much from the international community, which is certainly not capable, and will not be, of halting authoritarianism in the country. It's a task that fundamentally falls upon Venezuelans themselves.

The international community indeed has influence, but much less than some may think. Given the tools and limited infrastructure they have, what can be expected from the region's governments is not only to adopt a position in defense of democracy and respect for human rights, but also to seek mechanisms to make that a reality again in Venezuela. These mechanisms are limited, and basically consist of diplomatic efforts where it's crucial to establish a relationship, listen, and study how to convince the government, which is one of the actors in the conflict.

–All studies agree on highlighting that Latin America is one of the most unequal regions in the world. Can democracy survive amidst the poverty of its citizens?

It will become increasingly difficult for democracy to survive if it cannot address the main problems faced by citizens, and among these problems, economic situation always ranks high. However, the citizens of this region must also be aware that authoritarianism does not guarantee positive economic outcomes. Rather, recent cases like that of El Salvador should be considered. Now that it has managed to control the security situation, that country's economy poses a major challenge for the government of Bukele.

The region and its citizens must accept that the stronger a country's democracy with a clear rule of law, the more likely it is to attract domestic and international investment, which ultimately creates jobs and can contribute to reducing inequality. While another raw materials cycle cannot be ruled out, where state revenues are significant, it is not foreseen for

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the short to medium term. Therefore, private investment is crucial, and even authoritarian regimes like Venezuela, albeit with their limitations, have come to understand this.