

Dictators and democrats in Latin America

But can the poor tell the difference?

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The recent Chilean Supreme Court decision to strip General Augusto Pinochet of his self-granted immunity from criminal prosecution has been widely welcomed, not only because it keeps alive the possibility that Pinochet, having escaped Spanish justice, may yet face trial for the atrocities he presided over, but also because it confirms a broader mood of democratic reform in Chile. Mindful of the symbolic responsibility bestowed by his status as Chile's first socialist president since Allende, Ricardo Lagos has pledged to complete Chile's transition to democracy, proposing a raft of constitutional reform measures whilst giving short shrift to military murmurings of discontent. His attendance at a June meeting of 'Third Way' heads of state in Berlin bolstered his image as a modernizer and statesman, and he has wasted few opportunities to confirm his reforming credentials to the international press.

The *Financial Times* has held Lagos up as a role model for the rest of Latin America amid what it sees as worrying signs that some countries in the region may be 'returning to the bad old ways' of authoritarianism, violence and corruption, a decade or so on from the widespread restitution of formally democratic rule. Attempted coups in Ecuador and Paraguay; the withdrawal of the opposition candidate from dubiously conducted Peruvian elections which saw Fujimori emerge victorious amid domestic protest and international concern; the increasing grip on power exerted by Venezuela's populist President Hugo Chavez since winning a second term in office – such recent developments have been cited as evidence of a potentially dangerous resurgence of *caudillismo* (Latin America's historic penchant for political strongmen) which threatens to reverse democratization. In this context Lagos's inauguration pledge to uphold 'truth, transparency and justice', his apparent determination to root out residual military power and to deepen the moral legitimacy of democratic rule, may indeed make him appear as a shining example to his neighbours in the region.

'Democracy'?

It is worth recalling, however, that some observers who would now applaud Lagos's commitment to reforming Chilean democracy were, at the time of Pinochet's arrest in London in late 1998, professedly concerned that the ex-dictator's detention threatened to jeopardize the entire democratic edifice. The prospect of a trial, the argument ran, would 'reopen old wounds' in Chilean society and politics and stoke up old enmities

which could upset the delicate balance of transition and threaten the very survival of democratic institutions.

Such a view reflected the conventional wisdom which has surrounded transition and democratization processes since the so-called 'third wave' of democratization swept through Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s, replacing military despotism with elected civilian governments and thereby ending a long and bloody chapter in the region's history. The re-establishment of civilian rule was, quite rightly, hailed by progressive opinion as historic progress. High hopes for the future were understandably tempered by political pragmatism, and it was accepted by almost all, participants and observers alike, that in this precarious process – in most countries, as in Chile, the military retained considerable power – 'full' or 'consolidated' democracy would not be quickly or easily achieved.

Scholarly debate has also reflected political realities. In the huge literature generated by 'third-wave' democratization, procedurally minimal definitions of democracy (modifications, essentially, of Schumpeter's well-known definition focusing on the existence of electoral competition) have dominated. Numerous 'sub-types' of democracy have been identified, tacked-on adjectives denoting some limitation yet to be overcome. Such limitations may include: the continued existence of gross social and economic inequalities; widespread corruption; the persistence of substantial 'reserved domains' of military or authoritarian power; and, linked to the latter, the inability or unwillingness of new democratic regimes to deal with issues of past, and in many cases continuing, human-rights violations. In sum, an ostensibly 'value-neutral' perspective has dominated debate, with the procedural and institutional aspects of democracy being deliberately divorced from normative assumptions about its nature and quality. Although the serious shortcomings of new civilian regimes are recognized, the general tendency both in theory and in practice has been to defend even the most limited and compromised of them, on the basis that to push too hard for improvement will be to risk the whole.

Such well-intentioned pragmatism contains some dangers. It is, of course, both false and impossible to separate the procedural from the normative in the study and practice of democracy. Both the theory and practice of democratic transition are after all predicated on the normative belief that democracy is intrinsically better than the alternatives to it. For such a belief to be shared and sustained amongst Latin American publics and political actors, however, requires that the establishment of civilian rule be accompanied by real improvements in the quality of political and social life. It is glaringly obvious that in many countries, after a decade or more of formally democratic rule, such improvements have not been effected.

In the region as a whole in 1997, 15 per cent of households were living in extreme poverty, the same percentage as seventeen years previously. Population growth over this period means that the absolute numbers of people living in extreme poverty increased from 62 million to 90 million. Moreover, the last decade or so has seen the gap between rich and poor actually widen, with recent World Bank figures indicating that the wealthiest 5 per cent of Latin Americans absorb 25 per cent of the region's total income, while the poorest 30 per cent earn only 7 per cent of regional income. Around a quarter of the region's population have no access to normal health-care services. In such a context it is hardly surprising that respect for democratic institutions and for the political process is alarmingly low. In an opinion poll conducted in seventeen Latin American countries in early 2000 only 37 per cent of people said that they were satisfied with the way that democracy works in practice. Unsurprising too is the fact that satisfaction with democracy is lowest where inequality and poverty are highest. Only 12 per cent of Paraguayans and 18 per cent of Brazilians reported themselves satisfied with democracy, and one in four Brazilians thought that authoritarian government might be preferable. Roughly two out of three Latin Americans admitted having no faith in their politicians, parties, police and judiciaries.

Guillermo O'Donnell, one of Latin America's most eminent and influential analysts of change in the region, and himself a prolific theorist of democratic consolidation, has recently said that he finds it increasingly difficult to answer the question of why Latin America's poor should subscribe to the view that democracy is necessarily, in and of itself, worth their support. The obscene contradiction between a political order which professes its democratic credentials and a social reality in which many of the most basic civil and social rights are conspicuous only by their absence becomes ever more obvious and unsustainable as memories of previous military regimes fade and the novelty of civilian rule wears off. It is no accident that the 'new caudillos' of the region draw their support primarily from the poor, because they do at least promise social and economic improvement. If poor Latin Americans have become increasingly inclined to vote for populist demagogues such as ex-paratrooper Chavez (who led a 1992 coup attempt), this is not the result of some deep-rooted cultural savagery, but of the inescapable fact that for the poor democracy is being increasingly exposed as, if not a sham, then at the very least a disappointment of historic proportions.

Shadows of the past

The resurgence of caudillo politics in Latin America, for whatever reason, is a cause for concern, increasing the likelihood of political polarization and instability. But if democracy is to be defended and strengthened, it needs to deliver more. The conventional wisdom has long been that to push for improvement to democracy will be to risk its survival, with fear of a military backlash the clear subtext. And yet in one area – which affects the military directly – that of investigating and redressing past human-rights violations, great progress has recently been made.

The Pinochet case and the broader proceedings of which it is one part reminded the world of the nature and scale of the atrocities committed by the military authoritarian regimes which terrorized Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s. The statistics are chilling: more than three thousand killed or disappeared in Chile, some thirty thousand in Argentina, and over a hundred thousand in Guatemala. With the discovery in Paraguay in 1992 of the so-called 'Terror Archive' (some two tonnes of documentation relating to human-rights violations in the southern cone) and more recently the declassification of CIA and US State Department documents, the initial findings of truth commissions and official investigations are being corroborated and confirmed. The failure or inability of Latin American civilian regimes to mete out justice to the perpetrators of this egregious repression has become, largely as a consequence of the Pinochet affair, a topic of worldwide debate.

It appears, moreover, that the renewed domestic and international interest in pursuing justice is having tangible effects. The Spanish proceedings against Pinochet were only one part of a much wider investigative process in which Spanish lawyers have worked closely with Latin American human-rights organizations, lawyers and relatives' groups. To date the investigation has resulted in the issuance of international arrest warrants for some hundred or so Argentine ex-military, including several ex-heads of state, and it has recently expanded to encompass charges against ex-military rulers and personnel in Bolivia and Guatemala. In Chile itself, too, recent developments have proved that an important effect of the proceedings against Pinochet has been that, both during his enforced absence from Chile and since his return, the prospects for successful trials of ex-military repressors, and for reform of the authoritarian 1980 constitution, have improved greatly. The fact that a trial for the ex-dictator himself now appears possible (though his age and state of health make it unlikely that he will ever actually answer charges) is illustrative of how much has changed.

There can be little doubt, then, that Latin American military impunity for past crimes, largely accepted hitherto as the ransom of democracy, is being widely chal-



lenged. Yet while this is undoubtedly a positive development, on its own it will not be enough to furnish civilian political institutions with the moral authority they require for true consolidation. It has been a striking feature of the extensive international press coverage of the Pinochet affair and its fallout that the term 'human rights', so often invoked, has been overwhelmingly used in the context of the *past*. Whether applauding or warning against attempts to bring ex-military repressors to justice, few have seen fit to mention that in many countries of the region human-rights violations of the most serious kinds are still a daily occurrence. State-sponsored torture may have ended, but the murder of street children by the police is rife in the major cities of Brazil, child labour and forced labour remain widespread in the region, and in many countries attempts to protest against corruption and fraud are all too often still met with violence and intimidation. The use of the term 'human rights' in the context of past military crimes also tends to divorce it from any association with social and economic rights, the existence of which as we have seen is all too rare. Neither should we forget that the developed West's contemporary eagerness to preach human rights and democracy only recently replaced at

best tolerance, and at worst outright promotion, of their opposites in the region. Well might Latin Americans point out with irritation the hypocrisy of what some have indignantly termed a new 'human-rights imperialism'.

It is not difficult to see why such stunted conceptions of human rights and democracy continue to predominate. Undoubtedly it is easier (and cheaper) to redress the wrongs of the past than to tackle those of the present. For the Left, variants of which in Latin America and elsewhere have supported the Spanish and other investigations, it may be that the opportunity to exorcize the ghosts of the past is being used as a surrogate for an inability to advance in the present. Yet the effects of the Pinochet case and associated developments should not be dismissed by those who would like to see the causes of human rights and democracy, in their fullest and unashamedly normative senses, advance. For they have shown us that to push for improvement to the quality of democracy is not necessarily to jeopardize its existence. On the contrary, what surely jeopardizes democracy's survival, at least as much as having too high expectations of it, is setting these expectations too low.