Democracy is a mere word in Latin America

Peru’s leader joins the ranks of South American strongmen

Fujimori set democracy aside

By Andrew Reding

Alberto Fujimori’s decision to participate in an essentially meaningless presidential election in Peru marks another step in the move toward rule by plebiscite in South America’s northwestern “arc of crisis.”

From Peru to Venezuela, a new wave of rulers is turning to referendums and plebiscites — giving voters only the choice of Yes or No — to place a democratic mask over authoritarian reality.

Fujimori’s claim to a third consecutive five-year term is based on a runoff election in which he was the only candidate. The opposition candidate withdrew, and the Organization of American States withdrew its observation team after Fujimori declined to take measures against electoral fraud.

At the other end of the arc, in Venezuela, President Hugo Chavez has copied Fujimori, dismissing Congress and the courts, and rewriting the constitution. He is seeking a fresh six-year mandate, but voting has been postponed because of inadequate safeguards against ballot tampering.

In Ecuador, army officers who overthrew an elected government have installed the vice president as a democratic fig leaf. And war-torn Colombia’s beleaguered president, Andres Pastrana, has proposed a referendum to dissolve Congress.

Behind the fragility of democracy in this region are extreme inequality and stark ethnic divisions.

In Western Europe or North America, it is easy to forget that democracy presupposes a compatible socioeconomic order. Democracy is built on the principle that every citizen has an equal vote and equal rights. But in societies sharply stratified by wealth, income and ethnicity, democratic forms are at such variance with reality that they tend to degenerate into fig leaves for authoritarian rule.

Latin America has by far the greatest level of income inequality of any region in the world. Underlying that inequality are ethnic and social inequalities inherited from the period of Spanish rule.

The Spaniards and their successors subjugated native populations, but often did not assimilate them. As a result, distinctive native peoples make up a large part — if not a
majority — of the population in Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru. Many do not even speak Spanish. These populations have been denied access to education, and this is the single most important cause of income inequality. The effects of this inequality are visible.

In Ecuador, mass demonstrations by native peoples triggered the coup that brought down the government. In Peru, Alejandro Toledo’s native ethnicity caused his candidacy to soar. In Colombia, the gap between the relatively modern cities and the impoverished countryside splits society into warring camps. In Venezuela, corrupt elites have squandered oil wealth, antagonizing the impoverished majority from the privileged minority.

Where there is such profound inequality, democracy runs skin-deep. Elites fear that, in a genuine democracy, the impoverished majority would expropriate their wealth. For their part, the poor have lost faith with nominally democratic institutions that favor the interests of elites. Surveys show that belief in democracy runs low.

Both sides look to strongmen — caudillos in Spanish — to save them from their class enemies. For elites, that can mean a Gen. Augusto Pinochet. For the poor, a Col. Chavez. In Peru, Alberto Fujimori has followed the Mexican model, blending authoritarian rule on behalf of elites with populist handouts for the poor.

As Fujimori’s popularity wanes, he has borrowed further from the Mexican model by assuming control of the electoral commission. That explains the long delays in the first round of the election, as tally sheets were altered. With international observers complaining that no steps had been taken to ensure a clean second round, challenger Alejandro Toledo felt he had no option but to withdraw.

Washington has every right to complain that Fujimori’s actions violate Peru’s commitment to democratic rule under OAS treaties — but treaties are just as impotent as democratic forms in confronting the reality of inequality. To improve the chances for democracy we must declare war on extreme inequality.

Our weapon will be economic, not military. Washington should offer preferential trade terms to Latin American countries that will commit at least 5 percent of their GDP to education (Peru now invests 2.9 percent, Ecuador 3.5 percent, and Colombia 4.4 percent. Democratic Costa Rica invests 5.3 percent, the United States 5.4 percent and Canada 7 percent.)

A second condition should be to demand priority attention to their most marginalized citizens.

Only by addressing the root causes of inequality will democracy gain a firm foothold.

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