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# THREE PARADOXES OF DEMOCRACY

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The world in 1990 is in the grip of a democratic revolution. Throughout the developing world, peoples are resisting and rebelling against communist and authoritarian rule. The ferment has spread to the world's most isolated, unlikely, and forgotten places: Burma, Mongolia, Nepal, Zaire, even Albania. From the postcommunist world of Eastern Europe to the post-bureaucratic-authoritarian nations of Latin America, from the poverty-stricken heart of tropical Africa to newly rich and industrializing East Asia, nations are on the march toward democracy. Never in human history have so many independent countries been demanding or installing or practicing democratic governance. Never in history has awareness of popular struggles for democracy spread so rapidly and widely across national borders. Never have democrats worldwide seemed to have so much cause for rejoicing.

But committed democrats would do well to restrain their impulse to celebrate. Democracy is the most widely admired type of political system but also perhaps the most difficult to maintain. Alone among all forms of government, democracy rests on a minimum of coercion and a maximum of consent. Democratic polities inevitably find themselves saddled with certain "built-in" paradoxes or contradictions. The tensions these cause are not easy to reconcile, and every country that would be democratic must find its own way of doing so.

This essay explores three contradictions that will bear very heavily on the struggles now underway around the world to develop and institutionalize democracy. My analysis will draw on evidence gleaned

from a comparative study of experiences with democracy in 26 developing countries.<sup>1</sup>

Many of the problems that democracy has experienced in the developing world spring from three tensions or paradoxes that inhere in democracy's very nature. First is the tension between *conflict* and *consensus*. Democracy is, by its nature, a system of institutionalized competition for power. Without competition and conflict, there is no democracy. But any society that sanctions political conflict runs the risk of its becoming too intense, producing a society so conflict-ridden that civil peace and political stability are jeopardized. Hence the paradox: Democracy requires conflict—but not too much; competition there must be, but only within carefully defined and universally accepted boundaries. Cleavage must be tempered by consensus.<sup>2</sup>

A second tension or contradiction sets *representativeness* against *governability*. Democracy implies an unwillingness to concentrate power in the hands of a few, and so subjects leaders and policies to mechanisms of popular representation and accountability. But to be stable, democracy (or any system of government) must have what Alexander Hamilton called “energy”—it must always be able to act, and at times must do so quickly and decisively. Government must not only respond to interest-group demands; it must be able to resist them and mediate among them as well. This requires a party system that can produce a government stable and cohesive enough to represent and respond to competing groups and interests in society without being paralyzed or captured by them. Representativeness requires that parties speak to and for these conflicting interests; governability requires that parties have sufficient autonomy to rise above them.

This leads to the third contradiction, between *consent* and *effectiveness*. Democracy means, literally, “rule by the people,” or at least rule with the consent of the governed. This is the message of people all over the world who are fed up with the repression and corruption of authoritarian or totalitarian ruling elites. As the articles in this publication attest, people across the globe are making it clear that they want the right to turn their rulers out of office, to be governed only with their consent.

But founding a democracy and preserving it are two different things. To be stable, democracy must be deemed legitimate by the people; they must view it as the best, the most appropriate form of government for their society. Indeed, *because* it rests on the consent of the governed, democracy depends on popular legitimacy much more than any other form of government. This legitimacy requires a profound moral commitment and emotional allegiance, but these develop only over time, and partly as a result of effective performance. Democracy will not be valued by the people unless it deals effectively with social and economic problems and achieves a modicum of order and justice.

If democracy does not work, people may prefer *not* to be governed through their own consent—they may choose not to put up with the pain of political choice any longer. Herein lies the paradox: Democracy requires consent. Consent requires legitimacy. Legitimacy requires effective performance. But effectiveness may be sacrificed to consent. Elected leaders will always be reluctant to pursue unpopular policies, no matter how wise or necessary they may be.

These three paradoxes have important implications for the development of democracy in those underdeveloped polities of Eastern Europe and what is commonly called “the Third World” that are struggling now, after so much repression and frustration, to build lasting democracies. Let us consider the implications of each of these paradoxes, beginning with the last.

### Consent versus Effectiveness

Democracies—and especially new democracies—suffer from a special problem with regard to government performance: Popular assessments of how the government has done tend to take the short view. Democratic governments everywhere—in the industrialized world every bit as much as the developing one—are thus constantly tempted to trim their policies with an eye on the next election. This may make good political sense in the short run, but it does not make for good *economic* policy. And when we are talking about performance, it is primarily economic performance that counts.

Authoritarian regimes like Pinochet’s Chile are not dependent on popular consent, and can therefore afford politically to make their populations suffer through long periods of economic austerity and structural adjustment for the sake of long-term payoffs. Chile’s economy is booming now—but at what price in human suffering, poverty, unemployment, and political repression over the past 15 years?

East European and many Latin American countries need urgently to implement sweeping structural reforms to generate productive and internationally competitive economies. But how long and how hard will new democratic or democratizing governments push economic reform if the short-term pain proves devastating, while the gains, however great, will not become apparent until well after the next election?

In such circumstances, the consolidation of democracy—so intimately linked to structural economic reform—requires the negotiation of some kind of agreement or “pact” among competing political parties and social forces on: 1) the broad direction and principles of structural economic reform, which all parties will support, no matter which one(s) come to power; 2) a renunciation of certain political appeals and strategies—in particular an irresponsible but tempting politics of outbidding; 3) sacrifices that all social forces will share, including demands they will

mutually postpone, during the critical and highly unstable period of economic adjustment and democratic installation; and 4) a method of ensuring that the burdens of adjustment are shared more or less fairly and eased by relief measures for the hardest-hit groups, such as workers rendered jobless by structural reforms.<sup>3</sup>

Such pacts may be as narrow as agreements on core principles of long-term economic policy, or may be far-reaching enough to produce broad coalitions capable of governing in the name of a firm policy consensus. One possible model in this regard may be the political and economic pacts negotiated by elites in Venezuela in 1958 that facilitated the successful and enduring restoration of democracy there. In addition to sharing power, these pacts set the broad outlines of the country's major economic policies, thus removing potentially contentious issues from partisan debate.<sup>4</sup>

The scale of the relief required to make economic reform politically palatable may lie well beyond what the bankrupt and debt-ravaged economies of Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa, and other developing countries (such as the Philippines) can finance on their own. Successful adjustment through democracy would seem to require an international compact as well. The industrialized democracies and the international community could offer substantial new investment and aid and genuine debt reduction in exchange for reforms designed to break the economic stranglehold of statism and launch these countries into self-sustaining growth.

What reforms and principles might serve as the basic tenets of a new economic policy consensus for these troubled democracies?

The past four decades of Third World economic development have furnished invaluable lessons for distinguishing the policies that work from those that do not. Broadly speaking, market-oriented economies develop, while state-socialist economies fall behind. Internationally open and competitive economies work; closed (or at least rigidly and persistently closed) economies do not. Economies grow when they foster savings, investment, and innovation, and when they reward individual effort and initiative. Economies stagnate and regress when bloated, mercantilist, hyperinterventionist states build "a structure of inflexible favoritisms for different groups, curtailing change, experimentation, competition, innovation, and social mobility."<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, economies that invest in the human capital of the poor by meeting their basic human needs develop a continuing momentum of growth. But those that effectively prevent half, two-thirds, or more of the population from gaining the skills and opportunities needed to partake in and benefit from development ultimately founder.

Democratic development, like democratic culture, requires a considerable measure of balance, moderation, and respect for all interests. Markets must be sufficiently open, flexible, and competitive to generate

increases in savings, investment, and rates of return. This requires getting or keeping the state off the backs of producers. But the state must be sufficiently involved to ensure that there is adequate investment in human and physical capital, and that development is responsible to environmental and other community interests. Taxes must be substantial enough (and sufficiently fairly and efficiently collected) to provide revenue for these essential purposes, but must also be limited and designed so that they operate “in ways most neutral to the incentives to save, invest, and efficiently allocate resources.”<sup>6</sup>

Around these general principles lies much variation, and also much complexity. Countries develop with differing types and mixes of state involvement in fostering indigenous enterprise (and even temporarily protecting it). But countries fall behind when the state becomes the *dominant* producer and employer, or an enduring protector of inefficient economic actors, whether capital or labor.

Perhaps the most important lesson from our comparative study of 26 countries is very simple, but very commonly neglected. Whatever the exact shape of a country’s policy, it can only work if it is pursued consistently and pragmatically. Drastic shifts between radical populist redistributive policies and radical neoliberal austerity policies are bound to invite economic miseries and crises of the sort that now threaten the future of democracy in Argentina, Brazil, and Peru.

This is not the inevitable fate of electoral regimes in the developing world. Botswana, Colombia, and (more problematically) India, with very different development levels and natural resource endowments, have all achieved steady economic growth through stable, prudent policies. Entrepreneurs at all levels in these countries can save, invest, profit, and reinvest with some confidence in a predictable future. Most notably perhaps, Colombia’s eclectic, pragmatic economic policies have produced constant growth with low inflation in the three decades since its democratic transition. Although India is often believed to be an economic basket case, it has in fact achieved significant socioeconomic development in the past three decades—and would have done much better had its population not doubled to 800 million. Since independence, India has achieved self-sufficiency in agriculture, significant industrialization, and quite tangible improvements in literacy, life expectancy, and infant mortality. It has done all this, moreover, while holding inflation and foreign borrowing to some of the lowest levels in the developing world.

If India can develop, why cannot Africa? With a population more than half again as large as Africa’s—and no greater bounty of natural resources, plus a level of poverty as great as Africa’s at independence—why has India been able to perform so much better economically?

The answers are in part political, for they involve policies and

institutions. India had the political institutions—not only the bureaucracy but also a stable and institutionalized political party system—to pursue a consistent and pragmatic long-run strategy for economic development. By and large it worked, although there is still enough inefficiency, corruption, and waste—deriving from a misplaced socialist idealism and a suffocating statism—to threaten the economic progress that India has made so far.

This comparative evidence holds two important lessons. The first is that democracies do not, inherently, perform worse economically than dictatorships. Very probably, they do not *inherently* perform better, either. The policies chosen—and the skill with which they are implemented—are far more important. The second is that, since consistency, prudence, and pragmatism in policy are so important to economic development, struggling young democracies must give serious thought to how they can form and maintain a broad consensus on economic policy. This will require creative institution-building, public education, and elite accommodation. Above all, it will require political leadership with courage, vision, and determination.

This brings us back, then, to our second paradox—how to balance representativeness and accountability with the need for governability?

### **Representativeness versus Governability**

Governability requires sufficient concentration and autonomy of power to choose and implement policies with energy and dispatch. This generally conflicts with the need to hold power accountable to popular scrutiny, representation, and control. In some respects, however, vigorous public accountability may strengthen the capacity to govern and the effectiveness of government. This is most clearly seen with regard to political corruption.

Widespread government corruption is poisonous to democracy. It impedes economic growth by misdirecting the flow of capital and resources, and by distorting investment decisions and economic competition generally. Although some have argued that corruption may enhance political legitimacy by dispersing material benefits, these are typically concentrated rather than “spread around.” A narrow class of government officials and their business cronies is enriched at the expense of the bulk of the population—and of the legitimacy of the entire democratic system.

Moreover, where the prospect of ill-gotten gain is an important motive for the pursuit of office, the democratic process becomes a mere power struggle rather than a contest over policies. The premium on political power becomes so great that competing forces will do anything to win. This threatens the very essence of the democratic process—free, fair, and peaceful elections.

Statism exacerbates corruption by giving public officials numerous opportunities to collect rents from the state's regulatory activities. But opportunities for corruption are perennial features of public life everywhere. The only remedy is accountability, which requires a free press willing and able to expose corruption; an organized citizenry ready to monitor the political process and the conduct of public officials; and an assertive, independent legal system equipped to prosecute and punish official misconduct.

These are at least some of the ways in which accountability serves governability. They involve limiting the power of the state, and especially the executive, in order to prevent abuses. But there are trade-offs, for if power is too limited or too diffused, government may be hamstrung.

Each country must find its own way of resolving this universal tension. Juan Linz has argued that parliamentary systems may be preferable in most developing countries because, *inter alia*, they make the executive branch more accountable before the legislature, avoid the rigidity and winner-take-all features of presidentialism, and at the same time serve governability by preventing the potential deadlock that can arise in a presidential system when the presidency is controlled by one party and the legislature by others.<sup>7</sup>

But here, too, there are no pat formulas, and some countries may be better served by the more decisive character of presidential systems, by the greater stability of presidential cabinets, and by the possibility that presidentialism provides to elect a single, overarching national leader in ways (and with rules) that induce the recruitment of broad constituencies.<sup>8</sup>

A vigorous civil society enhances not only the accountability, but also the representativeness and vitality of democracy. Voluntary associations represent a crucial institutional supplement to democratic political parties. The persistence of democracy in India and Costa Rica for four decades, and in Venezuela since 1958, owes much to these countries' dense networks of autonomous voluntary associations and mass media. These not only check and scrutinize state power; they also enhance the legitimacy of democracy by providing new means to express political interests; increasing the political awareness, efficacy, and confidence of citizens; and training and recruiting new political leaders.

At the same time, however, democratic governments and parties must have some autonomy from group demands in order to make and implement tough decisions. If political parties are too weak or too penetrated by other social groups; if the bureaucracy is a captive of such parties or interests; if the elected government cannot stand above, reconcile, and at times resist interest-group pressures; then that government may be unable to formulate workable policies. Such weakness could produce a regime-threatening crisis of confidence.

The relationship among party systems, electoral systems, and constitutional structure introduces another profound tension between representativeness and governability. In principle, the purest way to represent diverse social groups and interests, especially in deeply divided societies, is through proportional representation (PR). In fact, where social cleavages are multiple, deep, and politically mobilized, to obstruct their representation through the party system by abandoning PR would be to risk political alienation, turmoil, and violence that could threaten democratic stability.<sup>8</sup> The purer the form of PR, and the lower the minimum percentage of the vote required for a party to enter the parliament, the more significant parties there will tend to be and the more parliament will tend to mirror in its political composition the balance of social, cultural, and ideological interests in society.<sup>10</sup> This may make the system more representative—but less governable and even less accountable, for three reasons.

First, if none of the parliamentarians is elected from (manageably sized) territorial districts, none of them is individually accountable to any clearly identifiable portion of the electorate, other than the party bosses or electors who put them on the party list of candidates. Second, with the fragmentation of the party system, voters may keep getting virtually the same coalition governments, with minor shifts in cabinet portfolios, no matter how the vote may change among parties. Thus, it becomes difficult truly to change policy, and to “throw the rascals out.” This may enhance stability of policy, even as it leads to frequent changes in government (as in Italy), but at the cost of denying voters clear electoral choice. Third, in a situation of evenly balanced large parties and numerous small parties, the latter derive vastly inordinate bargaining leverage or “blackmail” potential in negotiations to form a government. This leads either to an undemocratic concession of power and resources to these fringe groups or to a “national unity” coalition government so divided that it cannot act. This conundrum has increasingly crippled democratic politics in Israel, where electoral reform has become the rallying cry of an outraged Israeli population.

In such circumstances, a political system may be made *more* stably democratic by making it somewhat *less* representative. Thus West Germany, reflecting on the polarization and instability of the Weimar Republic, set an electoral threshold of five percent of the vote for a party to enter the Bundestag, and got a stable system comprising two dominant parties plus one or two minor ones. Reflecting on the political fragmentation and polarization that in 1980 brought its democracy down for the second time in as many decades, Turkey in 1982 adopted a ten-percent threshold and other changes that have also produced a much more consolidated party system. In the past year, a bipartisan electoral-reform commission in Israel has produced a wisely balanced proposal that, while retaining PR, would set the threshold at 3.5 percent and elect,

as in West Germany, half the members of parliament from territorial districts and half from national party lists.<sup>11</sup>

There are, of course, more drastic mechanisms for streamlining the party system, such as the election of legislators from single-member districts by plurality vote and the presidential system. Either one will tend strongly to reduce the number of parties; the two together are a natural recipe for a two-party system. But we have already mentioned the problems with presidentialism, and in a situation with more than two parties enjoying significant electoral support—such as Britain in the last parliamentary election or India since independence—the plurality method of election by district can magnify a party's national electoral plurality into a staggering parliamentary majority. This may produce not governability so much as a decidedly undemocratic imbalance and arrogance of power. Part of the riddle of democracy is that its paradoxes are not often resolved through recourse to blunt and simple alternatives.

### Conflict versus Consensus

Perhaps the most basic tension in democracy is between conflict and consensus. Democracy implies dissent and division, but on a basis of consent and cohesion. It requires that the citizens assert themselves, but also that they accept the government's authority. It demands that the citizens care about politics, but not too much. This is why Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, in their classic book *The Civic Culture*, called the democratic political culture "mixed." It balances the citizen's role as participant (as agent of political competition and conflict) with his or her role as subject (obeyer of state authority), and as "parochial" member of family, social, and community networks outside politics.<sup>12</sup> The subject role serves governability while the parochial role tempers political conflict by limiting the politicization of social life.

Other closely related elements of democratic political culture include tolerance of opposition and dissent; trust in fellow political actors; a willingness to cooperate, accommodate, and compromise; and hence a certain flexibility, moderation, civility, and restraint in one's partisanship. It is well understood that sturdy habits of moderation and conciliation make it possible for democracies to balance conflict and consensus.<sup>13</sup> To honor these virtues in deed as well as in speech is often one of the most important challenges facing nascent and troubled democracies.

How do such democratic habits develop? Certainly they are fostered by education, which, as Almond and Verba showed, increases a host of "democratic" tendencies in the individual. Socioeconomic development can also enhance democratic values and practices to the extent that it improves the income, education, skills, and life chances of citizens. Again we see why investment in human capital is so important for the preservation of democracy.

Yet is there not considerable historical evidence to suggest that democratic culture is as much the product as the cause of effectively functioning democracy? Elites may “back into” democracy for a variety of strategic reasons—including, for example, the historic lack or exhaustion of other means for resolving conflict,<sup>14</sup> or the unavailability in today’s Eastern Europe or Latin America of any other legitimate alternative. Subsequently, however, the successful practice of democracy demonstrates the value of participation, tolerance, and compromise—indeed the efficacy and intrinsic desirability of democracy itself. Over time, citizens of a democracy become habituated to its norms and values, gradually internalizing them.<sup>15</sup> The trick, then, is for democracies to survive long enough—and function well enough—for this process to occur.

But this returns us to the paradox. To survive and function well, democracy must moderate conflict. But the cultural mechanisms for doing so do not develop overnight. In the meantime, how can conflicts be contained so that political cleavage and competition do not rip society apart?

Cleavages tend to run along lines of class, ethnicity (including religion and region), and party. The problem of class cleavage presents a paradox within a paradox. For democracy to be stable, class cleavage must be moderate. For class cleavage to be moderate, economic inequality must be moderate too. Severe inequality tends eventually to generate intense, violent political polarization, as Peru and the Philippines are discovering. To avoid this, to achieve a moderate degree of inequality, socioeconomic reforms must be undertaken. At a minimum, these include prudent investments in education, health care, housing, and other social services. In some cases, more thoroughgoing reforms, including land reform, may be necessary. But this may ignite the bitter resistance of entrenched elites, especially large landowners and employers of cheap labor. And therein lies the rub: to moderate class conflict in the long run, a political system may need to risk aggravating it in the short run.

There is no obvious way out of this conundrum. Democracy often gains a purchase in tense and conflict-ridden situations only when certain especially contentious issues are ruled off the agenda. But the nettle must eventually be grasped, for democracy cannot endure if massive inequality and exclusion go unchallenged. By its very nature, democracy permits only incremental reform rather than revolutionary change. Opposing interests must somehow be reconciled. Land may need to be redistributed—but only after its owners are fairly compensated and given opportunities to reinvest their assets in other productive enterprises. Wages may need to be increased, but only at a pace that will not threaten severe damage to corporate profits and economic growth. For only in a context of economic growth can inequality be reduced in a way that brings an enduring reduction in poverty.

Getting reform on the agenda requires that disadvantaged and excluded economic groups organize and mobilize politically. But if reform is to be adopted without provoking a crisis that might destroy democracy, the costs to privileged economic interests of overturning democracy must be kept greater than the costs of the reforms themselves. This requires realism and incrementalism on the part of those groups pressing for reform. It also requires sufficient overall effectiveness, stability, and guarantees for capital on the part of the democratic regime so that privileged economic actors will have a lot to lose by turning against it.

### Ethnic and Party Cleavages

The social sciences may have discerned few true laws, but one that can be confidently stated concerns ethnicity: Ethnic cleavages do not die. They cannot be extinguished through repression or assimilation; however, they can be managed so that they do not threaten civil peace, and people of different groups are able to coexist tranquilly while maintaining their ethnic identities.

There are four principal mechanisms for managing ethnicity politically within a democratic framework: federalism, proportionality in the distribution of resources and power, minority rights (to cultural integrity and protection against discrimination), and sharing or rotation of power, in particular through coalition arrangements at the center.<sup>16</sup>

As the experiences of India and Nigeria demonstrate, and as Donald Horowitz has noted, federal systems are particularly effective in managing ethnic tension because they utilize a variety of mechanisms for reducing conflict. First, they *disperse conflict* by transferring much of it to state and local levels. They also generate *intraethnic conflict*, pitting different factions of ethnic groups against one another in the struggle for control of state and local governments. Third, they may induce *interethnic cooperation* as states find the need to coalesce with one another in shifting ways depending on the issue at the center. Fourth, they may generate *crosscutting cleavages* if some ethnic groups are split into different states, with different interests, advantages, and needs. Fifth, they can *reduce disparities* by enabling backward and minority peoples to rise within their own state bureaucracies and educational systems.<sup>17</sup>

More generally, federal systems give all major territorially based ethnic groups some control over their own affairs, and some chance to gain power and control resources at multiple levels. This points to another virtual law: the impossibility of stable democracy in a society where ethnic cleavages are deep and power is heavily centralized. There are compelling independent reasons why decentralization of power and strong local and state government promote the vitality of democracy, but these are especially striking imperatives in divided societies.

Finally, party cleavage can represent, independent of class and

ethnicity, a quite sufficient basis for violent and destructive conflict. Even in the absence of deep differences over ideology and program, political parties represent competing organizations for the conquest of state power, and the greater and more pervasive the power of the state, the more will parties want to get it and keep it at any price. This is another reason why statism is so toxic to democracy: not only because it breeds corruption and economic inefficiency, but also because it raises the premium on political power to a degree approaching a zero-sum game. When so much is at stake in the electoral contest, trust, tolerance, civility, and obedience to the rules become formidably difficult to maintain. A balanced political culture—in which people care about politics, but not too much—is possible only in structural circumstances where people can *afford* not to care too much, where wealth, income, status, and opportunities for upward mobility are not mere functions of political power.

In Eastern Europe and much of the developing world, restraining the partisan battle requires deflating the state and invigorating the private economy. But it requires more as well. Where parties are only beginning to take shape, where open political life is only just emerging after decades of repression and fear, the culture of tolerance, trust, accommodation, and cooperation is yet to be born. Passions are intense, memories bitter. People lack the basis of mutual trust and respect on which they might combine political efforts or at least pursue their own political interests prudently and flexibly.

In such circumstances, elite actions, choices, and postures can have a formative impact in shaping the way their followers approach political discourse and conflict. Opposing party leaders must take the lead in crafting understandings and working relationships that bridge historic differences, restrain expectations, and establish longer, more realistic time horizons for their agendas. Pacts or formal arrangements for sharing power represent only one dimension of this general imperative. At a minimum, competing party elites must set an accommodating and civil tone for political life. Above all, they must manifest a faith in the democratic process and a commitment to its rules that supersedes the pursuit of power or other substantive goals.

Building among political competitors such a system of “mutual security,” as Robert Dahl calls it, of transcendent respect for the rules of the game, may demand not only faith but a leap of faith from political leaders. They must believe that whatever results from the democratic process will, in the long run, serve their interests better than an intransigence that risks the breakdown of democracy. Among the manifold uncertainties that attend the founding of all new regimes, probably nothing is more important to democracy than the presence of party leaders with the courage and vision to join hands in taking this leap.

## NOTES

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15. Dankwart Rustow, "Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model," *Comparative Politics* 2 (April 1970): 358-361.
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