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**Assessing the State of Democracy  
in the Hemisphere**

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I'd like to thank Eric and the Council for the invitation to talk with you all about democracy in the region. I'm honored to be with Ted and Peter, and I'm especially happy to speak in this venue. The Council's foresight and leadership in recognizing the inter-dependence of economic and social development with rule of law, democracy and human rights has never been more important than it is today.

For USAID, this is a fascinating time to be engaged in the field of democracy promotion. The lesson of the past few years has been to underscore that democratic development is a non-linear, highly context-dependent endeavor. We've long known that democratic gains are all too easily reversed, but it may come as a surprise to you that that is not my starting point of reference in today's Latin America.

Let me start with a description of a glass half-full: I think a strong case can be made that much of what we are witnessing today is not, in fact, backsliding, but perhaps an important step forward in countries that have long struggled with problems of inclusion of historically marginalized

populations. The fact that power shifts in the hemisphere continue to take place within the context of democratic elections must not be overlooked. In fact, it provides us with the evidence that democratic processes are the best way to integrate and represent the voices of long-excluded populations -- that the expansion of democratic processes are what has made the empowerment of poor and indigenous movements possible. Certainly, it is the democratic process -- and not the military juntas or dictatorships of the past -- that has allowed the space for these populations to find their own voice.

Let me be more provocative: the USG has made great strides in expanding democracy. But we've also created a problem, one which we should not apologize for. That "problem" is the instability that arises from newly inspired and enfranchised citizens demanding loudly and persistently that they be in charge. For example, we sometimes joke with our State Department colleagues that we've been so successful with civil society work that the Bolivians cannot keep a government in place—we've turned it into France or Italy of the last century.

But let's look closely at Bolivia. We know from the USAID-supported Americas Barometer survey that something historic has happened in Bolivia. For years, support for democracy lagged significantly among indigenous Bolivians. But in 2006, for the first time, we found that rates of support for democracy and for Bolivia's democratic government converged across ethnic lines and increased across Bolivia's entire political spectrum, both left and right. Our 2008 survey will shed light on whether this is a wider or lasting phenomenon. In any case, I believe it may reveal the

window of opportunity. We now have an opening to engage populations who have long looked skeptically at democratic institutions as no more than the latest tool of entrenched elites. We now have an opening to engage new actors -- the historically excluded -- in a meaningful dialogue on democratic values. This hemisphere is particularly well-equipped with the framework for this dialogue, with strong networks of democracy and human rights institutions and with the Inter-American Democratic Charter as a common frame of reference. Our attitude echoes that of the Secretary of State: we are prepared to support all governments that are committed to democracy and working to meet the basic needs of their people. But we want to take advantage of this opportunity to not just broaden democracy but deepen it. And I hope, increase the reality of truly representative institutions and politicians at all levels, especially the local level. More about that later.

As Americans, we should appreciate the myriad challenges faced by our neighbors as they work to build inclusive, democratic societies. From our own experience, we know that protecting and expanding human liberty is a long-term job. That said, we must be vigilant that democracy's most institutionalized tool in the region – elections – not become the tool used to undermine other core principles and institutions of democracy that may be less well established. In the face of a wave of popular discontent with governments that have failed to truly represent and to deliver tangible improvements in the daily lives of citizens, there is a real risk that the ballot box becomes a new way of consolidating old, ugly forms of authoritarianism, or that it simply becomes a way for citizens to vent their spleens and so be manipulated by new elites, be they cynical or of the

visionary-idealist type; that is, populists. Indeed, on this account, I am concerned that the glass may be half empty.

If we do not meet the challenge of making democracy deliver both true and multi-layered representative government as well as material gains-- the topic I'll touch on next -- we will further enable the purveyors of populism. This would be a grave setback.

When I speak about populism, I refer to leaders whose policies seek to undermine the vital institutional checks and balances that characterize a democracy, who argue, indeed harangue, that the executive and his hand-picked and blessed entourage are the only representatives the people need. Populists seek to expand the powers and reach of the executive, hollowing-out the judicial and legislative branches, weakening local governments, and silencing opposition. Populists also tend to reject free trade and free markets, and instead promote greater control and isolation. Populists by their nature oppose and shackle the individual and force him into state sponsored communal arrangements. In the past, populist economic policies failed to promote long-term and broad-based economic growth because they aren't concerned with individual rights, which is the key to sustainable economic growth. They served as catalysts for financial crises and hardship. By presenting these policies as representative of the popular will, leaders gain support for initiatives that are not grounded in sound economics or good governance complete with checks and balances or subject to the rule of law. We have reason to be concerned. The Americas Barometer survey found that populist appeals fall on willing ears in our hemisphere: a majority of those surveyed are supportive of populist measures to increase

the power of the executive at the expense of democratic institutions and discourse. So to repeat, we've done good by helping to expand democracy, but we've not done enough to help deepen it and make it more properly nuanced.

It is clear that there is a broad swath of disaffected voters in Latin America – those for whom democracy has failed to pay promised dividends. To me, this suggests that the best counter to the threat of populism is to redouble our efforts to make democracy more layered and to make it deliver. I think it may also suggest that in this first generation of democracy promotion activities, we may have been too enamored with technocratic, elite-driven efforts that impacted the form, but not necessarily the substance, of democracy. Certainly, in many cases we were right to capitalize on the political will of elite technocrats to undertake critical reforms. Our investment in the wholesale reform of the criminal justice sector comes to mind, as well as our efforts to support electoral reforms and institutions. To be sure, the result has been more efficient processes and transparent changes of government for many, but I'm suggesting that this may not have been enough. It may be time to think more creatively about how our reform efforts interface with the vast majority of citizens and do so at the local level as well as at the national level. For instance, it may be time to focus greater emphasis on access to justice, local representatives and improving the user friendliness of those services most frequently required by citizens: whether it's notary services, adjudicating family disputes, or registering a birth or a business.

Voters need to know that government institutions at all levels are obligated to respond to them; AND government officials at all levels must know that the length of their stay in office is dependent upon serving their constituents, not whether Caracas or Tegucigalpa or La Paz (or will it be Sucre?) is pleased with their loyalty. And voters need to see themselves as citizens of more than simply the nation.

Again, our survey research allows us to get a pulse of what Latin Americans value, and in far greater detail than what we can glean from periodic election results. There are three additional reflections I would like to base on several years of this survey research. First, consistently, the two factors that are most strongly linked to citizens' support for democracy are the perceived and experienced levels of both crime and corruption. In addition to making democracy deliver a broader range of services, we know that a sense of physical security and a sense that the government is not victimizing its citizens through corruption are keys to deepening support for democracy. This suggests that we must continue to support transparency and accountability, and particularly where citizens come into contact with their government. It also suggests that we continue nascent efforts in the areas of community policing and community-level gang prevention efforts. The private sector has been key to these efforts. We'll need much more of that going forward.

Second, the survey data strongly suggests that the consensus on democracy as the best form of government is much better established in some societies than in others. To the extent that we have been able to measure support for government institutions, as well as levels of political

tolerance, we know that democracies in some countries are on an unsure foundation. The data across time is consistent in highlighting the Andes as a region of particular risk. In retrospect, we have had warning signs regarding the fragility of democracy in Bolivia and Ecuador. By the same measures, dynamics in Peru should concern us as well. I think the development community should begin to more proactively target resources on the basis of such "early warning" data.

Third, the surveys reveal that political parties, while unpopular in surveys worldwide, are particularly unpopular across Latin America. Some scholars posit a "crisis of representation" in Latin America. Across much of the region, we are confronted with two opposite varieties of political party systems: the ideologically and programmatically hollow "electoral" parties that form around individuals at election time and then quickly fade, along with the hopes of their supporters; or alternatively, the systems with stable parties that are so polarized that the vast majority of the center feel unrepresented. In neither case are parties acting as both true and knowledgeable representatives of their constituents, nor are they prepared to take on the tasks of government, either as the ruling party or in opposition. This suggests to me that it is time to take a fresh look at political party reform programs and invest in new approaches at all levels. We have yet to find a democracy that does not aggregate citizen interests through political parties, yet it is clear that this channel is dysfunctional in much of the hemisphere.

Finally, we know that with only a couple of exceptions, citizens have greater confidence in their local governments than they do in other

government institutions. Municipal governments have formed an important bulwark of democracy, providing the training ground for new leaders who are closer and more accountable to citizens. Perhaps even more importantly, in several countries, we've seen mayors and local officials with the audacity to buck party bosses when it was clear that top-down policies were not in the interest of their constituents (and their own interest in getting re-elected). In some countries, associations of local governments have become an important "check" on executive and legislative power, increasing accountability to the grassroots. We absolutely must do more in this area: in some countries, I believe it might be our only hope to help citizens hold on to democracy. We cannot flag on elections, but neither can we put all our eggs in that basket.

Ultimately, my message boils down to this: now is the time to applaud inclusion of more and new voices; but also the time to be vigilant against populist appeals. In response, we need to redouble our efforts across the full range of areas I've touched upon. We have to be champions working to truly empower the new voices struggling to be heard in our hemisphere, and do so at all levels so that there is true and, if you will, competing representations so that checks and balances can be preserved. We should seize the opportunities it presents with more informed programmatic choices, not remain stuck in elite-centered, capital city-based democracy promotion efforts. It will take all of us, in the public and private sector, here and across the Hemisphere, to consolidate truly representative and effective democracies in the Americas for all citizens. We should not settle for anything less.



Let me close with a little bit of political theory, as it informs and grounds my thinking.

There are two reasons I believe that we can succeed if we will do more and be more creative. First, as a believer in natural law and having a universalist, humanist outlook, I believe that all people are essentially alike in their hopes and aspirations. That is, every man and woman basically wants to have a better life for themselves and their children. That goes not only for material needs but also for things like not wanting to be abused for their beliefs, not wanting their children to be punished for being something the government doesn't like, not wanting to be denied the fruits of their labor and talents arbitrarily, among many other examples we could cite. I know that there are exceptions and aberrations: some cultures are much more communal or deferential to authority. But we find over and over again that once people are given a chance to experience or even to think about liberty, they naturally embrace it and demand more of it. Maybe Anglo-Americans are more habituated to this, Europeans, too, generally. But wherever people have purpled their finger or punched a chad or touched a screen; wherever they have gotten the local official to build a foot bridge or stop the police from demanding bribes, or thrown those malefactors out of office for not doing such, they are more and more emboldened to have what is naturally theirs by right. And what is theirs by right is to be free and to have justice and to self-govern. The more that free people around the world help them realize this—in their minds and in their daily lives—the better.

Second, in doing this work, I'm reminded of the American Founders and our War for Independence. One of the main reasons it all worked out is

that we had the philosophical and organizational and leadership support to first be motivated to act, then to actually do it and succeed. After all, we had been practicing self-government for centuries. What I mean is that the British colonists drew on a tradition of several hundred years, beginning with Magna Carta, of citizens being ever more increasingly in charge of their affairs, in charge of their governors. Fits and starts, set-backs, hypocrisy, sure, all of that is present in the story. But the simple fact of the matter is that when a critical mass of people emerged, ready to challenge abuses and usurpations of long practiced habits of self government, they acted. Citizens knew their rights; government re-learned its place.

In fact, one of the reasons the Founders felt justified in the War for Independence is that they were not simply revolting and throwing all to the wind and embarking on a disordered and chaotic path of idealistic and emotion driven politics (as the French were soon to do after them); rather, they had their own local officials that they knew and understood and trusted. They WERE those officials in many cases.

They cherished what they had, and therefore had an interest in fixing the "top" by means of their experience at the lower levels. It made for a pretty orderly transition to a new sustained, rational, constitutional, democratic republic, with competing centers of power, preserving the checks and balances.

My hope is not that our work sparks violent revolutions, of course, but that the free world is helping oppressed and ignored peoples find their voice and know their rights AND build lasting democracy, from top to bottom,

from side to side, as deep as it is wide, and as layered and nuanced as necessary to properly diffuse power. And that, my friends and colleagues, is a *long term* effort.

Thank you.