

Miami Herald Op-Ed: Friends of Democratic Charter Urge Early Intervention, Disclosure of Violations

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WESTERN HEMISPHERE

It's taboo to say our democracies are weak

More than a dozen presidents in the hemisphere in the past 20 years have failed to complete their term. While some have been removed under allegations of corruption or other wrongdoing, others have been forced to resign in the face of social turmoil and a constituency impatient with the rules of democracy and unmet demands.

The large number of cases, though occurring in different countries and under varying circumstances, still should lead us to search for explanations. Yet for some reason, we are not discussing the fact that our democracies exhibit huge weaknesses that endanger the future of all citizens of the Western Hemisphere. In our hemisphere it seems there are certain things that cannot be said.

Underlying the taboo statement that our democracies are weak is the fact that in many countries, with the exception of the freedom of protest, the fall of dictatorships has not brought about improvements in people's lives. Across the hemisphere, the gap between the rich and poor, distressingly, is still growing. In Ecuador, for example, a decade ago the income of the richest 10 percent of society was 14 times wealthier than the bottom 10 percent, while today it is 20 times. Its GDP per capita today is equal to or slightly lower than in 1977. But the most dangerous fact is that we are not talking about why this has happened. We have said nothing as we see our democracies have failed to diminish inequality in the most unequal region on earth, and our institutions fail to provide adequate channels for popular discontent.

What is the democratic legitimacy of a regime that produces such statistics? Even worse, what happens when we add to the loss of legitimacy and the resulting protests a desperate search to occupy the political vacancies left open by those who fall? It's the "You, leave, so that I can take your place" syndrome.

Who can be surprised that under such circumstances we witness this entourage of "incomplete presidencies?" The greatest favor we can do for our democracies--and for ourselves--in the face of such realities is to dare to say what is really happening.

We--former public servants, politicians, human rights leaders--have come together to form the Friends of the Inter-American Democratic Charter. We recognize that public officials are reluctant to talk about the taboo subject of our democratic deficiencies. Each government is afraid to point out defects in another, for fear of being criticized itself. But the Charter provides for assistance to address these defects in a constructive way and to chastise a government when it is the source of an institutional rupture.

When warnings come--and it was clear in Ecuador when the Congress and president intervened in the Supreme Court and Electoral Tribunal before Christmas--the hemisphere declines to address the issue. In the face of such emerging threats, governments become paralyzed with complacency, then hesitancy, and finally fear. Who can blame them when they are so easily turned out of office by angry citizens? But now, once again, the hemisphere is faced with a crisis after the fact, and one more incomplete presidential term.

The OAS did respond when the crisis hit and sent a high-level mission to Ecuador. It now has the opportunity to help Ecuador recover its footing. But if the organization cannot respond to prevent the kind of crisis that is Ecuador today, and another country tomorrow, it loses its very reason for existence.

The election of a new secretary general provides an opportunity to breathe new life into the OAS and the Democratic Charter. We propose three areas for action:

- Promote the debate within societies and governments alike about the promise of the Democratic Charter, for it is not just a punitive instrument, but a preventative one, committing the hemisphere to help our neighbors when asked and before a crisis erupts.
- Create early warning systems to alert the hemisphere when democracy is threatened. Human rights activists and local citizens are often the ones first sounding the alarm bell, and they need greater support by the OAS. We also urge that a network of scholars be formed to provide timely alerts and analyses of the state of our democracies. Likewise, ambassadors of the Permanent Council should have a mechanism to receive civil society groups, not just governments, to learn of incipient threats within member countries.
- Encourage member governments of the OAS to specify minimal indicators of unacceptable violations of the Democratic Charter and specific automatic response so we do not depend on the same old debate undermined by paralyzed will in the OAS at every early warning sign.

We commit to breaking the taboos and starting an in-depth discussion about democracy and ways to defend it.

This article was signed by former President Jimmy Carter and 11 others (see below).

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