

The importance of democracy for the construction of peace among nations

THE POWER OF THE PEOPLE IN ATHENS

The Greek word "democracy" that we could translate as "the power of the people" was conceived by the Athenians to define a system of government of the city in which decisions were made by the assembly of citizens.

Of course, the concept of citizen in the 6th century BC was not what we have today since it was not made up of women, slaves, or foreigners. In some cases we have not evolved so much as the thousands of refugees and displaced people still do not have rights, much less the new forms of slavery as in the case of women or children or the terrible working conditions and in which millions of people still on our planet live.

In any case, the substantial difference was the collective participation of a significant number of people in the decisions of a society, which differed substantially from what generally happened in the rest of the region of that time where kings or emperors were the ones who took the decisions, concentrating the absolute power in a person, without limits, without controls, without counterweights and without possibilities of changing that peaceful and civilized situation. Generally there were no peaceful successions as these were planned by succession of lineage but at that time there were conflicts, pressures, instabilities, conspiracies, conspiracies. All these situations occurred many times over many years generating instability and even internal conflicts that ended up internationalized.

In the ancient world we also have the example of the Roman Republic, where its leaders were elected and passed laws through popular assemblies. Due to manipulation and that generally the positions or interests of the majority were not respected is why that the Roman Republic is generally not considered as a democratic system.

The Roman Republic degenerated into the despotism of the Empire. The free cities of present-day Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands continued to apply some democratic principles during the Middle Ages,

especially in the self-government of the people through municipal institutions, such as the town councils that arrived in our Latin America.

MODERN AGE AND RENAISSANCE

The social and economic changes in the West led to more and more members of society becoming interested in the affairs of governments, and the need to be able to influence the decisions that affected their lives resurfaced.

The result of this was the resurgence of a spirit of freedom based on ancient Greek and Roman principles. The concepts of equality of political and social rights were further defined during the Renaissance, in which the development of humanism was enhanced, and later during the Protestant Reformation in the struggle for religious freedom.

At that time, there were fervent debates about the ancient writings and the experiences of Greece and Rome that began to revalue the participation of all the men of a society in the decisions of the State.

REFORM

We are commemorating precisely this October, the 500 years of the Protestant Reformation that without a doubt had transcendent impacts on the history of humanity. This process that began when the monk Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses in the abbey of Wittenberg and with it challenged the absolute power of Rome, initiated a process that had derivations in different areas of the society like the work ethic, the universalization of the education, the expansion of finance and a savings and credit system, the respect of private property, the promotion of science, the revaluation of women, the rule of law as a rule of coexistence, the separation of powers as a limit to the abuses, and the concept of public servant of the ruler.

Undoubtedly all these ideas began to generate movements that tried to capture them in society, producing substantive social changes that challenged the existing status quo and promoted conflicts that led to new experiences of governments. From then on, nothing was the same

and the claims embodied in the famous phrase of an absolute monarch as "The State is me", would no longer be the rule, and it began the questioning forever of that way of facing a Government.

The free access to the scriptures end up helping us to understand in the book written by Isaiah that God is our King, our legislator and our Judge. There the thinkers of the Renaissance abbreviated to the three functions of government, which in the person of the creator are together but in the hands of men, finite and imperfect are needed to be separated. This separation is the guarantee of checks and balances that can ensure freedom and respect for the individual rights of human beings, fundamentally the most humble and least powerful.

Likewise, some events occurred many centuries before the experience of Greece and Rome, when in the exodus through the desert Moses called the election of judges among the tribes. Calvin analyzes this by saying that *"here it is clear that those who were to preside at the trial, were not appointed only by the will of Moses but elected by the will of the people. And this is the most desirable kind of freedom, that we should not be compelled to obey any person who can be placed tyrannically over our heads, but that which arises from an election, in such a way that no one can rule unless it is approved by us."*

Here we have the awakening that during this time we needed:

- In the first place the empire, the primacy of the LAW that is above the whims of the rulers.
 - That the ideal is the participation of the people, of the citizens in the election of those governors.
 - That the power never be absolutely concentrated in a person or group but that the ideal is that it is separated as a way to generate healthy equilibria.
 - That permanent control systems exist so that those leaders do not deviate from their main objective, which is to work for the common good, governing by directing with fairness and justice.

ENGLISH REVOLUTION

John Locke said that human nature has an undeniable tendency towards evil, therefore the powers must be separated as a way to avoid tyranny.

As a result of these ideas and of the openness, the Netherlands generated – it became an early republic and benefited from the Jews expelled from Spain, who began the prosperous commercial and financial businesses there. The Scandinavian nations attend a growing and strong parliamentarism. In England already in the first half of the seventeenth century there was an army that depended on Parliament and that guarded the freedoms of belief and expression of citizens as well as respect for popular representation and private property.

FRENCH REVOLUTION

Although it had very limited success in establishing a new stable and strong regime that could replace absolutism with effective division of powers and in turn respect for rights and freedoms, the French Revolution was undoubtedly a historical event of universal impact and from the ideas that spawned and spread across the planet.

The Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in 1789 was a document that establishes some premises that, like wildfire, feeds the advent of a new stage, at least for the great majority of humanity.

The declaration that men are born and remain free and equal in rights and also that the purpose of any political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man, clarifying that those rights are freedom, property, security, and resistance to oppression.

It also establishes that the source of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation; neither individual, nor any corporation can be clothed with any authority that does not emanate directly from it.

It also highlights the primacy of the Law, granting it only the possibility of prohibiting actions or forcing people.

That Declaration establishes and reaffirms concepts of the new winds that blow in Europe and spread to the rest of the planet.

NORTH AMERICAN REVOLUTION

The Declaration of Independence of the United States is also a masterpiece of the new conception of the democratic system and of the relationship between rulers and the governed as a pact that must be respected.

In those first paragraphs where these truths are sustained as evident: that men are created equal; who are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, freedom, and the pursuit of happiness. It is recognizing rights that, due to their natural origin, may no longer be curtailed by any authority.

And they clarify in their second paragraph that to guarantee these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their legitimate powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever a form of government becomes destructive of these principles, the people have the right to reform or abolish it and institute a new government based on these principles, and to organize their powers in the manner that, in their judgment, will offer the greatest chances of achieving their safety and happiness.

The instrumental nature of governments is determined, that when they are not faithful custodians of the rights of individuals or seek to subjugate them, the people may have the right to change or replace them.

This system that was born later in the Constitution of the United States has stability over time that allows us to consolidate that complex of checks and balances that avoided the deviations and tyrannies that Locke feared.

And as Abraham Lincoln said in the Gettysburg address, *"May this nation, by the grace of God, have a new dawn of freedom, and that the government of the people, by the people, and for the people, does not disappear from the face of the earth."*

That affirmation, that some authors trace their origin some centuries before, and to a bishop of England, is speaking to us of something more demanding than a Democracy like system that supposes the expression of the people, but it has to do with the purpose of the system, with the objectives to pursue and with its necessary beneficiaries.

CHALLENGES OF OUR TIME

Many times we have heard that Democracy is not a perfect system but it is the perfectible form of government, the best perfectible form that humanity has been able to find and we have to worry at every moment to improve that instrument to try to solve the new problems or face the new challenges that come our way.

We all talk about Democracy but it is important to dwell on what kind of Democracy we have and what risks we have even within the system itself.

But that so important as trying to improve the tool is to be alert or attentive to the risks that are constantly present and that from within the system seek to distort it. This is always latent the pressure and danger of those groups, minority or not, who may try to subjugate the principles and pillars on which democracy is based.

It is fundamental to highlight both the importance of the legitimacy of the government in its origin (as Dr. William Soto Santiago said) and the legitimacy on which it must be carried out. The supremacy of the law that should be above the institutions and of course of the men and women who occupy the different functions should be one of the golden rules that we cannot allow to be violated in the least.

The importance of preserving transparency in electoral processes is also fundamental, transparency before, during, and after.

Regrettably, we have become accustomed in Latin America to rulers who cannot distinguish between the state, government, political parties, and candidates, shamelessly and audaciously using the apparatuses of governments, inauguration of works, benefits to citizens, pressure or gifts to the press, in the heat of the electoral

campaigns, distorting the processes and unduly influencing popular expression.

Transparency in management is also today a fundamental pillar, where citizens deserve free access to all government information and be able to judge, question, review, challenge decisions that affect the resources that are our property and that the government administers them only by our mandate and authorization.

Sadly, we witness an alleged "neo-constitutionalism" in Latin America that has led to a "neo-absolutism". Persons, groups, or parties that are intended to eternalize in power, tainted by the use of state perks, confusing the administration of public property as if it were private.

Democracy must ensure that citizens, without cheating or manipulation, can freely change their rulers. The alternation of parties and people in power must be guaranteed and the fact that this happens without traumas is the symptom of good health of democracy.

The operation of the separation of powers of a State, their independence that ensures a fair balance and system of checks and balances, is an essential requirement to guarantee individual freedoms of the citizen and human rights.

Another no less important pillar is guaranteeing the full freedom of the press, independence and competence of the media. In our societies there is a lot of power that these media have so we must be attentive to the manipulation of them, to the undue use of the influence that the State, companies or other corporations can make over them, as well as their concentration in a few hands.

We are witnessing a revolution linked to the exponential development of technology, the appearance of Social Networks and the change of behavior, tastes, and use of information through these non-traditional channels.

The electoral campaigns are already being played largely by these means. Parties and governments are not alien to this reality and are also present there.

We could say with some authors say that we are facing a transition of democracy from the internet. We are perhaps facing the most radical change in the democratic, republican, and representative system that we had in the contemporary Democracy.

There are authors who speak of a transition from the Madisonian Democracy, traditional and representative, where the citizens were mere spectators who expressed themselves only with their vote every four or five years, to a direct, Jeffersonian Democracy, where, through the marvel of social networks, citizens become actors, giving opinions, discussing, questioning. This produces a greater and better information of citizens, a greater involvement in public affairs and therefore in a strengthening of democracy.

This new cybercitizen becomes a permanent public prosecutor of its leaders, strengthens democracy, and improves levels of efficiency, honesty and excellence of its representatives.

These demands of the contemporary Democracy also contribute to condition the rulers as seekers of the best conditions in the enjoyment of rights and enjoyment of freedoms for their governed. Peace is a more than a necessary state, it is essential to achieve better stages of development of the different communities.

That is why the component of seeking peace and harmony between different nations is differential of the democratic systems that seeks or should seek the best development of their peoples.

Peace is not just the absence of conflict. I really like the Jewish concept of the *Shalom* that speaks of a comprehensive peace, which also includes the desire for a healthy and prosperous life.

The rulers in a Democracy, unlike other regimes, have a strong conditioning of their governed –who now have new and technological

means to more effectively exercise that pressure– to achieve their security, prosperity, and happiness. And those goals can be achieved only if peace reigns.

The democratic States with a full exercise of the Rule of Law are the subjects of International Law that can best guarantee, promote, and defend world peace.

Thank you very much.