

# Threats to Democracy in the Americas

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Latin America has made steady progress toward establishing democratic political systems in recent decades, and the democracies that have emerged have been surprisingly enduring in spite of major economic stresses. It may be too early to say that the oscillations between democracy and authoritarianism that characterized Latin American politics during the twentieth century have come to a rest, but elections have become the nearly-universally accepted means of political succession, and for the most part they are free and fair. Even so, a gloomy mood has gripped the region: it is not the fear of a return to military rule that weighs on the minds of Latin American democrats so much as the disillusionment that accompanies the creeping erosion of the quality of democracy. This change of attitude is particularly evident in the Andean region where events in early 2000 suggest a worrying reversal of the process of democratization.

Any analysis of trends in the region as a whole necessarily finesses subtle differences between individual countries and groups of countries. The options for Latin America vary greatly, and must be qualified by the acknowledgment that, from the perspective of democratization, there are at least two Latin Americas. The first Latin America has made progress toward achieving electoral democracy and good governance, and the prospects for further democratization are encouraging. This includes countries like Costa Rica, Uruguay, Chile (in spite of the fact that it has not completed the transition to democracy), the Commonwealth Caribbean, where support for democracy is comparable to European levels, and recent progress has also been observed in Argentina, Brazil and Mexico. The second Latin America includes the electoral autocracies of Peru, Bolivia, Venezuela, and Ecuador, where the formalities of democratic rule have been preserved while its spirit has been violated. Here, public support for democracy is more incoherent, ambivalent, and volatile.

While problems in these countries are now catching the attention of the international community and the Organization of the American States (OAS), there is still a need to assess the scope of threats to democracy in the Americas and to explore avenues and options for government actions at the domestic and multilateral level.

## RÉSUMÉ

Au cours des dernières décennies, l'Amérique latine n'a cessé de progresser vers l'établissement de régimes politiques démocratiques, et les démocraties qui en ont découlé ont manifesté une résistance surprenante en dépit d'importantes tensions économiques. Il est peut-être trop tôt pour dire si le va-et-vient entre la démocratie et l'autoritarisme, si caractéristique de la politique en Amérique latine au cours du 20<sup>e</sup> siècle, a cessé d'exister. Mais ce que l'on peut dire, c'est que les élections sont devenues le moyen le plus communément accepté de succession politique, et la plupart du temps ces élections se tiennent dans un climat de liberté et de justice. Et pourtant, un climat morose règne dans toute la région : il ne s'agit pas d'une crainte quelconque d'un retour des régimes militaires qui assombrit l'esprit des démocrates latino-américains, mais plutôt du désenchantement qui découle de l'érosion sans cesse croissante de la qualité de la démocratie. Il s'agit d'un phénomène tout particulièrement évident dans la région andine, où les événements qui se sont déroulés au début de l'an 2000 montrent une inquiétante volteface dans le processus de démocratisation.

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