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Transforming institutions: focus on citizen security, justice, and jobs

The case of Chile

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We are gathered here today in order to share ideas that help decision makers in this region of the world, aimed to achieve a democratic transition to consolidate peace, strengthen institutions, open spaces to democracies and give satisfaction to demands of a population that considered themselves away from the benefits of the XXI century. In that sense, the majority of the citizens want to: exercise their rights, their freedom, to be safe, and to have decent conditions where they can develop their lives and their families.

My comment is based on the Chilean experience, cited as a success story in the World Development Report on Conflict, Security and Development, published by the World Bank in April this year. I refer specifically to the role of the Armed Forces in Democracy, an issue directly related to the situation in North Africa and Middle East. I will use my experience as commander in chief of the Chilean Army, of completing the process of democratic transition in Chile, strengthening state institutions and particularly ensuring armed forces to act in a democratic context.

This will allow me to refer to what has been asked of me. I wish to recall the key aspects of democracy and the role of the army, giving an explicatory value to why I think that in Chile, both aspects suffered a profound deterioration in their essence, which led us in 1973 to the loss of democracy and action by the Armed Forces which strayed from its role in the democratic context. This period corresponds to what I will call an “exception,” because the exercise political power by the Army is abnormal and therefore distanced from its role. This is what happened formally in Chile from September 1973 to March 1990 extending in some issues beyond this period.

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In Chile, this transitional process has different periods and characteristics for the Army, and for all of the actors who, during 17 years, did not fulfill their true or traditional roles or fulfilled them in an abnormal way given different prevailing circumstances. An Army that during this period gets involved in governmental tasks, security, participation in some form in organisms of repression or political intelligence foreign to the institutional organization, is not an Institution functioning in the normalcy of the exercise of its role of security and defense. Additionally, this Army is perceived by the citizenship as a friend of those who support the government and antagonistic to those who reject it. Therefore, once democracy is reestablished in the country, neither the citizens nor the Army can transform themselves in one day- by the sole return of formal power- in an institution fully adjusted to the role and duty of an Army in democracy, and as such, respected and loved by the majority of a society still divided into antagonistic sectors.

Allow me to define my position on the fundamental concepts summarized as key points of the issue that brings us here today. Democracy is tied to elements like liberty as well as the functioning and structure of the State based on organisms and institutions with clear areas of competence. The most important of these are: the executive power of the President of the Republic, who is elected in free elections with confidentiality of votes and participation of all of the population without restrictions; the legislative power, elected in the same way to a bicameral system in the Chilean case; and the judicial power, which acts above politics in the application and exercise of the law through the Courts and advising organisms. The judicial system is beholden only to legitimately decreed judicial norms, and the absolutely inalienable individual rights of the citizens. Furthermore, there exist duties from which no one is excluded, demanding their fulfillment without distinctions of any sort; all citizens must submit themselves to the consequences when the law is not met or broken.

The other concept that interests us, the role of Armies in democracy, is tied to institutions with specific tasks, charged with providing security and democracy to the country, with an organization and characteristics outlined in the Constitution. There are also several Institutions essential to the proper functioning of the State. Among these are the regulatory agencies, the administrators of financial resources, and the obligatory services of the State like security for its citizens and others which we cannot fully list.

However, I feel that there is a crucial point which I cannot exclude from my view in this presentation: apart from what has already been described, a democracy has certain intangible elements of the greatest importance. In effect, many States could formally meet the general requirements of democracy described, and several others could meet an exhaustive list of requirements. But an analysis of whether a State operates under a true democracy or not sometimes leads us to conclude that democracy is not truly being practiced, and that the State only appears formally under that classification.

In my judgment, this is due to the lack of variables, that when undefined, make democracy imperfect. This situation is given when there exist conditions that challenge central elements of democracy, which are: liberty; full participation; respect of law and order; the real capacity to dissent; the legitimate exercise of power; and the restriction against appropriation by the State of faculties which are exclusive to citizens or other organizations. The conditions that challenge these elements are: the administration of unnecessary violence or fear in any of its forms to obtain the objectives of those in power; the discretionary management of means and resources; the existence of powerful interest groups, either representative of those in power, or of dispossessed sectors willing to make demands through fear or threats. To this we can add the control of the press or other means of expression; the use of fiscal monies to retain political power; the manipulation of the population through various campaigns to perpetuate power or those who hold it; revolutionary models that justify changes to existing norms through certain groups can come to power. The list could go on and on. In the end, I believe that governments are not true democracies if those who govern do so in benefit of their personal mission, transforming it in a goal in itself, or in benefit of the sectors they represent. In the latter case, those who are not followers of the messianic cause are excluded; this messianic cause is assumed as a false synonym of the power given, albeit legitimately, to govern in a way that should focus on the common good of all society and not on the deviations here listed.

In sum, in my judgment we can assure that in today's world a democracy must meet both formal and intangible standards and therefore avoid falling in the deviations described. Additionally, the Army in democracy is a permanent institution of the State, in charge of the security and defense according to the norms established in the Constitution and the law, attached to the society, and acting with complete transparency.

I conclude thanking you for your attention and reiterating the main idea of my presentation. Armies in democracy must assume their traditional role, be respectful of their characterization as professional, disciplined and hierarchical, be distanced from politics, close to the citizen, at the service of all the community and respected by those which hold power. In turn the representatives of State power must give them the necessary space for their professional actions, in the framework of subordination to the political power understood in its wide sense that excludes the inappropriate use of the Armed Forces for any means.

In my view these aspects made possible the successful transition of the Chilean Army, and its redefinition as a respected and modern actor in our democracy. All Chileans contributed to this accomplishment. To maintain and increase them will allow the Institution to meet its mission and will additionally strengthen a model of democracy that foments social cohesion and development in Chile.

I hope that the case of the transition in Chile can provide new ideas on how the Armed Forces can play an important role to develop a new democratic system, helping other variables to move forward in the need to create legitimate institutions that can offer a sustain level of public safety, justice and job, offering a possibility of participation in the society to groups that otherwise may get more respect and recognition practicing the armed violence, rather than getting involve in legitimate activities, and punishing violations of competent and fair. I think that the challenge of Tunisia is linked to define a procedure where many of these aspects should be developed according to the characteristics of your society, culture and tradition.