

# The Democracy Show: U.S. Rhetoric at the OAS Out of Touch With the Americas

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The 35th General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS) concluded in Fort Lauderdale, Florida on June 7th. From all appearances, the outcome was disappointment for the Bush Administration.

The U.S. opened the sessions by highlighting its key goals: “strengthening democracy,” and “promoting free trade.” Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice referred to these themes in her opening speech, and these concepts were the headlines in media coverage of the Assembly’s first day. What the soaring rhetoric obscured were two specific policy initiatives that reflected narrow geopolitical and corporate interests: a U.S.-led initiative to transform the OAS Democratic Charter in order to isolate the government of Venezuela, and a big push for approval of CAFTA - the U.S.-Central America-Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement - a trade deal that would actually increase huge and costly trade barriers on medicines and other patented products. CAFTA, if enacted, would pave the way for the proposed “Free Trade Area of the Americas” that would encompass the entire Hemisphere, save Cuba.

The fact that these initiatives failed to move forward is merely the latest example of how the U.S. is out step with the rest of the region. It also highlights the Bush administration’s declining influence in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The U.S. sought to alter the Democratic Charter so that the OAS could take action on governments “democratically elected that do not govern democratically.” In statements to the media, U.S. government officials made clear that this refers specifically to the government of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. But the Venezuelan government has been elected several times, and its record on democracy and civil liberties including freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, and freedom of association compares favorably with its predecessors and with other Latin American countries. These facts were not lost on the majority of OAS member countries that refused to go along with the U.S. proposal.

This effort also rang hollow in light of the OAS’ failure to invoke the Charter in Haiti after the democratically elected government of Jean Bertrand Aristide was ousted in a violent coup d’etat last year. Article XX of the Charter states that “In the event of an unconstitutional alteration of the constitutional regime that seriously impairs the democratic order in a member state, any member state or the Secretary General may request the immediate convocation of the Permanent Council to undertake a collective assessment of the situation and to take such decisions as it deems appropriate.”

Since Aristide's ouster, the interim government has persecuted his supporters, including continuing to hold over 700 of them in overcrowded prison cells – many without charges filed against them. Despite this clear case of “alteration of the constitutional regime” where the OAS' Democratic Charter would apply and as well widespread violations of Haiti's constitution and international law, the OAS has failed to act decisively in support of constitutional democracy in Haiti. As if to punctuate the double standards, representatives of Haiti's unconstitutional regime were able to participate fully in the proceedings of the General Assembly.

U.S. efforts to advance its trade agenda also went nowhere. President Bush himself made an appeal at the OAS to save the major trade policy objective of his second term: CAFTA. On Monday, June 6, Bush addressed the Assembly and ended his speech with a long pitch for the supposed benefits CAFTA would bring to Central America and the U.S., including claiming that the agreement would “bring economic growth to Latin America.” This also failed to impress the OAS delegates, and it is no wonder why - the evidence does not support Bush's claims. The past 25 years – the years in which the “Washington consensus” policies of trade liberalization and IMF policy prescriptions have held sway – have seen dismal cumulative per capita income growth in Latin America of only 12%. This is all the more striking when compared to the region's per capita income growth from 1960 – 1979, which was 80%.

Bush's lobbying for CAFTA at the OAS was a sign of weakness, not of strength. The trade deal would affect only 7 of the OAS's 34 members. Not surprisingly, the speech met with little enthusiasm from most delegates who have no direct stake in the agreement.

But for the U.S. it was all part of the show as it used the OAS to stage photo-ops and generate sound bites about “democracy” and “free trade,” which was inadvertently illustrated immediately following Rice's opening remarks. As the lights dimmed and the audience watched elaborate song and dance numbers from professional performers in sparkling costumes, one delegate remarked, “Now we know that everything from this point on will be a show.”

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