

***Palestra proferida no recebimento do
2006 Global Leadership Award***

The Chicago Council on Foreign Relations

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is summertime in Brazil right now. But there are very good reasons for me to leave behind the milder temperatures of my home country and be here with you tonight, in this great and yet freezing cold city.

It is indeed an honor for me to be granted the 2006 Global Leadership Award by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations. I did not hesitate for a minute to come when I was informed of the invitation. And here I am, together with the other personalities who are being honored by the Council.

I have been told that the Global Leadership Award has been conferred on me as a sign of the Council's recognition for my efforts to promote sustainable growth, human development and democracy both in Latin America and in my own country.

I left office in 2002 after two consecutive terms and eight years as President of Brazil.

That is all still recent, maybe too close in time, simply too early for any fair assessment of whatever contribution I may have left. And incidentally it is not appropriate for me ever to pass judgment on that legacy. No one is a good arbiter of his or her own deeds, particularly when it comes to politicians.

In any event, I am extremely grateful and pleased to share a few remarks with you tonight.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I started my political life relatively late. As a youngster and even as an adult, I had always intended to be a Professor, I had planned to live a quiet and intellectually rich life among students and books.

I was almost fifty when I decided to run for the first time in 1978 as a candidate for Senator in São Paulo. I was elected President when I was sixty three.

What reasons have prompted me to change course? In fact, there was virtually only one reason: military rule in Brazil. The military took power by force in 1964 and left it only in 1985. It was one of longest military dictatorships in South America.

Soon after the coup, I was first prevented from teaching and later on forced to leave Brazil by the authoritarian regime. I lived many years in Chile during the sixties as an exile.

Absence of democracy in Brazil caused me to rethink my whole life in the sixties. It was only natural therefore that, in the seventies, I joined the political forces that were pushing for democracy in Brazil. The fight for democracy is therefore the fight of my life, the fight of my generation of politicians in Brazil and in other parts of Latin America.

It was mostly by chance that I became President, as a result of a succession of lucky accidents rather than of any detailed plan that I had been following, as my critics argue. Hence the title of my memoir, "The Accidental President of Brazil", that I am now launching in the United States.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me now make a few remarks of the current situation of democracy in Latin America.

Some informed analysts have seen cause for concern in some of the latest developments in the region. They watch at the new leadership in Latin America and can recognize, among the new faces, a few who, in their view, have little respect for the rule of law and for democracy, in addition to boasting leftist credentials.

For my part, I see things differently, probably on a more optimistic note.

There is no denying that democracy has been weakened lately in some countries. The door has been opened to demagoguery, and to a kind of populism that is heavily tinged with nationalism. Political speech has dangerously shifted from rational discourse to the vagueness of grand rhetoric and empty phraseology. This poses a risk to democracy that one underestimates at his own peril.

Lack of economic growth has been widely mistaken for failure of democracy, thereby generating a disbelief in institutions, in the inner workings of representative democracy. This is the breeding ground for threats to democratic rule, to the continuation of reform, to the strengthening of institutions.

However, the basic fact is that democracy has been preserved in Latin America over the past twenty years. Democracy, albeit fragile in some countries, is there for anyone to see.

This becomes clearer if one does not look at Latin America not as a uniform political landscape. Differences

probably matter more than commonalities in the region.

Leaders of the left such as Hugo Chávez, Tabaré Vázquez, Néstor Kirchner, Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, Evo Morales and Michelle Bachelet have origins as different as can be. Most of them have not been questioning the economic reform measures implemented by their predecessors.

By the same token, strong and vibrant democracies co-exist with frail political systems. By way of illustration, let me Bolivia, Ecuador and Costa Rica as countries in which formal democracy has been hardly preserved over the past few years.

At the other extreme, I think I can mention Chile and my own country, Brazil.

A society has been formed in Brazil that thinks and acts independently, irrespective of whoever holds political power. It is a society of urban masses that is used to exerting pressure to try to obtain whatever it wants. It is an "open" society, an unjust and yet an open society, marked by high levels of social mobility.

The dynamism of our open society calls for more efficient and less arrogant actions by the State. It calls for partnership where there was imposition, dialogue where there was a monologue, autonomy where there was bureaucratic centralism.

It demands flexibility, a spirit of constant negotiation, tolerance, respect. It requires diversity of vision. It can do without saviors who pride themselves on being the bearers of a messianic ideology. Our society condemns corruption and would not condone any form of delusional explanations for acts of corruption. It is saturated with self-congratulatory and otherwise empty speech.

That is why, dear friends, I am still positive, very positive about Latin America.

The way forward will demand a lot of hard work and difficult choices. Economic reform was the easy part, so to say. Now we must go ahead with political reform in other areas of the State in order to make democracy a more tangible reality. We must change some of the ways in which we have behaved traditionally. But we must go on with reform if we want to continue taking a justified pride in our democracy.

It is my belief that, if reform is given a new impetus, Latin America will, rather than move Right or Left, simply move forward.