

## Background Guide

### The Organization of American States

#### Topic: Backsliding of Democracy



## **I. Introduction to the Committee**

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The Organization of American States (OAS) is the oldest regional organization in the world, dating back to the First International Conference of American States, which was held in Washington, DC, from October 1889 to April 1890. The OAS was created in 1948, and the charter came into force in December 1951. The OAS was established with the objective of achieving “an order of peace and justice, to promote their solidarity, to strengthen their collaboration, and to defend their sovereignty, their territorial integrity, and their independence” among its Member States. The Organization uses a four-pronged approach to effectively implement its essential purposes based on its main pillars of: democracy, human rights, security, and development.

The OAS is made up of the 35 independent countries of the Americas, which have ratified the OAS Charter and belong to the Organization. The initial 21 Member States, which met for the signing of the OAS Charter include the following: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, United States of America, Uruguay and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of). The remaining 14 Member States and their years of membership are: Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago (1967); Jamaica (1969); Granada (1975); Suriname (1977); Dominica, Saint Lucia (1979); Antigua and Barbuda, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (1981); The Bahamas (1982); Saint Kitts and Nevis (1984); Canada (1990); Belize and Guyana (1991). All Member States are represented in the OAS General Assembly and have the right to one vote.

The General Assembly is the supreme body of the Organization of American States. It includes the delegations of all member states and determines all the mechanisms, policies, actions and mandates of the Organization. The OAS is also made up of the General Secretariat, the Permanent Council, the Inter-American Council for Integral Development and several commissions, such as the Commission on Juridical and Political Affairs, the Commission on Administrative and Budgetary Affairs and the Commission on Hemispheric Security. The OAS also has several thematic commissions, such as the Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM), the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and the Inter-American Telecommunications Commission (CITEL), and many others.

## **II. Statement of the Problem**

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Over the past two decades, democratic backsliding has become a defining trend in global politics. Democratic backsliding is the process of a democratic country showing “signs of becoming autocratic or authoritarian. Backsliding can occur when a democracy has just a foothold or is firmly established as a democracy” (Political, 2023). The most common explanations as to why it has been happening is ranging from the role of Russia and China and disruptive technologies to the rise of populism, the spread of political polarization, and democracies’ failure

to deliver; they fall short when tested across a wide range of cases (Carothers & Press, 2022). Other accounts of backsliding focus on the central role of leader-driven antidemocratic political projects and the variety of mechanisms and motivations they entail (Carothers & Press, 2022). It can also occur due to lack of public support for democracy, economic inequality, culturally conservative reactions to societal changes, populist or personalist politics, and external influence from great power politics.

Periods of backsliding chip away at democratic institutions. They weaken institutions until they can no longer effectively govern. Over time, the needs of the public get ignored. People look to centralize authority to simply get things done, but when backsliding occurs, people lose faith in democracy itself. Democratic backsliding affects long-established democracies like the United States as well. Many consequences come with democratic decline, including political violence, increase in civil conflict, and the incidence of intra-systemic violence in democracies (violence by actors who compete within the democratic system). They use force to further their electoral prospects.

### **History/Past UN Action**

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The Inter-American Democratic Charter shows a clear declaration: “The peoples of the Americas have a right to democracy and their governments have an obligation to promote and defend it” (OAS, 2001). In 28 articles, adopted on September 11, 2001, there is an explanation of what democracy entails and specifies how it should be defended when it is under threat. It gives governments a new compass to guide their collective action when democracy faces challenges (OAS, 2001). The OAS Charter calls on member states to “promote and consolidate representative democracy.” Over the years, the OAS has taken an active role in defending democracy in member countries, while respecting the principle of nonintervention enshrined in its founding charter (OAS, 2001). OAS actions have varied, depending on the situation. In some cases—most recently in Ecuador and Paraguay—the OAS Permanent Council has swiftly condemned actions taken against governments and played a role in restoring order. In Peru, the issue wasn’t an armed threat, but divisive elections (OAS, 2001).

In the last decade, the OAS has created tools to respond to crises. In 1991, it adopted Resolution 1080, which provides for an emergency meeting of the hemisphere’s foreign ministers to decide on specific collective action when democracy is interrupted (OAS, 2001). Resolution 1080 has been a key factor in helping to manage crises in the hemisphere. It has been invoked on four occasions: Haiti (1991), Peru (1992), Guatemala (1993) and Paraguay (1996).

The Protocol of Washington has given the OAS another tool to use in defense of democracy. Under the terms of the Protocol, which amended the OAS Charter, the Organization has the right to suspend a member state whose democratically elected government has been overthrown by

force. The Protocol of Washington took effect in September 1997, following ratification by two-thirds of its signatories.

### **III. Latest Developments**

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In September 2022, the UN chief observed that democracy is backsliding across the world. Secretary-General António Guterres is “raising the alarm” and “reaffirming that democracy, development, and human rights are independent and mutually reinforcing” (UN, 2022). He believes that we need to stand up for democratic principles of equality, inclusion, and solidarity (UN, 2022). He has drawn attention to free media and the violence against women journalists. According to the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), over the past five years, 85 percent of the world’s population has experienced a decline in press freedom. From 2016 to 2021, UNESCO recorded the killings of 455 women journalists. UN Women is the entity for gender equality and women’s empowerment, and they have encouraged women to “participate in political processes and to support their aspirations of freedom, equality, autonomy and self-determination” (UN, 2022). The UN Humanitarian Coordination Office (OCHA) has been stressing the need to “fight mis and disinformation and protect the press” and pushing for essential roles in democracy (UN, 2022). The UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR) is also pushing for protection of the press and parts of democracy.

### **Problems a Position Paper and Resolution Should Address**

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A resolution should focus upon the promotion of an independent media as a key criterion of democracy. Defending the media and securing the release and stopping state-sponsored harassment of journalists is absolutely necessary to prevent democratic backsliding.

#### **Guiding Questions**

1. What is the purpose of the OAS?
2. What resources does the OAS have?
3. How many countries would be considered fully democratic in Latin America?
4. Which countries have seen a decrease in their democracy scores in recent years and why?
5. How do civil society organizations impact this topic?
6. What, if anything, can be done to reverse this backsliding?

#### IV. Helpful Sources

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OAS: Who we are: [https://www.oas.org/en/about/who\\_we\\_are.asp](https://www.oas.org/en/about/who_we_are.asp)

Understanding Democratic Backsliding:  
<https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/10/20/understanding-and-responding-to-global-democratic-backsliding-pub-88173>

## References

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