



English Summary of IDEA – Agora Publication on:

Political Parties in the Andean Region: Between Crisis and Change¹

Political Parties at a Crossroads

The credibility of political parties in the Andean Region is at an ebb, while democracy is in a critical state, even in Venezuela and Colombia, two of Latin America's longest-standing democracies. Within the context of their joint Programa Agora Democrática, International IDEA and the Asociación Civil Transparencia sponsored a seminar on the state of political parties in the Andean Region. One result was the publication of *Political Parties in the Andean Region: between Crisis and Change*, which provides a regional overview and an in-depth analysis of the political party systems in each of the Andean countries. The event and publication were also supported by the Andean Community of Nations, the Department for International Development, and the UN Development Programme.

Parties and Representation in the Andean Region

In recent years, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia have suffered from economic and political crises that have translated into a lack of support for political parties, as people hold them responsible for the failures of governance.

Since the early 1990s, the region has suffered from a variety of threats to democracy, including fraud-plagued elections, coups or attempted coups, corruption, increasing poverty, support for authoritarian governments, violence, drug trafficking and the rise of ethnic and regional movements.

People tend to blame parties for economic problems and other crises that result more from poor governance than from the party system itself. There is also a sense that parties are not truly representative, although many new forms of participation arose throughout the region in the 1990s. The volatility of the vote continues to reflect public discontent.

Instead of taking a structural approach, most reform efforts have responded to immediate demands. Meanwhile, parties have been slow to adapt to changes in the political panorama. While the party system's problems are commonly characterized as a crisis of representation, the issue is far more complex, and the region's prognosis is, at best, uncertain.

BOLIVIA

Until the late 1990s, Bolivia enjoyed moderate economic growth, stable coalition governments and reforms of the state that avoided either authoritarianism or populism. With the government of Hugo Bánzer, however, came economic stagnation, a budget crunch, political polarization, the rise

¹ Original Spanish title '*Partidos en la Región Andina: Entre Crisis al Cambio*'

of opposition movements of coca growers and indigenous organizations, and a plethora of regional and social conflicts.

The ouster of President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada in 2003 ended the reign of the three main parties that had alternated in governing the country for years and ushered in an “outsider” who attempted to govern without the support of party blocs in Congress, although he eventually had to seek their backing.

Electoral reforms in the mid-1990s allowed indigenous and peasant movements to gain political ground, but they tend to lack solid organization and internal structure. Even among established parties, lack of organization results in poor political leadership. The reforms also resulted in geographically disproportionate parliamentary representation.

Author René Antonio Mayorga argues for the need to address the internal decomposition of party organizations and the highly dispersed party system. Parties must stop seeing public administration as an opportunity to reap the bounties of power and promote debate and consensus with the grassroots organizations that are helping to create a new model for governance. He calls for a review of the flaws in the constitutional framework, many of which stem from ill-considered constitutional reforms made in 2004.

He also warns of the hazards of a “citizen” democracy that sees no need for parties and the dangers of a complete overhaul of the Constitution by a constituent assembly, which would dismantle the country’s institutional structure in a disastrous response to the real problem of the crisis of the country’s political parties.

COLOMBIA

Between 1997 and 2002, public confidence in Colombia’s political parties plummeted from nearly 30% to 10%. The country also has a highly fragmented and personality-driven party system.

Authors Elisabeth Ungar Bleier and Carlos Arturo Arévalo review the three stages of the country’s party system: the dominance of the Liberal and Conservative parties (1958-1974) in the Frente Nacional; the rise of local and regional political coalitions, sometimes with funding from drug traffickers; and the period since the 1991 Constitution, marked by the fragmentation of political organization and the rise of groups centered on particular political figures.

The Constitutional Political Reform in 2003 represents a step toward modernizing parties, making them more democratic and creating conditions for the emergence of new political options.

The authors, however, argue that reforms have been insufficient to change the ingrained habits of either political parties or voters. They call for further research and education on the political reform and its benefits, as well as greater accountability and transparency. They recommend that parties make their internal workings more democratic and focus not just on electoral politics, but on public administration and the formation of parliamentary majorities that will allow for better governance.

Political parties must adapt their ideologies, programs, strategies and organizational structure to new national and international conditions, which include increasing citizen discontent, political personality cults, growing demand for participation by historically under-represented groups, social and economic inequalities, and globalization.

ECUADOR

There are many studies of the performance of Ecuador’s political parties, focusing on their weak institutional foundations, constant changing of the rules, fragmentation, instability, volatility, weak representation and history of political patronage.

Frequent changes to regulations governing parties and elections have resulted in chaotic institutional organization. As many as a dozen parties participate in elections, many winning just a few congressional seats. Balloting is also marked by volatility: since 1979, no party has held the presidency more than once. The major parties have strong geographical bastions in which it is difficult for others to gain a foothold.

Critics often claim that Ecuador's parties have failed to adequately channel citizens' interests, but author Simón Pachano argues instead that by responding to the demands of pressure groups, parties have been distracted from developing proposals for the common good.

Ecuador's parties, he says, have failed not in representation, but in obtaining results in the policy arena. The general dissatisfaction with parties and the political system in general is not rooted in the parties' capacity for inclusion, but in their performance in governing the country.

PERU

The dismantling of the party system during the administration of Alberto Fujimori has led to high degrees of electoral volatility and the emergence of independents with little or no political experience. The result is an unpredictable, short-sighted political scenario.

Author Martín Tanaka argues that popular dissatisfaction with democracy in Peru is largely due to parties' weakness and the absence of a party system. While well-intentioned, current reform proposals, such as making recalls easier, shortening terms in office and prohibiting re-election, would make good governance even more difficult.

The fragmentation of parties and the proliferation of mechanisms for direct participatory democracy, which began with the approval of the 1993 Constitution, have created tension between representative and participatory democracy and given small interest groups disproportionate power.

While the recent Political Parties Law is a step in the right direction, the author argues that Peru needs mechanisms to strengthen parties, ensure their survival and encourage cooperation. The ideal would be a stable system consisting of fewer parties with national representation and better-defined ideologies and platforms. Debate about citizen participation must seek mechanisms that do not undermine the authority of elected officials.

Specific recommendations include shorter, less expensive political campaigns, elimination of the preferential vote; sanctions for legislators who switch parties; reapportionment to give Lima less weight in Congress; shoring up oversight agencies, making representation more proportional at the local and regional levels; and ensuring accountability, transparency and the separation of powers.

VENEZUELA

After a period of multi-party instability, the 1970s and 1980s were a time of moderate two-party stability that was followed by deterioration due to the system's rigidity, the country's socio-economic problems, partisan decision-making in the government and centralized party decisions. Direct election of local governors and mayors beginning in 1989 created a new balance of powers and given rise to new political leaders.

Late 1998 was a critical time, with elections for legislators, governors, state legislators and the president, which put Hugo Chávez in office.

Over the next several years, there was a series of elections to choose a National Constituent Assembly and relegitimize elected officials, including Chávez. The erosion of the former party system has given rise to instability characterized by multiple parties, many linked to Chávez, extreme pluralism, lack of institutional foundations and personality cults. The new system reflects the country's socio-economic and socio-political fragmentation.

The 1999 Constitution marked a shift from representative to participatory democracy, but has not been accompanied by new legislation on political parties and elections. It establishes electoral power as a national political force and replaces the concept of political parties with that of "groups with political purposes," with no clear definition of the term.

Because a wholesale reform of the party system is unlikely at this time, author Miriam Kornblith makes more specific recommendations, including a revision of the 1964 political parties law, including definitions of parties and "groups with political purposes;" a review of the internal organization of political groups; clarification of the term "political purposes;" a review of the prohibition on public financing for political parties; better party representation of the country's

ethnic and cultural diversity; and a re-thinking of the structure and function of both new and traditional political parties.