

## **The OAS Democratic Charter: A Step to Protect Democracy in the Western Hemisphere**

On September 11, at the request of Secretary of State Colin Powell, the 34 member states of the Organization of American States adopted an Inter-American Democratic Charter as a political and symbolic response to the terrorist attacks that occurred in the United States that day.

In his brief comments before the assembly in Lima, Powell called his presence "the most important thing I can do before departing to go back to Washington, D.C....I very much want to be here to express the United States' commitment to democracy in this hemisphere."

Peruvian Foreign Affairs Minister Diego García Sayán described the adoption of the charter as "not just a salute to the flag." The document has "very concrete procedures, with elements to sanction countries that step out of line with regard to democracy," he said.

The Democratic Charter was originally proposed by Peru's interim government at the Quebec City Summit of the Americas in April. García Sayán cited Peru's experience with the government of former President Alberto Fujimori, who "exposed the weakness of the inter-American system's reaction." OAS Secretary General César Gaviria acknowledged that the organization "fell short" in its response to Fujimori's unconstitutional expansion of executive power in 1992.

### *The Document*

Article 1 the OAS Democratic Charter begins by declaring that "The peoples of the Americas have a right to democracy and their governments have an obligation to promote and defend it." The 27 articles that follow define the elements that make up a democracy, express the need to strengthen political parties and government responsibility for public administration, and establish mechanisms to prevent attacks on democratic processes in the region. These include suspending a member state from the OAS in response to an "unconstitutional interruption of the democratic order or an unconstitutional alteration of the constitutional regime."

Some observers praise the document as going beyond OAS Resolution 1080, adopted in 1991. They view it as important tool that, along with the Washington Protocol (which allows the organization to suspend member states whose governments take power through nondemocratic elections), establishes a juridical framework for defending democracy in the hemisphere.

But critics point out that the Democratic Charter calls for collective sanctions only in extreme cases of authoritarianism or "serious" violations that "persist" over time. They argue that this overlooks other violations of democracy (such as the

temporary closure of a newspaper or government manipulation of the media through the granting of privileges or favoritism) that, while short term, undermine democratic institutions.

Secretary General Gárriga called the charter "an important step toward defending the right of our peoples to build their futures through democratic means." It is the closest thing the hemisphere has to a mechanism for regional coordination in the collective battle against terrorism and other crimes that threaten democracy and all of humankind.

[www.oas.org](http://www.oas.org)

Andrés Oppenheimer, "Los golpes civiles, en la mira"

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