

It is Essential to Expand Representative Democracy

LUIZA ERUNDINA (INTERVIEW)

FEDERAL Deputy Luiza Erundina (PSB) received the executive editor of *ESTUDOS AVANÇADOS*, journalist Marco Antônio Coelho, in her political office in São Paulo, on August 21, 2009, for the following interview.

ESTUDOS AVANÇADOS – *In your opinion, what are the causes of the crisis in the National Congress?*

Luiza Erundina – In my view, the principal cause of the crisis of the National Congress is the depletion of the Brazilian political system, which needs to undergo a profound reform.

For more than six years, the Chamber of Deputies has discussed a political reform to resolve the structural problems of our system. Unfortunately, a majority of votes has not been secured to approve substantial changes because each parliamentarian reacts contrary to the approval of any proposal that threatens his immediate electoral interests.

The party situation is also depleted. Political parties have little significance from a political-ideological perspective. They do not represent, in practice, what their by-laws, programs and their very names express. This generates considerable confusion about the identity of the different parties which, ideologically and politically, are no longer distinct. The only difference that exists is in terms of the position they occupy in relation to the government; in opposition to or support of its initiatives and, even so, always considering the opportunistic interests of each party, or, even, of each of its members.

This situation is aggravated by the ethical deviations that have marked the recent history of the Congress and government, which contribute to the loss of legitimacy and credibility of our representatives and consequently to a grave crisis of representation.

At the root of all this is the unsuitability of the political system as a whole. For this reason, a political reform cannot be put off that rethinks the Brazilian State: its character; its organizational structure; and that revises the federal pact, in order to achieve greater equilibrium in the distribution of power between the three spheres: municipal, state and federal.

Concerning the parties, the problem is not, as is alleged, their large number. But, the lack of a clear definition of their ideological commitments and of the political projects that justify the existence of each one and that

differentiates them.

The crisis of representation that I refer to is also expressed in the absence or low representation of broad segments of society. We, women, are more than half of the population, yet in the Chamber of Deputies, we are only 8.9%, and little more than 10% in the Senate. Blacks are less than 4% and there is not one Indian in the national Congress, which means that the large portion of the Brazilian population is not represented in Parliament. And if we analyze the presence of these segments in the Executive and Judicial Branches, the distortions are even greater. The conclusion that one can reach is that we do not have complete political democracy in Brazil, and much less economic and social democracy.

It is worth noting that the crisis of representative democracy is also due to the lack of participative democracy and direct democracy. Although the Constitution of 1988 presents significant advances in this aspect, they have not, until now, been effective, because the mechanisms called for in Article 14 have still not been totally regulated, such as: the plebiscite, referendum and proposed law by popular initiative.

For a long time Congress has been considering laws that propose the regulation of Article 14, but confront great resistance from deputies and senators who consider themselves to hold exclusive power and do not accept sharing it with the people, in clear disrespect to the Constitution and popular sovereignty.

In addition, the equilibrium and harmony between the three Powers of the Republic, called for in the Constitution, have been frequently compromised, which has also contributed to the aggravation of the crisis. Thus, the Executive improperly interferes in the Legislature, by indiscriminately decreeing a large number of provisional measures. The Judiciary, in turn, also interferes in the Legislative Branch by establishing new laws by means of Resolutions, such as one concerning the action of political parties and another about party fidelity. This is a usurpation of the prerogatives of one branch of power by the other, which is absolutely unacceptable.

In addition, there is also a great dependence of the Executive in relation to the Legislature, in the name of governability, which is one more distortion in the relationship between the powers.

All of this thus establishes a grave situation of a political crisis that needs to be confronted with courage and determination by the National Congress, with the participation of society, before it becomes an institutional crisis of unforeseeable consequences.

ESTUDOS AVANÇADOS – What measures could contribute to increasing the representation of Congress?

Luiza Erundina – It is essential that the proportionality of representation in the Chamber of Deputies be corrected, given that one vote by a voter in the small states, such as Acre and Amapá, for example, wind up having much more influence than the vote of those in the larger states such as São Paulo and Minas

Gerais.

In addition, the electoral laws are full of imperfections that wind up distorting the sovereign will of the voter. This is the case, for example, of the party alliances in the proportional elections for positions of city council and state and federal deputies. This is because the voter votes for a candidate of one party, who is not elected, and winds up, without knowing, electing someone from another party, who the voter does not even know.

For all these reasons, the electoral and party laws need to undergo profound revision, in order to correct these distortions and improve them. It is thus necessary to do away with the alliances in the proportional elections, maintaining them only in the elections for majority positions of mayor, governor, senator and president of the republic.

That is, it is a true political reform that Brazil has needed for some time; which, among other changes, establishes voting for pre-ordained lists of candidates of each party; exclusive public financing, in order to do away with the influence of economic power in electoral campaigns and guarantee equal conditions among the candidates.

Furthermore, the performance of the representatives must be accompanied and controlled by the voters who, to do so, need to have suitable and effective mechanisms that even allow the termination of mandates of those who may betray the popular vote.

ESTUDOS AVANÇADOS – Do you believe that changes are indispensable in the constitutional determination that allows the Executive to decree provisional measures?

Luiza Erundina – In my view, in this aspect, there is no need for change. What should be required is that the provisional measures be decreed in absolute conformity with the limits established by the Constitution, or that is, they should only be used in important situations of extreme urgency, which is not the case today. The abusive and indiscriminate use of provisional measures by the Executive branch has been a recurring practice, which represents a usurpation of the prerogatives of the Legislative power, which, in turn, has been amiss in its defense. Added to this is the aggravating factor that not all of the provisional measures are justifiable as such. The house frequently receives amendments that have nothing to do with the object of the measure.

ESTUDOS AVANÇADOS – How do you analyze the repercussion of the events around the crisis of the Congress, including when proposals arise such as the extinction of the Senate?

Luiza Erundina – This aspect is of great concern. After all, the crisis of the Congress does not only harm the image of the politicians who are involved in scandals, but also affects the institutions. The media, in turn, generalizes the level to a lower denominator, giving the impression that all politicians are equally corrupt and opportunist, which is not true. This judgment, moreover, is unfair and is an assault on democracy. After all, the media has no commitment

to democracy, particularly because it did not pay the price that many of us paid during the military regime, for the redemocratization of the country.

Therefore, this systematic campaign of defamation against politicians, promoted by the communication media, and which does not separate the wheat from the chaff, affects and weakens the democratic institutions and this is very serious.

It is irresponsible, because they join those who mistakenly defend the extinction of any of the branches of power of the Republic, particularly the Legislature which is that which represents Brazilian citizens most directly. A politicized society, and with adequate understanding of the conflicts and contradictions in the world of politics, and even, about the ethical deviations that occur there, and that need to be removed, certainly does not support theses that contribute to weaken democracy.

Finally, we have to adopt measures aimed at better qualifying the vote of electors; apply more rigid rules in the definition of candidacies; and create mechanisms of control and inspection of behavior of those elected by society, all of this to preserve and strengthen democracy.

ESTUDOS AVANÇADOS – What is the role of the University?

Luiza Erundina – In the first place, it is up to the University to contribute to the debate about the great issues of national interest. This includes political reform and democratization of the means of social communication, which currently, are part of the agenda of society.

The University could also, accompany more closely the activity of the National Congress, above all that of the various permanent Commissions, which is where the discussion of the politically most important and current issues of greatest interest to the life of the country takes place .

Finally, as a center of construction of knowledge, of education of new social actors and of research about reality in its various aspects, the university is an essential interlocutor between those responsible for politics in institutional spaces and those who command, in the name of the people, the destinies of the Brazilian nation.

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