

# MORE RIGHTS FOR MORE PEOPLE

## REVITALIZING THE ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES

*Luis Almagro*

**T**HROUGHOUT its 127 years of existence, the Organization of American States (OAS)—the oldest regional organization in the world—has evolved analogously with the political and socio-economic development of its 35 member states. From the end of the nineteenth century and the geopolitical framework of the Cold War, to the “triumph” of liberal democracy and the onset of the wave of democratization, the OAS has fulfilled its role as the premier political forum of the Western Hemisphere.

Although it is true that the OAS echoes the realities of the times, as well as the will and mandates of its member states, the cornerstone of the Organization has always been—and must always remain—the people, the citizens of the Americas. Strengthening the notion of a citizen-centered multilateralism—by way of improving the democratic hu-

man rights, security, and development conditions of the people of the Hemisphere—is the ultimate *raison d'être* of the OAS.

In view of this core purpose, the current administration (2015–2020) of the OAS General Secretariat, which I am proud to lead, has designed and adopted a new strategy that intends to transform the OAS into an organization that is closer to the people. This is the basis for our guiding principle, held together under the slogan “More Rights for More People.”

**I**t is important to note that the idea of an OAS at the service of the citizens of the Americas is not new. The OAS Charter, signed in 1948, is a symbol of the agreement of member states “in the name of their people.” Therefore, the “people” represent a fundamental element of the Organization’s found-

*Luis Almagro is Secretary General of the Organization of American States and a former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Oriental Republic of Uruguay. You may follow him on Twitter @Almagro\_OEA2015.*



Photo: OAS

*Luis Almagro*

ing document. Similarly, the Inter-American Democratic Charter (IADC), signed unanimously by the member states in 2011, introduces a new right, democracy, for its key stakeholder, the people of the Hemisphere.

Historically, the OAS has evolved mainly as a function of the development of its member states, in addition to the region’s geopolitical trends that have evolved over the course of its history. The priorities of the OAS have thus shifted accordingly, at times changing in a fashion that has mirrored ideological divisions instead of catering to the needs of the citizens of its

member states. These changing organizational priorities can be described broadly from the perspective of three transitions.

### THREE OAS TRANSITIONS

**T**he first began in 1948—the year in which the modern-day OAS was created on the foundation of the International Union of American Republics, dating back to 1890. For over four decades, the global post-World War II setting and the realities of a bipolar world influenced the role and work of the Organization. Sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the maintenance of regional peace were essential drivers.

Given that the priority for the United States and its allies was to eliminate any communist threat in the Hemisphere—including the many nascent revolutionary movements in Latin America—security challenges were the main focus of the organization, while democratic principles and human rights were largely ignored. In the process, dictatorships were largely tolerated.

The wave of democratization that swept the region in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the breakup of the USSR, represented a new era for the Americas, ushering in the second transition phase of the OAS.

During this time, the strategy shifted towards the promotion of democracy as the political regime *par excellence*. Given that context, the state remained the key stakeholder of the Organization, and the extent to which it adopted and embraced democratic institutions was a priority. Many important agreements that renewed support for democracy—which included new tools to defend democracy where it might be threatened—were reached by member states during this time, including the Declaration of Santiago (1991), Resolution 1080 (1991), and the amendment

to the OAS Charter by the Protocol of Washington (1992).

This did not mean that the region was exempt from crisis pertaining to democratic governance, as illustrated by the cases of Haiti (1991), Peru (1992), Guatemala (1993), and Paraguay (1996). However, it does show that the regional and global winds favored liberal democracy and consensus-building. And it validated the participation of international actors, such as the OAS, in special missions that contributed to the reestablishment of constitutional order.

During this second phase, the emphasis of the multilateral regional agenda was far more centered on regime change and the preservation of democratic system, rather than on the individual.

The significantly high level of consensus amongst member states in 2001, which the signing of the IADC wholly embodied, was paradoxically the beginning of the end of effective agreement-building in the Hemisphere in the twenty-first century.

Fueled by growing ideological divides in the Americas—summed up by

*Strengthening the notion of a citizen-centered multilateralism—by way of improving the democratic human rights, security, and development conditions of the people of the Hemisphere—is the ultimate raison d'être of the OAS.*

the dichotomy of the bloc of countries known as the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) versus the non-ALBA bloc—a paralysis and lack of agreement between member states ensued in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The immobility and deteriorating credibility of the Organization were intangible casualties of ideologically-driven agendas, which brought both good and bad news for the citizens of Latin America and the Caribbean.

The good news was the explosion of OAS social programs and thus the empowerment of millions of people who had previously lived on the margins of democracy. The commodity boom economic “supercycle” (2002–2012) allowed for government expenditures to tackle ever-pressing and persistent human development challenges such as poverty, inequality, and social exclusion.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, for instance, poverty decreased from 41.6 percent to 25.3 percent, whilst extreme poverty decreased from 24.5 percent to 12.3 percent, between 2003 and 2012. Also, the size of the middle class grew to such an extent that it surpassed the number of people living in poverty.

The bad news was that democratic backsliding took place in some countries, and there was no unified voice

that denounced this fact from within the Organization.

In 2012, the OAS began revitalizing its role, increasingly putting into focus its most important audience: the people of the Americas. As democracy in the region continued to develop—while at the same time dire economic prospects loomed and the risk of losing recently achieved social gains became real—OAS-led multilateralism centered its efforts on the individual.

The hope today is that in this new and current phase, principle will trump ideology.

In the Social Charter of the Americas, adopted in 2012, the countries of the region acknowledged that they have “a responsibility to develop and implement comprehensive social protection policies and programs, based on the principles of universality, solidarity, equality, nondiscrimination, and equity that give priority to persons living in conditions of poverty and vulnerability, taking into account their national circumstances.”

Other resolutions further endorsed this view, including Resolution 2814 entitled “Strategic Vision of the OAS,” adopted during the 44<sup>th</sup> Regular Session of the General Assembly on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2014 in Asunción, Paraguay. It recognized that “today’s multilateralism calls for an OAS that is closer to

peoples” to better meet the challenges and opportunities of the twenty-first century.

In order to achieve this objective, the resolution also resolved that the work of the OAS should henceforth correspond to four equal and interdependent pillars: human rights, democracy, security, and development.

**A COMPLEX BALANCE**

To become a reality, formally adopted resolutions have to be accompanied by the political will to implement. In this sense, I have repeatedly stated that the OAS is more concerned with seeking practical solutions to enduring problems of the region than with rhetoric and stridency in positions guided by one ideology or another. After all, there are no party colors or ideological clashes involved in trying to, for example, provide better educational opportunities for children from impoverished households; generate more job opportunities for disconnected youth in extremely violent societies; eliminate discrimination; or foster effective public management.

With the underlying guiding principle of “More Rights for More People,”

all the pillars have to be addressed simultaneously, from the perspective of the citizens of the region. In other words, a complex balance has to be maintained, for one pillar cannot be pursued to the detriment of another.

*I have repeatedly stated that the OAS is more concerned with seeking practical solutions to enduring problems of the region than with rhetoric and stridency in positions guided by one ideology or another.*

There is no point in expanding social and economic ones, if political ones are curtailed in the process. There is no point in expanding political rights and establishing a solid electoral democracy, if the right to speak freely and the right to protest is punishable by law. There is no point in achieving

safe societies, if personal freedoms have to be compromised in the process.

These are just a few of the challenges that the citizens of the Americas encounter on a daily basis. And, consequently, these are some of the pressing issues that a revitalized OAS faces going forward.

There are already clear signs that a new OAS is tackling the human rights, democracy, security, and development challenges of the Hemisphere with the interests of the peoples of the Americas at heart. During the emergency situation on the border between Venezuela and Colombia in August 2015,

for instance, emphasis was of course placed on increasing border cooperation and bilateral dialogue between the two countries, but even more so on addressing the humanitarian problem that emerged.

In the city of Cucuta, Colombia, thousands of Colombians who had been forced to leave their homes in Venezuela suffered in extreme and harsh conditions. In my capacity as OAS Secretary-General, I visited the border zone and offered concrete OAS assistance.

In an effort to guarantee the rights of children and the right of access to education without interruption, the OAS and its educational program Virtual Educa opened the first PopUp School for displaced children affected by the situation in mid-September 2015. The opening of the school in the municipality of Villa del Rosario, as well as other planned classrooms, were concrete actions on the ground that reflected our principle of “More Rights for More People.”

**PEOPLE-CENTERED MULTILATERALISM**

There is no clearer example of a people-centered multilateralism than the response from the Office of the Secretary General to the current political situation in Venezuela. In this new phase for the Organization, silence—and the consent that it signifies—is not an option.

Although the Venezuelan government rejected the offer of the OAS to deploy an Electoral Observation Mission (EOM) for the December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015 legislative elections, I publicly expressed concern with the uneven electoral playing field. Convinced that an EOM would provide all Venezuelans with some assurance of conditions of equity and electoral justice during the vote count process, the Organization—in an unprecedented appeal—openly insisted that Venezuela request such a Mission. The OAS, as an *agent* to the *principal*, a member state, suggested a course of action that did not defy the sacred principle of non-intervention in modern international relations.

Our reasoning was simple: the OAS has the obligation to safeguard justice and transparency in elections that allows citizens to vote freely. Ignoring the multiple justified allegations and assertions of an electoral process marred by unequal conditions, intimidation or jailing of candidates, and even political violence, would essentially represent intervention. It would have meant intervention by omission, in which the Venezuelan people bore the brunt of the cost of inaction.

The same rationale was applied in the aftermath of the elections. With the prospect of a government unwilling to recognize the electoral results and set on obstructing elected officials



from taking office, it was publicly stated that, if necessary, I as OAS Secretary General would be obliged to invoke the provisions of the Inter-American Charter to defend democracy.

I strongly believe that in a democracy, the only possible path one can follow is the one that safeguards the rights of all citizens. In the case of Venezuela, this was in jeopardy. That is the main reason why the OAS took the risk of denouncing what was perceived as a threat to Venezuelans' rights. The risk of not doing so would have betrayed the notion of citizen-centered multilateralism based on the principles and obligations enshrined in the various Inter-American instruments, and ultimately would have led to the further erosion of democracy in this member state.

In whatever political context, the OAS does not side with a particular government, an official party, or opposition forcers. It sides, however, with the principles it embodies—freedom, democracy, and, above all, respect for the human rights of the citizens of the 35 member states.

**THE CENTRAL AMERICAN SPRING**

This is mainly the reason why the OAS took notice of events that were later dubbed the “Central American Spring” during the course of 2015. Dissatisfied with rampant govern-

ment corruption and impunity, Central Americans in Guatemala and Honduras took to the streets demanding greater transparency and accountability. They expressed dissatisfaction with both corruption and impunity, which erodes democracy, drives citizens away from society, and generates distrust and a perennial perception of injustice in society. Unfortunately, the losers in this situation are the weakest and poorest citizens.

In the case of Honduras, it was the government that requested OAS assistance in opening a new chapter in the fight against corruption and impunity. Shortly thereafter, both parties began designing what is now the Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH), formally launched on January 19<sup>th</sup> at OAS Headquarters in Washington, DC.

MACCIH will be composed of prosecutors, judges, and international experts who will select, advise, evaluate, and certify a group of Honduran prosecutors and judges charged with investigating and prosecuting significant cases of corruption networks. The Mission will determine the cases of corruption in which it will actively collaborate and notify the competent authorities, while functioning independently—at both financial and political levels.

The OAS has invested considerable time, effort, and resources in the es-

tablishment of MACCIH—not simply because it is mandated to respond to requests originating from a member state, but also because we believe that initiatives such as this provide greater guarantees of the OAS's ability to promote the transparency demanded by Honduran citizens.

Again, people are being placed at the core of multilateral actions.

*The OAS has been a witness to—and an active player in—the good, the bad, and the ugly of Inter-American relations in the past 125 years.*

**SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

In the development agenda of the Organization, the people-centered multilateralism—what we call “More Rights for More People”—approach also applies. OAS member states continue to struggle to reduce the impacts of disasters on the lives and livelihoods of their citizens.

While the number of deaths from disasters in the Americas has declined over the past decade, the economic, social, and environmental costs of disasters continue to outstrip the capacity of governments to cope. This negatively affects their ability to fulfill many of the critical rights set out in the Protocol of San Salvador, adopted on November 17<sup>th</sup>, 1988—including the right to development, the rights of children, the right to health, the right to food, and the right to a healthy environment.

Mindful that natural phenomena like El Niño—and more generally climate change—are increasing the risks of disasters, and recognizing that the OAS has many of the instruments and mechanisms needed to build strong hemispheric cooperation in these areas, the Organization is well positioned to use its leadership as Chair of the Inter-American Committee for Disaster

Reduction (IACNDR) to support the efforts of member states to prevent and redress the impacts of disasters and climate change, as well as to ensure that all citizens have the necessary capacity to adapt to such disasters.

Moreover, our security efforts have embraced the paradigm of crime and violence as a social phenomenon. A rights-focused security strategy that strives to understand the causes of criminal behavior has been adopted as a result of lessons learned from past policy interventions.

For instance, it is evident that large-scale incarceration can result in conflict with basic human rights, such as those stemming from overcrowded prisons. Also, the majority of individuals incarcerated for drug-related crimes are not high-level drug traffickers, but those in the lower tiers of the supply chain, or

simply habitual drug users who require treatment rather than incarceration.

Surely, it is important to reserve the right to punishment when required, but it is also paramount to safeguard human rights in order to adequately respond to such a complex and dynamic problem. The new OAS acknowledges that “More Rights for More People” requires a constant search for balance in the area of justice, as in all others.

The OAS has come a long way since the times of the International Union of American Repub-

lics. It has been a witness to—and an active player in—the good, the bad, and the ugly of Inter-American relations in the past 125 years. It is now time for a renewed and refreshed organization that is close to, and at the service of, the citizens of its member states.

It is time for a genuine, people-centered model of multilateralism to come to the fore. The leadership of the OAS is strongly committed to this outcome and determined to continue working effectively for the benefit of the peoples of the Americas. ●

[www.cirsd.org/horizons](http://www.cirsd.org/horizons)