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(Eduardo Nunez Vargas – Resident Director – Guatemala and Regional Programs)

A dual perspective on the agenda to reform and strengthen democracy

First, with regard the endogenous challenges to democracy, related to regressive threats to human rights and democracy, the fight against corruption, and impunity, we must focus on issues that seemed to have been resolved, but that are now facing new challenges and threats:

Recovering basic dialogs and agreements on the necessary integrity of elections, adding new determining factors that transcend the conventional debate regarding electoral systems and the relative autonomy and reliability of electoral bodies;

Recovering basic dialogs and agreements on the human rights agenda, based on preserving or building inclusive conditions, both for minorities (e.g., sexual diversity) and for majorities in vulnerable situations (e.g., women and indigenous peoples). This means defending the principle of plurality inherent in all societies of the Americas and creating the conditions to ensure the rights of groups that lack the objective conditions needed to exercise them;

Restoring the spirit of domestic political dialog within countries and in the framework of international relations. This Hemisphere, like the rest of the world, has lost certain basic agreements on the democracy and human rights agenda. Unfortunately, we are living at a time when blatantly anti-human rights narratives and autocratic thinking win elections and, at times, erode democracy using power obtained through democratic means.

Second, regarding the contextual challenges that exert extraordinary pressure on the democracies, economies, and societies of the Americas, wide-ranging phenomena take the fore, such as:

The expansive presence of organized crime and its ability to control territories and penetrate state structures. We have regions and territories under the control of criminal networks that now have transnational scope and the ability to mutate, as well as extraordinary resources to assert their illicit interests.

The erosive capacity of complex structures of national and transnational corruption, including their impact on elections and parties, which have to do with the relationship between money and politics, as well as to the quality and scope of the state institutional apparatuses and their ability to formulate and manage strategic public policies and services.

The disintegrating impact—both political and social—of disinformation, which calls into question the basic agreements we had reached on democracy and human rights, undermines interpersonal and intra-societal trust, sows doubts about scientific truths, and creates self-reinforcing thought or echo chambers that erode the governance and effectiveness of democracies.

The growing, induced polarization that many countries of the Americas suffer and infects relations among certain countries, hampering mutual recognition as subjects of dialog and understanding. We are not speaking here of the polarization that follows the ideological differentiation inherent in democracy, but rather of one that is born of a strategy aimed to build narratives of exclusion, of good versus evil, a veritable culture of canceling whomever thinks differently.

The human, economic, social and political impacts of the growing irregular migratory flows that cross the Americas, turning many countries into territories of origin, transit and arrival, and stressing the need to address the migration phenomenon from a more comprehensive paradigm that includes variables of development, human rights, security and, without a doubt, governance.

The lasting impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, which has become a stress test of the political, institutional and economic systems in the countries of the Americas, deepening the dynamics of economic, social and political exclusion, have exacerbated new forms of polarization and disinformation and deepened regressive trends in matters such as access to public information, transparency, the conditions for democratic governance, social conflict, public debt, and the much-needed comprehensive discussion on how effective the nation state is to address the severe crises arising from the pandemic.

The balance between the need to recover the capacity to build political agreements and the promotion of effective enforcement arrangements

An approach is needed that focuses on balancing the recovery of basic agreements on an agenda for strengthening democracy at the hemispheric level, a sort of second-generation democratic reform in the Americas, with another approach aimed at strengthening the means for implementing the agreements reached, i.e., bolstering agreements on certain principles, guidelines and narratives regarding the defense and expansion of democracy, accompanied by concrete, verifiable means for implementation and enforcement. The Summits of the Americas have usually achieved some degree of significant accord, but that ability to generate agreements has been diminished, on the one hand, by a growing division among the views of our countries and, on the other, by a lesser ability to build a verifiable, effective agenda around the agreements reached. Many previous agreements have been significant achievements, e.g., the Inter-American Democratic Charter as an expression of hemispheric consensus, but they have lacked sufficient means for implementation or enforcement. Discussing a good agenda and the means for enforcement are the two essential dimensions to be balanced at the next Summit.

In this regard, it is essential to discuss the governance model of the inter-American system to increase its capacity to prevent, reduce, and eventually eradicate conflicts within and among countries and to work to address the threats, risks and vulnerabilities that we face at the hemispheric level. This governance model has to do both with formal relations among the member states of the inter-American system and with the ability to work together to meet shared challenges.

Accordingly, the approach informed by the democracy report jointly developed by the OAS and the UNDP in 2010 is to encourage countries to assume that the next generation of democratic reforms will require not only improving the credibility and legitimacy of democratic institutions and policies, but also building effective democracies that deliver concrete results to our citizens. It means building democratic states with the ability to produce and deliver public goods and services of effective quality and coverage for societies that are increasingly dissatisfied, that express this discomfort through social protest, and that drop out of politics and/or place their bets on populist choices of various ideological persuasions who offer solutions and results often at the cost of reducing rights and restricting democracy.

Moving forward in this debate will require bridging the gap between governments and non-state actors such as civil society, the private sector, the media, and academia. It is through building secure spaces for dialog and understanding between governments and these actors that both basic agreements on future agendas and the means to effectively implement those agreements can be strengthened. Citizen participation is not a threat to governments; it is a precondition for enriching democracy and making it sustainable. Similarly, the engagement of non-state actors in the inter-American system creates an opportunity to take representative and often innovative views on how to address the historical and emerging challenges to democracy and development in the Americas.