

Strengthening Democratic Values and Institutions in the Americas: Challenges and Opportunities Post-COVID for the Ninth Summit of the Americas



Summary

Gains in political and human rights by governments of the Summit of the Americas (SOA) are in danger. While tested by the COVID-19 pandemic, governments have an opportunity to revitalize the Inter-American Democratic Charter and the regional system for the protection of human rights, and strengthen democratic institutions weakened by populist and authoritarian leaders before the coronavirus. Governments have an opportunity to mitigate these effects through coordinated action, unity of purpose, and a whole-of-society approach that includes robust civil society and citizen participation.

Background

In 2021, the OAS will celebrate the 20th anniversary of the unanimous adoption by the Organization of American States (OAS) member states of the Inter-American Democratic Charter. During the time in between, democratic progress in the Americas has been challenged by a combination of populist and authoritarian leaders. They consolidate power through elections and unconstitutionally alter the legally constituted civilian authority by tapping into citizen dissatisfaction with the democratic experience, rising inequality, inefficient service delivery, neglect of social rights, freedom of expression and of the press, and, in some cases, slow responses to extreme natural disasters. During the 2000s, several countries reverted to authoritarian-style government, and one of those is experiencing near total economic collapse — triggering the worst migration crisis the hemisphere has ever seen, with economic and social consequences rocking close neighbors. Despite these cases, compared to the 1980s, governance and economic gains have been impressive. For example, most countries in Latin America were ruled by some form of dictatorship and 50 percent poverty rates were common. By 2000, most had civilian-elected leaders, and, by 2012, the region's poverty rate had fallen to [25 percent](#). However, such progress is fragile.

Against that backdrop, the COVID-19 pandemic has added another layer of complexity as all states have dealt with extended quarantines and their cascading effects. The disappearance of small businesses, shrinking or lost supply chains, a large drop in tourism (especially in the Caribbean), and a huge increase in demand for government services as millions compete for food, water, healthcare, shelter, and employment are just some of the problems. Meanwhile, widespread inequality, economic informality, inefficient and inadequate public services, and futile social safety nets are exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Economic contraction is lowering tax revenues, limiting the ability of states to expand social services at a time of need.

Key Trends and Ways to Address Them

Further disillusionment with democracy, and backsliding toward authoritarianism.

Citizens in countries with histories of authoritarian rule may look to the past for solutions when today's democracies do not seem to be delivering. Populist politicians may take advantage of the current

pandemic to use “us against them” appeals to prevail where citizens have grown tired of moderation and lagging results. In some countries, presidents are already leading assaults on legislatures and courts when they do not get their way. Elsewhere, simmering discontent over inequality has inspired a campaign to rewrite a constitution to enable more progressive social programs, but could also include aspects of less democratic charters depending on actors who participate in the process. And while 2021 will likely mark the end of most quarantines, it will also be an electoral super-cycle amid resurgent poverty, and the loss of much of the hemisphere’s middle class could well impact outcomes.

Opportunities for successful intervention: Programs that bolster the capacity and funding for regional bodies related to defending democracy and human rights as well as funding for pro-democracy civil society organizations (CSOs), watchdog groups, and investigative journalists will be key to strengthening and preserving democratic institutions, promoting gender equity and inclusion of all vulnerable populations, and holding populist authoritarian tendencies in check. Particularly at local levels, encouraging citizen participation in decision-making shores up faith in democratic processes and contributes to better communication between elected officials and constituents. For instance, strengthening municipal governance, civil society, and political parties to be able to develop local economic opportunity and enable better service delivery are key to reinforcing grassroots democracy in the Northern Triangle countries.

Foreign malign actors increase their influence. Russia, China, and Iran are again expanding their influence in the hemisphere—working with authoritarian governments, and in societies that have weak or corrupt governments unlikely to notice or resist their intrusion. Russia continues to aid Venezuela with arms transfers and military-to-military cooperation. Iran, which once received gasoline from Venezuela is now reportedly helping Venezuela restart idle refineries. Its HispanTV online and satellite television network partners with Venezuela’s TeleSur and has a presence on satellite and cable networks throughout the hemisphere. China assists with loans and off-the books petroleum trades and has the most extensive relations with most nations in the hemisphere and financial arrangements that include loans that must be repaid in commodities. China may even increase its relevance as a foreign investor in the aftermath of the COVID-19 when access to international financial aid may become more restricted due to increased competition for resources.

Opportunities for successful interventions: Countries are free to welcome sources of foreign investment. However, there are clear choices between investment and extraction, transparency and corruption, and rule of law versus the rule of the strong. Democracy should deliver in favor of social and economic development, security, and justice. Programs that work with independent journalists, CSOs, and legislatures to raise awareness and shine light on harmful aspects of foreign influences in their countries and the region deserve increased support.

Persistence of repressive regimes. As former Venezuelan Planning Minister for Popular Power Jorge Giordani [once confided](#) to a colleague, poverty and hope are essential parts of the engine that enable authoritarian regimes to survive. Aided by the pandemic, existing authoritarian regimes will continue to repress citizens and strengthen their grip on the wealth, labors, and movements of their citizens. While the masses can still mount protests in some countries like Venezuela, their political will and ability to think strategically has shrunk in the face of hunger and extreme poverty. In all cases, authoritarian leaders rely on links to security forces and outside sources of support.

Opportunities for successful intervention: The hemisphere’s democracies should prioritize continued support for democratic colleagues living under repressive regimes. It is essential to ensure that independent media, democracy and human rights activists, and independent CSOs are present to lay the foundation for a free society when that possibility arises. Moreover, in closing societies, those democrats should be supported in pushing back on authoritarianism to achieve hemispheric peace and prosperity.

Economic contraction and limited state capacity to mitigate its effects. The region's trade is down an estimated 23 percent compared to before the pandemic. Loss of export revenues are testing state capacity to provide services. A number of states were already heavily indebted when the pandemic began. These states are severely pressed to provide social services and jump start economies that were only beginning to integrate themselves into international trade opportunities. Central American countries feature some of the highest poverty, corruption, and violence levels; and widespread discontent with social and economic reforms in the Americas, second only to Venezuela. Social unrest could mount at a time when these states are least able to cope. Pressure on municipal governments, which have been historically under-resourced could also overwhelm.

Opportunities for successful intervention: Government officials are focused on triage, which leaves an opportunity for civil society to examine and advocate on behalf of broader solutions toward a more lasting recovery. Areas for consideration are improving inter-agency coordination between ministries at the national level, and among administrative (district and local) levels. Resources should be prioritized for CSOs and exchanges to study and advocate for new ways of doing business, infrastructure renewal, as well as economic policies that will support sustainable recovery. At a time when the pandemic has digitalized many human activities, the hemisphere's democracies must expand investments in remote and digital communications infrastructure to reduce pre-existing inequalities in access to digital communications.

Massive wealth transfers through impoverishment and corruption. Post-pandemic, the region is poised to experience transfers of wealth from the middle and working classes to the elite, largely as a result of remedial programs in some countries to prevent the loss of businesses; and as a result of the growing ranks of the unemployed liquidating their assets to be able to survive. Without oversight, it could be a windfall for those who are well-connected to public officials, those who understand the intricacies of domestic stimulus mechanisms, and those who have access to insider information. Meanwhile, the region's 30 percent poverty rate is worsening, taking the LAC region back to the 1980s, and possibly reigniting large-scale migration.

Opportunities for successful intervention: Mitigation efforts will likely vary by country and circumstance. But in almost all cases, interventions should bolster inter-American accountability mechanisms, strengthen institutional checks on corruption, and promote judicial autonomy and independence. Support to independent watchdog organizations, especially in both open and closed societies, the free flow of information, and protection of whistleblowers, especially reporting by investigative journalists, are the most effective tools in preventing public theft within programs designed to help those in financial distress.

The International Republican Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization that advances freedom and democracy worldwide by helping political parties to become more responsive, strengthening transparent and accountable governance, and working to increase the role of marginalized groups in the political process – including women and youth. More information on IRI's work is available at www.iri.org.

The National Democratic Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization that has supported democratic institutions and practices in every region of the world for more than three decades. Since its founding in 1983, NDI and its local partners have worked to establish and strengthen political and civic organizations, safeguard elections, and promote citizen participation, openness and accountability in government. Find out more about NDI's work in over seventy countries at www.ndi.org.

The National Endowment for Democracy is an independent nonprofit foundation dedicated to the growth and strengthening of democratic institutions around the world. Each year, NED makes more than 1,800 grants to

*support the projects of non-governmental groups who are working for democratic goals in more than 90 countries.
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