DEmocracy Is Not Enough: Latin America At A Crossroads Of Instability And Opportunity

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by Lisa Hartland *

On November 7, 2007, The Center for Latin American Issues joined with the Consensus of the Americas and the Atlas Economic Research Foundation to host a roundtable discussion entitled “Democracy is Not Enough: Latin America at a Crossroads of Instability and Opportunity.” The event was the first in a series of public forums that the co-hosts plan to stage in the coming months to advance the dialogue on how to strengthen democratic governance in the Americas. Dr. Susan Phillips, Dean of the GW School of Business, welcomed the panelists and guests.

Alejandro Chafuen, CEO of the Atlas Economic Research Foundation, stated that corruption and lack of adherence to the Rule of Law undermine respect for “democracy” in Latin America. He hopes that events such as the present roundtable discussion would broaden public understanding of this phenomenon and of the need to adopt an agenda focused on the problem and how to mitigate it.

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Addressing these critical issues were panel members Norman Bailey, President of the Institute for Global Economic Growth and Chair of the Advisory Committee for the Consensus of the Americas; Julio Cirino, Director of Foreign Relations at Fundación Pensar Argentina (Buenos Aires); and Max G. Manwaring, Senior Research Professor at the Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College. The audience included ambassadors and diplomats from several Latin American and other embassies, representatives of multilateral organizations, U.S. government officials, think-tank experts, academics, students, and several representatives of regional media organizations.

Norman Bailey began the discussion with an examination of the recent declaration by the U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security that describes the current Venezuelan regime as a threat. He credited the developing “friendship” between Chávez and the president of Iran as the reason for this overdue acknowledgement. Reviewing Venezuelan-Iranian relations, Dr. Bailey noted a history of drug trafficking as a source of funding for Islamic terrorist groups in Latin America, and highlighted Ciudad del Este in Paraguay, the eastern coast of Venezuela, and Maicao, Colombia, as centers of criminal activity. Bailey attributed the recent blossoming of relations between Venezuela and Iran to their desire to create problems for the U.S. within the Americas and to deflect U.S. attention from terrorist groups in the Middle East. He characterized those relations as clear threats to the United States and a source of instability in Latin America.

Max Manwaring identified gangs and other Transitional Criminal Organizations (TCOs) that currently exist throughout Latin America as another obstacle to stability in the region. He defined TCOs as violent mafia families, war lords, drug barons and insurgency leaders who smuggle drugs, people, and money to maintain control
over the population. Describing how gangs evolved through three generations, he identified an “instability continuum” that requires more than state police and military force to contain. Manwaring noted the general erosion of democratic governance in Mexico through intimidation prior to elections and the frequent assassination of candidates and political journalists. He described lack of Mexican state authority over these more powerful TCOs as favorable to the creation of instability.

“Connecting the dots” between the two preceding presentations, Julio Cirino argued that Latin America is suffering from violence and isolation, which threaten the probability of democracy. He lamented that for the last “five or ten years” there has been no discernable U.S. policy toward Latin America. Meanwhile, Hugo Chávez and his allies are offering “socialism for the 21st century”—a rehearsed, tired, and discredited formula—while no one is selling an alternate agenda. He appealed to those who love freedom and support democracy to engage in the political process with elections and set the agenda for sustaining democracy in the region.

Opening the question and answer period that followed the discussion, Honduran Ambassador Flores Bermúdez, who was in the audience, acknowledged problems of violence in Honduras but said his nation is tackling them not only through law-enforcement means, but also through rehabilitation, reinsertion, and enforcement that engage the entire community in confronting the problems. The representative of a major U.S. oil multinational wondered how Venezuelan institutions had failed so badly and had created an opportunity for Chávez to be elected. The panelists agreed that entrenched corruption and a lack of appreciation for democratic ideals had laid the ground for Chávez’ rise to power.

Editor’s Note: The views expressed at this event do not necessarily express those of the Center for Latin American Issues or of The George Washington University School of Business.