Democracy passing the test in South America

By Kevin A. Turner

South American democracy should take a well-deserved deep breath. Over the past year and a half, we have witnessed severe tests of the principles and institutions of democracy in the continent, including an attempted coup in Venezuela, unconstitutional presidential elections in Peru and the South America economic collapse and ensuing political turmoil in Argentina.

Thankfully, we also have witnessed victories for democracy.

Totalitarian military dictatorships were once the norm in South America. Closed-door governance and deplorable human rights practices, the defining characteristics of these regimes, went unmentioned in state-controlled media. Constitutions were routinely ignored or rewritten at the whim of dictators. The lack of governmental transparency combined with a repressed citizenry to deny representation, participation and accountability in governance. Only within the last 10 years has democracy begun to take root in the continent.

Testing the robustness of these roots was inevitable. Could democracy indeed survive the volatility of South American politics?

In light of the recent events in Venezuela, Peru and Argentina — and despite a vogue of criticisms to the contrary — democracy is surviving. Avoidance of a regression to the harsh military dictatorships of yesteryear can be attributed to two key factors: The collective resolve of South Americans to adhere to the established rule of law, and the contributions of a significantly more free and independent media.

These factors have played strongly in each of the three recent conflicts.

In Venezuela, democracy was subjected to the ultimate test in early April — a clear opportunity for military leaders to assume control of the government. Instead, in a departure from historical precedent, the military served as the backbone of Venezuelan democracy by demanding compliance with constitutional processes.

In short, after Venezuelan constitutional scholar deemed President Hugo Chavez’ resignation under duress to be unconstitutional, the military acted in support by legitimizing Chavez’ presidency and demanding that Pedro Carmona step down. Additionally, the response of the American supranational body, the Organization of American States, in boldly backing the return to power of this regionally unpopular figure, displayed the hemisphere’s unequivocal dedication to due democratic process.

As ambiguous as events surrounding the affairs of early April in Venezuela might be, it is clear, given the constitutional adherence and the relatively peaceful censure and return to power of Chavez, the rule of law prevailed. There can be no doubt that the media, particularly the presence and focus of the international media, influenced events.

Alberto Fujimori’s attempt at an unconstitutional bid for a third-term as president was a litmus test for Peru; a test that might have gone away were it not for the covert videotaping and subsequent airing on national television of Fujimori’s top intelligence official, Vladimir Montesinos, bribing an opposition legislator. Given the Peruvian media’s traditionally servile behavior toward the government, this was a remarkable development with monumental implications — a milestone in that the rule of law regarding a free and independent media finally had been upheld in South America. While the leadership of the government attempted to corrupt the rule of law, democratic integrity was maintained by a national press which succeeded in bringing the scandal to a public forum.

Fujimori was forced to accept more genuinely democratic elections with words that mirrored his shortcomings: “I again reiterate that the transition should be peaceful, orderly and it should begin a new period characterized by the strengthening of democratic institutions.”

Throughout Argentina’s current economic debacle, the rule of law has been the only certainty. Dr. Eduardo Duhalde is the country’s fifth president in the last eight months; unemployment continues to hover around 30 percent; and a bank permitting withdrawals is about as scarce as a job offer. Traditionally, such an extended period of insecurity would have virtually ensured a totalitarian consolidation of power by means of a military coup. But Argentina resoundingly rejected such a prospect.

Despite the crushing economic hardships and an abundance of civil unrest, democratic principles and institutions fostered since the post-Falkland Islands War elections in 1983 permeated the population. As presidents, finance ministers and other officials come and go, Argentineans are holding steadfastly to their constitutional architecture and its democratic processes.

Fundamental to this ascendency of a free and independent media is the underlying dramatic transformation of the mentality of the South American people. As evidenced by the Venezuelan military’s decisive compliance with non-military constitutional interpretation, the Peruvian media’s fulfillment of its obligation to free and independent reporting and Argentina’s unwavering commitment to democracy despite the most dire economic circumstances, South Americans now have come to view themselves as stakeholders in their governments, not victims of them.

Similar tests of democracy in the continent are a virtual certainty in the future. But, considering these recent victories, there is reason to believe South Americans will be further buoyed by the existence of a free and independent media that can sustain their hard-won democracies. Such a trend stands in marked contrast to the deteriorating respect for the rule of law worldwide.