



Parliamentarism in Latin America

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In the global political landscape, World Parliamentarism Day is a moment of reflection on the importance of democratic systems and how to ensure through them the representation of citizens. Latin America is no stranger to this debate and despite overall progress currently faces two main challenges: a) the disempowerment of parliaments by the executive through constitutional mechanisms (illustrated by the recent developments in Ecuador); and b) the still weak representation of women in parliament and political leadership positions.

The illustrative case of Ecuador

A recent example of democratic defiance in Latin America is the case of the *"muerte cruzada"* (crossed death) in Ecuador. This legal-political term refers to the power of the executive branch to dissolve the legislative branch in certain cases, which happened in May 2023 when Ecuador's President Guillermo Lasso dissolved Congress and general elections were called.

The cross-death in Ecuador raises questions about democracy in the region because, while the constitution gives the president the power to dissolve the national assembly, it is not a democratic process, as legislators are elected by the people in the same way as the executive branch.

-As Hernán Molina, constitutionalist, and professor at the Department of Public Law at the University of Concepción (UdeC) in Chile, explains, "the ideological struggle has to be between loyal adversaries and not between enemies".

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This does not imply that the state should ensure de facto equality between the different ideologies, since "intellectual quality" and the social weight of opinions vary. They enjoy very different levels of support which when combined achieve harmony and equality by exercising a necessary counterbalance. Thus, the enthusiasm of the masses, the sympathy of the clergy, the support of trade union organisations, the resources of big business are factors interacting freely and holding themselves in a certain balance.

In other words: in two completely different cases, based on the same political scenario, we can see that democracy plays an indispensable and inexorable role, as well as the diversity of opinions through the inclusion of women in these political spaces and representation in parliaments (an indisputable tool in a state governed by the rule of law).

-Karl Loewenstein in 1970 noted that: "According to democratic principles, the proscription of any public opinion, whatever its political aim may be, covert or overt, is unlawful. A state society that outlaws political opinions, as such, can no longer be considered fully democratic. Protected democracy or limiting democracy is one that defends itself against its enemies and proscribes them from legality."

Constitutionalism and Democracy are interrelated, since in a democracy the Constitution plays a fundamental role as the indisputable legal framework guaranteeing citizens' rights and establishing the limits to power. However, let us remember that Constitutionalism is present in both democratic and non-democratic regimes - even in authoritarian systems. It is a system of government limited and regulated by a Constitution, with the aim of protecting individual rights and guaranteeing a balance of powers, ensuring the rule of law.

Democracy, on the other hand, has as its main objective citizen participation in political decision-making, representativeness, equality, and freedom of expression, promoting the elaboration of public policies.

Strengthening women's representation in the legislature

Although we have witnessed in recent years a growing empowerment of women in the political arena, tensions and obstacles still remain on the road to full equality and political participation.

Affirmative action tools, such as quotas and legislative parity laws, not only strengthen the fundamental principles of equality and justice; but also improve the quality of political decision-making by ensuring the inclusion of diverse perspectives and experiences.

Latin America recognizes the need to overcome historical barriers that have excluded women from political decision-making, and the region has been a pioneer in the use of these affirmative action tools. Argentina was the first country in the world to pass a quota law in 1991, and a few years later the participation of women legislators rose from 5% to 30%.

It is worth noting that at present the global percentage of women parliamentarians in the Lower House or Single Chamber is 26.5%. In Latin America the regional average of 27% is similar to that of the Americas (including North America) at 26%, but it is much lower than the female representation in the Nordic countries which is 41%. This highlights the need to continue the work to increase women's participation in the political sphere.

Latin America has worked intensively in recent years to strengthen its democratic institutions and to promote greater political participation of all sectors of society. One of the main areas of focus has been the promotion of quota laws for legislative elections as an effective means of ensuring equitable gender representation and establishing strong and democratic parliaments.

Some countries in the region have made significant progress in this regard: Argentina, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Uruguay and Venezuela, among others, have established 50/50 gender parity in their parliaments. However, other countries still have some way to go, such as Paraguay with 20 per cent, and Peru and the Dominican Republic with 30 per cent and 33 per cent respectively.

Using democratic logic

It is an undeniable fact that women represent half of the population and therefore their voice and perspective must be heard and considered in all spheres of decision-making, especially in politics.

Standardizing the presence women in spaces of power enhances the awareness for gender related issues amongst their male counterparts. At the same time, women

have to be reminded that they deserve quality of life as such, spaces free of violence and free of discrimination, so they are able to enjoy life as a human being.

The absent or low participation of women in political spaces isn't an issue of the past. Even today we are seeing countries with very little political participation in their parliaments as it is the case in Brazil. This reality sustains the problem and women continue to accept the violence that is exercised against them, the silence of their voice, the silence of their problems, of their rights.

The World Parliamentarism Day, celebrated every June 30, gives us the opportunity to reflect on the role of women in parliaments. We can shed light on those areas where gender inequalities persist and where women face significant barriers to access positions of political leadership.

Importance and contributions of women legislators

The presence of women in parliaments is essential. First and foremost, it is them who can put on the agenda the issues that need to be resolved as a society in order to achieve greater equality.

-Equal representation: Women make up approximately half of the world's population. It is essential that parliaments reflect the diversity of the society they represent. Having more women in the legislature ensures a more equitable representation of the interests and needs of all people, regardless of gender.

-Different perspectives and experiences: Women bring unique perspectives and experiences to legislation. As a result of their experiences, they can direct attention on issues that have often been ignored, such as equality, violence, motherhood, and work-life balance, among others. This diversity of approaches enriches the legislative process and contributes to the creation of more inclusive and fairer laws.

-Boosting economic development: Women are a key part of the country's economic and labour force. By having representation in parliaments, policies that promote equal opportunities, female entrepreneurship and women's participation in all economic spheres can be promoted. This helps to unlock the country's economic potential and generate greater prosperity for society as a whole.

-Leadership based on experience and knowledge: Women legislators, having experienced inequality first-hand and faced obstacles in their development, bring a unique and relevant perspective. Their personal experience and knowledge of gender issues enriches debate and decision-making, allowing for a more comprehensive and sensitive view of women's needs.

-Improving existing legislation: Women's participation in the legislative process leads to greater attention to the problems and challenges faced by women in society. This can result in the introduction of new laws or the amendment of existing laws to address gender inequalities and promote equal opportunities for all more effectively. Diversity of perspectives and knowledge ensures more informed and comprehensive decision-making, which can lead to more effective and sustainable policies.

-Strengthened democracy: The active participation of women in the legislature strengthens democratic values. As society moves towards gender equality in political representation, it promotes citizen participation and broadens trust in democratic institutions. This creates a more inclusive and cohesive society in which all voices have the opportunity to be heard and contribute to decision-making.

Reflections

The power of women in parliaments lies in their ability to bring about transformative and lasting change. Historically, women have been leaders in the struggle for human rights, gender equality and social justice. Their empathy, resilience and inclusive vision are qualities that enrich the political sphere and enable the building of more equitable and just societies.

By legislating, women have the opportunity to effectively address issues that affect them directly, such as gender-based violence, the wage gap, discrimination, and lack of opportunities.

Moreover, women's participation in politics brings a diversity of approaches and solutions that enrich the political debate. Their unique experiences and knowledge generate more comprehensive and effective proposals, promoting inclusive public policies and informed decisions.

Ultimately, women's presence and participation in legislation is not only a matter of justice, but also a driver of change and progress. It is time to break down the stereotypes and barriers that limit their access to political power, and usher in a new era of equality and collaboration. The future needs us to build a more inclusive world, where the voices of all people are heard and represented.

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