



Susan Kaufman Purcell
Directora, Centro de Política Hemisférica, Universidad de Miami.

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Ungoverned

The recent OAS General Assembly took place as masses of indigenous protestors in Bolivia sought to oust President Carlos Mesa. The convergence of the two events highlighted some of the weaknesses and strengths of both the OAS and democracy in Latin America.

The OAS meeting was chaired by the organization's excellent new Secretary General Jose Miguel Insulza. One of his goals was to revitalize the organization by strengthening its role in protecting democratic governments in the region.

The Inter-American Democratic Charter, approved by OAS members in 2001, was an earlier and important step in this direction. It led the organization to increase its efforts to ensure that elections in member countries were free and fair. It also further delegitimized the military coups as a way of solving the problems of a stalemated democracy.

The Charter, however, did not limit the scope of OAS actions only to elections. It also allowed collective action to ensure that member countries behaved democratically. At the Ft. Lauderdale meeting, the Secretary General tried to get agreement on some general guidelines for moving the OAS in this direction. Unfortunately, the member states could not reach a consensus on this issue. The most important reason was that some members, including Venezuela, viewed the effort as targeting the government of President Hugo Chavez, who has been systematically using democratic processes to undermine his country's democratic institutions. Given their opposition to the expansion of the OAS's democratic monitoring role, the measure was watered down. This significantly weakened the possibility that the OAS would indeed be able to take constructive action to protect existing democracies from attacks on it from their own leaders.

The inability of the OAS to take stronger action to protect democracy strengthened the voice of critics of the organization who have long charged that it is little more than an ineffective debating organization. Part of the problem, of course, is the need to achieve a consensus on every big decision. Any organization that had to achieve an absolute consensus before it could act would be paralyzed. The period when the OAS was least paralyzed was when the United States dominated it. That period has ended. The most recent proof of this was Washington's inability to ensure that the candidate it initially supported would become the new secretary general.

The OAS today has no member country that can enforce its will on the others. This means that the OAS itself is more democratic than it was in its early days. But the decline of U.S. power in the hemisphere also means that power is more fragmented, despite the fact that the region is increasingly dominated by governments of the left or center left. This is because the leftist governments themselves are very varied in terms of their values, programs and manner of governing.

Latin America's new democracies are in a situation that is somewhat similar to that of the OAS. At the beginning of the region's transition to democracy, the absence of a national consensus regarding priorities and policies often led to a political stalemate. If it could not be resolved democratically, the military would impose order and its own agenda. Today, Latin America's military establishments have been greatly weakened. Also, important sectors of the population

have become disenchanted with military solutions and instead now take to the streets themselves to force their presidents to resign. When their strategy has succeeded, the new president has often been the person next in line for the presidency according to the constitution.

This kind of solution weakens democratic institutions. On the other hand, as long as Latin America's democratically-elected governments fail to implement reforms that would make them more representative, accountable and supportive of the rule of law, disaffected groups will be disposed to take direct action, for better or worse.

The end of U.S. dominance of the OAS and the welcome reluctance of the military to take power in times of crisis are both good and bad. These developments are good because they are allowing Latin America's elected governments and their citizens to take greater control of their own destinies. However, if Latin Americans want to keep such control, they will have to work harder to improve and protect their democratic institutions and culture.