

Democracy vs. Development?

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(English translation of article in Spanish published by *INFOLATAM*, March 15, 2015)

Somewhat the style of the film “Casablanca”, the end of the Cold War seemed to be “the beginning of a beautiful friendship”. Twenty five years later it is evident that geopolitical realities and interests are much more important in international relations than the greatest of best wishes. In fact, over the past years a revisionist literature has arisen that defies the conventional version of the role of democracy in national processes of change, particularly that involving the end of the Soviet Union. The lessons deriving from that are highly relevant for us Mexicans.

Revisionism is a constant in history because time, and the knowledge that accumulates over the years, permit an ever more incisive interpretation of the causes of distinct events or of the factors that turned them into reality. In the case of the USSR, the conventional version, broadly accepted, is that the West and democracy were the factors that finally defeated the Imperial Russia of the XX Century. We now know that the crucial factors that undermined the strength of that nation were its inherent economic weaknesses and the conflict that already then festered between Ukraine and Moscow.

Although the “new” Russia adopted democracy as its form of government and there were important advances in the government-citizenry relationship, neither there nor in Mexico has a liberal system of government taken root, understanding the latter as strong institutions that protect the citizen and effective checks and balances that render the Rule of Law effective. Fareed Zakaria was most pertinent when he coined the term “illiberal democracy” to describe this type of society.

In the end, a key question is whether democracy drove the development of liberal societies or whether the development of liberal societies gave rise to democracy. In the Western world, the predominant supposition is that democracy is what has produced development; and there is no need to go much further: the rationality of the U.S. invasion in Iraq was shored up by that notion and that has been the discussion revolving around the failed “Arab Spring”. This has also been the reasoning that has led to successive political reforms in Mexico. The problem is that, in many nations that have reformed themselves – some more advanced than others- this has not translated into a decisive economic advance or into the consolidation of a liberal society.

Mexico has taken great steps toward the consecration of rights in the paper of the Constitution, but very few have been effective in daily life. Suffice to see the state of affairs in the justice system or in the insecurity in which the majority of the population lives to discern how complex the social processes are and how uncertain their achievements. David Konzevik, creative thinker and acute observer of the reality, notes that “the 20th Century was that of human rights; if the 21 Century is not that of human obligations, this is far as we’ve gotten”. Over the past decades we have advanced in matters of rights, even if often in name only, but nothing has materialized concerning obligations, and the pathetic level of economic growth suggests that a line of happenstance between democracy and growth isn’t evident either.

On its part, the poor economic performance of recent decades has led to the coming together of the idea that there has been an excess in matter of citizen rights at the expense of the strength of the government because, according to this view, it is that strength from which the capacity of growth derives. Most likely, the current attempt to consolidate control mechanisms vis-à-vis the citizenry will also fail to achieve vigorous and sustained growth.

The reason for this is not of an ideological or political character. The true deficit is not one of a controlling government but rather of a functional one. Where the country evidences terrifying lacks is in

matters of the government's day-to-day operation: providing services, construction and maintenance of the infrastructure, public safety and justice. None of that will improve with greater control over the citizenry: rather, strictly speaking, a government more dexterous in achieving its fundamental duty (particularly in according security and fair and predictable conditions for the functioning of the rules of the game in all ambits) would require fewer mechanisms of control. The key lies not in the control but instead in the solidity and reliability of the governmental function, very distinct things.

Within a context characterized by these basic absences the citizenry's disillusionment that is running rampant in the country is inevitable. Also not surprising is the governmental argument that the only way to resolve the privations consists of reversing the excesses of recent times and achieving greater efficacy. The true subject matter does not reside in the urgency of having a more effective government (a condition sine qua non) but of how this can be procured.

The great challenge consists of constructing a system of government that is effective but that also safeguards citizen rights. There's no contradiction between the two: they are but two faces of the same coin. Unless the country returns to authoritarianism, its only playing card is that of constructing a liberal society, if only step by step.

Years of observing the evolution of Mexican democracy have convinced me that Womack was right when he affirmed that "democracy does not produce, by itself, a decent way of living. It is the decent ways of living that produce democracy". Starting with those ways...

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