



# FOCAL

Canadian Foundation for the Americas  
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## THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE PROMOTION AND STRENGTHENING OF DEMOCRACY

### Exploring National Contexts: A Report on Seminars in Ecuador and Bolivia

In August 2006, FOCAL hosted seminars in Quito, Ecuador and La Paz, Bolivia to present the conclusions of *The Role of Civil Society in the Promotion and Protection of Democracy in the Americas* conference that was held in Ottawa on March 1-2, 2006. The seminars gathered civil society organizations (CSOs) and other national stakeholders to explore how the regional trends and challenges facing democracy identified in the Ottawa session compare with the current Bolivian and Ecuadorian realities. Both countries have lived through critical moments in their democratic development in recent years and at the time of the seminars were engaged in processes that presented an opportunity for positive change: presidential elections in Ecuador and a Constitutional Assembly in Bolivia. In this context, an exchange of perspectives on the potential role of civil society in the promotion and strengthening of democracy was thought to be particularly *à-propos*.

On August 24, FOCAL and the Corporación Latinoamericana para el Desarrollo (CLD) met with 30 CSO representatives in Quito. A similar exercise was carried out in La Paz on August 30, co-organized with Red Participación y Justicia and attended by over 100 participants from CSOs, government and academia. At both events, participants and panellists from Ecuador, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada and Peru examined the main challenges to democracy in each country and civil society's role in addressing those challenges. Both events produced rich and thought-provoking discussions. This report presents a summary of the diverse opinions expressed by participants, calling attention to common trends as well as to the particularities of each country.

### Challenges to Democracy - Divergences

The point of departure for discussion was the conclusions of the report *The Role of Civil Society in the Promotion and Protection of Democracy in the Americas: A Vision for the Future*, drawn from discussions in Ottawa in March 2006<sup>1</sup>. The meeting used the key elements of democracy outlined in the Inter-American Democratic Charter as a definition and reference point for the discussion.<sup>2</sup> Ottawa participants acknowledged a widespread disillusionment with liberal

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<sup>1</sup> *The Role of Civil Society in the Promotion and Protection of Democracy in the Americas: A Vision for the Future* is available at [www.focal.ca](http://www.focal.ca)

<sup>2</sup> Key elements of democracy include elections, representation, a division of powers, majority rule, individual rights, and the rule of law. The Inter-American Democratic Charter can be accessed at

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democracy as a result of its failure to provide meaningful citizenship, economic benefits, improved social services and effective rights protection. Structural problems, including poverty and inequality and the lack of consensus around national objectives, were identified as key factors underpinning these shortcomings. The crisis of political parties, institutional gridlock and the intervention of non-state actors in politics were also confirmed as pressing threats to stability and the positive performance of democracy. Populist trends were flagged as a symptom of the ill performance of democracy, but discredited as a tangible, long-lasting solution to existing deficiencies: while populist leaders often encourage the inclusion of the marginalized, participants condemned their tendency to bypass or alter existing institutions and cited their rhetoric as a source of social division and instability. The conclusion in Ottawa was that the integrity of democratic institutions must be defended and that all actors, including civil society, must combat challenges to democratic governance using legitimate channels.

During discussions in Ecuador and Bolivia many of these observations resonated with participants, who concurred that the regional trends identified in Ottawa were indeed affecting both countries individually. Importantly, the sessions confirmed what other recent polls have shown, namely that citizens are not convinced that democracy will improve their situation. Facing the inability of the democratic system to respond to their demands, many citizens question elements of “representative” democracy and view candidates that promote far-reaching institutional change as a desirable, viable option. As a result, the search for alternatives is a significant part of the social debate in both countries as large numbers of Bolivians and Ecuadorians seek other models of governance. Opinions on potential solutions to this situation varied, and approaches about how to respond to the weaknesses of democracies were not shared by all.

Participants provided the rationale for their critical perspectives on democracy. Indigenous representatives remarked that liberal democratic notions of majority rule, representation and individual rights do not reflect the values of indigenous groups who live according to a tradition of consensus and community rights. Additionally, the current democratic system is viewed as the product of manipulation and one based on exclusionary rules created by elites during the transition process. Such manipulation continues to be practiced by politicians, whose tendency to use legal artifices to camouflage ongoing corruption was denounced by participants. This trend was of particular concern in Ecuador where legal and constitutional provisions were repeatedly and questionably applied to justify presidential impeachments. Finally, discussion revealed that liberal democracy is also closely associated with neoliberal policies that favour the elite and are not in the interest of most citizens.

Participants in both workshops emphasized the stark absence of institutional channels for popular expression in current systems, denouncing the lack of alternatives for the inclusion of marginalized groups such as the indigenous, afro-Ecuadorians and women. Many considered direct participation as an effective way to express their opinions and a valuable alternative to flawed and manipulated institutional mechanisms, and were hence drawn to populist leaders who promote a more direct relationship between the state and the people. Many Ecuadorian

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[http://www.oas.org/main/main.asp?sLang=E&sLink=http://www.oas.org/OASpage/eng/Documents/Democratic\\_Carterer.htm](http://www.oas.org/main/main.asp?sLang=E&sLink=http://www.oas.org/OASpage/eng/Documents/Democratic_Carterer.htm)



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participants did, however, recognize the perverse effects of populism on institutions and appreciated the limited real benefits it offers. Representatives acknowledged feeling manipulated by populist leaders. They have seen leaders such as Abdalá Bucarám and Lucio Gutierrez mobilize large segments of the population with populist discourses and felt the subsequent instability brought about by their failure to make good on promises of inclusion and redistribution. Yet, many continue to value the willingness and ability of these candidates to mobilize the disenfranchised and articulate their interests, and maintain the view that outsiders are the only candidates likely to bring about positive change. In this sense, the use of the term “populism” was perceived as derogatory and inaccurate.

Discomfort with the term “populism” was also widespread in Bolivia, where questions about the value of existing institutions are far-reaching. Participants pointed out that because current institutions have historically favoured elite interests and prevented participation by the indigenous majority, they feel that a democratically elected president who represents the people should update these to reflect a new reality and different objectives. Many, therefore, viewed the reshaping of the Constitution through the Constituent Assembly as a positive step. However, others warned of the power of images and symbolic inclusion that have historically allowed for authoritarian and exclusionary political management, and remained weary of the constitutional process being led by the Morales government.

Discussions thus revealed that proponents of both the liberal and the populist visions of democracy have manipulated and altered these notions to their benefit. Criticism of the performance of democracy and the lack of consensus on potential remedies were a feature of the conversations in Ecuador and Bolivia, dividing participants in both countries. Participants approached the discussion with different views on whether the fault lay with the democratic system itself or with individuals in power, and on whether solutions required changing parts of the system or the whole. The use of labels such as “liberal democracy”, “participatory democracy” and “populism” also affected the dialogue process, as they were used to describe both system structures and the practices within those structures, without distinction.

In this sense, the Ecuador and Bolivia sessions corroborated another important conclusion from the Ottawa session, namely that the lack of a social consensus is a fundamental challenge to democracy in the region. Debates revealed the extent to which these divisions exist within all spheres of society and pervade social relations in those two countries. This highlighted how the lack of consensus is not simply historical, but rather a dynamic and ongoing process that gives momentum to social and political divides.

### **The Role and Realities of Civil Society**

In addition to the lack of consensus around political definitions, the concepts of citizenship and civil society were equally diverse among Ecuadorian and Bolivian participants. For the purpose of the sessions civil society was defined broadly to include groups that are not part of the state or the market and do not seek profit or political power. However, this definition did not appear to encompass all realities. Though differences exist between Ecuador and Bolivia, in both countries civil society was generally understood as a combination of private citizens and groups that move in and out of state and non-state spheres.



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Definitions and clear roles are made more complex by the presence of social movements. The conception of civil society as a complement to the state and business is considered by some as a liberal construct that lacks the legitimacy social movements derive from their broad inclusiveness. Many participants did not delineate clearly between the social and the political spheres, nor did they perceive such a distinction desirable. In fact, many encouraged the free movement of people between CSOs, social movements, political parties and the state. This view was more widespread in Bolivia, where large social movements (indigenous, coca-growers) have moved beyond customary boundaries, competing and winning against traditional political parties.

Besides definitions, the realities facing CSOs are also quite complex. As is to be expected, there is a diversity of organizations in both countries. However, the composition of Ecuadorian and Bolivian civil society at once reflects social divisions and the influence of other actors. Some organizations deliver services and address local concerns, often with limited resources, and others have a more regional or international orientation, often with support from foreign governments and international organizations. While this split is common in many countries, it is necessary to bear in mind that channelling development assistance to non-governmental organizations, in spite of its many benefits and effective role in increasing CSO capacity, can create new interests within society and exacerbate divides between organizations.

Another important phenomenon facing civil society is corporatism, a practice whereby the state acts as a direct mediator between groups, incorporating civil society sectors in the policy-making process in a top-down system. This form of controlled inclusion further divides society and blurs identity lines as civil society is partitioned into compartmentalized groups along a limited set of explicitly recognized interests. Indigenous participants in Bolivia explained how past attempts to engage with the government on indigenous interests were met with requests to act through NGOs. Corporatism was repeatedly cited as an inadequate and objectionable government response to society's demands for inclusion and participation. Participants feared the loss of independence for civil society (cooptation) and the restrictions on CSOs' freedom of expression and action that corporatism can cause.

In this context, civil society faces the daunting challenge of determining who represents whom. A dose of caution is thus required when reflecting on CSO strategies in Ecuador and Bolivia: though civil society has an important role to play in building the middle ground by promoting tolerance, pluralism and inclusion, organizations that advocate on behalf of small groups or on specific issues may have limited results and can even work to increase fragmentation and polarization.

Analyzing the composition of civil society, participants in both countries signalled that women are generally underrepresented. Articulating the interests of women and incorporating their voice in policy and decision-making was highlighted as an area of potential for CSOs. Most participants also believed in the usefulness of civil society involvement in monitoring formal political processes (eg. elections), as well as in playing a watchdog role for government activities and ethics. Participants believed that monitoring and constructive engagement should be priorities for CSOs at both the national and regional levels, with organizations going beyond criticism to present concrete alternatives and recommendations. Finally, to be effective in this



role it was considered essential that CSOs themselves ensure transparency and rigor in their own activities and internal governance practices.

### **Collaboration with Key Partners**

As one of its recommendations, the Ottawa report suggested that to be more productive civil society should work more effectively with political parties at the national level, as well as with the Organization of American States (OAS). Reactions to this suggestion were mixed.

#### *Political Parties*

It was proposed that as potential policy makers and key actors in social debate, political parties are important partners for civil society making constructive engagement with them is a priority for CSOs. Such an alliance, it was argued, would also help strengthen political parties and improve their policy-making capacity and their representativeness. However, in both Ecuador and Bolivia it was clear that resistance (from governments and parties of all stripes) and the lack of effective institutional channels are powerful obstacles to this kind of positive working relationship. Participants signalled that Ecuadorian and Bolivian political parties resist civil society inclusion and their own internal volatility often fosters further uncertainty.

In Ecuador, a fragmented party system imposes challenges on governance. Current electoral law makes it easy for parties to establish themselves, leading to a number of small parties that splinter platforms and ideologies in congress. In order to govern, the president is forced to negotiate alliances with diverse parties, which are often coalitions of convenience that are shifting and uncertain, based around short-term strategic goals and the division of resources. This situation provides fertile ground for the executive-legislative gridlock present in many countries of the region. It also affects party-civil society relations, as shifting allegiances make it difficult for civil society to find stable interlocutors and channels with politicians. By the same token, this situation stands in the way of much needed strengthening of political parties.

In Bolivia, only recently has the political landscape been expanded beyond a small number of traditional political parties, as social movements have been incorporated into formal politics through constitutional processes and now play an active role inside and outside the government. While the inclusion of new political actors and the empowerment of the masses was welcomed by participants, some feared that the Morales government has little experience governing with the framework of formal institutions and noted its lack of practical knowledge about key issues of concern for civil society. This unfinished process of institutionalization carries uncertainty for CSOs: formal channels are currently few, and the MAS' (Movimiento al Socialismo) emphasis on direct participation requires that some CSOs adopt new strategies to interact with the government and political parties.

These findings do confirm the need to strengthen parties as a necessary condition to strengthen civil society and democracy in both countries. However, given the current state of parties, many expressed doubts that civil society could really be effective in assisting political parties to undertake internal reform or to be more representative or responsive. Participants believed that civil society support is necessary, but underscored the responsibility that parties themselves have to build transparency, ethics and their own structures.



### *The OAS*

Over the past seven years the OAS has made an effort to work more closely and openly with civil society throughout the region. However, the OAS is generally not regarded as viable or productive interlocutor by national CSOs in either country. Rather, the organization is considered a political, inter-governmental organization that responds to government interests only. Many organizations thus felt that the OAS it is not accessible or responsive to citizen's concerns. In reality, these perceptions are not completely wrong. It is very difficult for the majority of national organizations to have effective contact with OAS headquarters in Washington, while country offices, despite their international staff and knowledge of local realities, do not have the resources or the mandate to engage widely with domestic civil society or respond to local concerns.

The popularity of the OAS has also suffered as a result of the position it has taken on critical issues. In Ecuador, the OAS is also widely perceived as not acting in the interests of all Ecuadorians, having supported the government of Lucio Gutierrez in the face of constitutional abuses and despite pleas by key Ecuadorian non-governmental actors for an OAS intervention under the terms of the Inter-American Democratic Charter.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, the OAS' eventual intervention and assistance in the selection of Supreme Court justices following Gutierrez' request is viewed by other sectors as interference with the Ecuador's internal affairs.

The OAS has without a doubt made successful strides to include civil society on regional issues, particularly through its efforts to share information and provide opportunities for consultation and engagement. However, more work needs to be done to build relationships and foster understanding about the OAS mission with diverse national organizations. Suggestions made in the Ottawa report about the need for future OAS action in key areas rang true. Specifically, the OAS should reach out at the national level and provide information about the strengths and limitations of the organization via in-country workshops and written material, paying particular attention to the organization's structure and the points of access for civil society to impact decision-making.

### **Conclusion**

The sessions held in Ecuador and Bolivia were a useful complement to the Ottawa meetings, allowing FOCAL to confirm the main trends and opportunities for civil society, and ground its previous recommendations in the realities and complexities CSOs face at the national level. Regional trends identified in Ottawa are indeed affecting these countries. Citizen disenchantment with democratic regimes as a result of their underperformance in bringing about more equality, wealth and inclusion was clear and openly expressed by participants. The lack of consensus on national objectives and rules was also palpable and reflected in divergences and disagreements on solutions to the challenges faced by the democratic system and civil society. In spite of these challenges, participants demonstrated openness to dialogue and tolerance in the face of

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<sup>3</sup> These criticisms were made even though the Democratic Charter as currently drafted provides for OAS involvement in these situations only at the request of the democratically elected government.



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difference. They also recognized the value of CSOs as agents of change and as an essential player in the promotion and protection of democracy.

Nevertheless, the workshops illustrated how different trends affect different countries and groups with varying intensities and how wide-ranging their implications can be. These nuances and the divergences featured in the discussions indicate that efforts to promote and strengthen democracy must pay close attention to the subtleties of national contexts and that national and regional actors alike must remain vigilant in their assumptions and strategies.

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The report was written by Laurie Cole, Senior Analyst, and Caroline Lavoie, Program Associate in the FOCAL Civil Society and Governance Program.

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