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Organization of American States Lacks Credibility Among Some Member Countries

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Category/Department: Region
Published: 2012-07-13

The Organization of American States (OAS) and all its affiliated institutions—the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB), the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (Rio Treaty), the Inter-American Defense College (IADC), and the Inter-American Human Rights Commission (IACHR)—remained in the eye of the hurricane when, at the closing of its 42nd General Assembly in Bolivia in June, member countries approved a six-month period in which to analyze a program of "deep reforms in the structure of the inter-American system."

A month and a half after US President Barack Obama received strong displays of rejection from the entire region for US policy regarding Cuba at the Summit of the Americas in Cartagena, Colombia, the US was once again, at the meeting in Bolivia, the target of criticism. On this occasion, the US was accused of "using and manipulating the OAS for its own interests," allowing the host, Bolivian President Evo Morales, to say, "There are only two paths possible for the OAS: death at the service of the empire or renewal to serve the people."

Morales, Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa—the only president invited to participate in the assembly, which usually includes only the foreign ministers of the members countries—and other delegations insisted that, rather than seeking "the death" of the continental organization, they aspired to a "refounding."

While there was no final declaration and everything was reduced to entrusting a special commission to write a report with the proposal for "deep reforms" and suggestions for restructuring the inter-American human rights system, in the two days of General Assembly sessions, the OAS and its institutional system took a beating.

Morales' opening salvos made the meaning of "refounding" clear. And it was understood as well that that concept was not a contradiction for the countries that in December 2011 gave birth to the Confederación de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños (CELAC), an organization that was described at the time as an OAS without the US and Canada.

"Refounding," for Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Antigua and Barbuda, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Dominica—the countries that comprise the Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América (ALBA)—means abolishing all those affiliated institutions mentioned above, plus eliminating US military bases in the region and definitively closing the former School of the Americas (SOA), renamed in 2001 the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC) and moved from Panama to Fort Benning, Georgia. Although neither the bases nor WHINSEC are part of the institutional structure of the OAS, historically they have been associated with it.

Anti-US sentiment evident at meeting
The OAS General Assembly, like the Summit of the Americas in Cartagena, turned into an anti-US forum. Perhaps that is why, anticipating what would happen, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton...
did not go to Bolivia but sent in her place Roberta Jacobson, assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs.

The criticisms were so strong that one columnist for the Bolivian daily La Razón described them as "attacks" and said that, in a highly unusual move, Jacobson opted to leave early. So early that the speech she had prepared was left with US Ambassador to Bolivia Carmen Lomellin, who read it in the name of her superior. The speech simply ratified the US's commitment to democracy.

Jacobson's unexpected departure from La Paz occurred after Morales said that, "since its foundation in 1948, in the bipolar political world, in the lead-up to of the Cold War, the OAS has always facilitated interventions in various countries, to cover for dictatorships or to support them, to repress and punish social movements, but, fundamentally, to combat socialism. And, consequently, not only social movements but also political parties with an anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and anti-colonialist inclination. In sum, the OAS has only served to perpetuate US interests."

Morales, Correa, and the ALBA foreign ministers know very well that the IADC and the CID are really museum pieces. They also know that the military bases and the former SOA have nothing to do with the OAS structure. And they are aware that the last time that the Rio Treaty was applied was in 1965, when the US Marines invaded the Dominican Republic to overthrow the constitutional government of President Juan Bosch.

**IACHR seen by some governments as biased**

It is clear, then, that the real objective is to attack the IACHR. "We insist that we do not want the end but the refounding of the OAS," said Morales at the end of his 36-minute speech, "and that is why the universalization of the IACHR is important, to supervise the enforcement of human rights not only in Latin America but also in the US, and if it does not want to protect human rights in the US, then it would be better for the IACHR to disappear."

Later, when Jacobson was en route back to Washington, it was Correa's turn. After pointing out that the only choice the OAS has is to "revolutionize itself or disappear," Correa criticized the IACHR and "the enormous lobbying and manipulating power that nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) financed by North American or German foundations have over it." He ended his speech by rejecting US imposition in decisions related to human rights in the region, and he condemned the US for not having ratified the American Convention on Human Rights (ACHR). "There are intolerable and aberrant things. The IACHR headquarters is in Washington when the US is not a signatory to nor does it adhere to the San Jose Pact [the ACHR]."

Despite his attacks, Correa admitted that "the IACHR played a valuable role in the struggle against the dictatorships" during the 1970s, but he added, "Now that those same countries are governed by democrats, they are treated worse than the former dictatorial regimes."

Peru's Foreign Minister Rafael Roncagliolo agreed with Correa's criticism of a case against his country accepted by the IACHR. "It is unacceptable that these gentlemen consider that the era of democracy is the same as the era of the dictatorship," he said.

**NGOs fear changes could weaken human rights protections**

The debate had barely opened when, on June 7, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and 250 other NGOs from throughout the region—the agencies criticized by Correa—came
out in support of the IACHR and said that "the reforms that are being studied aim to modify the bylaws and the regulations of the commission and seek to reduce it competencies, weakening the general system of protection of human rights in the Americas."

The agencies hope for a change of orientation in the six months that the OAS allotted for adopting a final decision, and they hope that "the debate allows reaching a solution that strengthens the autonomy and independence of the IACHR." Like Correa, they stressed the IACHR's role in the 20th century when it condemned the repressive actions of the dictatorships.

On July 3, Santiago Canton, the jurist who served as the IACHR's executive secretary for 11 years, until June 30, joined the controversy. Canton, an expert in humanitarian matters, spoke with the international news agencies the same day that the commission began the final phase of selecting his successor from among five candidates. He did so specifically to warn them about the surprises that they might encounter. Without saying so directly, he indicated that the criticisms made during the General Assembly had a foundation.

Canton complained that the IACHR is subjected to "daily" pressures from the powerful countries and from the OAS Secretary General José Miguel Insulza, who in human rights matters acts pursuant to "unclear" interests, whom he did not identify by name. "Thus," he said, "the most important thing is that the person who is chosen knows how to respond to pressures" that are emptying the IACHR of content.

Canton extended his sights to the OAS as a whole and made an observation that should put defenders of the aging organization on the alert. He said that the OAS acted with "slowness in the face of the Paraguayan crisis"—President Fernando Lugo was overthrown on June 22 through a hasty legislative coup and the OAS secretary general arrived on an observer mission nine days later—while the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) and the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR) acted "with the necessary speed."

The 11 UNASUR foreign ministers were in Asunción on June 22, when the Paraguayan Senate had not yet begun its summary impeachment of Lugo, and MERCOSUR suspended the new regime on June 25, accusing it of breaking the "democratic clause" signed by all member countries.

"This space, bad or good, belonged to the OAS but was occupied by MERCOSUR and UNASUR, which shows that there is a subregional mechanism that is functioning and takes away from the OAS what historically belonged to it," said Canton.

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