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The word that always seems to modify democracy whenever Latin Americans talk about their countries is fragile. At a recent meeting with journalism students in Lima, Peruvian Ombud Jorge Santistevan de Noriega described the country as having "very weak institutions and a weak democracy without political parties." Although the country returned to the democratic fold in 1980, after 13 years of left- and right-wing military leaders, Peru continues to struggle to make democracy mean more than going to the polls every five years.

President Alberto Fujimori's 1992 self-coup, in which he closed Congress and the judiciary, was supported by nearly 80% of the population. Fujimori justified his move by pointing to the country's entrenched political parties, which were corrupt and ineffective. Six years later, as Santistevan de Noriega points out, Peru is basically a nation without political parties. In recent municipal elections, independents captured nearly 75% of the country's local offices. Many political groups that began as independent movements, including Fujimori's Cambio 90/Nueva Mayoria coalition and Lima Mayor Alberto Andrade's Somos Peru the two men are leading presidential candidates for the 2000 elections are run by modern-day strongmen.

The fragility of the region's democratic institutions, however, is best seen in Chile, which has become even more sharply polarized by the recent arrest of former dictator and retired Gen. Augusto Pinochet in a London clinic (see NotiSur, 10/23/98 and 11/06/98). Chile has been going through a "transition to democracy" since 1989, when Pinochet lost a plebiscite that asked Chileans if he should remain in office. Patricio Aylwin's center-left coalition took office in 1990 after defeating Pinochet's hand-picked candidate, Hernan Buchi. President Eduardo Frei, with the same coalition, won easily in 1994.

Despite more than eight years of civilian rule, Chile's democracy continues to be shaped by vestiges of Pinochet's dictatorship (1973-90), such as the 1978 amnesty law, which blocked investigations into human rights abuses; the presence in Congress of nine appointed senators, which swings control of the Senate to the right; and Pinochet's appointment as a senator-for-life, which he also put in place while dictator. Pinochet's arrest and possible extradition to Spain to stand trial on charges of torture and genocide has exposed the depth of divisions within Chilean society. While no one predicts a return to military rule, fear is increasing that violence could erupt if Pinochet is forced to stand trial for human rights abuses outside Chile.

"We have been able to see that [human rights issues] cannot be corrected by covering them up," said Copiapo Bishop Fernando Ariztia Ruiz, president of the Chilean Conference of Bishops. "The

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wound is much deeper and continues to surface. As long as this wound is not healed, it will continue to fester, and at times will produce a strong irritation throughout the body [of the nation] as a whole."

Chile is not alone in its struggle to build a modern democracy after years of iron-fisted military rule. In Paraguay, which has been grappling with the meaning of democracy since a 1989 coup overthrew Gen. Alfredo Stroessner (1954-89), rumors of a return to a military government continue to surface. In early October, President Raul Cubas, who has only been in office four months, laughed off the threat of a military coup against his government. Recent history, however, demonstrates that the threat is far from being merely a dream of some power-hungry general. "Democracy has not been consolidated in Paraguay," said journalist Ignacio Martinez of the daily newspaper ABC Color.

The country's current problems stem from an attempted coup in 1996 against then president Juan Carlos Wasmosy. The coup was led by Gen. Lino Oviedo, who later captured the ruling Partido Colorado (Asociacion Nacional Republicana, ANR) presidential nomination last year. Wasmosy eventually put Oviedo behind bars, moving running mate Cubas Grau to the top spot. He won handily and pardoned Oviedo after only a few days in office. "Our country has been run for more than 50 years by the Partido Colorado, and divisions within the party can easily polarize the country to the brink of a military coup," said Martinez. "We cannot take democracy for granted in Paraguay."

In Venezuela, which saw its last military leader ousted 40 years ago, rumors of a military coup are on the lips of many politicians as presidential elections approach. Several middle-level officers have been arrested for allegedly plotting against armed forces head Gen. Ruben Rojas. Leading presidential candidate Hugo Chavez, who staged an unsuccessful coup attempt in 1992, in turn has accused Rojas of plotting against him. Chavez claims military higher-ups want to assassinate him (see other article in this issue.)

While constitutional democracy exists in nearly all Latin American countries, and chances are slim that they will return to the dictatorships of decades past, the military is never far behind the scene. In the past year, rumors of military discontent have surfaced in nearly all South American countries except Brazil and Uruguay. Central America, struggling to recover from decades of civil war, continues to solidify its peace processes, with special emphasis on reducing and dismantling the security forces accused of widespread human rights abuses. But Central America-

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