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**Challenges to democratic governance in turbulent times:
The experience of the Peruvian Transition and Emergency Government**

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Introduction

Thanks to Dylon Robbins, Director of the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, a leading institution that has contributed to a greater understanding of the situation of our complex region, and to improved interactions between Latin American, Caribbean, 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 crisis times, when I was President of the Republic, to restore trust in government and hope in a better future for all in Peru, with reference on how to transform a scarce, highly coveted good —the Covid-19 vaccines— into a national public good.

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 (see Agnes Heller’s *Renaissance Man*, she spent many years at the New School for Social Research). 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. But at these trying times it is necessary to ask ourselves: 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 clearly not, at least not yet.

But 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. A particular pernicious form of questioning and undermining democratic practices is the *gradual disappearance of the "consent of the defeated" in elections*, and the

rising questioning of electoral procedures by those beaten claiming “fraud” as the only reason why they lost.

As an ancient but constantly renewed form of governance, democracy is still evolving, and needs to be improved. Issues such as 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

Let me turn now to the case of my own country. 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 pursue agreed goals and objectives. Second, we must find ways of making democracy work more effectively to mobilize common efforts, which 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 on 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 change 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.

Democratic governance and vaccines as a public good: the experience of Peru

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 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 promise; 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.

Let me now leave general statements and come to a specific example of what may be achieved in practice with this approach to the exercise of political power and authority: what we did with Covid-19 vaccines to confront the challenges of the pandemic in a fair and effective manner, transforming a scarce, highly coveted and hoarded good into a national public good in Peru.

Public goods in economic theory—a concept first introduced in this field by Paul Samuelson in 1954—are defined as those that are characterized by *non-rivalry*, in the sense that its consumption or use by one person does not prevent its enjoyment by another person, and *non-excludability*, in the sense that it is not possible to impede anyone from enjoying it. In addition, they are characterized by the possibility of *free riding*, which means that even those who do not contribute to its provision can enjoy it, and *positive or negative externalities*, which refer to the collateral effects and second-order consequences that their enjoyment have on those unrelated to the provision or consumption of the public good, which are particularly relevant at the international level.

Public goods, and particularly *global and international public goods*, do not exist on their own, they are the product of deliberate human action. They are the result of political commitments, knowledge advances, decisions on institutional and organizational arrangements, and of provisions for their financing, all of which constitute an *international public goods delivery system*. The experience of the COVAX facility, created to acquire, provide, and distribute vaccines to middle- and low-income countries clearly shows the need for, and the limitations of, recent initiatives to arrange for the creation of international public goods delivery system.

The COVAX facility is a multi-institutional initiative that put together the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI), the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), the World Health Organization (WHO), with the support of some governments and private foundations. Its function was to acquire through purchases and donations enough vaccines to provide initially up to twenty percent of the vaccines needed by middle-income countries, which would pay a relatively favorable price per dose, and low-income countries, which would receive the vaccines as donations.

Unfortunately, the COVAX facility did not access the number of Covid-19 doses of vaccines to achieve its aim. High-income countries, and the pharmaceutical corporations based in them, kept most of the vaccines for themselves and made only small amounts available to the COVAX facility. For example, in the case of Peru, despite having signed an agreement with the facility for 13.2 million doses in September 2020, by the time the Transition and Emergency Government, which ended on July 28, 2021, had received only 1.6 million. Moreover, after reaching an agreement with the COVAX facility, countries did not know which laboratory would deliver the vaccines, when and in which amounts, and required an additional negotiation to set the terms for the purchase of doses from each laboratory. In practice, when the Transition and Emergency Government began on November 19, 2020, we had no firm agreement to provide vaccines.

We had to try for a second-best solution. To make sure that even if the vaccine was not an international public good, we would at least make it a *national public good*. This meant ensuring access to everybody in the target population (people over 18 years of old), irrespective of their economic or social condition, place of residence and any other characteristic. In doing so, we confronted many demands for special treatment and priority in receiving the vaccine, vociferous requests by private sector enterprises to purchase the vaccine directly and apply it to their workers and their families, claims of special situations, and so on.

We decided to make the vaccine *non-rivalrous* by acquiring as many doses as possible, ensuring that all the target population would get vaccinated as quickly as possible, to make it *non-excludable*, by empowering an Ethics Committee of independent experts to define the sequence of target groups to receive the vaccine considering only vulnerability, need and contribution to combatting the pandemic, and to make sure it had *positive externalities* by accompanying the vaccination process with other measures to protect the population from the pandemic and maintain social stability.

Concluding remarks

The example of Covid-19 vaccine acquisition and application is but one example of the many things we did in the Transition and Emergency Government of Peru to show, as I said earlier, that we can govern ourselves well, honestly, transparently, efficiently, and effectively; that it is possible to restore trust in government and hope of a better future for all.

I am ready to answer your questions and reply to your comments on specific issues of your interest, but before I finish my remarks.

Thank you.