

# ***The need for Global Democratic Governance: a Perspective from Latin America***

Henry Kissinger Lectures in Foreign Policy and International Relations  
Library of Congress

Washington D.C. (USA), 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2005.

Democracy, as we all know, is not a new political concept. But only recently can democracy claim to command virtually universal support in the world. There is no alternative to democracy today. Where it is not yet a reality, it is certainly an aspiration. The fall of communism in the late eighties was a milestone in the process leading to the expansion of democracy - as was, by the way, the end of the undemocratic military regimes to which most countries in Latin America were subjected during the Cold War. Communism failed to deliver the goods and values to which people aspire, and that is the main reason for its monumental collapse.

Globalization is another contemporary force driving societies toward higher levels of freedom. To the extent that communications can now flow fast and unhindered across the world, democratic practices can no longer be prevented from entering previously closed societies. Emulation generates demands for greater participation in the decision-making process, demands that must be met, to some degree, even by leaders of authoritarian regimes. At the same time, and I am referring to very recent developments, promoting democracy seems to have become a newfound justification for actions taken by the most important - in fact, the only - superpower, the United States, on the international stage.

Spreading democracy has acquired religious overtones. It has become almost a new crusade. True, it would have been unthinkable a few years ago that the Taliban would be removed from power and elections held in Afghanistan; that Saddam Hussein would be captured and fair elections successfully organized in Iraq. Likewise, it would have been difficult to imagine that the succession of Yasser Arafat in Palestine could be accomplished as smoothly as it was, thanks, again, to fair elections.

But let us not run the risk of oversimplifying, for the pursuit of democracy in all those cases was secondary to security concerns. Democracy has been instrumental in achieving other and certainly more relevant objectives for the U.S. administration, such as:

- fighting terrorism, in the case of Afghanistan;
- destroying alleged weapons of mass destruction and protecting oil fields, in Iraq;
- and helping promote a peace process with Israel, in the case of Palestine.

Even if we consider all these developments positive ones, and mostly they are, there is little room for complacency. Democracy is far from being a reality today in several countries, indeed entire regions of the world, ranging from such communist die-hards as Vietnam, North Korea, and Cuba - not to mention China - to different forms of authoritarian rule in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia.

In Latin America, albeit relatively fragile in some areas, democracy seems to be withstanding the test of time. Over the past twenty years, it has survived economic stagnation in the region. It has outlived institutional crises. It has resisted attacks by populists and by demagogues. And the military, having spread violence in the past, remain today in the barracks, with no plausible chance to make a comeback.

Currently, no matter what their political orientation, be they left or right-wing, candidates for any elected post in Latin American countries do not challenge democratic principles openly, and the same applies to the market economy. But the fact remains that democracy is precarious in areas of Latin America.

An interesting study on the state of democracy in the region, recently released by the United Nations Development Program, is clear: promises for a better life that democracy carried with it are still to come true for most Latin Americans. And this gives rise to a sense of hopelessness, of fatigue, that is dangerous for democratic rule.

There is in the world today what I would call a changed reality of democracy. Far from being a formal and abstract construction, a theoretical concept only, the democracy that today has so many followers must mean something real, alive, something that is almost touchable. It has to live up to people's concrete expectations. It has to deliver better living standards for all. Otherwise it will fail in the long run.

A deep desire for renewal is behind this movement toward democracy. People experience a greater sense of political freedom. They want a greater say in all public matters. They mistrust old faces in the political establishment. That is why traditional forms of political representation are at a stalemate in mass democracies. The voter does not identify himself solely with the ideas of any one political party.

Citizens today have multiple interests and identities. They may be either workers or "bourgeois", but maybe equally or even more relevant to them is their ethnic origin, their age group, their religious creed, their sexual orientation, their consumption patterns, their lifestyle. This array of loyalties allows for multiple and overlapping identities, and for layers of individual or group aspirations moving in different directions.

Nationalities, for example, do not have the same importance they once had. A Portuguese may be a native of Portugal, but he or she is also a European and is interested in how decisions in Brussels affect his or her life. Quite often, citizens want their specific interests to be advanced by non-governmental organizations that participate in the political process. Or they simply communicate directly with the authorities involved, or take to the streets in protest, or else express their opinions in newspapers or on websites. All these forms of legitimate expression have a bearing on the shaping of public policy in a modern democracy. The vote in the ballot box remains vital. But it has become part of a wider and more complex game.

The challenge modern democracies face is precisely how to adapt to this rapidly changing world.

Democracies have become a process for collective deliberation, rather than simply an organized framework of institutions where the general will emerges or is enforced. Can we even speak of a general will today? Who would believe us?

What we do have, as the outcome of the democratic process, are decisions or rules reflecting the give and take of conflicting interests and values. The more open and transparent the process, the more legitimate it is.

Maybe democratic governance is a more appropriate term than democracy. What matters is not a fluid "will of all," but the participation of all concerned in the deliberation. The real political leaders are, now, those who are convincingly open to dialogue and prepared to translate what they hear into concrete action. What we know is that democracy will remain a vigorous movement in each nation as long as it promotes the advancement of the collective well-being, while at the same time taking due care of specific demands resulting from the multiple identities people adopt today.

What we also know is that democracy is still largely confined to individual nations. This is something I have difficulty accepting. What is the reason for this contrast between democracy being ever stronger as a form of governance inside nations, and being, on the contrary, increasingly curtailed, restricted, reduced as a model for global governance? On the world stage, there is little collective deliberation. Unilateralism seems to be the rule in an agenda dominated by security concerns and now by the fight against terrorism.

Let me be clear on that. The United States had virtual universal support after 9/11. Any civilized person would condemn such brutal and cowardly attacks. The worldwide support enjoyed by America was, however, soon to evaporate. A turning point was the "preemptive attack" doctrine, announced in a presidential speech at West Point in 2002, and used for the first time against Iraq, without a mandate from the United Nations and in conflict with international law.

Looking back in time, of course, one could say that preemption is not much more than a new name, a new discourse, to justify forms of unilateral action or intervention that have occurred in various periods of this country's history on the international stage. Nonetheless, while it would be unfair to say that unilateralism is a creation of the current U.S. administration, it most certainly represents a denial of all existing laws and mechanisms for dealing with threats to international peace and security.

That machinery was put in place after World War II, under the leadership of America, and it has served America well in the past, including in the first Gulf War in 1991. Unfortunately, the heirs to the legacy left by generations of American leaders who had an internationalist mindset do not appear these days to occupy key decision-making positions. The intervention in Iraq may be simply the bluntest example of a unilateralist trend in U.S. foreign policy whose signs were already visible long before the strikes of 9/11. These signs included, among others:

- the refusal to sign the Biodiversity Convention, and an attempt to seriously undermine the Kyoto protocol on greenhouse-gas emissions;
- the refusal to sign the treaty creating the International Criminal Court, where alleged criminals such as Saddam Hussein himself might have been tried under due process of law;
- the lack of compliance with international humanitarian law in connection with prisoners of war suspected of terrorist activity.

How can one claim that the victory of democracy and freedom is the most important goal in the world and, at the same time, try to disrupt the only mechanisms in place for democratic global governance? Can sometimes fragile national democracies survive without appropriate international institutions and rules? Or, conversely, can trans-border issues such as climate change, chronic disease, drug trafficking, and the war against terrorism be satisfactorily dealt with in the absence of a global, rules-based, democratic governance framework?

In addition, I do not believe that it is possible to create democracy in any single country in a sudden burst of enthusiasm or religious faith. Democratic governance, be it local or global, will always be a gradual, painstaking construction of the intellect, of experience, of rationality applied to a concrete and complex reality.

Democratic governance may be the ultimate fruit of the Enlightenment. It is thus precisely the opposite of any form of unilateral imposition. In the international sphere, it is clear today that all institutions created in the aftermath of World War II, including the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and World Trade Organization, are in need of aggiornamento. They have always been far from perfect, and they reflect - as does the membership of the U.N. Security Council - the world of sixty years ago, one that is greatly transformed today.

One area where those institutions need major adjustment is in the degree to which civil society participates in their deliberations. They are essentially intergovernmental bodies where the participation of NGOs is restricted not only during the decision-making process, which I find natural, but also in discussions leading to decision making - which I find unacceptable and detrimental to the quality of decision making itself.

Last year, at the request of Secretary General Kofi Annan, I presented to the United Nations a report with several concrete proposals on how to enhance the participation of civil society in the United Nations. Our expectation in writing the report was that, by widening the scope of the role played by society, we would be injecting into the United Nations system more of the values that are in short supply today but are needed if democracy is to prosper worldwide, values such as tolerance, solidarity, and cooperation.

The United Nations, however, also needs to be more open and democratic in other ways: among them, through reforms that would render the Security Council more representative, by increasing the number of both permanent and non-permanent members. For the Council to be more effective, it must reflect current international reality - not that of six decades ago. It is essential, therefore, that member states move toward

agreement and action on transformations which are now long overdue. The report recently presented by the High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change certainly constitutes an important contribution to the deliberations.

In the lecture he gave here last year, George Schultz mentioned that one of the answers to the problem of international terrorism was to "shore up" the state system. His view was that the world has worked for most of modern history with the sovereign state as the basic operating unit. With weakened or disintegrating states, the world will simply not be viable, or functional.

I do not dispute his argument. I do wish to add, however, that, arguably, the best way to protect the state system is to simultaneously strengthen the institutions and principles required for a truly global democratic governance. Hand-in-hand with a better-run world would go states that might operate effectively as political and democratic entities. But without the full involvement and without the leadership of America, there can hardly be any global democratic governance. Due to its economic and military might, due to its cultural influence and power of attraction, due to its traditions and history, the United States still is an example and a beacon for millions of people everywhere.

This is mostly true in my region, Latin America, as the saying goes, so near and yet so far from the United States. Latin America and the U.S. are closer today in that we share not only an attachment to the values of democracy, but also the daily practice of democracy. It is also the wish of Latin America, however, that our shared commitment to democracy be completed by the engagement of all countries in this hemisphere in advancing toward a truly democratic, rules-based international order - and that necessarily requires the active participation of the United States.

May the Americas, this inspirational New World of vibrant national democracies, join together as a leading force in the necessary and urgent building of a democratic New World.