



The End of Democratic Solidarity in the Americas?

By Roger F. Noriega

Not long ago, the governments of the Americas recognized the value of working together to consolidate the historic, promising trend toward democracy. Now, with democracy being dismantled in several nations and being assailed by authoritarian Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez Frías, Latin American countries seem to have abandoned the fraternal ideal of inter-American solidarity. The United States and the Organization of American States (OAS) can both do more to salvage the regional commitment to democracy, but unless Latin American and Caribbean governments are willing to stand together to defend their principles, the end of democratic solidarity is in sight.

On September 11, 2001, the members of the OAS signed the Inter-American Democratic Charter, binding all signatories to uphold the essential elements of representative democracy. In doing so, they reaffirmed their determination to work collectively to promote and defend constitutional democracy as the ideal form of government. When challenged in recent months to confront glaring violations of freedom of expression, separation of powers, and constitutional order, the OAS and its member states have done nothing. History will record that the region's premier multilateral body met this month to talk about—wait for it—ethanol. If the ideal of inter-American democratic solidarity is buried under such indifference, it is not merely because Chávez wants it dead. It is because most of the others in the region did not agree that the collective defense of democracy is a principle worth saving.

In Venezuela, Chávez is consolidating dictatorial control over the legislature, the courts, the electoral apparatus, and now, with his closure on May 28 of the last independent broadcast station, the media. He is even bullying his domestic

political allies into joining his unitary political party. He has militarized politics and politicized the military, and once-self-respecting, nationalistic Venezuelan soldiers are now forced to return salutes by barking the *fidelist*a slogan, “Fatherland, socialism, or death.”

Some apologists will say this is the way the Venezuelan people want it, but Chávez's anti-democratic campaign is not confined to his own country. Treating the largesse of his oil-rich nation as a petty cash box, Chávez has inspired and supported a band of elected autocrats who are kicking the foundation out from under democracies in several Latin American nations.

On Saying What Needs to Be Said

Unless the United States speaks more clearly and responds more effectively to this dangerous trend, we can hardly expect democrats at the OAS or in other Latin American and European capitals to step up to resist the tide. Of course, saying things merely to provoke Chávez is a losing proposition: he thrives on the attention, he has a greater command of curse words than any U.S. diplomat, and he places no limits on what he will say. But not saying things because Chávez might be provoked

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leaves others in the region wondering if the United States knows or cares enough to react.

Tenderhearted critics will always be appalled when a U.S. official makes public declarations that irritate Chávez or his cronies, but there is a vast difference between hurling personal insults, on the one hand, and expressing concern about where Chávez is taking Venezuela and invoking his obligation to respect representative democracy, on the other. Every elected government in the region—Venezuela included—can count on the United States for a respectful, civil dialogue. Dialogue and diplomacy, however, are not ends in themselves. If we send muddled messages and appear unwilling to make value judgments about troubling events in the region, we make matters worse for ourselves and for our friends in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina, and elsewhere in Latin America.

Ironically, those U.S. Latinamericanists who are the most offended by such value judgments or by the slightest criticism of unfriendly leaders are the first to find fault with *our* friends. They have very little to say as Chávez perfects a dictatorship in Venezuela, but in recent weeks they have been quick to make harsh—even humiliating—public statements about Álvaro Uribe, a U.S. ally and president of Colombia. It is natural that ideology will color what one says or does in foreign policy. When Latinamericanists in this country and in the region, however, turn a blind eye to “Chávez the authoritarian” because of their sympathy for his role as “Chávez the socialist avenger,” they risk both their honor and their credibility.

At the very least, our friends should not be left wondering what the United States really thinks about what is happening in the region, particularly in countries where representative democracy is being attacked by undemocratic autocrats. For example, Chávez acolytes in Bolivia and Ecuador have resorted to his playbook to use electoral victories to rewrite the rules of the game in their favor. It is a fact that plebiscites or constitutional conventions can be used to build healthier democracies, provided that the process reflects a commitment to building a constructive national consensus. But these instruments can also be abused by the majority if the rights of the minority are not protected.

Surely, anyone aware of Chávez’s abuse of the constituent assembly process knows what can happen when such a tool is used to tear down democratic institutions

only to reconstruct them in the service of a particular man or ideology. Indeed, Bolivian president Evo Morales and Ecuadorean president Rafael Correa appear to be applying those lessons with reckless abandon.

It may be a wise policy to try to keep the diplomatic channels open to La Paz and Quito rather than cede them to the Chávez camp. But when leaders there set out to undermine democracy under the pretense of perfecting it, they leave little doubt where they stand, and we should not be shy about expressing our concerns. Otherwise, our friends will perceive that they are alone in struggling to protect their institutions and liberty. As the world’s oldest democracy, we have to do better than that.

The Battle Is Raging

The elections of unorthodox leaders like Morales and Correa—far from being unredeemable—are proof that democracy can give countries the leaders they want and need. Notwithstanding the criticism of his past, Morales claimed a first-round victory by a historic margin of 54 percent. In Ecuador, traditional political leaders were so utterly discredited that a dose of Correa’s fresh populism was considered just what the doctor ordered.

Traditional institutions of Bolivia and Ecuador that would have blocked their path to power just a decade ago recognized their legitimate claim to power. Both Morales and Correa could have chosen to strengthen the democratic institutions that saw them elected, but instead, both are determined to scrap their constitutions and use popular assemblies to draft revolutionary charters to alter dramatically their nations’ economic and political order. As a result, what is happening in these countries today seems more like bare-knuckles class warfare than democratic renewal.

Morales has found it just as difficult to satisfy the angry demands of his own hardcore supporters as it is to take on his tenacious traditional opponents. In July 2006, Bolivians elected 225 members of a constitutional assembly that would have until August 2007 to draft a new constitution. Because Morales’s caucus fell nineteen votes short of the two-thirds margin required by the current constitution to amend it, he attempted to rewrite the rules of the game by installing simple majority requirements. Morales’s well-heeled opposition

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hung together to resist such tactics, which has slowed the gallop of Morales's revolution. With over half of the twelve-month timetable for rewriting the constitution consumed in this crucial, bitter battle over the required majority for approving amendments, the constitutional assembly made little progress in drafting and garnering support for the tenets of a new constitution.

The fight for a new constitution has been a politically costly one for Morales. He has had to dispatch troops to quell violence, even by some of his own supporters.

Moreover, four of Bolivia's wealthiest provinces, weary of the self-destructive and backward thinking, show no signs of abandoning their bid for autonomy. Only recently has Morales's firebrand vice president, Álvaro García Linares, had to make reassuring comments to calm the anxiety of Bolivia's middle class and productive sectors. Still, the same mob violence that toppled his two predecessors hangs like a sword of Damocles over Morales as well as his traditional opponents.

Correa won the presidency with very few allies in Congress, so he has had to wage a frontal battle with Ecuador's political establishment. Rival factions have used the rules aggressively to their advantage. In February, Correa's camp and a small opposition group passed a referendum to approve the formation of a constitutional assembly (all but one opposition member boycotted the vote). Opposition legislators then attempted to initiate impeachment proceedings against judges in the Supreme Electoral Tribunal based on their decision to approve the constitutional assembly. The judges retaliated by dismissing the fifty-seven implicated congressmen. Even after the Ecuadorean electorate voted to create a constitutional assembly and fifty-one of the fifty-seven dismissed lawmakers were reinstated, Correa went so far as to send police to prevent their return to work.

While some might defend this process as a uniquely Ecuadorean way of hashing out a host of divisive issues, the fights between the various branches of government are tearing at the country's institutions. The Inter-American Democratic Charter makes explicit reference to this sort of aggression by one branch against another. It is difficult to see how a constructive national consensus or inclusive constitution can emerge from such a divisive and polarizing process.

Back in Venezuela, university students have led intense protests challenging President Chávez's decision

to silence Radio Caracas Televisión (RCTV), the sole remaining broadcast network that was not a mouthpiece for his regime. This latest move is but one more step on the path toward dictatorship—with Chávez having undermined systematically the already weak democratic institutions of his country.

The recent unrest in Venezuela proves the proposition that those leaders who make peaceful opposition impossible make violent opposition inevitable. This latest fight was provoked by Chávez's decision to deny

a license renewal to RCTV, which provides entertainment as well as news. Four national television networks in Chávez's hands would not suffice so long as one independent voice remained, so Chávez converted what normally would have been a routine license renewal into an ideological showdown with the proprietors of RCTV and, as it turned

out, with the opposition that sees the decision as a final step toward dictatorship.

International reaction to this latest measure by Chávez to consolidate his power has been mostly low-key. Although Costa Rican president Oscar Arias called it "a mortal blow" to democracy, other Latin American heads of state have remained silent. Legislators in Chile and Brazil voted to censure the closure of RCTV. The European parliament condemned the act as well, and the U.S. Senate passed a unanimous bipartisan resolution.

At the recent OAS General Assembly in Panama, several member states—including Canada, Guatemala, Honduras, and Peru—addressed the issue of freedom of expression, although none mentioned the RCTV case by name. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice criticized Chávez's closure of RCTV as a threat to democracy. Secretary Rice told her OAS counterparts:

In a democracy the citizens of a country should have the assurance that the policies of their government will be held up for criticism by a free and independent press without the interference of their government. The citizens of the United States have that assurance. I sincerely hope that the citizens of Venezuela will have that assurance as well.¹

While Secretary Rice's comments reportedly were met with loud applause, the OAS's official silence was deafening. The gathering of regional diplomats did not produce a single resolution or communiqué committing

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to act on this blatant restriction of freedom of expression in Venezuela.

Secretary Rice argued that she has “invoked” the Democratic Charter, which would set in motion a process of review by the OAS Permanent Council. But unless that request is made formally and garners consensus support, the U.S. initiative will probably be ignored. In light of the silence of Latin American and Caribbean delegates, the OAS will likely do nothing at all.

Standing by Our Principles

Granted, it is difficult to pass judgment on whether the tumultuous events in Bolivia or Ecuador are undemocratic or whether they reflect a changing political and social order based on the prevailing popular will. Regardless, it is hard to see how any sort of governing—good, bad, or otherwise—is going on in any of these countries. Fierce and divisive political, social, and racial battles are being waged under the guise of democratic reform. No one side has a monopoly on virtue in any of these countries. All sides will say that they are fighting for more accountable and transparent institutions, the diffusion of political power, and a more representative democracy. But they cannot all be right, and we should have the courage to say this rather than accept autocrats and democrats as moral equivalents.

Most governments in Latin America and the Caribbean are unwilling to intervene in the internal affairs of a sister state—and even less so if it means risking a bilateral confrontation with the volatile and wealthy Chávez. For this reason, the OAS can serve a critical role as an instrument for concerted regional inquiry and action. If the OAS secretary general is strong and enjoys the confidence and the backing of key countries, he can speak and act—albeit cautiously and respectfully—as a representative of the region to examine troubling events and make recommendations for a regional response.

Indeed, upon his election as secretary general in 2005, Chilean José Miguel Insulza pledged to make the OAS an effective instrument to deal with those elected leaders who do not govern democratically:

The Inter-American Democratic Charter sets out our full commitment to forge a community of free

nations, whose governments not only develop democratically but also govern with full respect for the rule of law, guaranteeing the human rights of all their citizens at all times. The Charter is not simply an agreement among governments; it is also a victory for our peoples and, as such, it must be adhered to unconditionally.²

To his credit, the new secretary general proposed several new mechanisms to allow the OAS to hear complaints when democracy is threatened. But when

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member states failed to back these ideas, he apparently retreated. Last December, Insulza fielded a notoriously weak delegation to “observe” Venezuela’s undemocratic presidential elections, capitulating to the outrageous demands imposed by Chávez’s electoral engineers. When Insulza dared to express mild concern over the RCTV issue last December, Chávez called him an idiot, and in May 2007, the chastened Insulza stated, a priori, that the OAS

does not have the least intention to issue any condemnation against Venezuela. . . . The only institution with a capacity to make sanctions in OAS is the Permanent Council, through the General Assembly. As far as I know, and I think I know this all right, there has never been a claim or criticism or request for the Council to take actions regarding Venezuela.³

In fact, the secretary general knows that he has broad authority to act under the charter of the OAS, the Inter-American Democratic Charter, and several resolutions adopted in recent years to undertake a review of any situation in the Americas for the purposes of reporting to the Permanent Council. At the very least, the OAS should serve as an instrument for analyzing events in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador. In order for Insulza to take the initiative, however, he would have to count on support from a critical mass of South American nations as well as from the United States. With that diplomatic backing, he could find a way to play a constructive—and even decisive—role. Unless like-minded countries act swiftly to support this firm diplomacy, the role of the OAS as a defender of democracy will wither and die.

What's the Matter with Diplomacy?

If getting along diplomatically and acting multilaterally mean nothing more than going along, then Latin America is in big trouble. We owe it to ourselves and to our friends to be more rigorous in how we interpret events in these countries and in how we respond to challenges.

The United States should not be expected to carry the burden alone. Democratic states in the region should be expected to act together, in solidarity. But this is only possible if our Latin American and Caribbean neighbors recognize our leadership and consider regional democracy worth saving.

At first, it may be difficult to recover support for the idea of collective action, but we can start by making an effort to identify the true democrats in the region and supporting them. This does not mean making a slavish defense of any ally at any cost or picking fights on strictly ideological grounds. It means speaking clearly and acting decisively when our essential values are being assailed in a region whose trend toward democracy once

held so much promise. Unless we demonstrate real leadership, speak our minds, rally our allies, and coax the OAS to do its job, we may find ourselves in a hemisphere in which only a handful of countries enjoy democracy, while the rest are cauldrons of resentment and instability.

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Notes

1. Quoted in Pablo Bachelet, "Rice Calls for OAS Action on Venezuela," *Miami Herald*, June 4, 2007.
2. Organization of American States, "The Democratic Commitment," *Key OAS Issues*, available at www.oas.org/key_issues/eng/KeyIssue_Detail.asp?kis_sec=1.
3. "Insulza Rules Out OAS Condemnation against Venezuela," *ElUniversal.com*, May 3, 2007, available at http://english.eluniversal.com/2007/05/03/en_pol_art_insulza-rules-out-03A863129.shtml.