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Bridging Divides, Breaking Impasses: Civil Society in the Promotion and Protection of Democracy in the Americas

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper explores the role of civil society in the promotion and protection of democracy in the Americas. Civil society organizations have been engaged in important pro-democracy activities both on the ground in individual countries as well as transnationally in partnership with foreign counterparts, governments, and multilateral organizations. While our attention of late is often drawn by mass protest or “civil society coups” in places such as Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela, civil society also advances democracy in more constructive ways.

Civil society has served as an important bridging agent. First, the present quality of democracy in many countries in the region suffers some serious deficiencies; the ‘representative’ in representative democracy is often lacking. Civil society has an important role to play in putting the representative back in representative democracy. It must help to extend citizenship to the poor and under-represented. Civil society must also build stronger, more organic links with political parties in order to make the latter more relevant and representative.

Second, the phenomenon of populism presents itself as a potentially serious threat to democracy. Populism is divisive, polarizing, intolerant, and anti-plural. It feeds on existing class, racial, ethnic, and rural-urban divides. In bridging these divides, civil society must help establish spaces for dialogue, debate, and tolerance, from the community to the national level. Civil society groups can also help impart practical conflict resolution skills. The best way to counter populism is not so much to oppose it as to strengthen the representation of the underprivileged and promote tolerance and pluralism.

Finally, civil society organizations can also help strengthen the collective-defense-of-democracy regime at the regional level. In the wake of the 2005 Fort Lauderdale OAS General Assembly, the task of CSOs is to help break the current impasse in terms of putting the Inter-American Democratic Charter’s noble principles to practice in a timely and effective manner. Their challenge is at once political and normative: helping to find ways that convince governments that it is in their interest to support Democratic Charter compliance mechanisms as well as act decisively when countries renege on their Democratic Charter obligations or fall into political crises. CSOs must convince governments to strengthen new democracy norms even if these norms weaken state sovereignty prerogatives.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette recherche étudie le rôle de la société civile en matière de promotion et de protection de la démocratie dans les Amériques. Les organisations de la société civile (OSC) participent activement à d'importantes activités en faveur de la démocratie, tant sur le terrain dans divers pays qu'en partenariat avec leurs homologues étrangers, les gouvernements et les organisations multilatérales. Tandis que récemment notre attention est souvent tournée vers des protestations populaires ou des « coups d'État de la société civile » notamment en Argentine, en Bolivie, en Équateur et au Venezuela, la société civile fait également progresser la démocratie de façon plus constructive.

La société civile joue un rôle important comme agent de liaison. Premièrement, les critères de qualité actuels de la démocratie dans les nombreux pays de la région comportent de nombreuses lacunes; les entités représentant la démocratie représentative sont souvent absentes. La société civile a un rôle primordial à jouer en redonnant aux entités leur place au sein de la démocratie représentative. Elle doit aider les pauvres et les personnes sous-représentées à participer activement à la vie de la société. La société civile doit également établir des relations plus solides et plus directes avec les partis politiques pour que ces derniers deviennent plus pertinents et plus représentatifs.

Deuxièmement, le phénomène du populisme représente une menace sérieuse pour la démocratie. Il sème la discorde, polarise les intéressés, pratique une approche intolérante et antipluraliste. Il entretient les divisions entre les classes, les races et les ethnies. Pour combler ces diversités, la société civile doit favoriser l'établissement d'espaces pour les dialogues et les débats et faire preuve de tolérance, des collectivités jusqu'aux paliers nationaux. Les groupes de la société civile peuvent aussi mettre à profit leurs compétences pratiques en matière de résolution de conflits. La meilleure façon de lutter contre le populisme n'est pas de s'y opposer, mais de renforcer la représentativité des personnes sous-représentées et de promouvoir la tolérance et le pluralisme.

Enfin, les organisations de la société civile peuvent aussi aider à consolider les régimes collectifs de défense de la démocratie sur le plan régional. Dans la foulée de l'Assemblée générale de l'Organisation des États américains (OÉA), à Fort Lauderdale, en 2005, la tâche des organisations de la société civile est de dénouer l'impasse actuelle et de mettre en pratique les nobles principes de la Charte démocratique interaméricaine rapidement et efficacement. Le défi s'avère à la fois politique et normatif : trouver les moyens de convaincre les gouvernements que c'est dans leur intérêt d'appuyer les mécanismes de surveillance de la Charte démocratique et de prendre des mesures décisives lorsque les pays refusent de se conformer aux obligations de la Charte ou sombrent dans des crises politiques. Les OSC doivent convaincre les gouvernements de consolider leurs nouvelles normes démocratiques même si celles-ci affaiblissent les prérogatives de souveraineté des États.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo explora el papel de la sociedad civil en la promoción y protección de la democracia en las Américas. Las organizaciones de la sociedad civil se han visto vinculadas a importantes esfuerzos a favor de la democracia, tanto sobre el terreno en países individuales, como transnacionalmente en colaboración con homólogos extranjeros, gobiernos, y organizaciones multilaterales. Aunque últimamente nuestra atención a menudo se ha centrado en la protesta de masas o “golpes de estado de la sociedad civil” en sitios como Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, y Venezuela, la sociedad civil también promueve la democracia de modos más constructivos.

La sociedad civil ha servido como importante agente para tender puentes. Primero, en la actualidad la calidad de la democracia en muchos países de la región sufre graves insuficiencias. A menudo a la democracia representativa le falta el elemento de la “representatividad” y la sociedad civil tiene un importante rol que desempeñar en la restauración de este elemento. Esto debe ayudar al mejoramiento de la ciudadanía de los sectores pobres y mal-representados. La sociedad civil también debe forjar lazos más fuertes y orgánicos con los partidos políticos a fin de incrementar la representatividad y relevancia de estos.

Segundo, el fenómeno del populismo se presenta como una amenaza potencialmente seria para la democracia. El populismo es divisivo, polarizador, intolérante, y antiplural; y se nutre de las existentes brechas de clase, raciales, étnicas, y urbano-rurales. Al tender puentes sobre estas brechas, la sociedad civil debe ayudar a establecer espacios

para el diálogo, el debate y la tolerancia, desde la comunidad hasta el nivel nacional. Asimismo, los grupos de la sociedad civil pueden contribuir a la impartición de habilidades prácticas de resolución de conflicto. El mejor modo de responder al populismo no es tanto oponersele como reforzar la representación del desvalido y promover la tolerancia y el pluralismo.

Finalmente, las organizaciones de la sociedad civil pueden también ayudar a fortalecer el régimen de defensa colectiva de la democracia a nivel regional. Tras la Asamblea General de la OEA, celebrada en Ft. Lauderdale en 2005, su tarea consiste en ayudar para salir del estancamiento actual mediante la puesta práctica oportuna y eficaz de los nobles principios de la Carta Democrática Interamericana. El reto que enfrentan es a la vez político y normativo: contribuir a encontrar vías para convencer a los gobiernos de que es de su interés brindar su apoyo a mecanismos de verificación del cumplimiento de la Carta Democrática; asimismo, deben actuar con decisión cuando los países faltan a su compromiso de cumplir las obligaciones de la Carta Democrática o caen en crisis políticas. La sociedad civil debe convencer a los gobiernos de que hay que reforzar nuevas normas de democracia aún si éstas debilitan las prerrogativas de soberanía estatales.

Introduction

The links between civil society and the promotion and protection of democracy in the Americas are extensive. At the local and national level, civil society groups across the region have increasingly organized popular consultations (*consultas populares*) and citizen juries to invite people to voice their opinions on issues of importance, in order to raise public awareness about the everyday problems that their communities face. Civic organizations involve citizens in defence of the vote and educate the public about democracy and citizenship. Women's and human rights organizations push governments to deepen democracy. When elected representatives and governments fail in their responsibilities, we have even witnessed citizens hold them accountable through "civil society" or "impeachment" coups in Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela.

The flurry of civil society activities within countries has been accompanied by extensive transnational activity. Domestic groups have often undertaken collective action simultaneously across borders in pursuit of their agendas, networking with likeminded foreign civil society partners, governments, and multilateral organizations. For instance, civic organizations formed the *Acuerdo de Lima* (Lima Accord) and the Inter-American Democracy Network to promote the strengthening of democracy collectively as well as provide technical assistance to one another in areas such as election monitoring. Civil society organizations from across the Americas participated actively in the OAS-led discussions that created the Inter-American Democratic Charter in 2001; regional civil society networks continue to engage the OAS and member state governments on issues related to democracy through special civil society forums or meetings at annual OAS general assemblies and

the periodic Summits of the Americas, most recently in Mar del Plata in November 2005. Occasionally civil society actors have been formal partners with intergovernmental organizations in collective efforts to defend democracy; the Carter Center participated actively with the OAS and the UNDP in a tripartite mission to facilitate intra-elite dialogue during the recent political crisis in Venezuela (2002-2004). Civil society-intergovernmental collaboration suggests that Inter-American diplomacy may be moving gradually away from a more traditional interstate form to complex or networked multilateralism. Finally, as illustrated by the concerted resistance against former president Alberto Fujimori's attempt to rig elections in Peru in May 2000 or against the ousting of Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide in February 2004, local civil society groups have also formed transnational advocacy networks and/or social movements involving foreign counterparts as well as sympathetic governments and international organizations.

What are the current priorities for civil society in the promotion and defense of democracy in the Americas? By examining the evolution of the regional democracy problematic in the new millennium, this paper identifies three key priorities. First, civil society has an important role to play in helping to put the representative back into representative democracy. Second, populism is the sworn enemy of civil society and political parties alike and must be combated. Finally, civil society must help to break the present impasse in the inter-American defense of democracy. As the title of this policy paper underscores, civil society domestically and transnationally must do its part to bridge sharp societal divides and break important impasses.

The Evolution of the Regional Democracy Problematic

Despite some important continuity, the current regional democracy problematic is markedly different from the situation that prevailed during the 1990s. During the previous decade, the threat of coups d'état was a prime concern for still young democracies and for the OAS, as evidenced by the illegal seizure of power in Haiti in 1991 and attempted coups in Venezuela in 1992, and Paraguay in 1996. The OAS was prompted to sign the Santiago Commitment to Democracy in 1991 and create Resolution 1080 to respond to coups. The advent of the self-coup or *autogolpe* in Peru (1992) and Guatemala (1993) created an additional worry for governments and multilateral organizations in the region.

By the end of the decade, authoritarian backsliding by democratically elected leaders had joined coups and self-coups as a widespread threat to democracy. The dismantling of democracy under twice democratically elected President Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000) and his security chief Vladimiro Montesinos stands out potentially as the most illustrative case of authoritarian regression. Guillermo O'Donnell (1994) captured the phenomenon in his analysis of "delegative democracy," wherein incumbent, elected presidents maintained their popular legitimacy through vertical accountability (elections) while simultaneously eroding horizontal accountability by circumventing legislatures through presidential decrees, and compromising the autonomy of the judiciary by stacking courts with hand-picked appointees. The problem of authoritarian backsliding catalyzed the OAS to create the Inter-American Democratic Charter in 2001.

Problems with the quality of third-wave democracy in the region began to surface in the 1990s and persist to the present. Fareed Zakaria (1997) coined the term illiberal democracy to characterize the plethora of countries in which elections occurred but where citizenship and individual political rights were constrained. Scholars began to employ the terms "low-intensity" democracy and citizenship to describe situations in which citizenship rights beyond voting were limited (Gills, Rocamora, and Wilson 1993; O'Donnell 1993).

Annual *Latinobarometro* surveys and the major UNDP (2004) study *Democracy in Latin America* have confirmed widespread popular dissatisfaction with democracy across the region. These analyses have identified a deep popular distrust in elected officials, political parties, and political institutions in general. People perceived their governments as corrupt and incapable of representing them effectively. Moreover, support for democracy for many in the region was conditional on material improvements in their lives; many respondents indicated a preference for development over democracy. According to the UNDP (2004), almost 55 % of Latin Americans would support an authoritarian government if it solved their economic problems. Not surprisingly, those least supportive of democracy were less educated groups of lesser economic means with low expectations of social mobility. Accordingly, dissatisfaction with democracy persists along with poverty and inequality.

Popular discontent has manifested itself in two recent, sometimes intertwined political phenomena. First, the current juncture in various countries provides fertile grounds for anti-system challengers. Most notably, these include the current presidents of Bolivia and Venezuela, Evo Morales and Hugo Chávez. The underperformance of establishment political elites coupled with deep class, racial, and ethnic cleavages provides these leaders with receptive audiences to their ideas. Popular ambivalence toward democracy may indicate that people are willing to concede some erosion of democracy in exchange for the economic goods these charismatic leaders promise to deliver.

Second, in many countries, a gap has widened between an effervescent civil society and an ineffective, often corrupt political party system. Since 2000 yet another threat to stable democratic rule, that of mass citizen protests called "civil society coups" (Encarnación 2002) or "impeachment coups" (Boniface 2006) has emerged. These mass outpourings of popular discontent have helped topple elected leaders in Argentina (2001), Bolivia (2003, 2005), Ecuador (2000, 2005), and Venezuela (2002). The problem of civil society or impeachment coups is fed in no small part by a structural fault of existing democracies in the region. That is, most presidential democracies, which are the dominant constitutional model in the region, lack the equivalent of a parliamentary vote of confidence or a presidential recall referendum, such

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that popular demands for accountability must either wait for the next round of presidential elections to oust an unpopular government or assume extra-institutional forms of expression such as mass protest.

Another new, more elitist threat to democracy has come to the fore in Ecuador and Nicaragua. Divided government has led to instances of executive-legislative gridlock. Where scholars had identified presidents during the 1980s as the principal culprits of authoritarian backsliding, powerful legislative alliances have intentionally sought to weaken presidents for questionable ends, contributing to governability crises. In Ecuador, three consecutive elected presidents were each impeached or driven from office by formidable congressional opponents. In Nicaragua, President Bolaños has found himself locked in a bitter battle with a Liberal Constitutionalist-Sandinista legislative alliance led by former presidents Alemán and Ortega. In both countries, rival elites further attempted to manipulate the judiciary in their Machiavellian struggles.

In its efforts to elaborate on what former Secretary-General César Gaviria called a democratic solidarity paradigm, the OAS has played a continuous game of catch-up with the evolving regional democracy problematic. On paper the Inter-American Democratic Charter provides the tools for the OAS to deal with a variety of threats to democracy, including coups d'état, self-coups, and authoritarian backsliding. On the other hand, civil society coups and executive-legislative gridlock were not problems then on the radar when the Democratic Charter was crafted in 2001. Alongside these new challenges, the OAS continues to confront the persistent difficulty of converting the noble principles set out within the Democratic Charter into timely and effective action. Its debut has been less than spectacular.

As Peter Smith (2005, 344) has concluded, democracy is still nowhere near the only game in town in much of the Americas. From the discussion above, there are seemingly three broad sets of priorities concerning civil society's role in the promotion and protection of democracy. First, representative democracy (the preferred lingo of Inter-American diplomacy) is scarcely representative in many countries in the hemisphere. Civil society must play its part in

addressing this crisis of representation. Second, populism in its current form is a threat to political society and civil society alike. Finally, civil society has an important stake in strengthening the Inter-American collective defense of democracy.

Putting the Representative in Representative Democracy

The problems with the quality of democracy throughout much of the Americas have led many in civil society to blame the model of democracy itself as being at fault: representative or liberal democracy. According to this line of argumentation, representative democracy is intrinsically linked with capitalism in ways that perpetuate low intensity citizenship, poverty, and inequality. The radical critique's prescription is some combination of more "economic democracy" and participatory democracy.

Interestingly, the definitional criteria for representative democracy spelled out in the Inter-American Democratic Charter not only include a focus on elections and political institutions but also precisely the elements which some civil society critics claim it lacks. Article 6 for instance states:

It is the right and responsibility of all citizens to participate in decisions relating to their own development.

This is also a necessary condition for the full and effective exercise of democracy. Promoting and fostering diverse forms of participation strengthens democracy.

Articles 11-16 link the consolidation of democracy with the need to combat poverty, illiteracy, and low levels of human development. In article 28, the Democratic Charter also recognizes the full and equal participation of women as an integral component of democracy. In short, the problem is not the model of representative democracy but its real existing form, in which sadly many of these above-mentioned elements are in short supply. As the UNDP (2004) has asserted, the challenge is to move from a democracy of voters to a democracy of citizens. Put another way, the representative must be put into representative democracy.

There are at least three important dimensions to the challenge of making democracies in the Americas

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more representative. First, as referred to already above, there is a profound crisis of political parties in many countries in the hemisphere. Political parties have often failed to articulate popular interests and are viewed with widespread distrust. Second, a disconnect often exists between political parties and institutions on the one hand, and the aspirations of the population as articulated through civil society activity. Elite politics is literally out of touch with citizens. Third, large numbers of people across the region do not enjoy full citizenship because of pronounced class, racial, ethnic, and urban-rural divides in their countries.

Civil society organizations have already actively sought to fill these voids in numerous innovative ways. Popular consultations and citizen juries raise awareness of issues of importance to citizens and press governments for redress. Similarly, at the regional level, civil society networks have organized social forums and parallel summits. Progress has been made in terms of enhancing the citizenship of the excluded. For example, civil society has mobilized indigenous people in Ecuador and Bolivia with such a force that is no longer easy for political elites to ignore them. Civic organizations catalyze the organization of armies of volunteer election observers. Popular protest and ultimately civil society impeachment coups hold elected authorities accountable in between elections.

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The ongoing tasks include reinvigorating political parties as mechanisms for the articulation of social forces, strengthening organic links of dialogue and cross-fertilization between civil society organizations and political parties, as well as thickening civil society in areas where citizens have been underrepresented for economic, ethnic, or racial reasons. Civil society upheavals of the impeachment coup sort could be turned into more of a positive force than a destabilizing one through constitutional reform that introduces interim or midterm accountability mechanisms, such as recall referendums for elected officials. The precedent of course has already been set in Venezuela in Article 72 of its constitution.

These are no easy tasks. For instance, the relationship between civil society and political parties has often been one fraught with tension across the region. Political parties have historically sought to control civil society groups for their own interests, as

illustrated in the past by the Party of the Institutional Revolution (PRI) in Mexico or COPEI and Democratic Action in Venezuela. Political parties have also often stripped popular organizations of their most dynamic leadership, contributing to an ongoing leadership vacuum in civil society. Given the reliance of many civil society organizations on external funding, political party-civil society relations have also tended to reinforce clientelism. Civil society groups are also often forgotten by their political party partners once elections have concluded and elected officials are in office. It is no wonder that civil society groups instinctively seek to assert their autonomy vis-à-vis political parties.

While there are certainly no perfect models of civil society-party relations, some instances have enjoyed relative success and merit closer study. The Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) in Mexico and the Brazilian Workers Party are two possible examples. In the interest of strengthening democracy, we need to better understand the circumstances under which mutually rewarding relations can occur between these two sets of actors.

Forging closer, more organic ties between parties and civil society organizations is crucial. In their absence we continue to witness a bifurcation in countries of the Americas between an elitist, detached, and often corrupt political society and civil societies that oscillate between under-representation and upheaval. Societies in constant movement may focus national attention on popular issues of concern but lay weak foundations for enduring democracy.

Lastly, foreign donors must take caution in the ways they attempt to strengthen representative democracy through civil society. Whether intentionally or accidentally, foreign sponsorship has influenced the evolution of civil societies in the direction of *NGO-ization*. Non-governmental organizations have been the favoured executing agencies for many international projects. On the positive side, NGOs can embody professionalism and technical skill while advocating the right causes. They are more likely to speak the language of foreign donors. On the negative side, they are often run by segments of the same elite in positions of national power and socially distant from the sectors of society they claim to represent. NGOs can get caught up in the same politics of opportunism and clientelism, which hurts citizens' faith in political

institutions. While they often claim to speak on behalf of the underrepresented, they are frequently not representative organizations themselves. Therefore, they are not necessarily the ideal candidates for such priorities as enhancing the citizenship of the underrepresented. We need to understand better how to channel assistance not only through NGOs, but also directly to those more informal, localized groups at the community and grassroots level.¹

Populism is the Enemy

Democratic malaise, corruption, poverty, inequality, and racism have contributed to recurring populist tendencies throughout the Americas. Populist leaders have promised solutions to these problems that will bring genuine material gains to the poor and underrepresented. While their establishment predecessors certainly did not help the democratic cause, the ascent of populists to power puts democracy in even greater peril.

Populism is more a style or way of doing politics than an ideology. Indeed, populism is compatible with a variety of ideologies. Whereas former Peruvian and Argentinean presidents Alberto Fujimori and Carlos Menem had pro-market affinities, Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales have pronounced leftist and anti-US sympathies.

Among its defining characteristics, populism has a strong anti-establishment bent with an “us versus them” political dynamic that pits the underprivileged and exploited masses against their oppressors, the powerful elite establishment. In classical populist discourse the “us” was commonly referred to as “*el pueblo*” and “them” as “the oligarchy.” Chávez has updated the discourse with his own contribution; *el pueblo* is also now referred to as “*el soberano*” or the “sovereign people.”

Another defining trait is that a charismatic leader presents himself as one of the people and their champion against the unjust forces that hold them down. During his election campaign, Peruvian president Alejandro Toledo played on his humble, indigenous origins and claimed he was the modern incarnation of Pachacutic, the greatest emperor of the Incas. Indeed, often these leaders are political outsiders, like their followers, who are scorned by the establishment.

Classical populism during the 1930s and 1940s was distinguished by concerted efforts to organize the poor and previously un-represented and un-politicized into trade unions and peasant organizations. Getulio Vargas of Brazil and Juan Perón of Argentina, for example, catalyzed the growth of powerful labor movements in their countries. In Mexico, Lázaro Cárdenas mobilized millions of peasants through land reform.

While contemporary neo-populism often shares a common discourse with classical populism, it has its own distinct features. Neo-populism represents not just an attack on the oligarchy but the entire “political class.” Not only is the oligarchy perceived as rotten to the core, but also the complete political system. It aims to discredit existing political and social institutions, including political parties, unions, and other civil society organizations. It is not just anti-establishment, but also anti-system. In tearing down or circumventing existing political and social

institutions, it seeks to establish direct, unmediated, and highly visible links between the executive and the masses at the grassroots level. For instance, former Mexican president Carlos Salinas de Gortari formed hundreds of “Solidarity Committees” while Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez has created equal numbers of “Bolivarian Circles.” Neo-populism’s constituency is also different; it focuses not so much on the organized urban and rural poor but the very poorest and previously least organized, such as urban slum dwellers and the landless rural poor.

If populism mobilizes the formerly “invisible” poor and advances a pro-poor policy agenda, why is it so dangerous to democracy? First, as illustrated by its Peruvian variant under Fujimori, neo-populism points the finger at political parties and existing civil society groups as part of the problem. It intentionally seeks to weaken or destroy existing institutions of political and civil society where we have established that a more representative democracy requires stronger political parties and civil society organizations as well as enhanced connections between the two. Populism politicizes and mobilizes the masses in

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¹ For critical analysis of NGOs and civil society assistance, see Carothers (1999, 2004) and Ottaway and Carothers (2000).

continuous movement politics, as if society were in a constant state of mobilization. It does not, however, necessarily institutionalize enduring channels of popular representation because the essence of populism is tied up in the privileged relationship between the charismatic leader and his followers. Populism is inherently anti-institutional when what Latin America needs is stronger institutions.

Second, populism tends to reinforce corporatism and clientelism, not weaken them. It augments political control as much as it empowers citizens. Neopopulism under Salinas (1988-1994) is instructive. Targeted groups of peasants and urban poor received benefits and subsidies through the National Solidarity Program and PROCAMPO in exchange for their electoral support for the Party of the Institutional Revolution (PRI). Independent grassroots organizations and NGOs experienced difficulty in obtaining support for their initiatives.

Third, populism is often divisive, polarizing, intolerant, and anti-plural. Born of class, ethnic, and racial conflict, it promotes continued conflict rather than curbing it. The “us versus them”/ people versus the oligarchy logic translates into citizens being forced to take sides and declare their loyalty, either for the populist leader and his movement or against them. This can also feed perceptions of a zero-sum conflict where one side’s gains are the other side’s losses.

Populism can erode any middle or autonomous ground in society and with it pluralism. *Chavismo* has resulted in the systematic weakening of public spaces for dialogue and debate as well as channels of communication in society and politics, including the grassroots, the media, and the legislature. The curb on the healthy exchange of ideas and communication lines in a polarized situation can contribute to mutual misperceptions, distrust, and in turn, a radicalization of politics toward political violence and even civil war. Ultimately, populism destroys bridges across society and politics, instead of building them.

Fourth, populism masquerades as a bottom-up approach, but is very much top-down. It promotes the cult of the leader and deference to authority. In Venezuela, the new constitution created a new power alongside the other constitutional powers (executive, legislature, judiciary, electoral power), *el poder civil*,

ostensibly to promote civil society. At the same time, not all groups in civil society are equal; those of a *chavista* stripe are clearly privileged. Even among *chavista* popular organizations, internal debate and dissent are scarcely tolerated.

Fifth, populists like Chávez instinctively understand what the UNDP and the *Latinobarómetro* have confirmed in their surveys. That is, many disenfranchised Latin Americans prefer economic development and personal material gains to democracy and would be willing to sacrifice some of the latter for the former. The promises of Chávez and Morales are very seductive in this regard. Social spending has increased dramatically in Venezuela while horizontal and to some degree vertical accountability has worsened since Chávez took office.

Populism, however, does have its weaknesses. The populist revolution of the military dictatorship under General Juan Velasco (1968-1975) shows clearly one of its limits. The Velasco government created the National System of Social Mobilization (SINAMOS) to organize workers, *barrios*, and peasants in support of and in the implementation of its policies. At first many Peruvians enthusiastically joined SINAMOS’ mobilization, but the membership of the newly minted social organizations found that the military authorities had imposed limits on their autonomy and their own decision-making powers. Receiving government support for popular initiatives was tied to endorsement of the government’s directives. From initial enthusiasm, those mobilized by SINAMOS eventually became among the military regime’s most vocal critics. In its wake, populism can lead to institutional ruin and an even more disillusioned population.

Another vulnerability is that political populism has often gone hand in hand with what economists have called “economic populism.” That is, these governments often resort to a dramatic expansion of state spending to fund ambitious redistributive policies. The emphasis on redistribution is a noble one but as shown repeatedly in the past, in the absence of adequate resources to pay for them, these policies can eventually contribute to inflation and balance of payments crises. Venezuela is currently riding an oil boom on historically high world prices for petroleum but as it, Mexico, and Ecuador discovered in the early 1980s, oil prices (and other commodities) can also fall

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dramatically, putting their ambitious development plans in jeopardy and their economies in crisis.

Civil society across the region must combat populism and the conditions that give rise to it. One thing civil society groups can do is to promote spaces for dialogue and debate, tolerance, and pluralism, from the grassroots to the intra-elite level. Imparting practical conflict resolution skills is another. The promotion of responsible, professional, and independent journalism is also crucial, as Venezuela's case makes so evident. Civil society must strengthen the moderate middle ground between poles as much as the opposition, because populism thrives on polarization.

In countries such as Venezuela and Bolivia, civil society must also do its part to win hearts and minds over to the side of tolerance and respect for pluralism. Those susceptible to the pull of populism must see that there are alternative routes to obtain voice, acquire access to economic opportunity, and improve conditions in their communities. The best way to fight populism is not to resist it so much as to engage its target population in genuine, autonomous, and participatory community development that helps to build the social fabric of democracy at the grassroots. Populism feeds on societal divisions; civil society must build lasting bridges to the disadvantaged and under-represented.

The best way to fight populism is not to resist it so much as to engage its target population...

Ultimately, strengthening political parties is also an imperative in the struggle against populism. On the one hand, the profound popular distrust in political parties and other formal institutions is one of the factors driving the populist impulse. On the other hand, in a comparison of countries with populist tendencies and those without, the grandfather of populism studies, Torcuato Di Tella (1997), has stressed that populism is less likely in countries with strong political party systems that have institutionalized parties of the left. The sooner political parties become effective vehicles of popular representation, the more likely populism will find it difficult to take hold.

Beyond the Fort Lauderdale Debacle: Strengthening the Inter-American Defense of Democracy

Thus far, the analysis has focused on civil society at the

domestic level. As mentioned earlier, civil society has also played an important role through transnational activism in the regional promotion and defense of democracy.

Most recently, various civil society actors have forwarded proposals to help strengthen the Inter-American collective defense of democracy regime. In the months leading up to the June 2005 General Assembly, a new transnational coalition called the Friends of the Democratic Charter lobbied OAS member states to support reforms to strengthen the Democratic Charter and its implementation. Friends of the Democratic Charter is comprised of a network of former heads of state and high-ranking public officials as well as senior academics. The Carter Center serves as the group's organizational hub while the University of British Columbia spearheads its academic dimension.

As previously stated, the OAS has had considerable difficulty in putting the Inter-American Democratic Charter into practice in a timely and effective manner. To cite an example, the Democratic Charter was not invoked in the weeks leading up to the ousting of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide by an armed insurrection in February 2004, even though the Charter contained crisis prevention and anti-coup mechanisms. It was also absent when President Lucio Gutiérrez of Ecuador undermined the separation of powers by stacking the Supreme Court in December 2004, despite provisions against democratic backsliding. Then, Article 18 of the Democratic Charter made its appearance only after Gutierrez had resigned in the midst of a full-blown political crisis in April 2005.

The Friends of the Democratic Charter identified several crucial lacunae within the Democratic Charter itself that impede decisive action in defense of democracy. For instance, the Democratic Charter lacks an accompanying early warning system. The OAS also does not have its own monitoring or peer review mechanism for promoting Democratic Charter compliance. Accordingly, the Friends advocated greater civil society involvement in a democracy watchdog role. Moreover, although the Democratic Charter now provides a better sense of what representative democracy is, the definitions of "constitutional interruptions" and "constitutional alterations" are unclear. In other words, the

Democratic Charter lacks a clear set of benchmarks for determining precisely at what point the OAS should intervene using the main action clauses in Articles 17-21.

It appeared at one point as if the Friends' advocacy had paid off to some extent when the US government put forward a proposal to other member states in advance of the June 2005 Fort Lauderdale General Assembly for strengthening the Democratic Charter. Its proposal bore some similarity to the Friends' ideas. The US government proposed that the OAS create a new democracy monitoring committee that would be informed by various civil society groups and experts. However, the US did not help its own cause when President Bush met at the White House shortly before the Fort Lauderdale General Assembly with Maria Corina Machado, director of the Venezuelan non-governmental organization Súmate and a staunch opponent of Hugo Chávez. The incident fueled suspicions for many that the US would attempt to manipulate any democracy peer review mechanism with civil society participation as a weapon against its enemies, like Venezuela, and not necessarily to promote democracy. In the eyes of Latin American officials, such a mechanism could provide the Súmates of the region with a forum for discrediting their governments.

Latin American member states fell in instead behind a diluted counterproposal sponsored by Chile. The compromise was the Declaration of Florida, which contained no mention whatsoever of any monitoring mechanism. The Declaration did reinforce the good offices of the Secretary-General for coming up with proposals for defending and promoting democracy as well as bringing worrisome situations to the attention of the Permanent Council. The Secretary-General was also charged with preparing a report on how the Democratic Charter had been implemented since 2001. It was abundantly clear from the Declaration text, however, that the Secretary-General had to engage closely with the Permanent Council in the exercise of his good offices. His proposals also had to respect the principles of nonintervention and self-determination.

The incident revealed the dual political and normative limits of civil society advocacy for strengthening the Inter-American defense of democracy. On the political side, the Friends of the Democratic Charter had to

enlist state sponsorship in order to achieve broader buy-in for its proposals. Unfortunately, the General Assembly took place in the midst of heightened geopolitical tensions in which Latin American trust of US intentions was approaching an all-time low.²

Fort Lauderdale also underscored the normative constraints of attempts to strengthen the Democratic Charter. The US proposal crystallized the clash between established sovereignty norms and fledgling intervention norms of peer review and/or monitoring Charter compliance. Most member states were simply not prepared to support what they considered an infringement in their internal affairs. Additional tension occurred with respect to norms of multilateralism. Inter-American multilateralism rests on a tradition of interstate diplomacy with a built-in club mentality. That is, it has long upheld "executive sovereignty": protocol that upholds the respect for and recognition of the prerogatives and privileges of heads of state and government and their diplomatic representatives (Cooper and Legler 2006). Opening up the OAS' interstate defense of democracy to civil society involvement challenged these existing multilateralism norms.

In the end, efforts to strengthen the Democratic Charter highlighted that civil society must forge alliances with states and multilateral organizations to advance its policy and normative agenda, but also that these do not always make reliable partners. Fort

Lauderdale also suggested that the type of ideas put forward by the Friends required a positive alignment of state interests and norms in order to gain acceptance. Interests and norms were not aligned at the General Assembly.

Not all is lost. Although OAS member states vetoed the idea of a formal monitoring mechanism with civil society participation, it did loosen the leash of the Secretary General to some degree in bringing urgent situations to the attention of the Permanent Council. Reputable groups like the Friends of the Democratic Charter can continue to cultivate excellent ties with the Secretary-General, alerting him to situations that require his attention and offering to assist him in the exercise of his good offices.

...the Democratic Charter lacks a clear set of benchmarks for determining precisely at what point the OAS should intervene...

² On the deterioration of US-Latin American relations, see Hakim (2006) and Shifter and Jawahar (2006).

Just as international NGOs such as Freedom House, the International Crisis Group, and Transparency have carved out niches in their respective issue areas, there is nothing stopping civil society organizations in the Americas from constructing their own democracy watchdog institution. Indeed such an autonomous institution might be welcomed by OAS member states that are habitually reluctant to accuse a member of authoritarian backsliding for fear of violating its sovereignty. As a principled actor in international affairs, Canada could make an important contribution in financially supporting such an institution as well drawing attention to its analysis and reports in the Permanent Council.

Finally, there is plenty of work for academics. They can help define benchmarks for authoritarian backsliding, help monitor Democratic Charter compliance, and study various peer review mechanisms in other regional contexts in the interest of designing an Inter-American democracy watchdog. The support of the Government of Canada would be very valuable here too.

Conclusion: Bridging Divides and Breaking Impasses

In sum, civil society in the Americas faces three important priorities in the promotion and protection of democracy. First, it must help put the representative back in representative democracy. In the UNDP's words (2004), it has an important role to play in converting the region's electoral democracies into democracies of citizens. Second, populism presents a genuine threat to democracy that must be countered by civil society. In both these priorities, civil society must play an important bridging role: connecting civil society with political parties, spanning debilitating class, racial, and ethnic divides, and fostering a tolerant, plural middle ground in polarized societies. Finally, in addition to addressing threats to democracy on the ground, civil society also has a significant part on the international stage. Civil society must play its part in breaking the current impasse that impedes the timely and effective implementation of the Inter-American Democratic Charter.

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