

Whose Democracy?

Latin America and Venezuela Promote Holistic Vision Despite US

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Ft. Lauderdale, FL.—The 35th Organization of American States General Assembly (OASGA) closed this evening, after approving a joint declaration aimed at “Delivering the Benefits of Democracy.” The “Declaration of Florida” was initially proposed by the United States; however, several counter-proposals presented by South American and Caribbean countries ended up significantly remolding US goals, producing a very different document than what US diplomats had in mind.

The original US proposed draft contained a variety of references pushing for the application of the OAS Inter-American Democratic Charter in countries where democracy is faltering. The notion of an interventionist mechanism being included in the OAS Democratic Charter, however, was clearly unpalatable to a large majority of the hemispheric organization, who saw the move as a clear threat to Venezuela. At root was a significant disconnect between US desires to use the OAS to intervene in countries they deemed undemocratic, and South American and Caribbean desires to encourage social and economic advances in support of existing democracies. The contrast was thus between a strictly punitive-reactive mechanism versus a pro-active mechanism with regard to fostering democracy in the Americas.

Relations between the US and Venezuela have been strained since leftist President Hugo Chávez was elected in 1998. He has since been reelected in 2000 and had his mandate reconfirmed in a referendum in August, 2004 where he received 60 per cent of the vote. A recent poll put his approval rating at 70.5 per cent, but the US insists that Chávez represents a threat to democracy.

In a series of diplomatic maneuvers in April, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice turned an impending setback in the election of a new Secretary-General of the OAS into a coup d'état. José Miguel Insulza was poised to defeat the US-promoted Mexican foreign minister Luis Ernesto Derbez, when Rice pressured Derbez to drop out and threw her weight behind Insulza—for a price. According to one of Rice's aides, US support was conditional upon Insulza making a veiled threat against Venezuela: “those elected governments who do not govern democratically should answer to the OAS.”

Yet despite Rice's diplomatic finesse in manipulating Insulza, it proved to be a pyrrhic victory.

The original US version of the “Declaration of Florida,” pushed an aggressive strengthening of the OAS, seeking to empower it to actively promote and defend democracy in the Americas, intervening when necessary. In her speech to the General Assembly on Sunday night encouraging delegates to tow the US line, Secretary Rice—who also chaired the General Committee meetings—noted that, “Together we must insist that leaders who are elected democratically have a responsibility to govern

democratically...governments that fail to meet this crucial standard must be accountable to the OAS.”

Yet 28 of the 34 OAS member-countries begged to differ. In statements to the OAS General Committee that debated the “Declaration of Florida,” on Monday and Tuesday, Foreign Ministers from Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela and the Bahamas, among others, repeatedly called attention to the OAS’ foundational principles of non-intervention and self-determination.

Leaders from the Latin American Integration Association (ALADI), made up of South America, Cuba and Mexico, and the 14 member-states of the Caribbean Community and Common Market (Caricom) each offered counter-proposals to the US draft declaration. They insisted on the caveat that any “application” of the Democratic Charter—the US’ hoped-for interventionist mechanism—must respect the principles of non-intervention and self-determination, effectively removing its claws. The final declaration is in keeping with the Democratic Charter itself, which insists that the OAS must be invited by a country’s elected government before intervening or mediating in its internal affairs.

You Say “Democracy,” I Say “Democracy”

But at root in the division between the proposals was not only US attempts at securing a channel for intervention in the region. ALADI and Caricom, with specific additions by Venezuela, concentrated on improving the OAS’ ability to fortify existing democracies and to prevent the kinds of crises currently faced by Bolivia, whose President Carlos Mesa tendered his resignation today among widespread protests, and Ecuador, whose former-President Lucio Gutierrez was kicked out by popular protests in April.

Whereas the US focused on monitoring governments that step outside established democratic bounds—belaboring an already explicit threat against Venezuela—the rest of the hemisphere was more interested in preventative measures. ALADI and Caricom contributions to the final declaration included strong support for a Venezuelan resolution for the OAS to adopt a Social Charter of the Americas. The Social Charter would compliment the Democratic Charter, emphasizing the social and economic rights of Latin America’s estimated 240 million poor.

Speaking before the OAS General Committee on Monday morning, Venezuela’s Foreign Minister Ali Rodriguez noted that for Latin America to genuinely confront threats to democracy, “not only political rights must be guaranteed, but also social and economic rights.” “Democracy and poverty are simply incompatible,” he said, adding that “where the calamities of hunger and poverty exist, democracy is in doubt and human rights are a fiction.”

Rodriguez’s words appeared to underscore the emptiness of US proposals whose aggressive arrogance caused them to neglect the region’s most pressing issue: poverty. A US proposal to improve the OAS’ commitment to fighting drug and human trafficking and “other illicit activity,” was qualified by a Caricom inserted paragraph immediately proceeding it reminding the OAS not to forget the fight against “poverty, illiteracy, low levels of human development, social and political instability, environmental degradation, and the spread of lethal infectious diseases,” in its eagerness to fight crime.

While the US made baseless accusations against the Venezuelan government and strived to achieve some measure for censuring them through the OAS, Venezuela took the moral high-ground—a strategic, as well as an altruistic, move—presenting nine different proposals at the hemispheric meeting, eight of which were approved by their colleagues.

These proposals included the promotion of a proposed increase in the power of the OAS' Inter-American Council for Integral Development (CIDI), giving it the same force as the OAS Permanent Council in order to give social themes equal currency to political ones; access to micro-credits aimed at alleviating poverty and increasing community participation; a follow-up to the "Declaration of Margarita," in 2003, calling on OAS-member states to promote the access to credit for the region's poor; the Social Charter of the Americas; human rights, with a focus on national rather than multi-lateral institutions; free speech, highlighting the importance of free speech in the exercise of democracy, and calling for accountable and responsible media; cooperation in the extradition of, and denying refuge to, terrorists; and finally, a reiteration of the OAS' *raison d'être*: promoting and maintaining hemispheric peace.

Venezuela was busy, while the US groggily looked around at a hemisphere that must no longer appear to be recognizably pliable.

The US received a further defeat at the hands of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (ICHR) which gave a presentation commending Venezuela, among other countries. The US' red-carpet treatment of Venezuelan dissident Maria Corina Machado, director of opposition NGO *Súmate*, faltered on the rocky shores of evidence, never the US' strong-point. Machado met with President Bush last week in an extremely rare private meeting between the US President and an obscure NGO from another country, and Machado had a private meeting with Secretary Rice on Sunday—who did not meet privately with any other of the estimated 220 representatives of civil society at the OASGA. Machado's loud denunciations of Venezuela's human and civil rights violations fell on deaf ears excepting the US government, given that the OAS human rights body ICHR did not echo a single one of her criticisms.

According to Venezuela's ambassador to the US Bernardo Alvarez, the OASGA reflected a relatively recent hemispheric phenomenon in the region's growing articulation of its right to self-determination. Like a majority of countries in the hemisphere, Venezuela came to Fort Lauderdale looking to "clearly reaffirm the principles of the OAS, based in non-intervention and mutual respect."

"We have differences with many countries all over the hemisphere," said Alvarez by phone from Washington, "but Venezuela is a country that is profoundly integrated with the hemisphere. It is only with the US that these differences have developed into a political conflict."

For that reason, Venezuela has been trying to "open channels of communication," with the US that had long been clogged with accusatory rhetoric on both sides. On May 3, Venezuelan Chancellor Ali Rodríguez met with US ambassador to Venezuela William Brownfield, suggesting a meeting between Venezuela's ambassador to the US, Bernardo Alvarez, with the US Department of State. After over a month wait, Alvarez expects to meet with Assistant Secretary of State Roger Noriega on Monday. But

whether Noriega will take any lessons from the 35th OASGA to his meeting with Alvarez is as unlikely as ever.