

Security, Democracy and Individual Freedoms in Latin America

Increasingly, security, democracy and individual freedoms are becoming topics of attention and debate in international forums. Latin America is high on the agenda, due to the insecurity that threatens democratic regimes in certain countries of the region and the implications for civil rights.

The question posed by some analysts is whether improved security will help safeguard democratic values and individual freedoms. In a recent issue of *Perspectiva* magazine, Aurelio F. Concheso, director of Venezuela's Centro de Divulgación del Conocimiento Económico (CEDICE), writes, "events in Venezuela should alert us to the danger that an ostensibly democratic regime that can claim legitimate origins, but is illegitimate in its behavior, can manipulate the need for security to consolidate its hold on power at the expense of the majority popular will."

The very notion of security is a difficult concept to define. An Inter-American Development Bank seminar on the topic on late 2002 concluded that security is not merely a question of public order, but also implies political, social and economic considerations, with national and global dimensions. Jorge Mario Eastman, advisor to the secretary general of the Organization of American States on hemispheric security, terrorism and drugs, argued that "in a continent that encompasses such a broad range of geographies and populations, where global power coexists with unequal development and enormous asymmetries in military and economic capacity, and where the range of interests is as broad as it is diverse, the notion of who is the enemy and who should face him requires a deep level of debate."

Some countries in the region have oriented their policies around the concept of "democratic security": placing the nation's security forces under the civil control of democratically elected governments. According to this view, security and democracy go hand in hand. Colombian President Alvaro Uribe advocates this approach but takes it even further, insisting that "the goal of democratic authority is to ensure compliance with the constitution and the laws of the state through cooperation between the people, the security forces and the judicial branch."

Richard A. Posner, a law professor at the University of Chicago, argues that it is impossible to establish either security or individual freedoms as a priority. "Both are important, and their relative importance changes over time and according to the situation," he maintains. "The greater the threat to national security of a specific activity, the stronger the arguments to repress that activity, even at some cost to personal freedom."

A different view is expressed by Fernando Carrillo, a columnist for *Cambio* magazine. "After September 11, the balance between security and democracy is

heavily tilted toward the former, with the sacrifice of individual rights and public freedoms justified by the fight against a new enemy," he writes. "The mere fact of reviving torture as a tool in the war against terrorism shows the magnitude of the reversal in the debate about preserving basic rights in times of insecurity."

What's needed is a functioning system of hemispheric security that goes as far as possible to reconcile democratic values and principles (transparency and ethics, balance of powers, access to information, freedom of the press and of expression, etc.) with the practical imperatives facing the countries of the region. Before this can happen, however, the nations involved must agree to two basic prerequisites: the defense of a democratic system of government, and peace as the cornerstone of foreign policy.

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