

Public discussion

POPULISM AS A FREE PATH TO AUTHORITARIANISM?

March 17, 2023, São Paulo, Brazil

OPENING REMARKS:

Jakub Klepal, Executive Director, Forum 2000 Foundation, Czechia
Oscar Vilhena Vieira, Director, FGV São Paulo Law School, Brazil

PANELISTS:

Carlos Mesa Gisbert, Former-President, Bolivia
Constanza Mazzina, Academic Coordinator, DemoAmLat, Argentina
Christopher Sabatini, Senior Research Fellow for Latin America, US and the Americas Programme, Chatham House, United Kingdom
María Margarita Paca Zuleta, Director, School of Government, Universidad de los Andes, Colombia

MODERATOR:

Sergio Fausto, Director, Fernando Henrique Cardoso Foundation, Brazil

During the conference held at the Getulio Vargas Foundation (FGV) in São Paulo, the panelists analyzed the links between populism and authoritarianism, and identified the mechanisms to protect democracies in Latin America.

After a welcome message from the Executive Director of the Forum 2000 Foundation, Jakub Klepal, the Director of the FGV São Paulo Law School, Oscar Vilhena Vieira made an introductory review of Brazil's political situation and the persistent popularity of former president Jair Bolsonaro, describing his government as a government of "authoritarian sub-legalism".

Subsequently, there was an interesting exchange of opinions on a political phenomenon that occurs frequently in Latin America: populist governments that become authoritarian regimes. The panelists pointed out the importance of institutional rules such as the independence of public powers and the checks and balances to prevent the authoritarian drift of popular or populist governments.

Margarita Paca Zuleta opened the conversation highlighting the role of institutions and pointing out that although we may vote for individuals with "an authoritarian personality, if we have solid institutions we should not worry. When institutions work, we can stop authoritarianism".

Then, **Constanza Mazzina** listed the elements or characteristics of the authoritarian turn: "the erosion of the electoral system, the efforts to discredit the party system and the press, the instrumentalization of history and the spread of conspiracy theories, the unequal use of law and, when the numbers allow for it, the attempt to reform the Constitution for a re-foundation of the state and the society".

For his part, **Christopher Sabatini** explained that "populism is a [type of] leadership and a movement that pretends to represent the popular will against a hated class". He added that, by trying to promote polarization, populism "is a direct threat to democratic consensus".

Finally, the former president of Bolivia, **Carlos Mesa** wondered "if the democratic model, which today faces global tension, is capable of coping with the credibility problems of the system". He suggested that we must put aside the dichotomy of right and left governments and the approaches that seek to legitimize or delegitimize processes of institutional weakening as in the case of Bolivia, where Evo Morales was given a carte blanche of legitimacy that he used to destroy the institutions".

The conference was held on March 17th, 2023. It was organized by Democratic Solidarity, an initiative hosted by Forum 2000 Foundation, with the support of Fernando Henrique Cardoso Foundation and Getulio Vargas Foundation.