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REMARKS BY HER EXCELLENCY MRS. MARÍA SOLEDAD ALVEAR,
MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF CHILE ON THE TOPIC
“DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN THE AMERICAS,” AT THE
PERMANENT COUNCIL MEETING OF APRIL 30, 2003

EXPLANATORY NOTE

Taking into consideration the express request of the Delegation of Chile, which had proposed the topic “Democratic Governance in the Americas,” the Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedure of the Preparatory Committee of the General Assembly agreed that the Secretariat of the Permanent Council should ask the pertinent areas of the General Secretariat of the Organization to provide documentation on activities and projects related to democratic governance.

In reply to that request, information has been received on activities carried out by the Executive Secretariats of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the Inter-American Commission of Women, the Secretariat for Legal Affairs, and the Unit for the Promotion of Democracy. They are attached to this document as addenda 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively.

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Mr. Chair,
Mr. Secretary General,
Distinguished permanent representatives,

It is indeed a privilege for me to address the Permanent Council to reflect on the topic of “Democratic Governance in the Americas,” which Chile has proposed for the dialogue of Heads of Delegation at the thirty-third regular session of the General Assembly of the Organization, in Santiago, Chile.

Good governance is critical to the future of our region, and action by the Organization of American States can surely contribute to this joint endeavor.

The restoration of representative democracy in the 1980s and 1990s was one of the most significant victories ever for the American peoples. It was a victory that should be constantly reaffirmed so as to make democracy, through institutional governance and political participation, a meaningful structure in the lives of citizens of the Hemisphere. Twelve years ago, the OAS adopted the Santiago Commitment to Democracy and the Renewal of the Inter-American System, which established a cultural and political backdrop for democracy in the Americas.

The Organization has not been indifferent to the dynamics of a global system, where good governance provides necessary stability in the pursuit of progress and peace.

By adopting the Inter-American Democratic Charter in Lima on September 11, 2001, we proclaimed the right and the obligation to promote and defend democracy. The Charter embodied the spirit and the letter of OAS resolutions, declarations, and amendments to the Charter, which constitute the foundation and the democratic essence of the Organization.

It is an ethical and political commitment, based on shared values that reflect a vision of our region and the world. The countries of the Americas recognized it as the path toward political, social, economic, and cultural development based on liberty, equity, and diversity.

This normative process has become the standard for political activity in the Hemisphere and, when implemented, it makes a qualitative contribution to enhancing the dignity and law of the peoples of the Americas, who not only elect their leaders but also have a closer relationship with those in power. An increasingly vigorous civil society is opening doors to better opportunities for participation and influence by millions of people.

That is the positive side of our balance sheet, which no one can overlook and whose consolidation is essential in attaining higher levels of development.

Difficulties

Hemispheric reality and, in particular, reality for Latin Americans is such that they share, for the first time in their history, the same political system, governed by the principle of representative democracy, a representative party structure, parliamentary or presidential systems, a strong propensity toward centralism accompanied by attempts at administrative decentralization, and great difficulty when it comes to building civil society.

Although our democracy has afforded emerging sectors opportunities to participate in public life, it has resulted in major frustrations. The indifference of the elites, corruption, the inefficiency of institutions, and poverty have led to a distrust of politics and even respect for democracy itself. This is a concern that those of us with political responsibilities cannot ignore.

Democracy and good governance are two complementary and interdependent concepts. Their complementary nature may be expressed as a virtuous circle in democratic governance. In that relationship, governance is qualified in positive terms as a public and symbolic good, with a deep ethical sense, whose origins are found in political action based on values, consensus, standards, and long-term objectives, which bring about system-wide stability in society. Reinforcing democracy with good governance is therefore a matter of increasing urgency if we are to preserve the rule of law, adherence to democratic principles, and the legitimacy of institutions.

The social panorama today is a matter of concern. This is reflected in socioeconomic indicators and in the perceptions and views of the region's citizens. According to ECLAC, the region has lost the half decade prior to 2003; in other words the economic and social progress expected in the last five years has not taken place.

What is the main reason for these difficulties? I would venture to say that it is not solely economic. There are of course significant economic problems but there are also situations whose root causes are political in nature, and I would like to draw your attention to the latter.

Progress in the region seems to be hampered by the malfunctioning of key components of its political systems. It is precisely because we believe in democracy that we are duty-bound to enhance it.

The road ahead

The great challenge facing the Hemisphere today is to move forward in designing and implementing an Agenda for Democratic Governance in the Americas, which will make it possible to find the paths to democratic consolidation, the rule of law, and the full exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Also at issue is improving the quality of public institutions, achieving a balance among the branches of government, strengthening representation schemes and political parties, transparency and probity in government service and political activity, and modern forms of citizenship and civil society participation.

We are all involved in building democracy. It is the fruit of a common effort incumbent on governments, national institutions, and civil society. As indicated by the Inter-American Democratic Charter, living in a democracy is a right in our Hemisphere—a right that entails the obligation to take measures to make it effective. To that end, we propose exploring and embarking on some courses of action.

Governance and Institutional Modernization

We should enhance accessibility, transparency, and accountability in the civil service, which includes reforms to improve efficiency and others—more important still—to put an end to unequal access and combat corruption.

The objective is to increase the quality of public institutions and promote government modernization. Politics is the most sensitive link between institutions and the citizenry. Consequently, the essence of a country's institutions is critically dependent on the quality of its political system.

Our current concern is to find a state that is more intelligent, open, transparent, and equitable, with closer ties to civil society and the private sector. In this context, the strength of its political institutions will be decisive in addressing a crisis in governance.

That is why we believe that the OAS, particularly the Unit for the Promotion of Democracy, should work to strengthen the democratic framework in the Americas, through a cooperation network that will introduce good governance as a factor inherent in the obligations imposed on us by the Inter-American Democratic Charter.

Good Governance, Political Parties, and Civil Society

The shortcomings of the political system call for stronger political parties to be the main advocates for popular demands in a representative democracy. Party modernization will result in greater credibility and trust on the part of citizens and will introduce more transparent forms of leadership and management in the internal organization, thus fostering interaction and dialogue with other social actors. It will also promote, in particular, full participation by women in its structures. All of this is intended to avoid citizen dissatisfaction with politics and democratic institutions.

By the same token, we should shore up participation by civil society in the political system, by zeroing in on its interests and breaking down barriers to the arrival of new actors, especially those representing the concerns of future generations. The OAS should be open to this new approach, which favors civil participation in terms of self-management of its own projects and an active role in the formulation and refinement of demands and public policies.

Our Organization must therefore establish priorities for measures and programs to promote the full participation of citizens, both as voters and as social actors grouped together in the different types of civil society, thus strengthening dialogue between it and the political parties. It is also important to promote the training of young men and women as new democratic leaders and to support their incorporation into the political process.

Governance and Democratic Culture

Today, more than ever before, we need a form of civic education that will emphasize the virtues of living in a democracy and that, at the same time, makes it possible to safeguard diversity, pluralism, and the right to be different, in a climate of tolerance and civic friendship. Public debate and respect for dissent must also be encouraged. Stepping up efforts to promote a democratic culture will result in higher levels of participation and inclusion. What is needed, of course, is an effort to promote human rights and expanded civic freedoms, for the purpose of designing a Hemisphere characterized by the exercise and full observance of human rights.

Accordingly, we propose that those bodies of the inter-American system interested in these areas, in particular the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Inter-American Commission of Women, work actively on programs and projects to eliminate obstacles to participation in democratic processes. We must be constantly on guard to combat ignorance, intolerance, discrimination, apathy, and the absence of genuine initiatives.

Good governance, Growth, and Equity

Given the challenges of democratic governance, we must turn our attention to the responsible management of public affairs as an essential factor for sustainable development in a global economy.

The application of rational economic policies and the existence of sound democratic institutions that are responsive to the needs and expectations of the population are the foundation of sustained economic growth. What is at stake is promotion of investment and the generation of good jobs so as to eliminate poverty.

Thus, in speaking of growth with equity, we assume that the promotion of growth is a fundamental component of our development strategy—one that must go hand in hand with sound public policies and practices that bring about a greater share of equal opportunity.

Final Reflections

Mr. Chair,

Chile proposed this topic in the belief that the mere functioning of the institutions of a state under the rule of law was not sufficient to ensure democratic governance. Institutions should generate the necessary support and active participation by the citizenry as a basic means of giving them social legitimacy, to enable them to overcome the constant dangers threatening them. The risk is no longer bad government but a lack of governance and social decay. Our challenge is to lend political support to an Agenda for Democratic Governance, and the OAS is one avenue toward cooperation in this sphere.

When a de facto government complies with certain institutional parameters, it can produce economic growth, but at the cost of the suppression of democratic freedoms, which in the long run is neither morally acceptable nor sustainable. What we desire for the Americas is democratic governance.

These are the ideas we would like to discuss at the General Assembly in Santiago. We will continue in the direction set for us by the Heads of State and Government at the Summits of the Americas, in pursuit of the most urgent task that our peoples have entrusted to us for this millennium: the grand project of building a more integrated, participatory, just, and democratic society based on a social environment of diversity and respect.

Thank you very much.