

The Citizens' Audit On The Quality Of Democracy In Costa Rica: Improving Accountability And Civic Participation in a Mature Democracy.

The puzzle

A disturbing citizens' malaise runs increasingly deep in Costa Rica, the most enduring of Latin American democracies (Garita and Poltronieri 1997). Rising numbers of people disengage from public issues, or feel that public protests are the only way to "be heard". Most political institutions (including the Judiciary) have dismal approval ratings (UNIMER 1999). Distrust of politicians and political parties has led to a societal gridlock that hinders the State's ability to carry on much needed economic and institutional reforms (Proyecto Estado de la Nación 1999). Thus, improving the quality of democratic life has become the key political issue in Costa Rica. Bringing back the citizenry into public life, and strengthening the democraticness of the polity, may help extricating public deliberation and policy making from fingerpointing, stalling and "exit". Precisely, this is what the Citizen's Audit on the Quality of Democracy works towards.

This juncture may be seen as a surprise in a country where democracy is taken for granted. By all relevant international standards, Costa Rica scores high in civil and political freedom, and respect for human rights (Freedom House 1999; Freedom House 2000; Amnesty International 2000; Human Rights Watch 2000). Recent constitutional and legal developments increase protection and promotion of citizens' rights and oversight of public policies. Despite some evidence of declining support to the system (Seligson 2000), and recent outbursts of public protest, Costa Rican democracy is still one of the more stable systems of the region, if not the most. The point, however, is not that the malaise threatens the regime's stability but it is increasingly hindering its ability to provide good governance and to cradle further development.

Confronted with citizens' malaise and societal gridlock, the first reaction is to query what's wrong with democracy. Standing alone, the question leads to the usual culprits: politicians, poor institutional engineering and/or performance, lack of accountability and of citizen participation in public life. That may be important, but it begs the question of why democracy endures if citizens' malaise is so deep. For all their disappointment, in a mature democracy people are seasoned citizens. They know how to play by the rules. In fact, the majority continues playing the game if not within the electoral system, in civil society or in local issues.

Turning the attention on how democracy works in everyday life, and what do citizens' get vis-a-vis their shared expectations, may help both to better understand the breadth and scope of the malaise and to energize the strengths that keep the system running. In spite of widely held perceptions to the contrary, not all citizen complaints are warranted and not all

political institutions work poorly. The appraisal of democratic strengths and liabilities may contribute to improve public deliberation and to disseminate best practices.

Many argue that for all its problems, Costa Rican stability downplays whatever conundrums the country may face, especially when compared with developments in Peru, Venezuela, Ecuador and Colombia, or with glaring recent democratic accomplishments such as in Mexico. Yet, the Costa Rican case has regional implications. Should other Latin American democracies endure, they will probably face similar dilemmas –but may lack the depth of Costa Rica’s political resources.

The quality of democracy question can provide a new insights to the task of promoting further democratic development in the region –and move ahead beyond the transition and consolidation debates (Becker 1999). As Linz and Stepan argue, within the category of consolidated democracies, there is a continuum from low to high quality democracies [Linz, 1997 #43; Linz, 1996 #34]. Once democratic transitions are over, new challenges arise (O'Donnell 1998). Nowadays, the main challenge is to improve the quality of Latin American democracies.

Purpose and Scope of the Citizens’ Audit

Between June 1998 and June 2000, the Swedish Authority for International Development (SIDA) and the United Nations Programme for Development (UNDP) pooled resources to fund the Citizens’ Audit on the Quality of Democracy. The Audit was carried out by the State of the Nation Project, an initiative that annually issues the widely respected Costa Rican Country Report on Sustainable Human Development. The Audit Report will be published in the first quarter of 2001.¹

The Audit sought three purposes. The first was to depict a detailed baseline image of the strengths and liabilities of Costa Rican democratic life, digging beyond and below public opinion polls. Nobody experiences a democracy “on average” (Pérez Liñán, 1998), yet international measurements rely on averages. Hence, the Audit aimed at expanding the knowledge to the areas in which life comes close to the democratic aspirations of the citizenry as well as those where a rift exists between aspirations and practices. The second purpose was to develop a surveillance and assessment system of political life where citizens could participate at different stages of the Audit’s implementation. Finally, the Audit’s third purpose was to explore the concept of quality of democracy’s potential to illuminate the engagements between citizens and political institutions in democratic or polyarchical regimes (Dahl 1971; Dahl 1989; Dahl 1999).

Implementation of the Audit unfolded both a social and technical process. Citizens’ participation helped defining the areas of political life subject to the appraisal and the quality of democracy evaluating standards. After fieldwork folded, 34 citizens divided into ten panels evaluated the findings to judge the extent to which political life came close to those standards. On the other hand, the Audit was a complex technical research process that involved more than fifty researchers and multiple quantitative and qualitative methods (See text box).

Text Box 1: Stages of implementation of the Citizens' Audit

- The First Stage (June – July 1998) encompassed the preparatory activities. In this period the Audit's Consultative Board², the Academic Panel³ and the Coordinating Unit were formed.
- In the Second Stage (June – August 1998), the 42-member Consultative Board sets the quality of democracy evaluating standards, after successive rounds of consultations.
- In the Third Stage (September 1998 – December 1998), the Coordinating Unit engaged in fundraising and elaborated the fieldwork research strategy. In addition, the Coordinating Unit conducted focus groups and an exploratory survey to provide input for the Board's discussions.
- In the Fourth Stage (January 1999 – October 1999), more than 50 researchers carried out fieldwork research. Fieldwork included a national survey, sentinel site surveillance in 7 of the Costa Rican 81 counties⁴, 12 focus groups (where top governmental officials intermingled with plain citizens), 11 observation experiments, 22 legal opinions, 10 specialized papers, a detailed compilation of institutional and judicial data and the review of the news database of the leading Costa Rican newspaper.
- In the Fifth Stage (November 1999 – February 2000), the Coordinating Unit classified fieldwork information, and prepared the material for the evaluation panels according to the Audit's evaluating standards.
- In the Sixth Stage (February – March 2000), the Coordinating Unit developed the evaluating methodology, including a careful description of the process, the scales and the evaluating criteria.
- In the Seventh Stage (March – June 2000), 34 evaluators divided into ten theme panels rendered individual and collective judgment on the quality of democracy. Most panelists are members of the Audit's Consultative Board.

The Audit covered several topics. The Consultative Board established 33 democratic aspirations dealing with subjects such as local governments, public opinion, citizens' participation in public policies, the Rule of Law, the functioning of Congress, life in civil society organizations, political parties, electoral processes and treatment of people by public institutions. The basic agreement was that an assessment of democratic life should follow as much as possible the texture of citizens' daily engagements with public and private institutions regarding the debate and management of public issues. Thus, not be limited to the surveillance of electoral systems and political parties or assessing institutional performance.

Assessing the Quality of Democracy

For purposes of the Citizens' Audit, the quality of a democracy means the extent to which, under a polyarchical regime, actual political practices come close to citizens' shared democratic aspirations. Such a working definition implied three closely related queries. First, the Audit had to outline those "shared democratic aspirations" which may be framed as the maximum common denominator or horizon of best democratic practices agreed upon by citizens of different backgrounds (Stage # 2). Second, it should muster as much empirical evidence as possible on the "actual political practices" (Stage # 4). Thirdly, the Audit had to weigh the collected evidence against the shared aspirations to assess the gap

between the real world and those aspirations (Stage #8). One last point must be stressed: we hold the assumption that the quality of democracy puzzle becomes relevant only if a democracy exists in place. No democracy, no quality of democracy.

Preliminary results suggest some interesting insights:

- In Costa Rica, citizens' malaise, though extended, has certain shallowness to it. Underneath the widespread public negativism on virtually every issue in political life, as reported by public opinion polls, the Audit found that many times citizens' criticisms ease off when queried in depth. For example, over 80% of the people think that in Costa Rica justice is not equal, fair or timely and that it facilitates cover-ups of crooked politicians. Nonetheless, people that had undergone court experience were remarkably less critical of the Judiciary, although they also voiced their criticisms.
- Nonetheless, the Audit found glaring contrasts in the quality of democracy in different areas of political life. According to evaluators, the strengths of Costa Rican democracy are the quality of the electoral process, and of the institutional treatment of people. Evaluators were more critical of the quality of the internal life in political parties and civil society organizations, and of the lack of citizens' involvement in policy making, despite the recent openings in several public institutions.
- The Audit also found stark subnational differences in the quality of democratic life. At the national level, municipalities are, generally speaking, held in low esteem. However, a sentinel site surveillance in 7 counties found a range of situations. While in 3 counties, people were extremely angry at the lack of transparency and openness of their local government, in 2 of them, the Audit found sound practices of open, transparent and legitimate local government.
- There were also surprises. We did not expect civil society organizations to show ingrained antidemocratic practices in their functioning, much less the candid acknowledgment of those practices by relevant social leaders. Also, leading newspapers surprised us by accepting surveillance of their workplace by the Audit.

Some insights have policy and academic relevance. Take the local government topic. Given the observed differences in the quality of democracy of local governments, across the board, decentralization policies may strengthen clientelism and *caudillismo* in backward counties. Knowledge of how local democracy works in high quality counties may help the dissemination of good practices in others. Contrarily, public exposure of backward local governments may help building up the ability of grassroots organizations to exert accountability.

Impacts and Perspective

The Citizens' Audit full-scale impact will be appraised only after the publication of its Final Report due in 2001. Nonetheless, it has had promising process impacts, which are valuable insights about its civic and academic potential. First, the Audit was able to muster support and participation from different institutions and social groups. Top social and political leaders accepted to form part of its Consultative Board and to participate in multiple research activities and evaluating panels. Leading newspapers, trade unions and other civil

society organizations opened up to scrutiny by researchers. Second, the Audit compiled an impressive amount of data that enabled informed dialogue among participants in the evaluation stage. Third, the Audit helped improve the Costa Rican Human Development Report by catering fresh information on relevant public issues. Finally, it has had preliminary spin-offs in other Latin American countries (Argentina and Guatemala), where some institutional and academic circles are interested on developing participatory surveillance systems of democratic life.

The 1998-2000 Citizens' Audit draws a baseline on the quality of democracy in Costa Rica. As with any first experience, it took more time than initially planned. Successive Audits will help conduct temporal comparisons against this baseline on the evolution of the strengths and liabilities of democratic life in this country. These comparisons may prove to be a robust tool to improve accountability.

From a comparative perspective, research on the quality of democracy is still on its initial stages – a recent work by Lijphart provides a start (Lijphart 1999). In addition, citizens' aspirations on the quality of political life may vary from country to country. However, the similarities and differences of democratic aspirations are relevant to the research. Both help unearthing how the citizenry interprets, experiences and evaluates democratic life, a new approach to understanding democratic development once a regime meets polyarchical criteria.

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¹ The most direct antecedent is the United Kingdom Democratic Audit carried out in the mid 1990s. Even though this experience showed that a political audit was feasible, it must be said that the Costa Rican Audit took a different conceptual and methodological approach.

² The Consultative Board is an ad-hoc stance formed by personalities from diverse social, political and ideological backgrounds. Its purpose is to ensure the Audit's legitimacy, define its mandate, support fieldwork research and evaluate findings.

³ The Academic panel is also an ad-hoc stance formed by ten academics (seven of them are not Costa Rican citizens). It was active during the second stage of implementation. A second panel of evaluation experts was convened to help define the Audit's evaluation methodology.

⁴ The Sentinel Site Surveillance is a low cost local capacity building process that produces precise data and stimulates deliberation. It involves an in-depth observation of a panel of mini universes through quantitative and qualitative methods [.