



Involution of democratic institutions

This briefing is based on the Crisis States Programme Working Paper No.25: Francisco Gutiérrez Sarín, 'Los tiempos de las involuciones democráticas'. It is intended to provide a summary of the principal findings, and an indication of the implications these may have for debates over policy.

This paper examines the political processes whereby earlier optimism for democratic transition in the five Andean countries (Bolivia, Colombia, Peru, Ecuador and Venezuela) has given way more recently to a general weakening of democratic structures. While none has fallen into open dictatorship, they have all seen a gradual installation of a strong presidential executive, over which controls have been weakened; weaker parliamentary organisations; and traditional parties being supplanted by anti-political outsiders. Dividing recent history into two periods (Period 1, 1960s/70s; Period 2, 1980s/90s) he argues that these countries have gone through a double transition: of political regime and of the development model followed; and that neo-liberal adjustments have not sat well with democracy.

- **Not a simple return to populism or dictatorial traditions**

The present day deterioration of democracy has not signified a straightforward return to populist or dictatorial traditions in the region. This has been for three reasons: a) it has been accompanied by the articulation of new ways of conceiving political modernity; b) opposition to corruption has become of critical importance; and c) the dismantling of old institutions and organisations has been presented to the population as an expansion of direct democracy.

- **Changes in underlying international conditions**

Three important changes occurred between Periods 1 and 2: a) relations with the US are no longer defined by the Cold War; b) international concern about internal political organisation has increased; and c) the economy has opened up, with increased capital movement and looking beyond the internal market.

- **Economic crises have long term effects on political behaviour**

An economic crisis becomes "burnt into the memory of a population", and has a lasting effect on the political path taken by a country. In cases where the crisis is one of hyperinflation, the political solution tends to be 'right wing', with broad consensus around an adjustment programme. Where the crisis is one of growth, social turbulence produces 'left wing' solutions, or cycles of instability.

- **Political outcomes determined by a combination of economic crisis and attitude to the military**

If hyperinflation occurs in a society with very negative social attitudes to the military (because of the damage caused by an earlier military regime), a stable democratic pact is formed around the economic adjustment. When hyperinflation occurs where the military is not discredited, a democratic rupture occurs. Similarly, in societies undergoing growth crises, if the military begins with the support of the elites, democratic rupture is likely; but if the reverse is true, the society is likely to fall into continuous instability.

- **Popular support for neo-liberal adjustment partly dependent upon level of popular organisation**

Radical economic adjustment can be easier to achieve (albeit with criticism) without breakdown of democratic political institutions in societies in which the working class is well-organised, and with a strong formal economy. Neo-liberal adjustment is more likely to produce political crisis and rupture in circumstances in which working class organisation is weaker, and the informal economy stronger. This is due to the popular sectors having less margin for adaptation to the belt-tightening demanded of them.

- **Demand for economic adjustment leads to undermining of parliamentary institutions**

Economic adjustment produces a debate centred on the long-term public good. Parliaments become an obstacle to the introduction of such changes, since they are concerned primarily with the immediate interests of social groups. Presidents are able to claim to represent the 'national interest', and hence that of the population as a whole; while the parliaments become stigmatised as representing private interests.

- **Personalisation of politics undermines traditional party structures**

The same tendency of discrediting clientalist networks that has weakened parliamentary institutions has also made traditional party structures obsolete: tainted as complicitous with the past; and unable to survive the transition to a politics dominated by the images of popular cultures. Where parties have attempted to introduce the economic and political changes themselves, they have simply weakened themselves further. As politics becomes personalised, they are unable to compete with the popular appeal of anti-political outsiders.

- **Economic 'responsibility' leads to political 'irresponsibility'**

Although populism and neo-liberalism can generally be seen as opposed to one another, neo-liberal adjustment can lead to the adoption of populist strategies in order to push through the reforms. This leads to the contradictory situation in which, despite the natural requirement of capitalism and the markets for strong political institutions and organisations, to further their economic ends they sponsor the erosion of these institutions and organisations.

- **Corruption heightened by the clash between executive and legislature**

Where the political executive has eroded the position of legislative organisations, partly in the name of combating corruption, this has removed the controls on the executive, and has led to a dramatic increase in executive corruption.

- **Limiting of consociational pacts has increased uncertainty and political fragmentation**

The changes have all but eliminated consociational pacts. These pacts formerly constituted a democratic polity based on the inclusion and protection of minority interests. They pointed towards the establishment of open economic and political systems, and held out the hope of future political stability. Their erosion has led to electoral fragmentation, which strong personality-driven presidents have sought to overcome by 'unifying' the country around the 'common good'. However, this cannot succeed since it marginalizes minority interests, so deepening the conditions that generated the fragmentation in the first place.

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