



FLACSO
CHILE

OAS 2005: The Democracy Debate

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At the 35th General Assembly of the Organization of American States, the U.S. proposed that the OAS create a “mechanism” to strengthen democracy. In the months since, observers have begun to debate whether the meeting signaled a turning point in the history of the 57-year-old OAS. Some argue that the democracy debate has breathed new life into the much-maligned hemispheric organization; critics say that the wrangling further demonstrated its weakness and irrelevance. This paper examines the context for the U.S. proposal and the regional reaction. It argues that, in part, the assembly illustrated in stark relief the limits of U.S. power and influence in Latin America and the Caribbean. But more significantly, the assembly opened a window of opportunity for the OAS to become a more credible force to strengthen democracy in the hemisphere.

THE PROPOSAL

From June 5 to 7, 2005, the Organization of American States (OAS) convened its 35th General Assembly (GA) in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. The theme of the high-level meeting was “Delivering the Benefits of Democracy”, and as the host of the meeting, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice opened the meeting by urging the delegates to forge the OAS into an “effective instrument for the promotion of democracy and prosperity in our hemisphere”. Rice spoke in general terms of a “mechanism” that would allow the OAS to intervene in member countries where democracy was faltering. And while she left the details of such a mechanism undefined, much of the subsequent debate revolved around the U.S. proposal.

In an interview, Rice framed the proposed mechanism as follows:

Well, first of all, the Charter makes very clear that the Organization of American States is to be an organization of democracies. It's why Cuba does not have a seat at the Organization of American States at this point in time. And so I think it only is natural that there should be some mechanism to help states that are going through challenges...to democracy.²

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Remarks en route to Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, <http://www.oas.org/speeches/speech.asp?sCodigo=05-0109>.

In proposing the mechanism, Rice seems to have had two main goals. First, the mechanism would amend the OAS Democratic Charter to would allow civil society organizations in member states to bring to the attention of the OAS cases in which democratically-elected governments “do not govern democratically”. Second, it would designate a “nucleus of OAS members” to “monitor” member states and determine whether a country is governing undemocratically. That mechanism would also thereby define ways in which the OAS could intervene in countries deemed to be facing such a “crisis of governability”. The proposal left that mechanism undefined, creating a source of lively contention.

José Miguel Insulza, the newly-elected OAS secretary-general, has declared that his top priority for the OAS will be to find ways to prevent the breakdown of democracy in the region. As a result, Insulza publicly supported the U.S. proposal, saying, “The member countries must therefore agree on the necessary mechanisms for full compliance with their obligations under the Charter”, particularly if the proposed mechanism would take the form of an “early warning system” to anticipate military or civilian coups. He said that he would prefer such a mechanism to explicitly define “minimal indicators of unacceptable violations”, reflecting the model advocated by former President Jimmy Carter. But how those indicators would be defined was much less clear. Insulza said that he would prefer to assign the task to a committee within the Permanent Council to be comprised of prominent scholars, in the model of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.³

Insulza emphasized that the proposal was not meant to target any particular country.⁴ Rice

echoed Insulza, saying, “This is not a matter of intervening to punish; it is a matter of intervening to try and sustain the development of democratic institutions across the region”. Indeed, instability in Bolivia, Ecuador and Haiti played large on the minds of the delegates. In Bolivia, demonstrators were calling for then-President Carlos Mesa’s resignation. In Haiti, political and gang violence was sweeping through the country, more than a year after former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide went into exile.⁵ In Ecuador, President Lucio Gutiérrez was ousted by a legislative coup in April. Insulza sees Ecuador as a case in point of the need for an OAS mechanism: “Probably, with a reasonable mechanism, without intervention, but through mediation, we could have resolved this problem in December”, he said.⁶ Nonetheless, he admitted that the OAS should not intervene without the agreement of the country, saying, “We can never use any mechanism without the consent of the country. If the states don’t want something, then nothing will be done”.

THE REACTION

Even during the first day of the assembly, it had become clear that the U.S. officials’ aspiration to pass a strongly-worded declaration on the role of the OAS in supporting democracy faced staunch and lively opposition. Most opponents of the proposal retorted that the U.S. proposal was merely a disguised attempt to target and weaken President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela. One analyst writes, “The Bush Administration’s strategy was to polarize Latin America against Venezuela in order to isolate Chavez’s experiment with a welfare state, mixed economy and independent foreign policy”.⁷

³ Andrés Oppenheimer, “New OAS chief’s priority: defending democracy”. (Miami Herald, 5 May 2005).

⁴ Mariana Martínez, “OEA: Democracia y economía”. BBC Mundo. http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/business/barometro_economico/newsid_4613000/4613547.stm.

⁵ Elise Labott, “Rice urges promoting democracy in Americas” (CNN, 5 June 2005).

⁶ Oppenheimer, 5 May 2005.

⁷ James Petras, “La histórica reunión de la OEA” (http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2005/07/03/030a1_mun.php).

Indeed, it seems likely that the U.S. delegation approached the assembly as an opportunity to advocate for two specific policy objectives: to isolate the government of Venezuela from the rest of the member states, and to push for the approval of the Central America-Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA).⁸ U.S.

officials made clear that the proposed mechanism would target governments that were “democratically elected that do not govern democratically”, a clear reference to Venezuela. Nonetheless, a large chorus of delegates and observers balked, noting that Chavez has been democratically elected several times.

The Opposition: Three Blocs

- Venezuela and Mexico rejected any efforts to intervene in any Latin American country. Chavez felt that the U.S. proposal was specifically designed to intervene against Venezuela and support opposition groups.
- The Caribbean Community also rejected the U.S. proposal that the OAS forge a “preventive role” in “crises of governability”. These countries likely worried that the U.S. conception of prevention would resemble its intervention in Haiti in 2004.
- “The Eleven” (Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, Dominican Republic, Trinidad, Suriname and Guatemala) also rejected the proposal that the OAS determine when to intervene. However, they proposed a mechanism whereby the OAS could intervene in a member country, as long as the government feels that it is facing a “crisis of governability”, and “asks for aid” from the OAS to reestablish control.

Source: FLACSO-Chile.

Argentina, El Salvador, and Honduras sought to reconcile the U.S. position with these three groups. They proposed to grant the OAS secretary general the authority to recommend specific measures to support countries claiming a crisis of governability. During the course of negotiations, a compromise between the four blocs seemed to hold some promise. But by the end of the assembly, the delegates had spent most of the negotiations wrangling over language on free trade and poverty.

A TURNING POINT FOR THE OAS?

In the wake of the assembly, some observers have been heralding in a new era for the OAS, in which the GA meeting “set the stage for the future”.⁹ Others have been lamenting its demise. With the benefit of a meager helping of hindsight, where does the truth lie?

Reflecting on the 3-day assembly, Luigi Einaudi, the OAS assistant secretary general, was pleased to note that “the OAS got a new lease on life,” though he allowed that the emergent momentum was more symbolic than operational.¹⁰ One reporter referred to this momentum as “additional wiggle room”, for a body “strapped for cash” and accustomed to being maligned for inaction.¹¹ Insulza seemed cautiously optimistic, noting, “There was much discussion, as there always is in these cases. But to me at least it seems a very satisfactory way to start a new mandate”.¹² Mark Schneider, an analyst with the International Crisis Group, was less optimistic, reporting his sense that “there were no major groundbreaking achievements. There was a lot of thrashing in the water to stay in the same place”.¹³

⁸ Dan Beeton, “The Democracy Show: U.S. Rhetoric at the OAS Out of Touch With the Americas” (Foreign Policy in Focus, 21 June 2005).

⁹ Pablo Bachelet, “OAS assembly set stage for future” (The Miami Herald, 9 June 2005).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

Those heralding a new era largely refer to the seeming repudiation of U.S. influence over the organization. Insulza began his term as the first OAS head to not be originally supported by the US. And despite Insulza's support, the U.S. proposal to amend the Democratic Charter fell flat, facing nearly-universal rejection by the rest of the member states.

Others argue that rather than reflect a turning point for the OAS, the June meeting instead served to illustrate in stark relief how "out of step" the U.S. has become from the region. In this sense the meeting was wake-up call to U.S. officials that high-flung rhetoric would not mitigate the declining influence of the U.S. in Latin America and the Caribbean.¹⁴

CONCLUSION

The Bush administration, which has repeatedly expressed little-veiled disdain for multilateral institutions, clearly had high hopes that the OAS assembly would be fertile new ground for reviving its much-maligned efforts to promote democracy. But the Latin American and Caribbean delegates were immediately skeptical of U.S. motives, interpreting the proposed "mechanism" as a strategic move to legitimize unilateralism with the cloak of OAS multilateral support. For this reason, the assembly illustrated in stark relief the limits of U.S. power and influence in Latin America and the Caribbean.

However, the assembly should not be seen merely as a repudiation of the US. The strong support by Secretary General Insulza for a mechanism to strengthen democracy, and varying degrees of support among some member states, reveal that more was at stake than a mere desire to discern US motives. Despite widespread opposition to the US proposal, the

June assembly demonstrated the growing recognition in Latin America and the Caribbean of the need for a concerted regional effort to strengthen democracy in the region. And the fact that the debate arose at the OAS general assembly revealed the organization's potential role in stemming what has come to be known as the "crisis of governability" in the region.

Thus the OAS currently has a window of opportunity to become a credible force to strengthen democracy in the hemisphere. Most member states clearly recognize the importance of tackling questions of democracy in the hemisphere. If the member states take seriously the potential role of the OAS in the "democracy cause", and the issue becomes a certifiable rallying point for the organization, the US proposal could become a mere footnote in an otherwise remarkable historical moment for the region and the OAS.

Ultimately, whether the GA meeting will prove to be turning point in the history of the organization will depend on Insulza's ability to redirect the diplomatic energy evident in Fort Lauderdale in a constructive direction. It is undoubtedly a delicate and arduous task, given the understandable skepticism in Latin America toward U.S. involvement in the region. But Insulza, whose "democratic credentials are impeccable", and is known for "charging hard in whatever endeavor he takes on", has the credibility and authority to take on the challenge. Particularly considering the various obstacles faced by the delegates at the recent Summit of the Americas in Argentina in November, the principal diplomatic challenge for the OAS will be the question of how to transform a symbolic mandate into an operational mandate, and drive the organization to become an agent for lasting democratic change in the hemisphere.

¹⁴ Beeton, "The Democracy Show".