Winds of Change across the Andes: An Introduction

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Introduction

In recent years, the five countries that make up the Andean subregion have experienced some of the highest levels of political turbulence in all of Latin America. Developments in Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela have raised serious questions about the process of democratic consolidation in this important subregion, despite significant democratic gains in the past.

In the 1960s and '70s, for example, Colombia and Venezuela were the only two countries that managed to maintain stable democratic regimes against a wave of authoritarianism that ended democratic experiments everywhere else in South America. At the end of the 1970s, Ecuador and Peru were the first two countries in the region to experience the wave of democratization that, by the end of the last century, would sweep the rest of Latin America. And Bolivia, thanks to a series of governing coalitions between rival political parties in the 1980s and 90s, was able to overcome the challenges of its fragmented party system to produce impressive levels of democratic governability.

Notwithstanding past progress toward the consolidation of democracy, within the last decade the political systems of the five Andean countries have confronted a number of major challenges and undergone a series of important transformations. The purpose of this section of February's special edition of *Strategic Insights* is to explore these different challenges and transformations through four country-specific essays.

- **Ecuador:** Tom Bruneau's essay ("Ecuador: The Continuing Challenge of Democratic Consolidation and Civil-Military Relations") focuses on the tremendous political instability that has racked Ecuador in recent years, culminating in the extra-constitutional overthrow of President Lucio Gutierrez in April 2005.

- **Colombia:** In his essay on Colombia ("Uribe's Second Mandate, the War, and the Implications for Civil-Military Relations in Colombia"), Douglas Porch investigates the state of that country's long-standing civil war, together with the implications of this war for the historic re-election bid of President Alvaro Uribe later this year.

- **Venezuela:** Harold Trinkunas' essay ("What is Really New about Venezuela's Bolivarian Foreign Policy?") explores evidence of change and continuity in the new foreign policy agenda that President Hugo Chávez has articulated and pursued in Latin America and beyond.

- **Bolivia:** And in his essay on Bolivia ("Bolivia at the Crossroads: Interpreting the December 2005 Election"), Kent Eaton offers answers to a series of questions about that country's recent elections, including why Evo Morales won the elections so handily, where he won within the country, and what his victory might mean for the future of U.S.-Bolivian relations.

While each of the essays in this special issue emphasizes a distinct set of topics, a number of common themes and concerns run throughout all four essays.

First is substantial new evidence of the institutional weakness that continues to threaten these Andean democracies. Stable democracies must be able to depend on strong respect for the institutional rules that govern political behavior and protect citizens' rights. In order to be considered fully consolidated, democratic regimes in the Andes will require politicians who obey the institutional constraints in which they operate, and who refrain from simply doing away with institutions they do not like. In recent years, however, there is little evidence of institutions become stronger in the Andes. Ecuador is the site of one of the most stunning examples of the frailty of political institutions. Subsequent to President Gutierrez's decision to dissolve the Supreme Court in direct violation of the constitution, according to Bruneau, "Ecuador currently lacks the legal institutions to establish legitimate government processes."

In Colombia, Porch argues that President Uribe's very personal leadership style, together with his successful attempt to change the constitution so that he can run for re-election, threaten to undermine the process of institution building that is ongoing in the country. In Venezuela, Trinkunas shows how President Chávez's advocacy of an "alternative vision of participatory democracy" has produced an obvious downgrading in the role of institutions in the country. Finally, in Bolivia, Eaton argues that Morales' easy victory in the 2005 election obviates the need to bargain with the national legislature, which may lead to a majoritarian leadership style and the marginalization of Congress.

A second concern that runs through these four essays is regionalism, with regionalism referring both to the relationships between countries in the Andean subregion, and to subnational regions within each of these countries. Using the first meaning of this term, Bruneau, Porch, and Trinkunas explore new forms of conflict between countries in the region, most of which have resulted from Colombia's ongoing civil war. Bruneau documents, for example, the unwillingness of Ecuador's government to participate in counterterrorist operations against the FARC insurgents who cross the border from Colombia, an unwillingness he attributes to the fear of possible future FARC attacks against the Ecuadorian government.

Colombia's border with Venezuela has also become increasingly volatile. While tensions between Colombia and Venezuela certainly pre-date the rise of Chávez, Trinkunas shows how the Venezuelan President's Bolivarian proposals clash with the logic of Plan Colombia. According to Porch, "both Ecuadorian and Venezuelan military equipment has turned up in the hands of the FARC." Thus, these essays generate additional cause for concern that Colombia's civil war, for decades confined mostly within the country's national territory, is increasingly becoming a regional affair.

But these essays also pay considerable attention to the problematic consequences of regionalism *within* Andean countries. Eaton, for example, emphasizes the importance of the growing split within Bolivia between the poorer, highland departments in the west that overwhelmingly

supported Morales, and the richer, more economically developed departments in the west, where Morales' Movement toward Socialism was defeated. In Ecuador, Bruneau focuses on the extent to which regional conflict between the national capital region around Quito and the more economically vibrant city of Guayaquil on the coast has limited the reach of the central government. In Colombia, as Porch notes, tremendous differences between Bogotá and the interior are reflected in the harsh reality that only when the FARC took the battle to urban centers did the national government mount a more vigorous defense.

A third theme that runs through the essays is the increasingly complicated relationships that bind the United States' government to governments in these four Andean countries. Though the success of the U.S.-supported Plan Colombia goes a long way in explaining why Uribe will most likely be Colombia's first-ever president to win re-election, Porch notes that he is "also beginning to understand the disadvantages of hitching his star to U.S. support" in a region that is "increasingly disenchanted with Washington's policies."

In Bolivia, this disenchantment fueled the election of Evo Morales, a little known leader of a local coca growing union who used the widespread resentment against U.S.-supported coca eradication policies to rise to national prominence in the late 1990s and ultimately to the presidency. In Ecuador, the involvement of the military in what Bruneau calls "clearly unconstitutional changes of power" directly conflicts with the democratic model of civil-military relations that the U.S. would like to see consolidated in the region.

Finally, given the probable re-election of Hugo Chávez later this year, the relationship between the U.S. and Venezuela is not likely to improve anytime soon. According to Trinkunas' analysis, however, it is unlikely that Venezuela's anti-U.S. Bolivarian revolution will be copied elsewhere in the region, precisely because it lacks a "coherent ideological model" and depends quite heavily on the "personality, charisma, and drive of Hugo Chávez."

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