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## **Former Dominican Republic president talks about democracy at AUB**

Beirut, Lebanon- 14/12/2012 -Former President of the Dominican Republic Leonel Fernandez told an AUB audience on December 14, 2012 democracy needs patience as it is a process that goes through different stages, with ups and downs.

Speaking at a seminar entitled “Latin America’s Democratic Development,” Fernandez reminded the audience of academics and students that the democratic process in Latin American took over 200 years, passing through phases after World War II, when the political system would oscillate back and forth “like a pendulum” between democracy and authoritarian, military regimes.

“You don’t create democracy by a decree or just by toppling an autocrat. Democracy is a process,” said Fernandez, adding that it also involves having the individual adopt democratic practices in their personal behavior, since democracy is also about obligations.

The seminar was organized by the Office of the Provost and the Department of Political Studies and Public Administration at the American University of Beirut. PSPA Chair Thomas Haase also recognized the help of Zaid Eyadat, dean of the School of International Studies and Political Science at the University of Jordan, in helping organize Fernandez’s visit to AUB.

“The PSPA department is committed to providing its students and the AUB community with opportunities to interact and learn from practitioners who have real-world experience,” said Haase. “Advancement of human knowledge takes place as a result of interaction between academics, students, and practitioners.”

AUB Provost Ahmed Dallal introduced Fernandez, noting that at 42, he was the youngest elected president of the Dominican Republic, and during his tenure, he worked hard to combat political corruption, instituting reforms and imposing greater scrutiny on state-owned firms. Fernandez served as president of the Dominican Republic for three terms, from 1996 to 2000, then a double term from 2004 to 2012. He was succeeded by current President Danilo Medina Sánchez in August 2012.

In his historical overview of the Latin American experience with democratization, Fernandez noted that although Latin Americans all aspired to democracy, several

internal and external factors led young people to become disillusioned with democracy, developing the notion that revolution is the only way to social justice. “Even Fidel Castro was for democracy and he was a candidate for parliament in 1952 (which was canceled due to a coup d’etat),” he said, adding that the rhetoric turned to a battle between dictatorship and revolution, and fascism and socialism. “[In the 1950s and 1960s] democracy was not considered with any respect, but thought of as a bourgeois democracy which will benefit a capitalistic few.”

But a decade or so later, external factors, such as the United States’ and Europe’s political interests in Latin America also played a role. Similarly, internal factors, represented mainly by the economic crisis of the 1970s, also pushed people to reject the status quo. The result: a period of democratization that lasted through the 1980s.

By then, “the honeymoon with democracy was over,” said Fernandez. “People wanted a system that would also provide food on the table. Freedom of expression and fair representation... were not enough.”

Then followed a period of economic growth and prosperity, as a result of a market-oriented model, or a neo-liberal model, which focused on economic reforms, reducing the deficit and unemployment. “But it lost sight of social issues,” noted Fernandez. “And the prosperity did not trickle down to the lower social classes nor did it eradicate poverty.”

For Fernandez, what is needed now is to develop a new system that is neither purely socialist nor purely capitalist. That system should include a strong fiscal government policy which will help build infrastructure to solve social problems and promote social cohesion while at the same time upholding human rights and safeguarding freedoms.

“Democratic transition is not an isolated event,” he said, warning: “It’s a process that goes through different stages, with ups and downs, and certain challenges will come to the forefront, and if they are not addressed they will cause frustration.”

Fernandez’s final word of warning: “People revolt not because they have a clear idea of the future but because they reject the status quo. It’s up to the leaders to decide where to go after the success of the revolution; and that’s where the external forces will come into play. The external forces will try to take part in the change based on their own strategic interests and these might not coincide with the aspirations of the locals.”

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**Note to Editors**

**About AUB**

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy,

standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 600 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 8,000 students. AUB currently offers more than 100 programs leading to the bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full service 420-bed hospital.

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