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Demise of the OAS

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“The fact is that we need not only a new human rights system, but a new inter-American system. We must understand that the Americas to the north and to the south of the Rio Grande are different, and we must communicate as blocs. The Organization of American States, the OAS, has historically been the prisoner of North American interests and visions, and its accrued biases and atavisms make it inefficient and unreliable for the new times that Latin America and the Caribbean are experiencing.”

Speech by President Rafael Correa of Ecuador during the Plenary of the Seventh Summit of the Americas, April 10 to 11, 2015, Panama City, Panama¹

The Organization of American States (OAS), on account of its traditional subordination to North American interests, has proven to be adversarial to the Bolivarian movement towards Latin American integration and independence. This contradiction has come into full relief in the ongoing attempt by Secretary General of the OAS, Luis Almagro, to use the institution’s Democratic Charter against the administration of President Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela. This essay takes a brief look at two historic regional conferences held during the past week that reject Almagro’s interventionism and partisanship and implicitly call into question the continued viability of the OAS.

An “extraordinary session” of the Permanent Council of the OAS, convened by petition² of the permanent missions of Argentina, Mexico, Peru, Costa Rica and the United States, was held on June 1, 2016 in Washington to consider the “project of a declaration about the situation in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.” Venezuela had also submitted a request to convene the Council to discuss “the dialogue initiative currently being pursued in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, promoted by UNASUR . . . as well as the submission of a draft declaration of support for the aforementioned initiative.” The extraordinary session of June 1 ultimately accommodated all of the petitions and was held just one day after Almagro invoked the Democratic Charter against

¹ Correa, Rafael. DISCURSO DEL PRESIDENTE RAFAEL CORREA DE ECUADOR DURANTE LA PLENARIA DE LA VII CUMBRE DE LAS AMÉRICAS. Accessed June 6, 2016. http://www.summit-americas.org/vii/docs/ecu_es.pdf.

² Calendar of Conferences. Calendar of Conferences. Accessed June 06, 2016.
<http://www.apps.oas.org/oasmeetings/default.aspx?Lang=EN>.

Venezuela.³ On June 4, 2016, the Seventh Summit of the Association of Caribbean States (AEC) met in Havana and took the opportunity to weigh in on the same issues. The communiqües coming out of both of these conferences, in effect, reject the activation of the Democratic Charter against Venezuela and support the ongoing mediation efforts of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). We will discuss these conferences in more detail below.⁴

Almagro at the helm of the OAS

With its image already tarnished by decades of serving as the seat of imperial domination in the region, the OAS has been in a free fall since the new Secretary General, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Uruguay, Luis Almagro, has been at the helm. In his first year, Almagro has doggedly represented the U.S.-backed Venezuelan opposition, the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD), which won a majority of seats in the National Assembly last December, and he persistently has attacked the Chavista administration of President Nicolas Maduro. This blatantly partisan and interventionist campaign culminated in Almagro's invocation of the Democratic Charter on behalf of the opposition and against the will of the Maduro administration.

Activation of Articles 20 and 21 of the Charter could ultimately result in the temporary suspension of a member state from the OAS, but such a move would require an affirmative vote of two thirds of the member states after other remedies are considered to have failed.⁵ In the case of Venezuela, given the push back by the member states against activation of the Charter, such a scenario is highly improbable, but should it somehow proceed, it would likely exacerbate an already volatile political climate and could help provide a pretext for foreign intervention in that country. Taken in context, Almagro's efforts are aligned with the Obama administration's renewal of an executive order against Venezuela last March, a bellicose measure that follows more than fifteen years of U.S. support for the counter revolution in this South American nation.⁶

The Extraordinary Session of the Permanent Council of the OAS

At an extraordinary session of the Permanent Council of the OAS held in Washington on June 1, 2016, neither Almagro nor Washington were able to call the shots. The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of the Americas (ALBA) and the Caribbean nations took a strong position in favour of regional sovereignty and even some of the more conservative governments which are often critical of the Maduro administration joined in the consensus. The Declaration of the Permanent Council clearly supports the efforts at dialogue over activation of the Democratic Charter in the case of Venezuela. The body of the declaration⁷ states:

³Redacción. Luis Almagro Invoca La Carta Democrática De La OEA Para Convocar a Reunión urgente Sobre Venezuela. BBC Mundo. May 31, 2016. Accessed June 06, 2016.

http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2016/05/160531_noticias_venezuela_carta_democratica_oea_luis_almagro_nicolas_maduro_amv.

⁴ RUEDA, JORGE. Ex-presidents Meet with Venezuela Government, Oppo. U.S. News. May 28, 2016. Accessed June 6, 2016. <http://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2016-05-28/ex-presidents-meet-with-venezuela-government-opposition>.

⁵ OAS :: Inter-American Democratic Charter. OAS :: Inter-American Democratic Charter. Accessed June 06, 2016. <http://www.oas.org/en/democratic-charter/>.

⁶ FACT SHEET: Venezuela Executive Order. The White House. 2015. Accessed June 06, 2016. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/03/09/fact-sheet-venezuela-executive-order>.

⁷ OAS Declaration on Venezuela - 1 June 2016. Scribd. Accessed June 06, 2016. <https://www.scribd.com/doc/314549866/OAS-Declaration-on-Venezuela-1-June-2016>.

CONSIDERING:

That the Charter of the Organization recognizes that representative democracy is essential for stability, peace and development in the region, and that one of its main purposes is to promote and strengthen democracy in accordance with the respect for the non intervention principle in the domestic affairs of the States; and that every State has the right to choose, without external interference, its political, economic, and social system and to organize itself in the way best suited to it.

DECLARES:

1. Its fraternal offer to the sister Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in order to identify, by common accord, a course of action that will assist the search for solutions to the situation through open and inclusive dialogue among the government, other constitutional authorities and all political and social players of that nation to preserve peace and security in Venezuela, with full respect for its sovereignty.
2. Support the initiative of the former Presidents José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero of Spain, Leonel Fernández of Dominican Republic and Martín Torrijos of Panamá for reopening of an effective dialogue between the Government and the Opposition, in order to find alternatives to promote political stability, social development and economic recovery of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela,
3. Support for the various national dialogue initiatives that may lead to, in accordance with the constitution and full respect for human rights, the timely and effective resolution of differences and the consolidation of representative democracy.
4. Support for all efforts of understanding, dialogue and the constitutional procedures.

While there was consensus on the final declaration, not all members were content with the process. In a recent interview with Colombian Radio F.M., Juan Jose Arcuri, Argentine Permanent Representative to the OAS and Chairman of the Permanent Council, described Almagro's management of the process as "without consultation or coordination" and agreed with his fellow ministers that "the entire question of Venezuela ought to be dealt with by the Venezuelans."⁸ It is also likely that some ministers were hesitant to set a precedent for one member state to invoke the democratic charter as a political instrument for isolating and delegitimizing another member state or one of its branches of government.

Something much larger than pragmatism, however, was operative in the resistance to

⁸ ¿Se Debe Invocar La Carta Democrática Interamericana Para Venezuela? | LA F.m. - RCN Radio. Accessed June 06, 2016. <http://www.lafm.com.co/internacional/noticias/¿se-debe-invocar-carta-democrá-207397>.

Almagro's interventionism at the extraordinary session of the Permanent Council. Having been an instrument of US hegemony since its founding in 1948, the OAS appears to have lost all of its luster in the global South as formerly subaltern peoples insist on expressing their own cultural identities and exercising sovereignty in the political and economic spheres of their territories.

The Seventh Summit of the Association of Caribbean States (AEC)

On June 4, at the Seventh Summit of the AEC, which includes 25 of the 34 member states of the OAS, met in Havana. President Raul Castro opened the session with a statement that included some of the common concerns of the association:

"We cannot remain indifferent to disturbances in Latin America and the Caribbean resulting from the imperialist and oligarchic counteroffensive unleashed against popular and progressive governments, which emerged after the failure of the neoliberal wave. This constitutes a threat to peace, stability, unity and indispensable regional integration."

He expressed solidarity with the government of President Nicolas Maduro and concern over the interventionism of the Secretary General of the OAS:

"It is a source of deep concern, the unacceptable attempt by the Secretary General of the Organization of American States to apply the so-called Inter American Democratic Charter to interfere with the internal affairs of Venezuela."

And Castro made it clear Havana had no interest in returning to the OAS:

"I would only reiterate our view that the OAS, from its inception was, as it is and will continue to be, an instrument of imperialist domination, and no reform whatsoever can change its nature or its history. That is why Cuba will never return to the OAS."

It is significant that Castro referred to the inability of the OAS to "change its nature or its history." We are living at a time when Latin America and the Caribbean are coming to terms with the historic memory of the dirty wars of the past century. We are also witnessing the continued revitalization of the Bolivarian independence movement that began with the election of Hugo Chavez as President of Venezuela in December of 1998. What is impossible to comprehend from the point of view of U.S. exceptionalism is the rationality and humanity of today's tremendous resistance to foreign domination that motivates the popular sectors throughout the region.

The AEC Summit ended on the same note as did the OAS meeting a few days earlier, with a Special Communique on Venezuela.⁹ This statement illustrates that the alliance between Caribbean states and Venezuela has not been broken, in spite of the efforts by Washington to lure them into an alternative energy program for the Caribbean islands.¹⁰

⁹ Castro Ruz, Raul. We Cannot Remain Indifferent to Disturbances in Latin America and the Caribbean. > Association of Caribbean States Summit > Granma. June 4, 2016. Accessed June 06, 2016. <http://en.granma.cu/association-of-caribbean-states-summit/2016-06-04/we-cannot-remain-indifferent-to-disturbances-in-latin-america-and-the-caribbean>.

¹⁰ Goldwyn, David L., and Cory R. Gill. The Waning of Petrocaribe? - Central America and Caribbean Energy in Transition.

“Taking note of the efforts at dialogue promoted by the government of the Republic of Venezuela, accompanied by UNASUR:

We support the initiative of ex-presidents José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero of Spain, Leonel Fernández of the Dominican Republic and Martín Torrijos of Panama, for the re-opening of an effective dialogue between the government and the opposition, with the goal of finding alternatives that favor political stability, social development, and the economic recovery of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela;

We also support the different initiatives for national dialogue that are directed, with adherence to the [Venezuelan] Constitution and with full respect for human rights, in an opportune, prompt and effective manner, towards the resolving of differences and consolidation of democracy; and we support all the efforts at mutual understanding, dialogue and constitutional procedures.” [Unofficial translation by the authors]

This communique provides a further bulwark against the traditional imperial pretensions of the OAS. It also constitutes a victory for the cause of dialogue in Venezuela at a time of economic crisis and intense political polarization.

The final declaration of the AEC¹¹ makes it clear that the Association rejects not only intervention in Venezuela, but also U.S. coercive measures against Cuba or any other country in the region:

“[The Association] welcomes with satisfaction the restoration of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States of America and the reopening of their respective embassies. Reiterates its deepest rejection to the application of unilateral coercive measures and reaffirms its call to the Government of the United States to put an end to the economic, commercial and financial blockade imposed on that sister nation, repeal the Helms-Burton Law and cease its extraterritorial application. Urges the President of the United States to use his broad executive powers to substantially modify the blockade.”

Despite the defeat of Almagro’s partisan initiative on June 1st and again on June 4th, there is still a request pending by Almagro to the Chair of the Permanent Council for an “urgent session”¹² sometime between June 10-20 to consider the activation of the Democratic Charter against Venezuela. Though it is not on the official agenda, Almagro has also indicated his desire that “the theme of Venezuela” should be raised at the Annual General Assembly of the OAS¹³ that will convene on June 15 in Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic. The main topic of the assembly will be “strengthening the institution.” The irony will probably not be lost on the

Atlantic Council. Accessed June 06, 2016. <http://publications.atlanticcouncil.org/Petrocaribe/>.

¹¹ Comunicado Especial De La Cumbre De La AEC Sobre Venezuela. Cubadebate. June 04, 2016. Accessed June 06, 2016.

<http://www.cubadebate.cu/noticias/2016/06/04/comunicado-especial-de-la-cumbre-de-la-aec-sobre-venezuela/#.V1Xzio-cESI>.

¹² OSG/243-16. Luis Almagro to Mr. Juan Jose Arcuri. May 30, 2016. Organization of American State, Washington, DC.

¹³ EFE. Santo Domingo Acogerá En Una Semana La Asamblea Anual La OEA. El Mundo. June 05, 2016. Accessed June 06, 2016.

<http://www.elmundo.com.ve/noticias/actualidad/internacional/santo-domingo-acogera-en-una-semana-la-asamblea-an.aspx>.

member states.

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