

AMERICAS

THE GREAT WALL OF KLEPTOCRACY

by Patricio Gajardo

According to the latest data released by the Chilean survey company Latinobarómetro, as published in *The Economist* (August 17, 2002), Latin American countries are maintaining a positive index in favor of democracy. Democracy appears to be surviving amidst a sea of doubts caused by economic instability and the period of recession through which the region is passing.

It seems as well that the peoples of the region have understood the true significance of democracy. The underlying problem is not misunderstanding over the meaning of the term but identifying those who are in charge of perfecting it. According to the same survey, political parties and parliaments are the most discredited institutions, with levels of trust at only 14% and 23% respectively. Political leaders have been incapable of nurturing trust in the population, and the majority of them have contributed to this instability in the democratic process. The people have begun to doubt the political and economic system that has taken hold since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The profound discontent produced by the functioning of Latin American democracies is most clearly evident in those countries—Argentina, Paraguay and Venezuela—that have been battered most severely by their economic crises, a regional crisis which in turn has been augmented by external global variables. Economic disparities have become ever more abysmal in the region, casting a pall over the vision of true democracy. In general, Latin Americans are profoundly unhappy with their leadership and with the privatization

policies implanted in the continent, yet they continue to believe that the best way to resolve economic, political and social problems is through existing democratic channels.


The greatest problems are the institutional corruption and generalized kleptomania of leaders that have sacked the national treasuries (for example in Nicaragua and Peru); the lack of clarity and vision of the future among political leaders; and the lack of transparency in the justification of the policies implemented by these governments. There is also a chronic lack of independence among the branches of government and continual bickering among representatives in the legislative assemblies across the continent.

Until now no successful solutions have been found to counter the prevailing conditions, but we believe that organizations like IFES can continue to play an important role in the various countries where we have worked since the late 80s. Ultimately, although we live in a globalized world, lasting change must have local roots. Each country must find solutions that benefit the majority of their population and not the niggardly interests of the few. National and international assistance programs must be coordinated and emphasize institutional strengthening. Mechanisms must be found to create lasting ties among the various national actors in the public, private and civil sectors and in this way defend and strengthen the democratic process.

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January: Vaclav Havel elected as Czech president.



September: Israelis and Palestinians launch Oslo Peace Process.

October: Yeltsin's forces crush revolt in Russian Parliament.

November: Europe's Maastricht Treaty takes effect, creating European Union.

November: South Africa adopts majority rule constitution.

1993

IFES receives its first cooperative agreement from USAID for work in the former Soviet Union.



IFES launches its quarterly magazine, *Elections Today*.



IFES provides technical assistance in voter registration, poll worker training and public information for referendum on multi-party elections in Malawi.