

**The Travails of Democracy in  
Latin America**

*Inaugural Lecture of the Academic Year  
Latin American Centre, Oxford University  
October 15th, 2024*

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Good afternoon.

How wonderful it is to be back at the Latin American Centre. Thank you, Eduardo, for a very kind invitation that means the world to me.

You see, after all these years, I still get glimpses of the Latin American Centre, sparks that cast light on my long sojourn at Oxford. Most of those mental images lead back to my cubicle in the basement, where for years I would spend a few hours every day chiseling away the recalcitrant marble of my thesis, and many more, happier ones, learning about the role of women in the struggle for universal suffrage in Mexico, the technical details of innovation policies in Chile or the political economy of oil in Venezuela, namely what my fellow DPhil castaways were writing about with far more efficacy than me.

On occasion, like a vampire, I would venture out into the world of the living and make the trek upstairs to this very seminar room, where a colorful set of Oxford dons would share with us their encyclopedic knowledge of Latin America, with passion and more than a little exasperation for our region's inability to live up to its fabled potential. A few times, we were fortunate enough to be given tantalizing hints of the future of Latin America in this room. It was here that I first heard Alvaro Uribe muse about the impossibility of reaching a negotiated solution to the armed conflict in Colombia, with a single mindedness that makes for poor academics and successful politicians. It was here too that I attended a hair-raising session with then-candidate Hugo Chávez, which left me convinced that the political disaster he railed against with zeal was a mere prelude to Venezuela's long descent into the abyss.

Even more rarely I would climb to this building's upper levels, to the quarters of some of the Centre's faculty members. I can't remember how many therapy sessions I had at Alan Angell's office. I do remember, however, his unfailing patience and his faith that my dissertation would turn out alright.

And I also recall the experience of performing a veritable rain dance at Alan Knight's office—a forbidding landscape with hundreds of piles of papers and books strewn on the floor—to find a suitable place to land my feet. Listening to him was well worth the strange ritual, though.

How lucky I was to have spent those years at the Latin American Centre, learning not just about politics or Costa Rica, but about all things Latin American; learning about the power and rigors of free inquiry, which Oxford teaches you with unparalleled eloquence; learning from dons and fellow travelers, from supervisors and strangers, from the high and the low, the illustrious and the unknown, all summoned to the Latin American Centre to profess their perplexity and their love for our prodigious continent. So, thank you for having me here, Eduardo and colleagues.

I did not come here to talk about this wonderful place, though. I was asked to speak in this session about the roots and triggers of the democratic deterioration that we are witnessing in Latin America. And I am going to do that, but I want to broaden the lens a little. Because what is happening in the region, although with its specificities, is part of a global process.

So, I would like to do three things in this presentation: first, I would like to share a sort of diagnosis of the illnesses that are undermining democracy worldwide; second, I am going to lower the level of analysis and say what I think is happening with democracy in Latin America, trying to go beyond the current situation and place what is happening in the context of the democratic journey of the region over the past four decades; and third, in light of the serious problems we are seeing, I want to reinforce a point that seems crucial to me: it is very important not to succumb to gloating over the obvious shortcomings of the region's democracies and then jump to the conclusion that they have no achievements, that they are worthless and must, in consequence, be replaced by various versions of authoritarianism, those that claim to be able to bring eternal happiness to this vale of tears.

Let us begin, then, with the problems of democracy on a global scale.

Let me state the obvious – the current problems of democracy are really serious. I could give you a hundred indicators to prove this, but it seems to me that you already have a sense of the story. I will only give you a couple of figures from International IDEA's Global State of Democracy Report, published some 3 weeks ago.

Our report, which is available on our website, assesses democratic performance at country level in four big attributes: Representation, Rights, Rule of Law, and Participation. The number of countries where the quality of democracy has deteriorated over the past five years far exceeds those have witnessed improvements. This is the eighth year in a row that this

happens, the longest such sequence in the past half a century. Not just that. If you take the 173 countries covered by the report, nearly half have experienced a statistically significant decline in at least one key component of democracy over the past five years. In some cases, it is the credibility of elections that has suffered, in others the protection of press freedom, in yet another group the quality of civic space, and so on. Ten years ago, this proportion was less than a quarter of the total. That alone tells you both how widespread the erosion of democracy is in the world, and how rapidly it is advancing.

We see these challenges in all parts of the world and at every level of democratic performance. Many countries that already had it bad are getting worse, while some of the world's most robust democracies face mounting threats.

What is going on? What is driving this trend? What is ailing democracy?

After thinking a lot about what the big problem facing democracy might be, I settled on four sets of problems.

The first one is what I would call the disappearing democratic polis. It seems to me that, increasingly, democratic communities do not have a set of common values and experiences that hold them together. Democracies are being rent asunder by different forces and, as a result, are weakening. We are seeing increasing political polarization everywhere, which has many underlying causes but today cannot be understood without reference to the role of social media and disinformation.

In addition to political polarization, we also have the grotesque levels of inequality around us, which conspire against any effort at social integration. For 40 years we chose to believe that it was possible to build robust, healthy, stable democracies amidst ever increasing inequality levels. Well, at some point the bill comes in – and it has come in.

To those two centrifugal factors, I would add a third: the collapse of traditional mechanisms to aggregate interests and preferences. And here it is key to mention the implosion of political parties almost everywhere. According to the latest iteration of the World Values Survey, which covers 79 countries, when asked how much confidence respondents had in political parties, more than 70% of respondents said they had “not much” or “none.” Only 4.5% have “a lot” of confidence in parties. Almost everywhere, parties have lost the ability to aggregate social interests and demands and to represent broad social coalitions, which is what they were always expected to do. When that happens, public interest becomes balkanized and politics becomes, in essence, a naked dispute between interest groups.

The second big set of problems is related to the perceived inability of democracy to respond to social demands. These are reasons linked to the increasing difficulties that

democracies seem to have in solving problems –including inequality– and responding to crises, crises that are becoming more frequent as a consequence of the interconnectedness and volatility of the world in which we live. Social demands are growing exponentially, while the capacity of democracy to adapt and meet those demands is growing very slowly, if at all. In that ever-growing gap, monsters are bred, including the monster of authoritarian populism.

The third big factor is corruption, perceptions of corruption and impunity for corruption, which has really become a toxic element in this story all over the world. Corruption is eating away at the legitimacy of democratic systems in many different ways. One of them, as I will argue later in the case of Latin America, is that every corruption scandal reinforces the perception of inequality, the notion that the political system only caters to those who are “plugged in” – *los enchufados*. The terrible thing is that when it comes to corruption, if you look at our data at IDEA, the proportion of countries with a high level of corruption has hardly changed at all since 1975. The graph is a flat line. We are stagnant when it comes to corruption, despite all the efforts and resources that have been put into tackling this problem. This should give us pause for thought and a sense of the enormous complexity of this problem.

So, we have a series of internal factors that lead people to lose faith in democracy, but we also have a fourth group of international factors that have helped to accelerate and deepen this process. One of them is that the credibility of the democratic powers, particularly those in the West, has been weakened by very damaging events over the past two decades, including the invasion of Iraq, the global financial crisis of 2008-09 and its aftermath, and the nightmarish experience of Donald Trump’s administration in the United States, which we may well be about to repeat. All these own goals, which gravely undermine the credibility of the democratic West, have taken place at the same time that credible alternative models of governance have emerged. They range from so-called illiberal democracies to hybrid regimes of different kinds, all the way to the combination of brutal political authoritarianism and a market economy, of which China is of course the best example. Today, liberal democracy faces reasonably well-articulated competitors, in a way that was not the case 30 years ago.

Moreover, as journalist Anne Applebaum has written about eloquently, those competitors are visibly collaborating. There is a protection network that makes sure that authoritarian leaders who undermine democracy today pay a lower price than they used to. The international environment is now much less conducive to the protection of democracy. We are seeing this at play, glaringly, in the case of Venezuela.

The result of the convergence of these four sets of problems is very serious. People are more willing to give up on democracy. In Latin America the proportion of people who say that

living under a democracy or an authoritarian regime is the same for them has increased 12 points in little more than a decade, according to *Latinobarometro*.

In general, what we are seeing is that people like democracy in the abstract, but increasingly they like it much less in practice. Again, as per the World Values Survey, since the mid-1990s, the share of citizens who are “dissatisfied” with democracy has risen globally by about 10 points, from 48% to 58%. This is worse in Latin America. *Latinobarometro* tells us that dissatisfaction with democracy has increased almost 20 points in the past decade and a half. Even more tellingly, 72% of the population in Latin America believes that their political system protects the interests of the powerful few, rather than those of society as a whole – a topic to which I will return later.

When citizens feel that they are not being heard, that the normal functioning of institutions is beyond their control, that they derive no real benefit from a system whose defining feature is severe and growing inequality, they are very likely to heed the siren’s song of demagogues and take a leap into the void. In some cases, the void is on the left and in some cases on the right. In both situations, the offer put before them is to end politics as usual and use simple, often authoritarian, methods to solve complicated issues, such as inequality and immigration.

And that’s the thing: I don’t believe that people in most modern democracies are brimming with civic vocation, burning with a willingness to participate in public affairs. That assumption is unproven, as far as I can tell. What really angers people is being taken for granted and treated like underage dupes. Beware: when a political system gets to the point where a significant number of citizens feel that the rules are systematically biased against them, there’s a good chance that they may just decide to blow it up. For democracy to prevail, the vast majority of citizens must feel that they have something to lose if the system collapses.

So, this is my diagnosis. The demise of the democratic polis and the loss of faith in the capacity of democratic institutions to deliver fairness, have weakened democracy and made people more willing to give up on it; and when they do, the autocrats who cater to that demand pay a smaller price for their conduct.

One general conclusion that emerges from this diagnosis is that, indeed, democracy faces a long-term global struggle against powerful competitors, some of them hostile, but more fundamentally it faces a struggle against itself. Democracy needs to be redesigned for our time. Above all, we need to strengthen democracy’s immune system and its ability to solve real problems for real people. Now, more than ever, we need to harness democracy’s self-correcting capacity. Here it is worth remembering that, fundamentally, communism did not collapse

because of external competition, but because it rotted from within. This is what we must prevent from happening to liberal democracies.

This is the global story, as I see it. Now, how does this play out in Latin America? What does the crisis of democracy in Latin America look like?

As usually happens, distilling one narrative for the whole region is very difficult. Like Tolstoi's families, every democracy in Latin America is unhappy in its own way. The terrible situation in Venezuela and Nicaragua is of course different from that of Northern Central America, where the impact of criminal violence is paramount. And this, in turn, is different from the situation in Colombia, where the hangover and still the reality of the armed conflict is decisive in the way politics operates, or from the reality of Argentina, where the ills of democracy are connected to inflation. And so on and so forth.

But there are a few macro stories that ought to be highlighted. I think that the past few years have exposed the strengths and weaknesses of the process through which Latin America built democracies over the past generation.

On the positive side, Latin America holds elections very well. This is, no doubt, the area of democratic consolidation that has traveled the furthest – the introduction of robust electoral institutions. We saw it during the pandemic: Latin America went through a huge election cycle amidst the impossible conditions created by the pandemic and did it with flying colors.

Despite what the recent experience of Venezuela may suggest, blatant fraud has become a thing of the past in Latin America. Nearly everybody in Latin America has accepted the notion that the electoral process is the only legitimate way to access power. This is a huge social, political, cultural transformation in a region where until not so long ago power was dilucidated either in the military barracks or in the mountains.

That's why the regional reaction about what just happened in Venezuela is as important as the terrible event itself. If we cannot get ourselves to say, with one voice, that what happened in Venezuela is completely unacceptable, if the Presidents of Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, the big democracies of Latin America, are unable to state explicitly something as basic as that, then we must conclude that we haven't learned anything and ought to harbor serious doubts about the future of democracy in the region.

That's why, also, standing up for the autonomy of credible electoral authorities such as those in Mexico and Brazil and Peru, that have been under fire from incumbents and political actors, is so vital. Because these attacks weaken precisely the aspect of democracy in which the region has made the biggest strides.

But then, of course, elections are the easy part of democracy, the instant gratification in the process of building a democratic society. And the truth is that the region is not doing well in many of the other aspects that make for a strong democracy. The problem is that if you don't deal with the other elements of democracy, particularly with the rule of law, authoritarian populism is much more likely to rear its head and end up weakening and corrupting also the electoral side of democracy.

I could give you here a long list of ills and shortcomings that need to be addressed, but that would make my presentation too gloomy and too boring. For now, let me zero in on the question of the weakness of the rule of law, which I think remains the single most important pending assignment on the road towards building solid democracies in Latin America.

Just to give you an idea, in our Global State of Democracy Report, the average score for Latin American countries for the attribute of Representation is 0.62, between 0 and 1, which is quite good. Seven countries from the region make it into the top 50 in the world. For Rule of Law, meanwhile, the average score is much lower: 0.46, and only 3 countries –Costa Rica, Chile and Uruguay—make it into the top 50. So, rule of law is an area where Latin American democracies are really struggling.

And here I'd like to make a point about sequencing that is seldom remarked. Admittedly, in saying this I'll paint with a broad brush. The sequencing of the process to establish democracy in Latin America is problematic. Roughly speaking, democracies in the North Atlantic, as well as other places that are umbilically connected to them, such as Australia and New Zealand, had rule of law before they had universal suffrage and, ultimately, democracy. In Latin America we are striving to create democracies before the rule of law is nowhere nearly established. When this happens, the potential for the emergence of gravely flawed democracies, democracies prone to the abuse of power, democracies riddled with impunity, democracies where basic rights –such as personal safety or access to justice—are poorly protected, is much greater. Correspondingly, it is also much more probable that we will see the emergence of polities defined by widespread popular disaffection and weak democratic loyalties, and where the credibility of institutions is chronically challenged.

In the case of Latin America, the weakness of the rule of law is linked, like almost everything else, to the most structural and ancient of the region's problems: inequality. Highly unequal societies distort power relations and make the equal application of the law almost impossible, thus fueling the prevalence of impunity. It is a vicious circle from which it is difficult to escape – inequality weakens the rule of law and favors corruption and violence, and

corruption and violence, in turn, weaken the capacity of the state, deepen inequality and fuel the perception of injustice.

Don't take my word for it. An UNDP study published in 2021 detected that 72% of the population in Latin America are convinced that the equal application of the law is not guaranteed, while 80% do not believe that access to justice is equitable.

Let me now elaborate on a couple of ways in which the weakness of the rule of law is having a pulverizing effect on the legitimacy of democratic institutions in Latin America.

The first, and most obvious one, is endemic criminal violence. With only 9% of the world's population, the region accounts for one third of the world's intentional homicides. Moreover, about a third of the population in the region, roughly 200 million people, are victims of crime every year. Although this is a multi-causal phenomenon, both inequality and impunity play a central role in its reproduction. In Latin America, most crimes are not reported, and conviction rates are very low. Moreover, violence disproportionately affects the most vulnerable people, perpetuating and widening inequality in aspects such as health, education and income.

It has been empirically demonstrated that both the high levels of crime victimization and the acute perception of insecurity throughout the region negatively affect support for democracy, trust in institutions, interpersonal trust and levels of social tolerance, while driving support for heavy-handed solutions to national problems. A little more than a decade ago, I published a study for the Brookings Institution in which I found that both victims of crimes and people who feel gravely threatened by criminal violence were significantly more likely to support a military takeover to solve serious crime problems.

I want to emphasize this – the prevalence of crime, especially organized crime, is arguably the single most acute challenge faced by democracies today in Latin America. Moreover, it is a problem that is spreading to countries where it wasn't a big issue, the likes of Costa Rica, Chile and Uruguay. In all 3 countries, criminal violence has become the single most important issue for the population, according to *Latinobarometro*.

And this is not a figment of the popular imagination. I'll give you the figures for Costa Rica, a case I know well. There, the murder rate stood around 4 per 100,000 inhabitants for most of the 1980s, which is roughly where most West European countries are. Then murder rates began an ascent that was first gradual, then severe, and finally irresistible. By the year 2000, 4 had become 6 or 7, which then became 11 or 12 a couple of decades later. By the end of 2023, it had jumped to over 17. Costa Rica's most recent numbers place it above all its chronically violent Central American neighbors, except Honduras. The peaceful oasis in a



violent isthmus is no more. And let's not talk about what happened over the past 5 years with homicide and violence rates in Ecuador, which is really shocking. This is a huge political problem.

As we all know, Nayib Bukele, the President of El Salvador, is by far the most popular politician in the region on account of his brutal crackdown on youth gangs. He is also a ruthless autocrat that, unlike dictators of years past, openly boasts about violating Human Rights. Bukele's genius lies in having realized what was there for all to see in every opinion survey in Latin America already over a decade ago when I did my study for Brookings – people in the region care very little about the niceties of the rule of law and democracy when they feel threatened by crime.

Whatever their level of democratic development, Latin American countries would do well not to forget the serious warning laid out in a study done by political scientist Nancy Bermeo a number of years ago on interwar Europe: the perception that public order was unraveling was one of the key factors in the rise of authoritarianism and, in particular, of fascism.

Bukele's example suggests that public demand for personal safety must be taken very seriously by democratic forces. Violence must be prevented or controlled in ways that are both compatible with human rights and effective if democracy is to survive.

And there are ways to do it. Bogota, a city that is bigger than the whole of El Salvador, had a homicide rate of 83 per 100,000 people in 1993. Today it has 13. It got there through a combination of effective policing and better social investment. Much the same can be said about Sao Paulo. Even more remarkably, some of the same can be said about Guatemala, a country that has managed to reduce its homicide rate by two thirds over the past decade and a half, and has done so quietly, without posting pictures of prison inmates seated in rows like slaves in a Roman galley, without deploying the army to the streets, and without incarcerating 2% of its population.

The second manifestation of weakness of the rule of law that I would like to mention is, of course, corruption. According to Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, Latin America scores only 43 on a scale of 1 to 100, with 100 being the highest. This is, clearly, a very poor result.

But there is more to this than meets the eye. A few years ago, when big scandals were raging all over the region –scandals like *Lava Jato* in Brazil, and *La Linea* in Guatemala, and *Oderbrecht* all over the region—I wrote a long paper for the Inter American Development Bank on the question of why those corruption outbursts were proliferating. And what I found and

couldn't find was very interesting. I couldn't find any evidence, for starters, that measurements of corruption levels or of the perception of corruption had gone up in Latin America in the recent past. On the basis of the available evidence, it was impossible to say that there was more corruption now in Latin America than ever before.

What I did find was that social attitudes towards corruption had hardened considerably, which is good. For example, according to data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project at Vanderbilt University, while in 2006 1 in 4 citizens of the Americas said that paying a bribe could be justified in certain circumstances, by 2014 the figure had dropped to 1 in 6. Even among those who paid a bribe in 2014, 2 in 3 believed that such acts were never justifiable. Social sanctions against corruption were and are increasing in the region and, consequently, the political cost imposed on the political system when it is made public. This political cost, moreover, goes up dramatically depending on the economic situation. This has been demonstrated empirically time and again. When the economy is growing robustly, a lot of people are willing to turn a blind eye on corruption and adopt the old "*Rouba, mas faz*" attitude. Of course, that has not been the reality of Latin America over the past decade of economic calamity during the pandemic followed by anemic growth rates. This is the kind of circumstance when the political fallout from corruption can be considerable.

And I'm not just talking here about the obvious fallout, as seen in the election of self-appointed anti-corruption crusaders like Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador in Mexico, Nayib Bukele in El Salvador, or Rodrigo Chavez in Costa Rica. What I'm referring to is something deeper connected to the legitimacy of democratic institutions.

I mentioned before the huge majority in Latin America that believes that governments do the bidding of small powerful sectors. Corruption feeds into this belief. In a way, corruption scandals become the visible confirmation of the biases of the political system, of the notion that politics only works for those that are "in the know."

This perception of a system that is rigged is rooted, again, in inequality. But there is something here that is analytically different from sheer inequality, which I want to bring to your attention – the notion of legally sanctioned privilege. I'll illustrate this with a couple of examples.

A few years ago, I read a note in a Mexican newspaper about a high-ranking official in the judiciary, where they described the perks of his job. This is a guy that earned, at the time, give and take, US\$20,000 per month. Then the note added that "the Magistrate also has several salary supports such as: 25,000 pesos per month for food (about US\$1200), 3,000 pesos for two cell phones, 7 cars (2 of them armored), gasoline vouchers to have 140 to 520 liters per

month per vehicle, as well as 4 bodyguards.” There you have it. I could just imagine what a lady selling tacos out on the streets in Mexico would feel upon reading this.

Or what we in Costa Rica feel when we learn that there are former public officials and, remarkably, former professors from the public university, that gaming the system, in a perfectly legal way, have accrued pensions of a quarter of a million US dollars per year. This is real.

You see, this is different from wealth inequality. The Mexican magistrate is not like Carlos Slim or Ricardo Salinas or Emilio Azcarraga. What we have here is a different phenomenon.

I have the impression that this perception of privilege is a very important source of political irritation in Latin America. It was one of the drivers of the social explosion that happened in Chile in 2019, just as it was one of the factors that led to the election of Javier Milei in Argentina. When you add this to the perception of corruption, what you get is a big problem for the social contract. Most people in Latin America feel that they have nothing to gain from paying taxes and should resist tooth and nail any attempt at reforming the tax system. And reforming it is of the essence if we are to address inequality in most Latin American countries.

It is the weakness of the rule of law, it is the reality and the perception of rampant crime, of impunity, of corruption, of privilege that provide the rocket fuel to authoritarian populism in Latin America and beyond.

And here I go back to the beginning – if we care about the future of democracy in the region, we need to rein in the forces that are pulling societies apart and make sure that democracy delivers fairness, above all. We thus must do all the things that we left undone or did wrong since the transitions.

In particular, we need to ensure that we move towards establishing the basic building blocks of the rule of law. We need to ensure, in other words, that we protect judicial independence, which in my book is the single best barometer of the state of democracy writ large; that we are serious about reducing impunity for corruption and for crime, in general; that we grant truly democratic access to justice to every citizen; and that we make sure that checks and balances work, because without them success against power abuse, against corruption, against privilege and against unfairness becomes impossible.

There are many things that we need to do to protect democracy in Latin America, but if we don't preserve the integrity of elections and get serious about the rule of law, we will doom democracy to living an increasingly precarious existence, where all the real achievements that have been made in the last generation would be seriously endangered.

Because the fact is that there are achievements. And with this I have now reached the final part of this presentation.

Today, democracy faces severe headwinds throughout the world. In Latin America, democracy must be defended against the pathologies that have always been with us and against the new forms of democratic besiegement, which are more sophisticated than military uprisings and shameless frauds, and hence more insidious.

Above all, it is urgent to defend democracy from the deep disenchantment that is undermining it from within; it is vital to defend it from the widespread acceptance of a narrative that denies all accomplishments to the democratic experience of Latin America and places the region's hopes in the hands of enlightened prophets. In the hands, that is, of leaders who perceive the rule of law, freedom of the press, alternation in power, checks and balances, and tolerance of dissent as dispensable formalities or, worse still, as existential threats to their power.

Four decades after the start of the third wave of democracy in Latin America, it is obvious that the region faces enormous challenges. It remains deeply unequal and violent. Economic growth and productivity levels are low. Poverty, which afflicts a third of the population, remains unacceptably high, while corruption and privilege are widespread.

“And yet it moves,” as Galileo reputedly said. Because the truth is that, despite persistent challenges, democracy does have achievements to show in Latin America. It is not only that in most of our countries democratic elections are, as I have said, the only legitimate path to power and that there have been advances in the quality of representative government. It is also that elections have given citizens an unprecedented share of power and that this power has resulted in insufficient but very real changes in people's well-being.

This is crucial: in Latin America, democracy is not only valuable and useful in and of itself but also as an instrument of progress. Over the past three decades, and despite the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the region made notable and nearly continuous progress in raising levels of human development.

According to ECLAC figures, by 2023, poverty in Latin America had been reduced [by 22 percentage points since 1990](#) and extreme poverty was [down by 25%](#) over the same time period. Meanwhile, in the last 30 years, income inequality was reduced in practically all countries in the region. Not enough, but it was reduced.

Periods of good economic growth underlie these advances but so do public policy decisions, such as the increase in social investment, which were clearly influenced by the vote.

In 2000, social investment in Latin America was equivalent, on average, to 8.5 percent of GDP; in 2022, it was 11.5 percent, even after a big dip in the previous two years.

The consolidation of electoral democracy and the acceleration of social progress were processes that went hand in hand. In the last three decades, the region has moved in the right direction on the social front because democracy, with all its shortcomings, has done its job of allowing the participation and representation of previously excluded interests and, consequently, has been able to reduce socioeconomic disparities. With a time lag, the distribution of political power that electoral democracy allows ends up manifesting itself in social progress.

The advances seen in Latin America may seem slow to us, but we must not lose sight of the fact that it took the United States almost two hundred years to make equal rights possible for the Afro-American population and that Europe took nine centuries to move from a parliament of nobles to a parliament elected by universal suffrage. In just a little over one generation, with ups and downs, the electoral democracies that were born in Latin America accumulated real achievements and it is vital not to forget it in this winter of discontent.

The enlightened prophets, the Messiahs that have proliferated in our political landscape are right in one respect: much remains to be done to build equitable societies, safe communities, and efficient and transparent governments. But democracy is our ally, not our obstacle. The democratic glass is more than half full. Now it is incumbent on all of us to continue filling it with respect for the rule of law, with integrity in public service, with freedom of the press, with progressive tax reforms, and with greater social inclusion.

Persevering in the democratic journey that Latin Americans started over the past generation is our duty, but it is also our only opportunity. With all its exasperating flaws and limitations, the alternative to democracy in Latin America is only one: darkness.

Thank you.