

6-9-2005

States Show New Independence At OAS General Assembl

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "States Show New Independence At OAS General Assembl." (2005). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9313>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

States Show New Independence At OAS General Assembl

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Central America

Published: 2005-06-09

The 35th General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS) opened in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, June 5 with a diplomatic confrontation occasioned by a US proposal for a "pre-emptive democratic intervention" agenda for the hemispheric organization. The proposal called for intervention without the consent of the country in question.

This was the first meeting presided over by newly elected Secretary-General Jose Miguel Insulza (see NotiSur, 2005-05-05), and his first opportunity to mediate an issue brought on by the same new willingness on the part of many member states to stand up to US domination that won him election to his post.

The disagreement began with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's statement at the opening of the meeting. "Together, we must insist that leaders who are elected democratically have a responsibility to govern democratically," said Rice. "Governments that fail to meet this crucial standard must be accountable to the OAS." The statement brought sharp reaction, initially from Venezuela and Brazil.

Venezuelan Foreign Minister Ali Rodriguez said the OAS should not "carry out evaluations of the status of democracy" in member states. Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim agreed, saying, "Democracy cannot be imposed."

Rice swings and misses; Insulza calls strike two

Rice's push was widely interpreted as an attempt, her second, to isolate Venezuela. Her first attempt, during a recent swing through four Latin American countries, failed as she was repeatedly rebuffed on the issue (see NotiSur, 2005-05-13). Rice was thought by many observers to be on shaky ground as she based her argument on the Inter-American Democratic Charter, adopted Sept. 11, 2001, contending, "In this document, we all affirmed our intention to defend our people's right to democracy. Now we must act on this pledge."

In her enthusiasm, Rice neglected Article 18 of the charter, which states that any outside intervention to help deal with democracy issues requires the consent of the country involved.

Insulza supported the language of the document. "From my point of view," he said, "you can never use any mechanism without the consent of the country." The reaction that erupted deep in the Southern Cone found its way northward as Guatemala, Panama, the Dominican Republic all of which had felt the sting of a nonconsensual US democratic intervention Trinidad and Tobago, and Canada joined Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Peru, and Surinam in presenting a proposal rejecting the notion of forced intervention in accordance with the charter.

The proposal emphasized preserving and strengthening the document by limiting assistance on democratic issues to countries "that ask for it." The proposal was the initiative of Chile, another country that has been living with the consequences of uninvited intervention in its democracy. US policy also took some flanking fire on Cuba, the "empty chair at the table."

Calling Cuba's 1962 exclusion from the OAS "an anomaly," Brazil's Amorim said the time had come to rethink the organization's 1962 expulsion. "Already in 1994, Brazil, with the support of other countries, proposed that a dialogue be opened on the situation of Cuba," said Amorim.

Directing his comments to Rice, Amorim said, "Madam President [of the assembly], a reference has been made to an empty seat in our organization, and we consider that this is an anomaly." He said it was not the position of his government to judge the policies of another state, "but I want to reiterate that, to our understanding, cooperation is the best way to ensure that the objectives of the charter are achieved."

It was Rice who first evoked the empty chair image in her opening remarks, claiming it as a "place that will someday be filled by the representatives of a free and democratic Cuba." The remarks, observed by members of the anti-Cuba congressional delegation from Florida, were part of a strategy that included a request from several former presidents and legislators of the hemisphere to prepare for the eventual demise of President Fidel Castro.

A document, *Compromiso para la Democracia en Cuba*, was presented to Insulza. Among its signers were former Costa Rica President Luis Alberto Monge (1982-1987) and Uruguay's former President Luis Alberto Lacalle (1990-1995). The two jointly announced their intention to work "for the establishment of democracy in Cuba so that one day Cubans might exercise their rights and live with dignity." The treatise was the product of a seminar sponsored by the Instituto de Estudios Cubanoamericanos of the University of Miami, held the Saturday before the start of the General Assembly.

Others signing the *Compromiso* were former leaders Vaclav Havel of the Czech Republic, Kim Campbell of Canada, Phillip Dimitrov of Bulgaria, Mart Laar of Estonia, and Gabriel Joaquin Llano, a legislator from Argentina, and still others from member and nonmember states.

In an interview with the Spanish daily *El Pais* just before the opening of the General Assembly, Insulza appeared to signal he was unlikely to align with one or the other extremes of the Cuba issue. "I believe that the world and America are used to the presence of someone who was there when President Eisenhower was governing the United States and the coming afterwards of a lot of North American presidents. For me, the subject of Cuba will continue being political, and hopefully the hemisphere will come to some agreement about how to improve the situation."

In that interview, Insulza indicated that he was taking a broader view of the region's problems and was not necessarily focused on letting the meeting become the vehicle of narrow or vindictive agendas. He said that Latin America is not the poorest region of the world, but it is the most unjust. "I'm not speaking of North America or the Caribbean, but of Latin America, where the levels of distribution of wealth are the most unequal in the world and where there are 200 million people

below the poverty line." Insulza was wary of the emergence of populism with "easy answers" in the region.

At the same time, he said he recognized that democracy is intimately linked to economic and social development, "but that's one thing, and the other thing to say is that it is harder to have democracy if there are many impoverished people. In any case, that can never be a pretext not to have it." Insulza's view of democracy was succinct, if undifferentiated in that he appeared to recognize only one form of it. "For me, democracy is something clear; one knows it when one sees it," he said. "Democracy is free elections and permanent liberty of citizens. It is freedom of expression, of association. It is parties, respect for minorities and for the opposition."

George W. Bush, the US president, also spoke on the link between economy and democracy, but for him the maldistribution of wealth was not a stopper for his support of free trade. He told the assembly, "An Americas linked by trade is less likely to be divided by resentment and false ideologies. An Americas where all our people live in prosperity will be more peaceful. And an Americas whose countries have reduced the barriers to trade among ourselves will be a more competitive region in a global economy." Bush reduced the issue to two visions, his, founded on representative governments and free markets, and another that "seeks to roll back the democratic progress of the past two decades by playing to fear, pitting neighbor against neighbor, and blaming others for their own failures to provide for their people."

With that premise, which some saw as a slam at Venezuela and others saw as a projection, Bush segued into a pitch for approval in the US Congress for the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). The Bush view evoked ire among countries that want to see the Social Charter of the Americas redacted and passed. That is the instrument that would guarantee economic, social, and cultural rights, and the one, said the critics, the US has declined to support or even mention.

In other developments at the OAS meeting, Secretary Rice said that for the moment the US is ruling out sending troops to Haiti where a UN force led by Brazil is facing a losing battle, with violent upheavals occasioned by planned elections (see NotiCen, 2005-01-20). The US has, however, evacuated all nonessential personnel from its embassy there.

But in El Salvador, said Rice, the US will fund a police academy to train an international crime-fighting force. "The US is working with El Salvador to create in that country an international academy of police officers. This institute will train officers from the entire hemisphere to improve protection of all their citizens and serve them better. Also, we are entertaining the possibility of working with Peru to expand the reach of the academy to South America."

In the end, the 35th General Assembly appeared to reflect a growing shift in loci of power in the hemisphere, away from the unquestionable domination by the US that has characterized the organization since its birth. "It may have been the first OAS meeting in over 30 years to be held in the United States, but it was also the first time really that we have seen Latin America being vocal that they are not going to complacently follow suit after the United States," said Sarah Schaffer, a research fellow at the Washington think-tank the Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA).

As a parting shot at the US preemptive strategy, and perhaps to Insulza's one-size-fits-all democratic views as well, the Latin American countries added to the final declaration of the meeting a statement that all countries have the right to decide their own "political status" and their own economic, social, and cultural development.

-- End --