



Challenges to Democracy in the Americas and the Role of the Inter-American Democratic Charter

Conclusions

On May 24, 2007 the Inter-American Dialogue and the Americas Program of the Center for Strategic and International Studies convened a group of experts representing a broad cross-section of organizations dealing with Hemispheric affairs to discuss means by which the Inter-American Democratic Charter can more effectively address challenges to democracy in the Americas. Participants engaged in a roundtable discussion focused on identifying the key variables affecting the practice of democracy in the region and practical steps by which the Inter-American Democratic Charter can be applied.

A number of conclusions were reached from the discussion. These conclusions are noted below. They do not imply endorsement by any individual participant or institution represented, but instead reflect a general consensus of the discussion as summarized by Inter-American Dialogue and the Americas Program of CSIS.

Key challenges to democracy in the Americas:

- The capacity of governmental institutions in many countries to govern effectively is very limited. Key sectors of government, especially judicial systems, require substantial improvement. Higher standards of transparency and government ethics are needed.
- Political parties in the region are weak, with many not carrying out the vital functions performed by parties in a democracy.
- Crime and insecurity have reached levels in many countries that diminish citizen confidence in legitimate state authority, undermining democracy and threatening stability.
- Deep social inequality and persistent high levels of poverty weaken democratic governance.
- Freedom of expression, an essential element in democracy, is under pressure in parts of the region.

- Regional consensus in favor of cooperative efforts to strengthen democracy has been diminished in recent years.

Means by which the Inter-American Democratic Charter can better address challenges to democracy.

So far, the Inter-American Charter has served mainly (and importantly) as a statement of principles. It has not yet proven to be an effective operational instrument for meeting challenges to democracy, in part because of the current conditions of distrust and dispute in hemispheric relations. Two ideas were proposed to improve the Charter's operational value:

- The invocation of Article 17 by an OAS member state would provide an excellent opportunity to use the Inter-American Democratic Charter to promote regional solidarity and cooperation in support of democracy. This reflects the key purpose of the Charter in strengthening democracy and avoiding disruptions in constitutional order. By applying Article 17 in support of democracy in a member state, the OAS would underscore the utility of the Charter, help to de-stigmatize its application, and foster regional cooperation.
- The Secretary General should be empowered to promote, through his good offices, greater application of the Charter in support of democracy in the region. Additionally, civil society and academic organizations around the hemisphere should play a role in monitoring the implementation of the Charter and in analyzing factors affecting democracy in the Americas. This expert advice would produce useful points of reference in all aspects of democracy promotion. It could also be drawn on to counsel the Secretary General regarding any potential developments that may impair the democratic order in a member state, as outlined in Article 20 of the Charter.