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# Latin America in 'a deep crisis of confidence' on democracy

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While elected civilian governments have replaced military dictatorships in most of Latin America, their citizens doubt that democracy can cure the persistent poverty and inequality that plague the region, a U.N. report warned Wednesday.

In what officials termed "a deep crisis of confidence," more than 54 percent of Latin Americans surveyed by the United Nations Development Program said they would support an "authoritarian" regime over "democratic" government if authoritarian rule could resolve their economic problems.

"That is very sad," U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan said Wednesday. "More important, it is wrong. The solution to Latin America's ills does not lie in a return to authoritarianism. It lies in a stronger and deeper-rooted democracy."

The three-year study assesses conditions and attitudes in 18 democracies following the transformation that has made the region the first in the developing world to be governed almost entirely by freely elected leaders.

The report was released in Lima, Peru.

The 250-page report, prepared by a team headed by former Argentine Foreign Minister Dante Caputo, finds that the regional Electoral Democracy Index - a measure of the right to vote, free and fair elections and access to public office - increased from 0.28 to 0.93 on a scale of 1 between 1977 and 2002.

But at the same time, the first generation to come of age in functioning democracies has experienced virtually no per-capita income growth and widening, world-record disparities in national income distribution. In 2003, 225 million Latin Americans had incomes below the poverty line.

As a result, the report says, just 43 percent of the 20,000 Latin Americans surveyed in 2002 were fully supportive of democracy, while 30.5 percent expressed ambivalence and 26.5 percent expressed nondemocratic views.

Since 2000, presidents elected in Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru have been forced by declining support to quit before their terms expired.

The authors interviewed more than 230 regional leaders, including almost all sitting presidents and former presidents and the heads of the Organization of American States, the Inter-American Development Bank and other key institutions.

The release on Wednesday kicked off a series of meetings planned for Santiago, Chile; Washington; Mexico City and Brussels, Belgium.

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