ENTER ZIP COD GO

SEARCH OUR SITE GO

- Subscribe
- About
- Blog
- News
- Contact
- Advertise
- Archive
- Partners

ARCHIVE

From issue: **Media in the Americas: Threats to Free Speech** (Fall 2013)

AQ FEATURE

Is Brazil the New Regional Champion of Democracy?

BY Oliver Stuenkel

Don't confuse Brasília's stepped-up profile with U.S.-style democracy promotion.

Addressing the United Nations General Assembly in September 2010, U.S. President Barack Obama appealed to rising democracies around the world to help spread the democratic message, declaring that “we need your voices to speak out,” and reminding them that “part of the price of our own freedom is standing up for the freedom of others.”[1]

Many observers regarded this as wishful thinking. Democracy promotion, they argue, is a typically Western endeavor. While governments and NGOs in Europe and North America spend billions of dollars every year on democracy-related projects, emerging powers have traditionally avoided such projects—underlining the view held by some skeptics that there is no place for democracy promotion in a “post-Western world.”

Yet even the skeptics might find reason to pause when it comes to Brazil. Latin America’s largest nation has quietly turned into democracy’s “defender-in-chief,” in sharp contrast to emerging democracies in other regions, such as Turkey, South Africa or India—none of which regard democracy promotion beyond their borders as a priority.

This has not always been the case.

Despite Brazil’s dominant position in the region, it usually shied away from intervening in its neighbors’ internal affairs prior to the 1990s. Defending national sovereignty and non-intervention has always been and remains a key pillar of Brazil’s foreign policy, so any attempt to promote or defend democracy and human rights abroad conflicts with the principle of non-intervention. The tension arising from these two opposing visions—respecting sovereignty and adopting a more emphatic pro-democracy stance, particularly in the region—remains one of the important quandaries in Brazilian foreign policy.

Under President José Sarney (1985–1990), the first civilian president after more than two decades of military dictatorship, Brazil supported the inclusion of a reference to democracy in a new preamble to the Organization of American States (OAS) Charter.[2] But as recently as the end of the Cold War, Brazilian leaders resisted democracy promotion policies that could be seen to violate its commitment to non-intervention. In 1990, under President Fernando Collor de Mello, Brazil deflected calls for a military intervention in Suriname following a military coup. In 1994, Brazil—then a member of the UN Security Council—abstained from Resolution 940 authorizing the use of force in Haiti to re-install President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who had been deposed in a coup d’état. Strengthening democracy outside Brazil’s borders was less important to Brazilian policy makers than addressing the political challenges at home, partly because of Brazil’s own recent democratic transition.

The Model Breaks

Events and new leadership began to recast Brazil as an increasingly assertive defender of democracy in Latin America. In 1996, President Fernando Henrique Cardoso leveraged regional bodies like the *Mercado Común del Sur* (Mercosur) and the OAS to roll back a coup attempt in Paraguay, ultimately convincing Paraguayan General Lino Oviedo to back down from his effort to unseat then-President Juan Carlos Wasmosy. In the political crises that followed in Paraguay, Cardoso continued to play a crucial mediating role.[3]

Paraguayan and Brazilian supporters of ousted President Fernando Lugo demonstrate on the International Friendship Bridge in June 2012. Photo: Jose Espinola/Reuters

Like 22 people like this. Be the first of your friends.
Tweet 30 50
Comment on this post

In 2000, when Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori was suspected of violating election standards, Cardoso ostentatiously stayed away from Fujimori's inauguration. A year later, Brazil supported the drafting and approval of the OAS Inter-American Democratic Charter,[4] which established the norm of democratic solidarity—largely aimed at Fujimori— stating that the people of the Americas have a right to democracy and their governments have an obligation to promote and defend it.

In April 2002, Cardoso was also active in the behind-the-scenes negotiations to return Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez to power, 48 hours after he was deposed by a coup d'état. Washington's reputation as a defender of democracy was tarnished in the region as then-President George W. Bush all too quickly recognized the coup leaders as Venezuela's legitimate new government. The policy of defending President Chávez's electoral mandate was continued under then- President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Cardoso's successor.

The Lula administration was in fact only just getting started, reflecting the emerging consensus across the domestic political spectrum that it was time for Brazil to play an important role in the region. In 2003, Lula speedily engaged to resolve a constitutional crisis in Bolivia. In 2005, he sent his foreign minister to Quito to deal with a crisis in Ecuador. In the same year, Brazil worked with the OAS to mediate a political crisis in Nicaragua, including providing financial support for the electoral monitoring of a municipal election there. In 2009, Brazil clashed with the U.S. over the U.S.'s inconsistent response to the coup d'état in Honduras that removed then-President Manuel Zelaya and sent him packing to Costa Rica. At first, the Obama administration denounced the rushed exit of Zelaya from office by military officers as a coup. But the de facto government of Roberto Micheletti, who replaced him, refused to step down. Facing opposition from Republicans in the U.S. Congress (who insisted that what had occurred was not a coup), the administration backed down from a plan to return Zelaya to power. Across Latin America, Brazil's steadfast

opposition to the de facto government and willingness to let former President Zelaya reside in its embassy were considered more principled than the inconsistent positions taken by the U.S. and segments of the Republican Party, which made no effort to hide its relief that left-leaning Zelaya was gone.

Yet these ad hoc interventions are only part of the story. More important, Brazil has systematically built references to defending democracy into the charters, protocols and declarations of the sub-regional institutions that it leads. The importance of democracy in the constitution and activities of Mercosur, the Rio Group and the *Unión de Naciones Suramericanas* (South American Community of Nations—UNASUR) can essentially be traced to Brazil's activism.

At the same time, Brazil has been anxious to make clear that such activism is not a reversal of its long commitment to non-intervention. It enthusiastically adopted the concept of "non-indifference" developed by African leaders. Whether that concept represents anything more than a play on words remains, correctly, open to debate. But it underscores how Brazil's thinking about sovereignty has evolved.

In juggling these policies and rhetoric, Brazil has attempted to position itself as a more moderate alternative and defender of democratic consensus than the United States and one that continuously balances its interest in defending democracy with its tradition of non-intervention.

Embrazing Regional Leadership

Brazil's pro-democracy strategy really came of age in 2012, when President Dilma Rousseff—together with the leaders of Uruguay and Argentina—suspended Paraguay from Mercosur after the impeachment of Paraguay's President Fernando Lugo, which most governments in the region regarded as the equivalent of a coup d'état or a "parliamentary coup." The Brazilian government thus set an unmistakable precedent that anti-democratic tendencies in the region would trigger a rapid and clear reaction from Brasília. Rousseff's decision to work through Mercosur—rather than the OAS—is consistent with a growing preference to use local regional bodies, possibly in an effort to strengthen its claim to regional leadership. Once again, Brazil's position collided with that of the U.S., which had swiftly recognized the new Paraguayan government.

Protecting democratic norms and stability in the region has thus turned into one of Brazil's fundamental foreign policy goals. Brazil realizes that neighboring countries may not be able to provide basic levels of public order, and the resulting political unrest is likely to affect many of its core interests. For example, violence and chaos in Bolivia could spill over into Brazilian territory and scare away investors in Brazil. As the region's largest country continues to grow and become stronger, some of its neighbors appear to be getting weaker. That is where Brazil faces its biggest challenges.[5]

Differing Approaches

Brazil's approach to regional leadership differs from that of the U.S. in a number of ways. The phrases "democracy promotion" or "defense of democracy"—favorites of U.S. policymakers—are rarely used in Brasília. Nor does Brazil encourage the kind of activism practiced by U.S. or European NGOs, ranging from political party development, support for independent media and journalists, capacity building for state institutions, and training for judges, civic leaders and legislators.

Further, neither Brazilian civil society nor government has developed the capacity to deploy civilian democracy aid workers around the world, as is the case with European and U.S. NGOs. Unlike the U.S., Brazil does not make democracy a condition for providing aid, presenting itself as a partner in development,

rather than a donor. Democracy promotion is not part of a greater Brazilian "liberal narrative."

Rather, Brazil is, by nature, suspicious of any pursuit of ideological convergence among states. Brazil has no *mission civilizatrice* or interest in expanding its own ideological agenda around the world, and it is unlikely to elevate its own success into a basis for foreign policy.

Brazil's approach represents a distinct alternative to the normative approach of Western democracy promotion, which reflects the urge to recreate liberal democracies. Brazil prefers to take preventive action through normative or multilateral means—for example through treaty clauses punishing countries that do not uphold democratic standards, or through institutionalized collective action. Defenders of this less invasive approach observe that it is less likely to stir up anti-Brazilian sentiment at home or abroad. Only when preventive measures fail do Brazilian policy makers contemplate more invasive interventions, as cited above. As a consequence of this approach, many Brazilian citizens are largely unaware of their government's activities in defending democracy.

Room for Cooperation

The different approaches taken by the U.S. and Brazil in the realm of democracy promotion shouldn't be a cause for collision. Rather, a more nuanced discussion is required about when and how democracy promotion is legitimate, and how it should take place. Given the complexity of the subject, it is natural that Brazil and the U.S. will regularly disagree about how to best defend democracy— even if they share the same general goal. During a political crisis, when decisions must be made quickly and there is often little room for coordinating policies, such disagreements can be sharp. Still, the U.S. and Brazil— the Western Hemisphere's two largest players—should consider establishing better channels of cooperation to make sure that clashes over policy toward Venezuela, Honduras or Paraguay can be dealt with collaboratively behind the scenes to create greater stability and consensus on these issues throughout the region.

This won't be easy. Differing policy reactions are due to fundamental differences in the two countries' understanding about how to deal with these complex challenges.

Brazil rarely justifies its democracy related activities in the context of a larger liberal world view, as do U.S. policymakers. It remains suspicious of the at-times sweeping Wilsonian liberal rhetoric used by U.S. democracy promoters, which policymakers in Brasília consider ineffective and culturally imperialistic. For this reason, Brazil has not embraced such U.S. ideas or policies to create blocs of democratically elected governments and it eschews terms such as "democracy promotion."

Fostering collaboration between Brazil and the U.S. could be done more easily by focusing on more technical terms—such as "good governance" or "transparent government"—rather than the ideology laden liberal "democracy promotion." At the same time, Washington policy makers must recognize that the Brazilian government will be reluctant to engage in any offi cial pro-democracy alliance with the United States.

Brazil considers its regional credibility to work in areas of democracy to be extremely important, and a close alliance with the U.S. on the U.S.'s terms would undermine that. Maintaining legitimacy and capacity to act is particularly central to Brazil today as its neighbors face rising challenges to democratic stability and norms. Many of the reasons for these challenges stem from the realities Brazil faces at home, such as high inequality and poverty.

Brazil's own very recent experience of a successful transition to democracy is in fact a key asset. And its

credibility among developing countries may be higher than Washington's precisely because it is rarely perceived as paternalistic. Brazil is therefore in a better position to share experiences about democracy than the U.S., where democratization lies in the distant past and civil society does not share the same challenges as those in the developing world.

Finally, as a growing number of leaders look to China as an economic and political model, Brazil provides an important counter-example: a country where political freedom is not an obstacle to economic growth.[6] Brazil's emergence as one of the developing world's most successful democracies may thus do more to enhance democratic ideals than any openly ideological push or activist policy could ever hope to achieve.

Endnotes

To read more from *Americas Quarterly*, sign up for a free trial issue of the print magazine. No risk, no commitment.

---

0 Comments Americas Quarterly Login

Sort by Best Share Favorite

Start the discussion…

Be the first to comment.

ALSO ON **AMERICAS QUARTERLY** WHAT'S THIS?

Sports: A Tool for Development

1 comment • 2 months ago

Elena Selivan — Great article. Although I live in US, this is such an important discussion here as well. …

Transforming Monterrey's Landscape

1 comment • a month ago

amomexico — Muy buena noticia. Más probablemente mis hijos tambien va ir Tec porqué el costo …

Monday Memo: Venezuela—Ecuadorian Elections—U.S. …

1 comment • a month ago

immigrationlawyerla — I have came across or a informative video, here is a link …

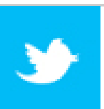
From "Make-Sicko" back to Mexico City: The Greening of …

2 comments • 2 months ago

ApolO — wouldn't it be cool to have an article about Line 12 from Mr. Ebrard's, i would read that, unlike …

Subscribe

Connect with *AQ*



Venezuela in Depth

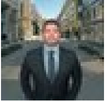
View *AQ* Online's special in-depth page for updates on the crisis in Venezuela.

» Read more.

Sustainable Cities

The Atlantic Cities @AtlanticCities 4m
The Chicago Housing Authority has unveiled its redevelopment plan for Cabrini-Green bit.ly/1oHredy
Show Summary

Citiscope @Citiscope 9m
@Citiscope: Why is #Medellin where it is? How did it grow? @cswope interview w/author Gerard Martin's answers. #WUF7 citiscope.org/story/2014/how…



Brent Toderian @BrentToderian 37m
Just 1 example why #Medellin is hosting the WUF7 @WorldUrbanForum, & was named the 2013 world's most innovative city. pic.twitter.com/KzKLtFryRG

WEB EXCLUSIVES

- Can Venezuela's Economic Strategy Keep Protests From Spreading?

  March 24, 2014

  by Thomas O'Donnell

  Thanks to Chinese and Russian loans, Venezuela's new Sicad 2 foreign exchange system may mitigate shortages, but will it keep protests from spreading?

- Venezuela's Escalating Protests, Violence and Political Instability: The Legacy of Chávez

  March 7, 2014

  by Mariana Rodríguez and Jonathan Hiskey

Data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project show that political instability in Venezuela was a likely outcome after Chávez' death.

MORE WEB EXCLUSIVES »

Read our new series of first-person articles.

Most Popular

MOST POPULAR ON *AQ* ONLINE

Most Viewed

Past: 1 day 1 week 1 month 1 year

Monday Memo: Costa Rican Elections – U.S. Deportations – Venezuela-Spain Spat – FIFA Delays (180 times)

Brazil's Long To-Do List (169 times)

Colombian Oil: Scraping the Bottom of the Barrel (158 times)

Business Innovator: Lenddo, United States and Colombia (157 times)
Challenges facing Hillary Clinton for President (116 times)

AQ Course Packets: Now Available for Your Classroom!

Browse our catalogue.

NOW ON AS/COA ONLINE

Press Release - Unity of Nature: Alexander Von Humboldt and the Americas
12 hours ago
Guest Curators Georgia de Havenon and Alicia Lubowski-Jahn Press Preview and Reception: Tuesday, April 29, 5:00 p.m. New York, ...

Por qué los precandidatos presidenciales apuestan a Estados Unidos
by Julieta Nassau and Mauricio Caminos - Apr 04, 2014
Los casi 8500 kilómetros que separan Buenos Aires con Nueva York parecen ser insignificantes para los políticos argentinos, ...

Weekly Roundup: Chile's Earthquake, LatAm's Mega-Cities, Cuban Twitter
Apr 04, 2014
Amid Protests, Maduro Seeks Support from International Community As protests continued this week, Venezuelan President Nicolás ...

AQ MEDIA PARTNER

FINANCIAL TIMES

World

Picture site Imgur raises funds to expand

Apr 03, 2014

Andreessen Horowitz and community news platform Reddit are investing $40m for a minority stake in the five-year-old ...

Companies

BoE to support lending for exporters

9 hours ago

Chancellor George Osborne believes the central bank's support could cut the cost of private sector export finance loans by 5 to ...