

## **21<sup>st</sup> Century Democracy Promotion in the Americas: Standing up for the Polity\***

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(Heine, Jorge and Weiffen, Brigitte. 21st Century Democracy Promotion in the Americas: standing up for the Polity. Routledge, 2014)

Since the creation and successful development of the European regional integration, a debate has existed on how regional institutions can contribute to the promotion and defense of democracy. Thus, a link between regionalism and democracy has been established. The extent to which regionalism and democracy are related and how regional institutions promote and defend democracy have been issues also discussed in the Americas. In particular, Latin America is a part of the world where regionalism has a long history (even if successes are limited), but also where democracy has had problems in consolidating as a stable form of political organization. Certainly, significant progress has been witnessed in the last three decades; however challenges still persists in the form of instability. Recent crises in countries such as Honduras, Panamá, Venezuela and Bolivia indicate the persistent challenges to democracy in Latin America. Jorge Heine and Britta Weiffen (2014) discuss in this book the role played by a regional organization (the Organization of Americas States, OAS) in the promotion and defense of democracy.

The OAS was chosen as a case study because it is within this institution where more progress has been achieved in the creation of regional framework to promote democracy, particularly, since the signing in 2001 of the Interamerican

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(\*) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1981-38212015000300027>

Democratic Charter (IADC). However, the OAS has been an institution under attack by the left-wing governments that took power in Latin America since the late 1990's and early 2000's. By the same token, mechanisms to defend democracy existed in the Andean Community and the Southern Common Market (Mercosur) before the IADC and the emergence of the new regional processes such as the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) has created new fora to discuss democracy. Notwithstanding this, the OAS and IADC have developed mechanisms, procedures, and have material and human resources allowing them to play the role of strong advocate in the defense of democracy.

The presence of the United States in the OAS, the hegemonic power in the continent and the world, and a respectable Western democracy, has pros and cons and, consequently, it is a contested issue. Certainly, the U.S. tradition on democracy and political stability has always been perceived as a model for the Latin American elites. However, the commitment of the U.S. governments to democracy has been questioned because of its tolerance vis-à-vis the atrocities of military regimes, and in some cases, the support of dictatorships in the region. Similarly, the traditional control of the OAS by the U.S. has been so overwhelming that nationalist and left-wing sectors have described this institution as the U.S. Ministry of Colonies.

However, after the end of the Cold War, the OAS was perceived as an institution in transformation that could serve not only the strategic and military interests of the United States but also has the potential to become a tool to promote a real hemispheric community of interests. One of the pillars of such a community was the adoption of free market economy, as promoted by the Washington Consensus and the Free Trade of the Americas project. The other pillar was the commitment to establishing democracy as the unique acceptable form of political regime in the continent. The approval of the IADC in 2001 was the manifestation of that commitment.

Since then, much has changed and both regionalism and democracy have experienced substantive changes in Latin America in the recent years. These transformations have posed challenges to the still young IADC and OAS actions in the defense and promotion of democracy in Latin America. Heine and Weiffen (2014) made an important effort in understanding and explaining this complex

process by describing the diverse periods of the OAS involvement in the democratic issues and by analyzing the role of the IADC in the recent regional crisis.

The book initiates with a chapter devoted to the analysis of the logic behind the democratic promotion. In Chapter 01, Heine and Weiffen (2014) examine how democracy was transformed into a subject for discussion in the discipline of international relations and comparative politics, particularly, in the sub-field of regionalism. The trend towards regional democracy promotion; the mechanisms for regional promotion and defense of democracy and comparison of the regional initiatives to defense democracy are topics studied in this chapter.

The second chapter of the book evaluates the emergence of the OAS democratic paradigm. One aspect is crucial here: the OAS is an expression of panamericanism-interamericanism, a regional project fostered by the U.S. and led by Washington since its early steps in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. History matters in this analysis and what historical analysis shows is that panamericanism was mostly centered on the promotion of trade and legal issues, while interamericanism (as the movement began to be called since the 1930's) was mainly concerned with security and the fight against communism. Democracy was secondary, even after the creation of the OAS in 1948 and throughout the Cold War period in which OAS did not react vis-à-vis the violations of human rights by Latin American dictators. The book analyzes this issue in a quite general way. Certainly, the main concern of the book is the IADC and recent mechanisms to defend democracy. The problem is that these new mechanisms are perceived as a part of an institution that for decades disregarded the defense of democracy and human rights. This perception is a part of the collective memory of many Latin Americans both in the political sphere and the civil society. The authors argue that the principles of national sovereignty and non-intervention are crucial to understand why OAS did not act in the defense of democracy in the Cold War, but that situation has not changed in the post-Cold War era. If sovereignty and non-intervention are still strongly defended by Latin American states then, why did the paradigm concerning the creation of regional mechanism to defend democracy shift? The second factor presented by the authors has a major explanatory value: the U.S. interests. Unfortunately, this issue is not examined in an in-depth manner in the

book. The U.S. has always promoted a discourse of promotion of democracy, but its commitment with that discourse has been quite weak, particularly, in the Cold War. This is quite obviously a sensitive issue and a deeper analysis would have been welcomed.

The end of the Cold War supposedly implied a shift in the OAS approach to democracy and the emergence of the democratic paradigm represented by the IADC. This is examined in the final sections of the second and third chapters of the book. Heine and Weiffen (2014) describe the interesting process of the establishment of an institutional framework for the defense of democracy in the 1990's and the creation of the IADC in 2001. The IADC is described in its strengths and shortcomings. The limitations of the Charter are extensively and properly analyzed in the third chapter. As a part of the literature on the issues, Heine and Weiffen (2014) consider that the problems of legal status of the IADC (a political accord, not an agreement), the central role of the executive in IADC implementation, and the lack of a clear threshold determining precisely at what point the OAS should intervene to defend democracy are shortcomings that could impede effective adoption of the mechanisms to defend democracy. These arguments are used in the following chapters to explain why the IADC has not fulfilled the expectations of its promoters.

Fourth and fifth chapters examine the IADC in action. These are probably two of the more interesting chapters of the book. An issue that deserves to be considered is the dichotomy democratic crisis and democratic decline presented in the fourth chapter. Concerning the democratic crisis, Heine and Weiffen (2014) propose a taxonomy (ambiguous endogenous, ambiguous exogenous, unambiguous exogenous, and unambiguous endogenous) that have a descriptive and explanatory power because, as is well accepted in current literature, threats to institutional democratic order does not come only from traditional coup d'états, but from new practices. Taxonomies are useful but sometimes pose a problem when analyzing a concrete case. Thus, many pundits in Latin American would probably not describe the 2012 crisis in Paraguay as ambiguous endogenous. Similar argument is valid when referring to the categories of democratic decline. Some experts would not accept the description of the democratic experiments in Venezuela in the Chavez era or Ecuador in the Correa era as decline democracies

or semi-democracies by arguing that such a description is based on a traditional understanding of democracy as representative democracy. Venezuela and Ecuador would be examples of representative democracies and the criteria used by Freedom House or Polity would not be useful to describe this new type of democracy. This debate about representative and participative democracies is crucial in order to understand what is currently happening in Latin America, but Heine and Weiffen preferred not to be involved in it. The category of representative democracy is contested by some political leaders and academics in the region but it is the official narrative of various countries of the region, and that is the reason for it to be considered in the analysis.

The crisis of Honduras, examined in detail in the fifth chapter, is crucial to understand both the real commitment to democracy in Latin America and the impact of the IADC. In both cases, the scenario is not for optimism. Honduras demonstrated that the compromise to create a real community of democratic nations in the hemisphere is still subordinated to the interest of elites and geopolitical factors. It also evidenced the shortcomings of the IADC. Heine and Weiffen (2014) go beyond the partisan explanation on the Honduras crisis. They argue that before the events of June 29, 2009, an environment of conflict existed between Zelaya and the economic and political elites of that country. Some actions of the President could be considered as transgression of the Constitution. In spite of this, what happened on June 29 was a Coup d'état. The reaction of the OAS to that crisis was initially successful, but Zelaya was not reinstated in power. The authors also point out that the U.S. played a key role in the outcome of the crisis. Particularly, the actions of Republican Senator Jim DeMint would have convinced Roberto Michelletti to refuse Washington's entreaties to allow President Zelaya to return to office. The story about DeMint's role in the crisis is very well known but what has not been analyzed is how a single Senator could have such an influence as to alter the Obama Administration's official position on the Honduras crisis. DeMint is not a lone ranger, as Jesse Helms was not in the 1980's and 1990's. His position reflects an approach on how some sectors in the U.S. perceive the relations with Latin America and the compromise to defend democracy in this region. It would have been interesting to have a further analysis on this subject.

The fact was that the crisis in Honduras and the erratic behavior of the OAS in the Paraguayan crisis have undermined the credibility on IADC, particularly in the left-wing governments. On the other side of the political spectrum, conservative parties have rejected the OAS inaction in the deterioration of democracy in countries such as Venezuela. Thus, the IADC is under attack from all sides. Consequently, doubts have emerged on the future of the OAS democratic paradigm, as discussed in the final chapter of the book. The increasing contestation of the OAS democratic paradigm and the emergence of regional initiatives such as UNASUR and CELAC pose challenges to IADC's role in the region. In the South American regional space, UNASUR has gradually substituted the OAS as the institutional framework to resolve democratic crisis. UNASUR's involvement in the events of Bolivia (2008), Ecuador (2010), Paraguay (2012), and Venezuela (2014) shows the extent to which new Latin American assertiveness is influencing the understanding of the democratic paradigm.

Heine's and Weiffen's book shows the difficulties regional institutions such as the OAS have experienced when trying to create mechanisms to promote and defend democracy. The book certainly is a contribution to the debate on the relations between regionalism and democracy in Latin America. Despite some criticism made in this review, the political, institutional, and legal analysis presented in the diverse chapters of the book aid in the understanding of what has been done and what should be done to strengthen democracy in Latin America.

Revised by Cabo Verde