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bojer@reospartners.com

+55 11 972 723 066

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Civil Society Leaders Map the Future of Democracy in Latin America

37 leaders present four scenarios about democracy in Latin America in 2030

On September 21, 2015, Alerta Democrática—a diverse group of leaders from across Latin America—will release the results of an eight month dialogue on the future of democracy in Latin America over the next 15 years.

The exercise produced four possible scenarios for Latin American democracy, varying from hopeful to alarming. Possible outcomes range from a fairer redistribution of power, strengthening of democracy, and institutional innovation to governance hijacked by organized crime and rampant corruption.

“Scenarios for the Future of Democracy in Latin America,” the resulting document, will be presented at academic and social launch events in Bolivia, Brazil, Honduras, El Salvador, Peru, Guatemala, the United States, and other locations with extensive public participation.

“Latin American democracies are experiencing tense moments, but in all cases, for the first time, solutions for the tensions are coming from democracy and not against it,” says Pedro Abramovay, Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean of the Open Society Foundations. “Understanding the risks and opportunities around those tensions is key for civil society at this moment”.

The main launch event in Washington, D.C., will take place at 3:00 pm on Monday, September 21, 2015 in the Hall of the Americas at the Organization of American States (200 17th St. NW Washington, DC 20006). A delegation of seven representatives from Alerta Democrática will be available for media interviews and further meetings in Washington on September 22-24. If you would like to schedule an interview with members from the delegation, please contact Jonathan Kaplan (jonathan.kaplan@opensocietyfoundations.org).

According to Reos Partners, the company which coordinated the scenario construction exercise, the four scenarios are meant to stoke a deepening of the dialogue on democracy in Latin America and to guide future decision-making.

Alerta Democrática, Reos Partners, and their three funding organizations—Fundación Avina, Ford Foundation, and Open Society Foundations—intend for this exercise to catalyze strategic conversations with key actors at the local, national, and regional levels about the possible futures of democracy. They hope to stimulate individual and collective action in support of better governance and positive social transformation.

The initial stages of the process involved 65 conversations with various actors on the condition of democracy in Latin America. These were followed by three meetings in Brazil, Colombia, and Guatemala between December 2014 to April 2015.

The four scenarios were constructed through a reflection by multiple stakeholders of the current situation in the region and a collective mapping of possible futures. The first scenario, “Democracy in Transformation,” envisions a redistribution of power, a strengthening of democracy, and institutional innovation. “Democracy in Tension” anticipates a shallow democracy: power is concentrated and disputed among different political and economic forces, generating social frustration. The scenario “Democracy in Mobilization” predicts creativity, pressure, and popular mobilization challenging traditional power structures. The final scenario, “Democracy in Agony,” contemplates hijacked democracy, dominated by organized crime, and permeated by fear and a sense of defeat among citizens.

Summaries of the scenarios

Democracy in Transformation: This scenario depicts the strengthening of democracy in the region through institutional innovation. Latin America experiences widespread demand for a reassessment of its democratic institutions. This process allows the region to make progress on its most pressing structural problems. In a growing number of countries, the conditions arise for those democratic institutions to promote wide-ranging transformations in critical areas where special interests had previously dominated. Some countries show that it is possible to gradually overcome the structural inertia that had prevented the reduction of inequality and violence. In this way, they ensure that fundamental state institutions truly represent the interests of a diverse society.

Democracy in Tension: This scenario depicts a democracy of “appearances,” of tension and power disputes between diverse political and economic forces, and of frustration on the part of citizens. Political and economic power is concentrated. The region is marked by a *caudillo* political culture, with patronage and authoritarian tendencies. Some countries go through political crises and, in certain cases, authoritarian setbacks, with serious consequences for institutional structures and the exercise of citizen rights. Democracy in the region has endured, but few are satisfied with the ways in which it has done so.

Democracy in Mobilization: This scenario depicts protest, pressure, and popular creativity in the face of traditional power. The forces of social mobilization consolidate their capacity to push democracy forward and gradually begin to promote transformations. The proof that individual and collective actions, more than state actions, can generate large-scale social changes that solve public problems renews the democratic model. The organization of horizontal cooperation schemes that include multiple actors leads to broader and more transparent civic empowerment. The new forms of participation that go beyond the influence of traditional institutions create real benefits. At the same time, there is an awareness of the risk that those innovations could be appropriated by illegal and undemocratic forces and that the same technologies used to promote change could end up limiting its impact.

Democracy in Agony: This scenario depicts violence, fear, feelings of defeat, and the hijacking of democracy. In much of Latin America, the predatory influence of illicit activities prevails over or coexists with government action. Corruption serves as a way of life for politicians, businesspeople, and criminals alike, all of who live and prosper in the shadow of the state. Over the course of 15 years, violence has served to consolidate certain territories out of the control of nation states. Some failed states are merely contained by the regional and international communities. The shared destiny of the democracies in the region is unstable.

Comparison of the Four Scenarios

	A. Democracy in Transformation	B. Democracy in Tension	C. Democracy in Action	D. Democracy in Agony
Power Structure	Scenario of the redistribution of power	Scenario of the concentration of power	Scenario of the decentralization of power and of the questioning of traditional power	Scenario of the predominance of organized crime and violence
Democratic Institutions and Political Culture	The value of politics increases and improves the capacity to govern with the greatest efficiency and transparency through structural reforms. Deepening the exercise of citizens' rights, the institutional mechanisms of social participation, and the fortification of the democratic system through greater inclusion and pluralism is the ultimate goal.	Different phenomena, such as a reconfiguration of leadership in some cases and a <i>caudillist</i> tradition in others, deepen the concentration of power, erode institutional controls and checks and balances, generate permanent power disputes, and influence the exercise of democracy.	Frustration with the traditional democratic model generates a permanent push forward through strategic work in networks, popular pressure, and the appropriation of new technologies by citizens and social movements.	Institutions are undermined and a consolidation of corrupt governing schemes weakens democracy in many territories in the region. Sophisticated organized criminal activities penetrate the state. Violence and corruption spread and predominate, criminals operate with impunity, and authoritarianism is embraced.
Civic Participation	Greater incentives, better means of participation, and greater emphasis on educating citizens to rebuild a sense of civil ethics lead to a more demanding electorate, greater levels of participation in the traditional schemes of representation, and a general collaboration between society and the state.	"Captive votes," reduction in electoral participation, absence of reliable information, and increase in mistrust toward the public prevail.	Factors such as new horizontal cooperation schemes, activism in parallel networks, and the expansion of social movements generate pressure on the state, raise questions about voting as an effective means of influence, and engender more widespread citizen empowerment and collective appropriation of shared interests beyond the	The citizenry adopts silence, fear, self-censorship, and double standards. Civic values decline in territories and provinces in the region.

			traditional representative framework.	
Economic Development and Social Inclusion	Alternative models of sustainable development and more effective redistributive politics to overcome the structural challenges of poverty and inequality. These factors lead to greater productivity and higher salaries.	Shortsighted solutions and economic efficiency above social justice and environmental equilibrium prevail. These factors impede a more fair distribution of power and money.	Innovative models, including forms of local economic development that are less dependent on the state and new forms of commercialization based on sustainable and just economic models and on work done in networks emerge.	Given the absence of guarantees for inclusive growth and the inoperability of the redistributive mechanisms of the state, poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation increase.
Regional Integration	Various countries group themselves in commercial and political blocs that insert the region on the global map with greater force.	Shortsightedness leads to a slowing down of regional integration and to the loss of competitiveness with other regions in the world.	Development of new forms of exchange and regional territorial integration and of new agendas for multilateral bodies through the influence of networks.	The dynamism and growth of informal and illegal mechanisms of regional integration exceed the slow advance of support for regional accords and shared solutions.

The Scenario Team

Pedro Abramovay

Regional Director for Latin America and the
Caribbean
Open Society Foundation

Naschla Aburman

President of the Student Federation
Universidad Católica de Chile (FEUC)

Laura Albornoz Pollmann

Academic from the Law School
Universidad de Chile

Ivana Bentes

Professor and Researcher in Social Communication
Universidad Federal de Río de Janeiro, Brazil

Nabil Bonduki

Cultural Secretary
City of Sao Paulo, Brazil

Luis Javier Castro Lachner

Managing Partner, Mesoamerica, and President
La Asociación Empresarial para el Desarrollo, Costa
Rica

Óscar Chacón

Executive Director
La Alianza Nacional de Comunidades
Latinoamericanas y Caribeñas (NALACC)

Wálter Delgadillo Terceros

Bolivian Citizen

Nilcéa Freire

Representative in Brazil
Ford Foundation

Rossana Fuentes Berain

Funder
México Media Lab S21

Manuel Garrido

Deputy
National Chamber of Deputies, Argentina

María Beatriz (Pilu) Giraudo

President
La Asociación Argentina de Productores en Siembra
Directa (Aapresid)

Nega Gizza

Lecturer and Presenter
Central Unica das Favelas (CUFA), Brazil

Gustavo Gorriti

Director
IDL-Reporteros, Peru

Carlos Hernández

President
Junta Directiva de la Asociación para una Sociedad
Más Justa, Honduras

Miguel Lago

Founding Partner
Meu Rio, Brazil

Juan Pablo Luna

Associate Professor
El Instituto de Ciencia Política, PUC-Chile

Otilia Lux de Cotí

Executive Director
El Foro Internacional de Mujeres Indígenas,
Guatemala

Carlos March

Director of Strategic Communication
Avina Foundation

María Consuelo Mejía Piñeros

Director
Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir A.C., Mexico

Zulia Mena

Mayor,
Municipio de Quibdó, Chocó, Colombia

Carlos Hugo Molina

Rector
La Universidad Nacional Ecológica, Bolivia

Ricardo Morel

Vice President of Corporate Affairs
Minera Antamina, Peru

Nohra Padilla Herrera

President
La Asociación Nacional de Recicladores de Colombia
(ANR)

Susel Paredes Piqué

Attorney, Activist, and Political Leader
Peru

Claudia Paz y Paz

Former Attorney General
Guatemala

ALerta DEMOCRÁTICA

Escenarios para el futuro de la
democracia en América Latina
2015—2030

Thamy Pogrebinski

Senior Researcher, WZB Berlin Social Science Center
Professor, Political Science
El Instituto de Estudios Sociales y Políticos de la
Universidad del Estado de Río de Janeiro

Miguel Pulido

Founding Executive Director
Centro de Análisis e Investigación, A.C., Mexico

Antonia Rodríguez

Executive Director
La Asociación Artesanal Boliviana Señor de Mayo
(ASARBOLSEM)

María Paula Romo

Politician, University Professor, and Leader of
Movimiento Ruptura
Ecuador

Eugenio Scarpellini

Bishop
El Alto Diocese, Bolivia

Schuma Schumaker

Feminist Activist, Writer, and Executive Coordinator
La Rede de Desenvolvimento Humano (Redeh), Brazil

Alexander Segovia

President
Instituto Centroamericano de Investigaciones para el
Desarrollo y el Cambio Social (INCIDE), El Salvador

Jorge Soto

Deputy Director for Civic Innovation and
Coordination of Digital Strategy
Mexico

León Valencia Agudelo

Executive Director
La Fundación Paz y Reconciliación, Colombia

Edwin Vásquez Campos

General Coordinador
Las Organizaciones Indígenas de la Cuenca
Amazónica (COICA)

Jean Wyllys

Deputy in the Chamber of Deputies
Brazil

Design, organization, facilitation, systematization, and project management

Reos Partners

Funders

Avina Foundation
Ford Foundation
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