

Challenges to Democracy in the Americas

CONFERENCE OVERVIEW: The Latin American and Caribbean Program (LACP) of The Carter Center holds policy conferences every two years on issues of inter-American relations, sponsored by The Coca-Cola Company under a grant for *Forging a New Partnership in the Americas*. Past conference participants have included members of the Center's Council of Presidents and Prime Ministers of the Americas, the secretaries general of the OAS and UN, the president of the Inter-American Development Bank, U.S. Vice President Al Gore and other top administration officials, private sector businesspersons, scholars, policy makers, and NGO leaders from across the Americas. Through plenaries and working groups, these influential experts discuss policy problems and formulate policy recommendations that receive substantial media attention. The Carter Center has held two such conferences in conjunction with CNN's World Report, communicating the conference findings to reporters from around the globe. In 1996 the conference focused broadly on regional policy to develop *An Agenda for the Americas for the 21st Century*. In 1999, *Transparency for Growth in the Americas* focused on corruption as a problem for development and good governance.

On October 16-18, 2000, the LACP will hold its next conference on *Challenges to Democracy in the Americas*. The conference will focus on ways to address such troubling phenomena as the decline of party systems, impunity and lack of public accountability, the centralization of executive power, citizen insecurity, and the myriad ways in which the military continues to intervene in politics and circumvent civilian authority. The Council of Presidents and Prime Ministers selected this topic as an expression of their serious concern about the direction of democratic development in the region, especially in the Andes.

The conference, chaired by former President Jimmy Carter and members of the Council of Presidents and Prime Ministers, will begin with a set of public plenary sessions, and then move to closed-door working sessions with high-level people from throughout the hemisphere. Participants will include former and current heads of state, private sector leaders, policy makers, scholars, media professionals, and non-governmental organization representatives. The conference will result in a set of recommendations concerning how to improve the quality of democracy. Leading scholars of democratic development will provide background papers to help orient participants' thinking, and will hold a preparatory meeting to begin framing the recommendations. The Carter Center will communicate the conference recommendations to the public through a press conference; to regional policy specialists via a conference report; to the scholarly community through publication of the conference papers as an edited volume; and to the presidents and prime ministers at the 2001 Summit of the Americas in Quebec, Canada via the conference participants and LACP's Council of Presidents and Prime Ministers of the Americas.

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY: We have not lost sight of the tremendous progress the hemisphere has made toward a minimal definition of democracy: establishing elections as the exclusive means for leadership selection. Nevertheless, the quality of democracy can be substantially improved in all of our countries, and in some, even the basic institution of elections has suffered setbacks. By quality of democracy, we mean that citizens have the capacity to influence decision-making that affects their everyday lives, that they have equal

access to justice and public services, and that their elected representatives have the intellectual, technical, and financial resources to identify and solve national problems and provide services.

Democracy requires accountability of leaders to constituents. This means the ability of constituents to remove leaders through established, legal means or to withdraw the delegation of authority when they don't perform. Accountability requires information and transparency – so that constituents know what their leaders are doing, and it requires established rules to choose and remove leaders.

We want to address the issue of accountability in all of our deliberations, and to consider ways to improve accountability of leaders and organizations beyond elected representatives, such as security forces, political parties, the private sector, media, and non-governmental organizations.

We will make recommendations for action items for three levels of actors: international organizations, national governments, and societal groups. Some actions to strengthen democracy can best be taken by different types of actors and we have representatives from all levels here.

THE WORKING GROUPS. We have identified five challenges to democracy.

- A. ENSURING PUBLIC SECURITY.** Rising crime rates and lack of physical safety top the list of citizen concerns in polls across the hemisphere. We know that there are many sources of citizen insecurity, including economic deprivation leading to crime, undertrained and underpaid police forces, international criminal gangs and drug rings, the growth of unaccountable private security forces, and paramilitary and insurgent groups seeking financial resources through kidnapping and robbery.

This working group will discuss how to reduce criminality while protecting human rights. Regulating private security forces, obtaining oversight of intelligence services, eliminating paramilitary forces, community policing, and controlling the flow of weapons might also help to improve citizen security.

- B. STRENGTHENING ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE ARMED FORCES.** How can we move from a situation of governments being subject to military oversight, to the reverse? One argument is that the perceived inefficiency and corruption of many civilian governmental bureaucracies leads to military participation in decision-making areas that have little to do with national defense. Military autonomy is further enhanced by direct access to revenues from military businesses or from entitlements to extractive commodities, such as oil and copper. Finally, opportunities for corruption in the security forces through procurement responsibilities or drug trafficking are of concern.

This working group will look at new ways to encourage military subordination to civilian oversight, and improving accountability and anti-corruption in the security forces.

C. EMPOWERING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION. Enhancing citizen participation and efficacy helps to strengthen democracy. We have noted with concern the growing skepticism among citizens in the hemisphere about whether their governments adequately express the will of the people and whether politicians serve their constituents. Even as public support for the principles of democracy remains strong in most countries, dissatisfaction with performance is high.

This working group will consider the importance of freedom of expression and access to information; creating responsible and transparent civil society organizations; and involving the private sector and encouraging corporate responsibility.

D. MODERATING EXECUTIVE POWER THROUGH INSTITUTIONAL BALANCES AND DECENTRALIZATION. A growing concern has been the concentration of power in the executive branch in a region already noted for its historic tendency of presidentialism. Strengthening legislatures and depoliticizing judiciaries are crucial to providing accountability through institutional checks and balances in presidential systems. In parliamentary systems, greater openness of the legislative process and electoral reform may help to check concentration of power where one party dominates.

This working group will consider how to moderate executive power through these and other forms of accountability, including greater transparency and oversight through administrative investigation and audits; responsible fiscal decentralization matching new responsibilities with increased revenue-raising authority of local governments; and countering impunity through judicial and administrative means.

E. EFFECTIVE REPRESENTATION. Failed party systems and new populist leaders lead some experts to call for electoral reforms to bring more accountability of leaders to voters and to make more efficient policy-making that is responsive to voters. The rise of populist leaders, the collapse of traditional party systems in Peru and Venezuela, and the fragmented party systems of Brazil and Ecuador are cause for concern.

This working group will consider reforms such as democratizing political parties through internal party elections for leaders and candidates; mixed electoral systems of proportional representation and single-member districts; more independent and professional electoral authorities; and campaign finance reform to bring more transparency and help level the playing field.

