

# Relaciones Internacionales: los Nuevos Horizontes

Grace Jaramillo, compiladora

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**FLACSO, Sede Ecuador**  
La Pradera E7-174 y Diego de Almagro  
Quito-Ecuador  
Telf.: (593-2) 323 8888  
Fax: (593-2) 3237960  
www.flacso.org.ec

**Ministerio de Cultura del Ecuador**  
Avenida Colón y Juan León Mera  
Quito-Ecuador  
Telf.: (593-2) 2903 763  
www.ministeriodecultura.gov.ec

ISBN:  
Cuidado de la edición: Santiago Rubio Casanova  
Diseño de portada e interiores: Antonio Mena  
Imprenta: Rispergraf  
Quito, Ecuador, 2009  
1ª. edición: enero, 2009

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# Implementing the Inter-American Democratic Charter: How the OAS responded to the democratic crises in Ecuador, Bolivia and Nicaragua in 2005

Arturo E. Lopez-Levy\*

## Introduction:

This paper discusses the implementation of the Inter American Democratic Charter (IADC) to three cases of democratic crisis that occurred in 2005: 1) The deposition of president Lucio Gutiérrez of Ecuador in a combination of street demonstrations and impeachment by the National Congress after Gutiérrez twice sacked out the highest judicial authorities of the Supreme Court and the Constitutional Tribunal of Ecuador, 2) the resignation of president Carlos Mesa in Bolivia after massive mobilizations of civil society movements against his government; and 3) the invocation of the IADC by Nicaraguan president Enrique Bolaños under the assumption that democracy was at peril because the National Assembly, dominated by opposition parties (FSLN and PLC), passed some constitutional reforms that significantly reduced his presidential prerogatives.

Why is this analysis relevant? The crises in Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua are similar to other situations of democratic governance that the region would likely face in the next decade. In a premonitory article, Terry Lynn Karl wrote in 1990: “The relationship between the problematics of survivability and *cui bono* may well represent the central dilemma of democratization in Latin America” (Karl, 1990). Several countries of

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\* Ph.D. Candidate Graduate School of International Studies University of Denver

the region have approached to a critical juncture in which they are revising the political pacts in which the functioning of their politics has been based. A critical mass of social actors is demanding their democracies to deliver more than civil rights and elections. The democratic development in the region is making unavoidable to confront the extreme situations of poverty and inequality that the region confront<sup>1</sup>. The cases of Ecuador, Bolivia and Nicaragua are representative of these emerging challenges<sup>2</sup>.

The construction of a viable democratic welfare state is the main challenge of Latin American democracies today. When many of the Latin American democracies emerged from the long night of authoritarianism, those who negotiate the transition pursued stability, accepting to insulate the economic model and the privileges of the upper classes from popular pressures to redistribute national wealth. As Terry Lynn Karl alerted in 1990: "Ironically, the conditions that permit democracies to persist in the short run may constrain their potential for resolving the enormous problems of poverty and inequality that continue to characterize the continent ... Thus, even as these democracies guarantee a greater respect for law and human dignity when compared to their authoritarian predecessors, they may be unable to carry out substantive reforms that address the lot of their poorest citizens" (Karl, 1990). This was a worth taking compromise with the military and economic elites, given the alternatives but the time to correct the terms of such Faustian bargain has come.

The combination of political democracies with neoliberal economic models unleashed social forces that radicalized many of the Latin American polities. As happened with the democracies in the Northwest, the rise of civil and political liberties created demands for social, economic and cultural rights that if not properly addressed generate political instability or even the temptation for authoritarian solutions. Latin America is witnessing a crisis of democratic growth. The neoliberal model based on the Washington consensus can't contain the social forces that its

1 For a complete study of Inequality in Latin America, see Guillermo Perry, David de Ferranti, Francisco H.G. Ferreira, Michael Walton, Inequality in Latin America, Breaking with history, World Bank Latin American and Caribbean Studies, World Bank. 2004.

2 In the 2006 Latinobarómetro survey evaluation of how democratic people believe their country was in a scale from 1 to 10, Bolivia (5.7), Nicaragua (5.3), and Ecuador (5.6) were very close to each others.

own dynamics empowered by giving free and fair elections to the masses in which the votes are respected.

### The democratic governance norm in the Americas:

During the 1990's, the OAS developed a doctrine of democratic solidarity coherent with the prevailing balance between the representative democracy hemispheric identity and the non-intervention norm recognized in the OAS Charter. The Declaration of Santiago subscribed by all the countries of the hemisphere at the OAS general Assembly in Chile (1991) and the protocol of Washington clearly defined situations in which the hemispheric organization should react and how to react when a democratically elected government is overthrown by a military coup. There is also a long tradition in the OAS that rejects any legitimacy to governments imposed by foreign military interventions. Short of these two extreme cases, any intervention was doctrinally questionable as a violation of sovereignty.

The Inter American Democratic Charter approved in Lima, September 11, 2001 expressed a continental consensus on supporting democracy beyond these extreme cases. The great achievement of democracy in the region is that military coups and foreign interventions are very rare. The main disruptions to democratic consolidation in the region –as the cases of Nicaragua, Bolivia and Ecuador in 2004-2005 showed– are due today to more complex problems like the explosive socioeconomic situations in some countries, the dysfunctional system of political parties, and the low performance of courts, parliaments and other state institutions. Such issues make difficult the observance of the rule of law and the constitutional compliance with the balance of the public powers of the state. These problems arise more gradually. Consequently they attract less direct attention than coups, military intervention or for this purpose, fraud in the counting of the votes in the electoral process.

The crises are discussed in the following framework: First, I discuss the context of the specific crisis and; Second, I concentrate on the OAS response to it. The central approach is to look at the building of a func-

tioning democracy as a long term project, understanding not only the immediate sources of instability or the short term effects of OAS response but also assessing the OAS role in the long term consolidation of democracy and the effects of the intervention in the international regime constructed around the norm of hemispheric democratic solidarity.

The possibilities of having a successful political intervention depended not only of OAS capabilities and intentions but also on the specific conditions of the country, like the vulnerabilities of domestic actors to external incentives or pressures. The three countries are among the poorest of the continent in the Human Development Index; strategically none of them are considered regional powers even in their respective sub-region (Nicaragua-Central America, Bolivia and Ecuador-South America).

The fact that all three crises occurred during a year could lead us to control at least the variables of identity and general interest of the OAS. This can be confusing because during this year there was an election of a new Secretary General Jose Miguel Insulza with a very strong agenda and will to play an assertive role. The three crises discussed in this paper are obviously significantly different from each other and from previous situations in which OAS intervention was requested. At the same time, they have in common that the OAS had previously monitored actively the political processes of Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua at least since the early 1990's. Their elections have been regularly monitored and the OAS had mediated several of their political crises.

From the point of view of the OAS, the response to a democratic crisis can be divided in three central dilemmas: whether to intervene in the presence of a democratic crisis, when to intervene and how to do it. The Inter American Democratic Charter had the goal of developing a proactive approach to democratic promotion and suggests the convenience of an early response to crisis to avoid making a critical situation of democratic interruption unmanageable. However, most of its prescriptions are difficult to implement in the absence of an invitation by the country in crisis. In some cases, the government that supposed to call for the OAS intervention is itself a significant part of the problem or is afraid of transmitting signals of weakness or being accused of involving international actors in conflicts that are still overwhelmingly perceived as domestic.

The OAS response depends essentially on how the democratic crisis is framed within the debates of the organs of the OAS. The IADC has two major situational definitions for a democratic crisis: democratic alteration and democratic interruption. In addition, nothing in the Charter prohibit a country to ask the OAS for support for its democratic process outside this framework and indeed, most of election monitoring, the main proactive protection against crisis of democratic governance, has happened under agreements of cooperation or invitations of the receptor country without invoking articles 17-21 of the IADC.

The framing of a particular crisis within the structure of the IADC is a political not a judicial decision. The OAS international regime of the IADC is a mechanism to manage an international norm not a police. In this sense, the implementation of the IADC depends not only of the agreed rules adopted by the member states but also of the collective action capacity of the OAS. In Bolivia, the crisis was not even framed as a democratic alteration but most of the observers and diplomats expressed concerns that the lack of negotiation and OAS involvement could make the country ungovernable. In Nicaragua, the government insisted that a constitutional alteration happened and encourages an OAS rejection of the constitutional reforms and the political actors behind them (PLC and FSLN). In Ecuador, after the removal of President Gutiérrez, the question was what kind of crisis has happened, an alteration or an interruption, and what kind of response such crisis demanded.

#### Discussion of the cases:

##### **Bolivia: the crisis.**

Carlos Mesa became president of Bolivia after the violent protests of October 2003 that forced the resignation of President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada. Though not in agreement on where to go, Bolivians were convinced at least on where not to go. Sanchez de Lozada, despite being elected by Congress with just a few votes more than the leader of the MAS, Evo Morales, chose a confrontational neo-liberal strategy to deal with the challenge.

Due to his position as a legitimately elected vice-president, his rejection of violence during the 2003 crisis and his prestige as an independent journalist, President Mesa enjoyed significant popular support, especially among the influential Bolivian middle class. The new president, however, inherited an explosive situation.

The sources of Bolivian democratic crisis can be described as follows:

- The democratization of Bolivia in 1985 brought the inclusion of the Indigenous majorities that have been traditionally excluded from the political system (Yashar, 1999). Though the rise of Indian participation is a sign of democratic progress, in the short term it also brings some demands of urgent solution to long time relegated problems difficult to solve in a short period of time.
- Bolivia is the poorest country in South America, with around 30 % of its population living on incomes less than \$ 1 a day. Poverty is concentrated amongst the 62 % of population of indigenous descent. These people, who many of them are well organized miners and with access to dynamite paid the costs for the neoliberal model –called by president Mesa “el modelo maldito”– the damned model. A study of the World Bank showed that the richest 10 % of Bolivians consumed 22 times more than the poorest 10 % (International Crisis Group, December 2005).
- Due to centuries of exclusion, these sectors are not in a patient mode. Wide resentment exists against the neoliberal economic model implemented since 1985. The privatizations brought limited economic growth and a well acclaimed reduction of inflation, but also a clear worsening of income distribution and poverty. Popular majorities were strongly opposed to the privatization of the electricity services, much like they have opposed the privatization of water in Cochabamba, in what was later recorded as the “war of the water” (la Guerra del agua). This militarization of the language of the social movements in which they refer to their political demonstrations as “wars” (of the gas, water, electricity) is symbolic of their anger.

- The U.S. war on drugs, which came to be epitomized by the forced eradication of cocaes (Coca plantations), is a major rallying point for the nationalist and indigenist movements (International Crisis Group, March 2005).<sup>3</sup> Although the presidential election of 2002 catapulted Evo Morales and the MAS as major political forces in Bolivia beyond their defense of the cultivation of Coca (“un cato de coca por familia”) in 2000, the struggle in the Coca rich region of Chapare is at the origins of this movement.
- The widening regional division between the resource-rich Eastern departments (Santa Cruz is the most important) and the poorest Western departments in which the main issues are social poverty and exclusion has put Bolivia at risk of a national breakdown. This led to demands along ethnic/regional lines for autonomy and control over its natural resources.

Facing such difficult challenges, President Mesa was not a wise manager of his political agenda. After Sanchez de Lozada’s resignation, there were goodwill gestures between Mesa and the MAS, the Congress, and the social movements but a few months later the honeymoon was over. It took several months for Mesa to settle his legislative agenda. At the moment of the crisis, the Bolivian congress was divided among four major parties making the passing of any substantive legislation very complex. Only after loosing a precious grace period, Mesa was able to pass a central law about the natural gas industry. Then, his popularity had fallen dramatically.

At the beginning of 2005, the discussion of the Law of hydrocarbons took the center of the crisis. Many Bolivians believe that Bolivia remains poor because foreigners have “milked” it for centuries beginning with the extraction of gold and silver in the colonial times and tin in the twentieth century. The new indigenous awakening is accompanied by a growing nationalist feeling because of the “access to the sea” question. Under

<sup>3</sup> International Crisis group, “Coca, drugs and social protest in Bolivia and Peru”, Latin American Report No 12. 3 March 2005.

these circumstances, the mere mention of a project to export gas through Chile to Mexico and the United States sparked protests that resulted in a growing demand for nationalization of the gas resources.

Facing a hostile Congress, Mesa had limited room for compromise. In March 2005, he threatened with his resignation, but such option was rejected by public opinion and congress. This temporal support for the president did not translate in a more cooperative attitude towards his agenda. The political stalemate continued.

The protestors, especially those led by Evo Morales and Felipe Quispe, were reluctant to engage in compromise politics. They identified it as the source of their economic and social exclusion. On May 26, two lieutenant colonels Julio Galindo and Julio Herrera went to a TV station and called for the resignation of President Mesa, his replacement for a civic military junta, the nationalization of the natural gas and the calling of a Constitutional Assembly. The military high command condemned the sedition and all the political parties declared support for democratic institutions (Marín, 2005) but asked Mesa to adopt the best solution for the country. Attacked by the left and with no sympathies of the right, Mesa resigned in May -31.

#### **The response:**

While Mesa's presidency was unraveling, the OAS response was minimal at best. The Inter American Democratic Charter was invoked at the declaration of the General Assembly in Fort Lauderdale, once Mesa's resignation had already occurred. Neither the Bolivian government nor any other member states nor the Secretary General called for assistance of the OAS until a special session of the Permanent Council in June.

Why president Mesa did not invoke the Inter-American Democratic Charter? The opportunity for moving Bolivia to a more stable situation was certainly there. Mesa was at times a popular president. In March, he seemed capable of assembling a working relation with the MAS and other parties in Congress. Just days before the crisis, Evo Morales called upon Mesa to nationalize the gas but insisted that the MAS did not want the

president's resignation. Why did Mesa insist on a solution "among Bolivians"? Why didn't Mesa frame the issue in a different way, allowing the OAS to support a dialogue among the Bolivians?

The reluctance of President Mesa to apply or invoke the Charter seems to be partially based on his perception that this would transmit a sign of weakness bringing more trouble to his government than benefits. I haven't been able to find information about the perceptions of the Bolivian government about the situation in the OAS, particularly busy with the election of a new Secretary General after the resignation of Miguel Ángel Rodríguez. Did the fact that the new Secretary General José M. Insulza was Chilean play some role on Mesa's reluctance to invoke the IADC?

Perhaps, Carlos Mesa didn't call for OAS mediation because he simply was politically exhausted. From March to June, Mesa threatened to resign twice, at the beginning raising his stature but in the end wasting his political capital (Antognelli, 2005). By May, it seemed like Mesa's agenda was only to survive until the next elections. Turned into a mere caretaker at the presidential office, he didn't have many incentives to prolong its term and preferred to speed up his exit, leaving behind a vacuum.

Unfortunately, there were also problems of OAS credibility among the indigenous protesters. Public declarations against OAS meddling in Bolivian politics reflected a strong negative perception of its role. Even after the violent events of February and October 2003 in which several demonstrators were killed, the OAS permanent council supported Sánchez de Lozada through resolutions 838 (1355/03) and 849 (1384/03). In general, the Bolivians supporting the MAS and the MIP do not regard international institutions in high esteem because of a difficult history of poor relations and unfilled promises for which the IMF is blamed.

#### **The post crisis response:**

The main post crisis response consisted on helping the Bolivian state to organize the elections of December 2005. On July 26, President Rodríguez sent a special ambassador, Marcelo Ostría Trigo, one of the

diplomats who negotiated the Inter-American Democratic Charter, to speak to the Permanent Council of the OAS about the situation in Bolivia. The mere habituation by member-states to report to the Permanent Council and discuss the problems democracy faces in their political systems is a success. The fact that the IADC became part of the debate may lead to a better implementation in future cases.

From the perspective of the hemispheric regime of democratic governance, the debate about possible implementation of the Charter before Mesa's resignation was poor. A situation of chaos, street demonstrations and incapacity to govern did not cause more than a General Assembly declaration with a vague reference to the OAS Charter and the IADC. Almost two months after Mesa's resignation, Ambassador Ostria Trigo presented retroactively the Bolivian congressional session of June 9 as a normal and constitutional transference of power from Mesa to his successor.

#### Ecuador:

President Lucio Gutiérrez's ouster was the latest in a saga of political turmoil in Ecuador (Mejía et al 2004). Since the removal of President Abdalá Bucaram of the Partido Roldosista Ecuatoriano (PRE) in 1997 on the dubious grounds of "mental incompetence", no elected president of Ecuador has finished his term. The deposed presidents typically faced a crisis of governance as result of conflict with Congress, leading to criminal charges and popular revolts in the streets.

The fragmentation of political power in Congress makes difficult stable majorities characterizing what Shelley McConnell called "centrifugal politics" (McConnell, 2001: 73-79). Ecuadorian politics is deeply dominated by political parties divided around regional, ethnic, and ideological cleavages. For example of the last ten presidents only two has belonged to the same political party (DP). The traditional parties are highly personality-oriented and regional. Paradoxically, these scarcely supported political parties are very powerful (Ecuador is the only country in Latin America in which the population considered Congress more powerful and politi-

cal parties as powerful as the government in 2005-2006). They have controlled the Electoral Supreme Tribunal, the Congress and the Supreme Court blocking any initiative to reform the system and manipulating the application of the laws. Between 2001 and 2004, the support for democracy against any other alternative in Ecuador was lower than 50 % (Latinobarómetro, 2006).

Amidst this perverse combination of massive discontent against political parties with a political system in which they were dominant, Lucio Gutiérrez was elected as an independent outsider in 2003. Gutiérrez's identity as an outsider trying to implement an insider agenda added uncertainty to Ecuadorian politics. In less than nine months, the political alliance that elected him was dissolved and his vice-president Alfredo Palacios was speaking against his policies.

President Gutiérrez became an outsider implementing an insider's political agenda. The collapse of the electoral alliance brought Gutiérrez's presidential agenda to a standstill in Congress in which he opted for playing Ecuador's political parties against each other, hoping to gain time and build up his movement, Sociedad Patriótica, along the lines of Fujimori style populist *caudillismo*. For many, Gutiérrez became a traitor to those who elected him: Instead of addressing issues of poverty and inequality, Gutiérrez spent much of state revenues servicing foreign debt. Corruption continued to thrive<sup>4</sup>.

In November 25, 2004, Gutiérrez counterattacked against the opposition PSC (Social Christian Party) in alliance with the parties PRIAN and PRE. By congressional resolution (No.R-25-160), the PRE-PRIAN-Sociedad Patriótica (Gutiérrez's movement) alliance replaced most of the members of the Electoral Supreme Tribunal, and the Constitutional Tribunal. In December 8, by means of a slim congressional majority, the new congressional coalition replaced 27 of the 31 Supreme Court justices in a stroke, ignoring a constitutional procedure according to which magistrates can be nominated only through the Consejo Nacional de la Judicatura<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> A coup by the Congress and the street, *The Economist*, April 25th, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Comisión Andina de Juristas, *Sucesos en el Ecuador. Situación de la democracia y los Derechos Humanos en el Ecuador*. Documento actualizado al 5 de mayo de 2005, p. 7.

For the lack of one, Ecuador had in these period two politicized Supreme Courts. The old Court declared these actions illegitimate and tear-gassed by Gutiérrez's followers moved to Quito Catholic University and proclaimed themselves a "Supreme Court in exile." The new Court dropped corruption charges against Abdalá Bucaram, allowing the former president to return to Ecuador.

Although there were not many voices that defended the old Court's integrity, there was no doubt that what was happening in Quito was an outrageous violation of the separation of powers. The replacement of the Court created a public confrontation in the streets between Gutiérrez's supporters and those who denounced it as an interruption of the constitutional order. Although the OAS didn't condemn Gutiérrez's actions, later, Secretary General José M. Insulza- he was not Secretary General yet-would call later Gutiérrez's action an "flagrant contradiction of the Inter-American democratic Charter"(Insulza, 2006).

Fresh protests broke out after Bucaram's return. Demonstrations began taking place all over the country, especially in Guayaquil, Ecuador's largest city and in the capital, Quito.

On April 15, after several months of instability, President Gutiérrez flanked by military commanders announced that he was dissolving the Supreme Court, which the Congress had appointed four months earlier following his own instructions. This sign of weakness incited more revolt in Quito. Gutiérrez ordered the police to restore order but the Quito police chief resigned after refusing to follow presidential orders. On April 20, the Congress passed a resolution electing vice president Alfredo Palacios to take Gutiérrez's place. Continuing a bizarre tradition of removing president using doubtful charges, the congress removed Gutiérrez for "abandoning his post" while the president was still at the presidential palace.

The military supported Gutiérrez throughout the crisis but stop doing so when it was evident that major repression will threat its corporate unity. In the presence of mass demonstrations, the military took control of the capital and asked President Gutiérrez to leave. Gutiérrez denounced a coup against his presidency and accused his opponents of being corrupt individuals that did not want to pay taxes. Brazil mediated

between Gutiérrez and the group who ousted him, known as "los forajidos" - a pejorative term Gutiérrez used against his opponents, which they gladly adopted. Gutiérrez was flown to Brazil.

#### OAS Response:

From the perspective of OAS response, the Ecuadorian crisis between November 2004 and May 2005 had two different breaches of the constitutional order:

- 1.- President Gutiérrez removed the Supreme Court and trumped over essential principles of separation of powers.
- 2.- President Gutiérrez was removed from power by a combination of actions of the Congress, street demonstrators and the military under the dubious reasons that he abandoned his post when he was still in his office.

Were these two actions constitutional alterations or interruptions? Does the occurrence of the first one justify the use of unconstitutional procedures in the second case?

The international reaction to Gutiérrez's actions was particularly ineffective. Neither the OAS nor the Andean Pact or the Rio Group looked for a mediated solution. There was legal ground for action, especially after the Special Rapporteur for judicial affairs of the United Nations; Leandro Despouy called the attention of the international community that judicial independence in Ecuador was under severe threat. Despouy presented a report to the Secretary General of the U.N and the Human Rights Commission and called for the intervention of the Rio Group. Prestigious civil society groups like the Comisión Andina de Juristas and the Carter Center evoked the Inter American Democratic Charter and called OAS member states to defend democracy.

Until Gutiérrez was ousted, the OAS avoided taking a position. The Secretary General did not bring the issue to debate at the Permanent

Council until the crisis was well advanced. None of the member states brought to the attention of the permanent council or called the Secretary General to take action in the crisis. Then president of OAS Permanent Council, Aristides Royo did not even received former vice-president Blasco Peñaherrera when he traveled to Washington December 8, 2004 to denounce the situation. The Charter bias in favor of the acting president, preventing any other public power of invoking the IADC might explain Ambassador Royo's refusal.

#### A flaw in the international regime:

Why then the OAS did not react to the violation of the Charter by the government of Lucio Gutiérrez and the congressional majority that supported him?

The implementation of Chapter IV of the IADC requires three main capacities from the hemispheric regime of democratic governance:

- Detection of the violation of the norm by type and degree. (Alteration or interruption of democratic order).
- Assessment of the violation and potential responses.
- Implementation of the response.

The crisis of Ecuador in 2005 represents a violation of a precisely defined norm but the international regime of the Charter lacked the political will to act against the violator. President Gutiérrez's allies in congress dissolved the Supreme Court and the Constitutional Tribunal replacing more than 90 % of these judicial organs in a single stroke. The designation of a new one clearly clashed with article 3 of the Inter-American Democratic Charter as an infringement of the principle of separation of powers. There is no lack of precision in the Charter, which posits the "separation of powers and independence of the branches of government" as "*Essential elements of representative democracy*". (Art.3, Chapter I, IADC). Gutiérrez

was a typical case of a democratically elected president behaving in undemocratic ways.

Regardless of how discredited the old Supreme Court was, Ecuadorian civil society reacted to the crisis by denouncing the violation of the Inter-American Democratic Charter in defense of their democratic institutions. Until January 2005, press reports recorded continuous demonstrations against the dissolution of the Court. They were seconded by regional non-governmental organizations such as the Andean Commission of Jurists as early as December 14-2004, which alerted the hemispheric community about the aggression against democratic civility and evoked the IADC and specifically the violation of judicial independence and the separation of powers. Unfortunately, there was no institutional track that the civil society groups could use to formally call the attention of the Permanent Council or the Secretary General of the OAS, and the member states neglected their duty to defend democracy in Ecuador.

What failed in Ecuador in 2005 was the political will of the OAS member-states to convoke a meeting of the Permanent Council and make President Gutiérrez accountable for his violations of the democratic governance norm. The fact that the Charter could be improved does not justify inaction in this specific case. The member states led the decisions to ask for mediation or good offices to the government of the country in trouble but Article 20<sup>6</sup> of the Charter could have been invoked by any of the other member states. The IADC does not explicitly define a violation of what it considered "*essential* elements of representative democracy" as an "alteration" of constitutionality but such interpretation was implicit on the deliberations for the adoption of the document<sup>7</sup>. What occurred in Ecuador was a typical "autogolpe". There were already precedents (Perú, 1992, Guatemala, 1993, Perú 2000) in which resolution 1080 was invoked and the OAS set up a mission to deal with these cases.

6 Article 20 enabled any member state or the Secretary General to call the attention of the Permanent Council about an alteration of the constitutional order in another member state.

7 See opinions of the Ambassadors to the Permanent Council, Acta de la Sesión ordinaria del Consejo Permanente de la OEA, 6 de Septiembre de 2001. CP/ ACTA 1292/01

### Damage control and promoting the legitimacy of the Charter:

On April 18, 2005, just two days before Gutiérrez was ousted, the ministers of foreign affairs of the South American countries expressed concern over the political crisis in Ecuador. The ministers called the branches of government, as well as civil society, to engage in political dialogue while respecting the democratic institutions and *the Inter-American Democratic Charter*. Although it was reinforcing to the democratic norm that the Charter was mentioned, its invocation could not have been more imprecise. There was no reference to violations of specific articles or potential remedies to use.

### Nicaragua: fighting yesterday's battles.

The 2005 political crisis in Nicaragua cannot be understood outside the context of an unfinished transition to democracy after the defeat of the Sandinista government in 1990.

"In Nicaragua, I was privileged to witness the statesmanship of Daniel Ortega transferring power to Violeta Chamorro" - said President Carter<sup>8</sup>. Regardless of the "Piñata" and other flaws that came later, the FSLN, a militant revolutionary party, accepted to go to early democratic elections, under international supervision and difficult conditions like the war of the contras illegally supported by the U.S. Furthermore, Daniel Ortega and Sergio Ramírez conceded their defeat in a sign of political maturity and strength. On the other side of the aisle, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro defended a national reconciliation policy to move Nicaragua to the challenges of eliminating poverty and war. The possibility for building a more stable political democracy in Nicaragua was there. Unfortunately, the trends to conciliation and compromise didn't last too long.

On one side, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), the revolutionary force behind the overthrowing of Somoza's dictatorship, kept its revolutionary rhetoric, mystique and organization in parallel to

<sup>8</sup> President Carter delivers Keynote Speech to OAS Lecture Series of the Americas. 25 Jan. 2005: 3

its role as a major party in Nicaraguan representative democracy. Neither the internal political process of the Sandinista Front nor its role as a political party inside a representative democracy were reformulated in ways that the party could modernize and cope with the challenges of Nicaragua in conciliatory and compromising ways of a multi party system.

On the other side, Liberals and other political groups that fought against the Sandinistas spent a decade and a half trying to recover lost properties and vindictively settling political scores against their revolutionary rivals. The reality is that the redistribution of property and power that occurred under the Sandinista regime can only be reversed by interminable violence if it can be reversed at all. This fact was accepted by many in the Administration of Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, who tried to develop an agenda of national reconciliation. Unfortunately, Arnaldo Alemán, with the support of Jesse Helms and even the Clinton government, refused to recognize such facts and energized the Liberal base hoping to reverse the Sandinista expropriations.

A political system that should strive to develop strategies to deal with acute poverty and economic growth is still paralyzed in settling the disputes of the past. In 2002, president Bolaños brought to the executive a genuine concern for corruption, but his administration did not reconcile with the idea that the Sandinistas were a factor impossible to circumvent for governing Nicaragua. The country is still paying an immense price for a political class that stubbornly is still fighting yesterday's battles.

### The Crisis of 2004-2005

When in 2003, President Alemán was finally condemned to twenty years of prison on charges of fraud and embezzlement, the anti-Sandinista coalition of the Liberal Party collapsed. This fracture among its opponents gave Ortega's FSLN a more decisive role in the decisions of the National Assembly and an opportunity for an eventual return to power in 2006. As part of a strategy of multiple negotiations, Ortega played the liberal factions against each other. First he supported Bolaños in a governability pact that helped the latter to fight Alemán but enraged the U.S.

When the U.S forced Bolaños to break up with Ortega, the Sandinistas gathered with Alemán's faction of the PLC to introduce more constitutional reforms and virtually control from the bottom all the major state structures of the country.

The control of Alemán and Ortega over Nicaraguan political system is based in two main elements that existed before the conflict about the constitutional reforms and the potential prosecution of president Bolaños. These elements were:

A) The two major parties are ruled through vertical power structures. From being ruled by a national directorate of nine comandantes until the 1990's, the FSLN turned into Daniel Ortega's private fiefdom. Equally, Arnaldo Alemán transformed the PLC from a federation of factions into a party made to serve his personal interests. This situation, particularly in the FSLN but also in the PLC, created such profound resentment that new cadres began to structure alternatives to their leaders. The response of the caudillos was to cancel previous mechanisms of partial internal primaries. Logically, some ruptures occurred in both parties.

B) As if controlling their parties was not sufficient, The pact FSLN-PLC passed the Law 331, the electoral law, which imposed high requirements for the registration of political parties or independent candidates and the formation of electoral alliances (Freedom House, 2006). Nicaraguans don't vote for specific candidates but for a closed list of deputies chosen by party leaders. Control of the parties in ways that impede challenges to their power was complemented by blocking dissidents of developing new groups that eventually would challenge the caudillos' control from outside their parties.

The constitutional reforms presented in 2004 took the cannibalization of the political system to new heights. The reforms severely harmed the separation of powers principle contained in article 3 of the IADC:

1) The parties of the FSLN-PLC Pact politically colonized the Supreme Electoral Council, the Supreme Court of Justice and the Comptroller

General by distributing functions in the state apparatus among the major parties. With this action, the FSLN and the PLC dispossessed the judiciary and the electoral authorities of any substantial capacity to perform independent functions.

- 2) This partisan distribution is critical in the Supreme Electoral Council because widespread irregularities happened in the last two presidential elections and accusations of "electoral crimes" and misuse of funds against the major candidates have been presented. Such situation is tragic because under the leadership of Sandinista Mariano Fiallo, the organ set a high standard of honesty and competence that guaranteed the elections of 1990.
- 3) The National Assembly under the control of the caudillos transferred powers from the executive to itself. Through the reforms, the National Assembly expanded its functions from an already powerful budgetary oversight, and the ability to summon the president and ministers to exert the government through agencies in charge of some utilities and the solution of property claims. In two presidential terms (Chamorro and Bolaños) conflicts between presidents and their parties allowed the opposition to push for reforms that expanded the National Assembly functions at President's costs<sup>9</sup>.
- 4) The parties of the pact also imposed constraints on future legislative initiative through their control of the judiciary. In May 2004, the Supreme Court ruled that "recursos de amparo" (injunctions) against draft laws in the Assembly may paralyze the debate about such legislation. This is an invitation to obstruction that obviously will be used politically to nip in the bud projects that are rejected by the forces that control the Supreme Court, coincidentally the FSLN and the PLC.

<sup>9</sup> Nicaragua and Ecuador are the Latin American countries in which the majority of the interviewed in the surveys of Latin Barometer mentioned the parliament among the most powerful institutions. In Nicaragua only the government was considered more powerful than the parliament. See Latinobarómetro, 2006.

These trends formed the context in which the government retreated from the tripartite dialogue with the FSLN-PLC pact, mediated by Cardinal Obando y Bravo. President Bolaños understood that the pact commandeered presidential power from him and decided to fight, eliciting the support of the OAS. Although not popular at home, Bolaños counted on his highly positive reputation in the international community, and the support of Nicaragua's neighbors in Central America.

### The response:

Although the democratic crisis in Nicaragua is rooted in structural problems of transition to democracy after the Sandinista Revolution, the concrete detonators of the current OAS intervention under the IADC were the latest constitutional reforms approved by the National Assembly in the fall of 2004 and the threat of impeachment against president Bolaños because of his refusal to cooperate with Nicaraguan Comptroller General about the funds of his electoral campaign. The discussion of the response to the Nicaraguan democratic crisis that follows refers to these specific measures.

Practices like the ones developed by the FSLN-PLC pact that block the diversity of political participation weaken democracy and therefore are in conflict with the IADC. As the IADC posits in articles 3, 4, 5 and 6, democracy requires competitive elections among parties. The Charter, however, does not reduce democracy to this essential element. Article 6 is explicit in declaring: "it is the right and responsibility of all citizens to participate in decisions relating to their own development. This is also a necessary condition for the full and effective exercise of democracy".

The Charter, however, cannot work if it is not invoked by the member states. In the absence of a major development (a clear interruption or alteration of the constitutional order), only the government of the country in question can use article 17 and ask for OAS action in defense of democracy. That was the case when Nicaraguan Ambassador to the OAS, Carmen Marina Gutiérrez, speaking under an invocation of the IADC April 27, 2005, presented a report to the Permanent Council of the OAS

about what she defined as "attempts to affect the democratic order" in her country. The first OAS response was a Secretary General Luigi Einaudi's declaration the same day calling for a peaceful negotiation of the conflicts in Nicaragua and offering his "good offices".

Historically, The OAS was well situated to mediate in the Nicaraguan crisis. The regional organization has played a significant role in Nicaraguan history. In 1979, the organization recognized the government of national reconstruction in opposition to dictator Somoza. OAS presence in Nicaraguan Politics is a factor counted in the political equation by almost all the domestic actors. International norms, especially in the issue of democratic governance, have been also a reference in the political discourse of most parties in the last two decades.

The four OAS missions to Nicaragua kept the crisis under a very close scrutiny<sup>10</sup>. As early as October 17 2004, the Permanent Council of the OAS sent Secretary General Luigi Einaudi and the president of the Permanent Council, Ambassador Aristides Royo to Nicaragua after the Central American presidents (SICA) called for OAS intervention. SICA supported President Bolaños when he evoked the IADC, denouncing the attempt by the National Assembly to impeach him<sup>11</sup> as a "technical coup". Royo's report in October 22 to the Permanent Council (Consejo Permanente de la Organización, 2004) was a defense of Bolaños' legitimacy as a competent president under siege.

10 The four missions were: 1) A mission of Secretary General interim Luigi Einaudi, on October, 2004; 2) A technical mission of the General Secretariat led by Enrique Lagos of the Department of Democratic and Political affairs of the General Secretariat of the OAS, 3) Mission of the Secretary General to Nicaragua that included several visits evoking article 18 of the IADC through declaration 43 (XXXV-0/05); 4) Special envoy to the Republic of Nicaragua, Dante Caputo, under the mandate of Resolution 43 of the General Assembly and ratified in Resolution 892 of the Permanent council. CP/Res. 892 (1507/05)

11 Resolution of the meeting of presidents of member states of the Central American Integration System in support of Nicaragua. OAS. CP/INF 5091/04 Oct 16 2004.

Bolaños' government strategy was properly framed in the structure of the IADC:

- 1 The government used articles 17 in May and article 18 in June later to build consensus for Inter American support in defense of President Bolaños' position using the advantages that the Charter gives to the incumbents as the main voice in international negotiations<sup>12</sup>. In the XXXV OAS General Assembly at Fort Lauderdale, the government achieved with unanimous approval a resolution of support with the democratic process in Nicaragua (AG/DEC-43 XXXV-0/05). Consequently, Secretary General José Miguel Insulza traveled to Nicaragua to establish a negotiation between the different parties. In all these actions, President Bolaños increased the political cost for the National Assembly of any action of the FSLN against his presidential prerogatives.
- 2 Bolaños' actions demonstrated how the IADC was a useful tool to defend the capacity of governance of the incumbents. Nicaragua formulated its petition for OAS assistance under the assumption that a constitutional alteration had already taken place. On May 12, Nicaraguan minister of Foreign Relations, Norman Caldera evoked article 17 of the IADC and asked for a technical mission to Nicaragua to observe the violations of the essential elements of representative democracy formulated in article 3 of the Charter. This framing of the crisis in favorable term for Bolaños' government was reiterated in the report of the technical mission of the General Secretariat of May 2005 that established that "diferentes sectores públicos, políticos y sociales del país consideran que en estos momentos Nicaragua enfrenta una situación de conflicto, como consecuencia de la alteración del orden

<sup>12</sup> President Bolaños' speech at the extraordinary session of the Permanent Council of the OAS in July 14, 2005 enunciated clearly the use of the IADC, resolution 43 and the report of the technical mission as supporters of the government position in the dispute with the National Assembly. Enrique Bolaños Geyer. Palabras del Presidente de la República de Nicaragua. Sesión extraordinaria del Consejo Permanente de la OEA, 14 de Julio de 2005. <http://www.oas.org/speeches/speech.asp?sCodigo=05-0156>.

constitucional, producto de las recientes reformas constitucionales aprobadas por el legislativo" (OEA, 2005: 3). Nobody in the OAS, at any moment blamed the executive power for the crisis while solidarity was frequently expressed with the people and government of Nicaragua.

- 3 The alert by the technical mission of the threat of a crisis in Nicaragua opened the door to the application of Article 18. Declaration 43 of the General Assembly in Florida asked the General Secretary to implement it. The FSLN-PLC pact was blamed internationally as the main obstacle for democratic stability, becoming the main target of the Secretary General's proactive measures to protect democracy. Vested with this authority to facilitate negotiations, Secretary General José Miguel Insulza designated former Argentinean minister of foreign affairs Dante Caputo<sup>13</sup> as his personal representative in Nicaragua.
- 4 Finally, the declaration 43 of the General Assembly did not mention a need *to restore* the old dialogue abandoned by President Bolaños because he felt outmaneuvered by the FSLN-PLC pact but a mission that "helps to establish a broad national dialogue...with strict observance of the principle of separation of the branches of the government in the country. Resolution 892 (1507/05) reiterated this call for a "broad and constructive dialogue". The government used international support as a leverage to change the rules of the tripartite dialogue, negotiating with the support of the OAS the inclusion of political and social actors beyond the parties of the FSLN-PLC pact. The presence of the OAS in the dialogue was favorable for the government in another sense, because it counterweight the role of Cardinal Obando, whose strong links with the Pact had made the government uncomfortable.

<sup>13</sup> Caputo's designation is symbolic because of the role Inter American civil society plays in promoting the IADC. Days before Insulza designated him; Caputo leaded a mediation mission of the Carter Center to Managua.

The first critical turn in the OAS action happened with the report of the technical mission in May 2005 to the General Assembly. The mission enhanced its own mandate and instead of addressing the issue of analyzing the merits of the reforms and the accusations against president Bolaños, produced a report about potential democratic assistance to Nicaragua and evaluates the main challenges ahead including the 2006 elections.

The presence of the OAS mission in Nicaragua under the IADC clearly helped President Bolaños to finish his term without submitting to the impositions of the National Assembly. This obviously doesn't solve the central problems of democratic consolidation in Nicaragua but was a major achievement. The 2006 elections brought a critical moment for improvement in the implementation of the democratic governance norm. The OAS observation together with the Carter Center and the European Union guaranteed free and fair elections accepted as legitimate by all the contenders.

A major contribution of Secretary General Insulza in the solution of the crisis was his recognition of the role of the dominant political parties, particularly the FSLN in finding a political solution to the crisis. The development of Nicaraguan democracy is a long-term task. By identifying FSLN interests in OAS recognition and observation in the 2006 elections, Caputo was able of inducing Ortega to cooperate in his mission and postpone the constitutional reforms. Caputo took distance from any selective and politically biased intervention-against the FSLN. Indeed, this kind of intervention –used by the U.S under Clinton and Bush against the Sandinistas– has brought discredit to the concept of democratic promotion not only in Nicaragua but also in the whole region. This level of meddling in the internal affairs of a country is in conflict with the non intervention and sovereignty principles of the Inter-American system.

Unfortunately, the Sandinistas and their leader Daniel Ortega has been treated as pariahs by most democratic actors of the region despite the fact that they conducted in 1990 one of the most democratic elections ever celebrated in the region. This treatment of pariah used frequently against leftist groups tends to reinforce these identities. Caputo's pragmatic treatment of the Sandinistas was a central issue in the promotion of democra-

cy in Nicaragua. There is no reason to doubt that the FSLN will be a major actor of Nicaraguan politics with or without the presidency, with or without a new constitution. Indeed, the FSLN was the decisive factor in the approval of the Marco law that solved finally the crisis<sup>14</sup>.

OAS support for democracy in Nicaragua took into account not only the flaws but also the strengths of Nicaraguan democracy. Nicaragua is a familiar country for the international donor community and positive cooperation is already in place. Despite being the second poorest country in the region, Nicaragua has a vibrant civil society that includes well organized business and labor groups as well as women and indigenous organizations. All of them are integrated to the political system. Institutions like the army and the Church possesses a significant approval among the population. The caudillista behavior of the dominant parties must not demerit the fact that major parties are well organized and the political life is not atomized.

### Conclusions:

This paper analyses three main crises of democratic governance in the Americas that warranted the use of the Inter-American Democratic Charter between October 2004 and October 2005. They occurred in Ecuador, Bolivia and Nicaragua:

- In Ecuador there was a crisis of separation of powers when President Gutiérrez, in less than six months, twice removed the magistrates of the Supreme Court, first using a narrow majority in the national congress and later by a presidential decree. The case is particularly relevant because incidents of “court packing” and political conflicts between the executive and the judiciary or between the legislative and the judiciary have been happening in other countries (Venezuela, Perú, Guatemala, and Paraguay) since the 1990's.

<sup>14</sup> For an explanation of the Sandinista vision of the crisis: Daniel Ortega, Soy un luchador social, un revolucionario, Interview with Carlos Fernando Chamorro in “Esta semana”. [www.fsln-nicaragua.com/archivo](http://www.fsln-nicaragua.com/archivo)

- In the case of Bolivia and Ecuador, the crisis concluded in social revolts against the incumbent governments as result of a deteriorated economic situation and a perception in large segments of civil society of government corruption and mismanagement of the national resources. Some analysts labeled these incidents “civil society coups” because they took place under weak states characterized by presidents without strong parties and were confronted by a highly mobilized and hostile civil society. Although some official “explanations” argued that nothing unconstitutional happened, analysts like Dexter Boniface argues that these are “under the table” coups (Boniface, 2005, 2007), in which the actors internalize the risks of possible condemnation and simulate some level of constitutionality. There is no doubt that street demonstrations are not the constitutional procedure for changing presidents envisioned either by the respective constitutions of these countries or the IADC (Art. 2).
- In Nicaragua, there was a conflict between the executive and legislative powers for the control of the judicial, constitutional and electoral authorities. The conflict included attempts by the legislature to curtail presidential prerogatives by removing state agencies from presidential control. From the point of view of the two main political parties, that control the legislature and the Courts, the passing of these reforms was totally constitutional because established procedures were followed. From the point of view of the presidency, such changes constituted a new constitution in disguise without the call of a constituent assembly.

These three cases are relevant to the study of the implementation of the IADC because they represented typical problems associated with the functioning of democracy in the hemisphere and the norm of collective defense of it. In each of the three cases, there were problems associated with the separation of powers (Art. 3). Presidents began their terms with limited capacity to pass legislation due to a hostile congress. Two of these presidents were forced out of office before either they or the congress that opposed their policies could be tested in elections or referendums.

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Este libro se terminó de  
imprimir en enero de 2009  
en la imprenta RisperGraf C.A.  
Quito, Ecuador