

Human Rights in Latin America

Introduction by Regina Nockerts

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As with many regions of the world, human rights are an issue of enduring concern for Latin America. The essays and bibliographies in this digest chart the recent history of human rights issues in this region, beginning, in most cases, with the wave of military coups that began in the 1970s, highlighting their lasting effects on the governments, civil societies, and economies of the region today. The cases of Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Peru are given here; the Organization of American States (OAS) is also covered.

In most countries, the military coups that took place removed democratically elected governments, often because of the fear by national and international elites that the elected officials leaned too far to the Left. This was most evident in the military coup in Chile that ousted (and possibly killed) socialist President Allende. Since then, Chile has emerged with a strengthened democracy, as evidenced by two historic moments in recent events: first, Chile has elected President Michelle Bachelet, the first female Latin American head of state elected on her own merits rather than as the successor to a dead or disabled husband (as was the case with Isabella Peron in Argentina). Second, General Pinochet, who ruled Chile from 1973-1990, and was responsible during that time for the torture and killing of thousands of people, was stripped of his parliamentary immunity and put on trial. Although his death on December 10, 2006 prevented the conclusion of the trial, the very fact that the trial had begun (several previous attempts to try Pinochet both abroad and in Chile were abortive) showed a great step forward for Chile.

The effectiveness of current democratic regimes in Latin America varies drastically—not all of the Latin American countries discussed have been successful in their efforts to quell internal violence and human rights violations. Colombia, for example, remains “in a constant state of war,” in the words of the Colombia section’s author. In Guatemala, despite a peace accord in 1996 and the end to civil war that accompanied it, structural violence remains a fact of everyday life for the majority of the population.

Even in countries where the violence has ended, the traumatic experiences of the recent past have led to tense civil-military relationships. In the Honduras section, for example, it is argued that Honduras continues to struggle with an overly influential military relative to the weak civil administration. The result has been continuing denial of responsibility by both the Honduran and U.S. governments for past human rights violations and only tentative steps towards reform in this arena.

However, other Latin American countries have been more successful in their attempts to reconcile tensions between building a democratic state, the continuing presence of the military, and an active civil society. Peru is a good, although little recognized, example of this reconciliation. The Peru section’s bibliography provides a good introduction for those who would like to take a closer look at Peru’s development. With the end of the “truth and reconciliation” process in 2003, Peru has

made considerable progress at moving beyond the previous eras of violence (first of military dictatorships, then of the corrupt Fujimori regime).

The influence of external actors in Latin America is also an area of considerable interest when examining human rights issues in the region. The role of the U.S. in particular has been generally negative. The U.S. is infamous in the region for propping up Right-wing dictators and funding violent paramilitary groups. Even today, the U.S. continues to fund anti-drug violence in Colombia that has resulted in massive numbers of internally displaced persons with negligible effects on the international drug trade. The U.N., in contrast, has been largely beneficial for the region, being influential in the truth and reconciliation projects of several countries. In El Salvador, for example, the U.N. was instrumental in brokering formal peace accords, and the transition to democratic elections.

The Organization of American States (OAS) stands out as an example of a regional organization with great potential to further democratic consolidation and the respect for human rights in Latin America. The OAS has been viewed by many in Latin America as being U.S. dominated and largely ineffective. However, recent developments within the organization have begun to challenge this perception. For example, in May 2005 the U.S., despite a strong lobbying effort, was unable to get either of its two preferred candidates elected to head the organization, and a month later the U.S.-backed plan to “monitor” democracy in the region was also rejected by the OAS. The OAS section, below, highlights the continuing reforms in the Organization’s structure which will hopefully strengthen the OAS’ ability to mediate disputes and influence policies in Latin America.

The essays and bibliographies that follow are not intended to comprise an all-inclusive account of human rights issues in Latin America, but rather are intended to serve as representative introductions to issues of significance dealt with in the literature. Thus, the entries deal with the continuing legacies of past human rights violations, as well as a variety of contemporary human rights challenges.

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