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The Danger of Chavez

During her recent trip to Latin America, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice repeatedly emphasized that the United States wanted to have good relations with the region's democratic governments, whether of the right, left or center. Their place on the political spectrum was less important to Washington, she explained, than whether they were democratic or non-democratic regimes. The most important part of her message was that being democratically elected was a necessary, but far from sufficient, definition of a democratic government. Also important was whether or not a democratically elected government subsequently adhered to democratic rules of the game in its treatment of its citizens and its neighbors.

Rice's expanded definition of democracy was an attempt to clarify why Washington was treating Venezuela's democratically elected leftist government differently from leftist governments in Chile or Brazil, for example. The United States, she explained, is concerned about the behavior of the Venezuelan government, specifically its treatment of the media and the opposition, as well as its support for anti-democratic leaders and groups in other parts of Latin America. Washington had no such concerns about Chile or Brazil.

The Secretary of State's distinction between types of democratically elected governments ultimately was reflected in the compromise that allowed Jose Miguel Insulza of Chile to be elected president of the Organization of American States. Washington agreed to support Insulza when he publicly declared that he shared Rice's view that for a country to be truly democratic, democratic governance was as important as democratic election. The media generally regarded the election of Insulza as a defeat for Washington, but that misses the point. Washington's problem was not with Insulza but with the fact that he was Chavez's candidate. By publicly declaring that he, like Rice, considered democratic governance to be important, Insulza demonstrated his independence from Chavez.

Equally important, from Washington's point of view, Insulza's words strengthened the ability of the OAS to take action against democratically elected governments that abused their power. If this clarification between acceptable and unacceptable behavior on the part of democratically elected governments had been made earlier, it might have been easier for the member states of the OAS to act against both Hugo Chavez and ex-president Lucio Gutierrez, who tried to pack Ecuador's courts with his supporters. In the absence of this clarification, the OAS remained paralyzed when democracy was being undermined in both countries.

Although Rice's trip to Latin America made clear the degree to which the United States is concerned with developments in Venezuela, it would be a mistake to conclude that the left-of-center democracies in the region do not share Washington's preoccupation. In fact, these governments are worried, and for good reason. Chavez' championing of leftist populist leaders and movements, as well as his arming of his civilian followers, threaten to alter civil-military relations in the region. Latin America's democratic institutions are weak. To varying degrees they will be further weakened by growing and armed populist movements. The region's militaries will not forever remain subservient to democratically elected leaders who either cannot keep political control or who use their control to challenge the military status quo.

Furthermore, to the degree that Chavez remains unchallenged in the hemisphere, he will serve as a model for ambitious and power-hungry military men eager to become president without having to stage a coup to reach their goal. Already there is a would-be Chavez developing in Ecuador. It is conceivable that additional admirers of the Venezuelan leader will make their appearance in other countries whose democratic governments are weak.

Finally, Latin America's democratic left is trying to create more socially conscious and responsive democracies that are also economically productive and equitable. The efforts of these governments will be undermined to the extent that other leftist leaders promise faster and better results in return for popular acceptance of the destruction of democratic governance and the repudiation of market economies and responsible macroeconomic policies.

Latin American democracy is not yet in crisis, but it could be in the not-too-distant future. By giving more attention and importance to democratic governance, it may be possible to act sooner to save disintegrating democracies in the region from collapse.