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**Democratic governance in turbulent times:
The experience of the Peruvian Transition and Emergency Government**

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Introduction

Thanks to Steve Levitsky, Director of the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, a leading institution that has contributed to a greater understanding of the situation of our complex region, and to better interactions between Latin American and North American scholars, policymakers and professionals interested in promoting hemispheric cooperation.

I would like to briefly cover a range of issues that brings forth the question of democratic governance, starting first with an assessment of the current times we are living in —what I have thought of as “the twilight of Bacon’s age” — and their implications. I will focus next on the challenges that Latin American countries, and Perú in particular, face to mobilize commitments and energies to strengthen democratic practices, achieve results that improve living conditions, and maintain peace and security. I will close with remarks on what we did during my time as President of the Republic to restore trust in government and hope in a better future for all in Peru.

A change of epoch

We are now living a “change of epoch” not an “epoch of changes” in all aspects of human activities. We have not experienced such a situation since the end of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance when humanity’s perceptions and conception of the world changed in fundamental ways. As the result of the scientific revolution, advances in technology and prodigious innovations, the last five hundred years have seen a fundamental shift in the ways we relate to the world around us and to each other. Following German philosopher Hans Jonas, I have explored how the “Baconian program” of dominating nature through understanding to improve the human condition unfolded since the early sixteenth century, when it was implicitly formulated by Sir Francis Bacon. In the mid-nineteenth it was deliberately deployed, when the expansion of international capitalism appropriated the Baconian program to generate an explosion of scientific knowledge, technological advances and innovations that improved human life everywhere, albeit at different paces and to different extents.

The extraordinary success of the Baconian program ended up undermining its own foundations. Its impact on nature and society took place without safeguards that could have guided its application and influence without negative consequences but now its effects are pervasive. Bacon’s dictum “knowledge is power” and his injunction to “dominate nature through understanding”, ideas that were to be mobilized to, in his words, “improve the human condition”, were transformed with the passage of time into the reckless exploitation of natural resources, without any regard for preserving the regenerative capacity of

ecosystems that support human life (our species now faces the once unthought possibility of extinction!).

Among many extraordinary technological advances, the triumph of Bacon's program led to the creation of new information technologies that have fundamentally altered the patterns of human interaction and done so in ways that outpaced our capacity to develop values and norms for organizing and regulating them to enhance its positive features and protect us from their harmful effects.

The results are now for all of us to see: together with mindboggling innovation came uncertainty, insecurity, and an erosion of trust. Human interactions, both at the individual and collective levels, are now fraught with polarization, resentment, mutual contempt, disregard of the other, lack of dialogue, waning of empathy, breakdown of solidarity, disconnect with the common good. "*No sabemos lo que nos pasa, y eso es lo que nos pasa*" — "We don't know what is happening to us, and that is what is happening to us" — sentenced Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset seven decades ago, referring to his times, but clearly anticipating our current predicament. I believe we are experiencing the *twilight of Bacon's age*. His program has served us well but now needs to be rethought, reformulated, and vastly improved to deal with the challenges that its own success has created.

Democratic governance in turbulent times

Our efforts to cope with the transition to a post-Baconian age require collective efforts, joint undertakings. Do we have the institutional structure and arrangements at the global, international, and national levels to begin such a daunting and crucial task for the survival of our species in the coming decades, for peaceful coexistence between nations, for improving the human condition in the more than 190 countries of the world? I think not, at least not yet.

At other times and in other settings I have focused on what is needed to improve and consolidate international cooperation initiatives in a variety of fields, and specifically on mobilizing development finance. My research, writings, policy, and political experience have explored how to improve development cooperation arrangements, how to provide and finance global and international public goods, and how multilateral development banks can improve their support of national development efforts in Latin America and other developing regions.

Therefore, I would like to devote my remarks today to the challenges of democratic governance in turbulent times, using Peru as an example and the experience of the Transition and Emergency Government to illustrate some of the current challenges and the ways they can be met.

The change of epoch we are in the middle of is generating challenges to the ways in which we organize our collective endeavors. In addition to the structural transformations in all aspects of human activities, the last few decades have witnessed a shift towards individualism, toward unfettered selfishness in our interactions, that are threatening even the most fundamental forms of collaboration that underpin social cohesion. The spurious antinomy between individual liberty and collective action has decanted in favor of the former,

with the latter being relegated not even to those activities that —paradoxically— are essential for exercising individual freedom in a responsible, productive, and fulfilling way.

The supposed contradiction between individual freedom and collective action was clearly stated during the debates on the role of the State, the market and civil society that began in the 1980s. It is now finding a renewed expression in the questioning of democratic practices and the resurgence of authoritarian ways of exercising political power and authority, to the extent that non-democratic forms appear to be gaining the upper hand in several different settings.

Democracies are under stress, professors Levitsky and Ziblatt have clearly shown how democratic practices can be used to subvert democracy itself —and, paradoxically, to do so while claiming to represent the will of the people. As an ancient but constantly renewed form of governance, democracy is still evolving, and needs to be improved.

Issues such the capture of the state apparatus, the tyrannies of the majority and of the minority, the distortion of democratic rules and regulations (gerrymandering, political disintermediation, filibustering), and the unbridled power of the purse in electoral processes, not to mention widespread and pervasive corruption that substitutes individual gain for the common good, need to be addressed to make democracy a more effective way of structuring and organizing human interactions,

But, as Winston Churchill said in a rather candid way, “democracy is the worst form of government – except for all the others that have been tried.” Therefore, we are stuck with democracy as the most reasonable way of governing ourselves and organizing collective actions to improve the human condition. Yet rather than trying to introduce, or even impose, sweeping changes in the current workings of democracy, we need to adopt a paradoxical approach that keeps in sight a grand vision, but proceeds step by step.

We need to push for what may be defined as “*incremental democratic enhancements*” that should be firmly anchored in specific historical circumstances, but at the same time rise up to envisage the broader historical sweep of forms of government that have, over centuries and even millennia, allowed our species to flourish —but as I argue in my works on the “twilight of Bacon’s age”—, have also created ominous threats to the survival of our species.

The case of Peru

has been often said that Peru is a “social laboratory” which anticipates and focusses sharply on issues and trends that become visible later in other countries, regions, and latitudes. The convergence of our troubled history of failed, or at least ineffective, governance practices (dictatorship, authoritarianism, exclusion, discrimination, inequalities, corruption, inefficiency, and so on), with the new challenges posed by the turbulent global context of the transition to the post-Baconian age, create a political maelstrom that requires, once again, a paradoxical approach to democratic governance.

How to begin approaching this? First, we must reaffirm our conviction that democratic governance is the more adequate, and least harmful, way of organizing human interactions to pursuit agreed goals and objectives. Second, we must find ways of making democracy work more effectively to mobilize common efforts, which this involves designing and introducing

modest institutional reforms that facilitate those “incremental democratic enhancements” required to make democracies work better.

What are these incremental democratic enhancements? It depends to the place, time, situation, and other factors that must be continuously assessed to determine the best course of action. For example, it may be necessary to tweak the rules for access to elected positions, so that those who come to play government roles are at least slightly better than the average citizenry, and that may therefore be able to improve, however slightly, the ways we interact with each other in the pursuit of both our individual and common goals.

Finally, it requires a determined group of citizens that share a vision of enhanced democratic governance, can put aside their petty aspirations, willing to be not only leaders but also followers when the times and circumstances demand it, and that can combine modest incremental steps and grounded political decisions with ambitious visions of a much better functioning polity.

This is the only way we may be able to avoid what may be called a “low level, low quality democratic equilibrium”, a trap that guarantees the stasis or deterioration of human interactions and the degradation of our aspirations. But, to become a reality, this demands changes in the habits, values, behaviors, and aspirations of those that are willing and able to undertake leading roles in the process of devising and putting in place those incremental democratic enhancements.

Values are changed through education in all its forms; through the exposure to others through communications, media and, increasingly, social networks; but most importantly through example, through showing that other ways of being and acting in the political arena are possible, and that they are effective, produce results and generate consequences that benefit the majority.

The experience of the Transition and Emergency Government

This is what we tried to do in the Transition and Emergency Government during a few months: to generate trust and hope; to show that it is possible to govern ourselves well, honestly, with transparency, efficiency and effectiveness; to demonstrate that we can, and should, find ways of rejecting corruption in all its forms; to not promise what we cannot do, but do what we promised; to keep the common good in mind at all times, to do the best we can and to aim at improving the human condition in our troubled country.

What we did to confront the challenges of the pandemic in a fair and effective manner, to improve the prospects for economic growth and maintain social peace, to alleviate (and hopefully improve) the situation of the vulnerable and poor, and to support fair and clean electoral processes, among other things, are just examples of what could be done in the future with a more sensible, down to earth, but high aspiration style of government.

I am ready to answer your questions and reply to your comments on specific issues of your interest, but before I finish my remarks, I would like to quote from the last paragraphs of Carlos Granés’ recent masterful book *Delirio Americano*, and I will do it in Spanish:

“No hay más remedio que vivir con lo real, y lo que hay es imperfección complejidad, diferencia, antagonismo, increíble diversidad; tampoco hay otra opción que convivir con lo que nos ofende nos asusta y nos incomoda.”

“América era el lugar del encuentro, de la mezcla, de la antropofagia cultural que todo lo deglutía y todo lo hacía suyo. En esa actitud tolerante palpita una esperanza. Sus mejores creaciones han sido mestizas. ... los que no han temido al recurso extranjero y no han desdeñado la complejidad local.”

“De manera que ni arielismo, ni indigenismo, ni nuestroamericanismo, ni peronismo, ni castrismo ni guevarismo, porque ninguna de estas mitologías, a pesar de sus buenas intenciones y de sus sueños salvadores cohesionó las sociedades ni las hizo prosperar. Quizá la antropofagia sea una mejor guía: un liberalismo no redentor, cosmopolita e impuro, que fomente liderazgos plurales. Como cualquier otro lugar, Latinoamérica amasa una historia compleja y bárbara de vergüenzas y luces. Pero nada nos ata a ese pasado. El futuro está ahí, como para cualquier otra comunidad humana. Es hora de poner un pie en el siglo XXI.”

Thank you.