



Chávez Wrecks Venezuela, Democracy

By Roger F. Noriega

Despite all appearances, Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez is not popular in his own country. While he is busy destroying the domestic economy, spending billions on vanity projects in foreign countries as the Venezuelan infrastructure crumbles, and supporting Colombian terrorists, his people are taking note. The November regional elections, while hopelessly rigged, are still a chance for the people to tell their president that they have had enough.

Only the most zealous or naive outsider would challenge the right of Hugo Chávez to wreck his own country. But we now know that he has converted his politics of rant and division into policies of criminality, terror, and aggression. And that is our business.

Guerrilla computer records captured on March 1 in a terror camp in Ecuador have confirmed lingering suspicions of Venezuela's substantial support to the narcoterrorists of the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC). Thus far, U.S. authorities have used these data to sanction three senior Chávez aides for aiding and abetting the FARC. One by one, other Chávez co-conspirators will be identified publicly and sanctioned summarily. And the "Bolivarian Republic" will be unmasked as an aggressive, bandit state that has provided material support to criminals, terrorists, and troublemakers who have sown instability throughout the Americas.

Let me be clear: our friends in the region can no longer pretend that this is a tug-of-war between the United States and Venezuela. Chávez's decision to expel U.S. ambassador Patrick Duddy and his rehashed assassination

Roger F. Noriega is a visiting fellow at AEI. His law and advocacy firm, Tew Cardenas, LLP, represents U.S. and foreign governments and companies. A version of this article appeared in the *Miami Herald* on September 19, 2008.

plots are merely desperate attempts to whip up anti-U.S. sentiments as a smoke screen to conceal his own shaky position at home. But, despite years of Chávez's idle threats, the United States continues to get at least 13 percent of its oil from Venezuela. Chávez knows that were he to interfere with these U.S. sales, he would be committing economic and political suicide. So, the United States is doing better than most in its dealings with Chávez. Venezuelans and their Latin American neighbors are paying the price for Chávez's corruption and imperialist project.

It is clear that Chávez has squandered the oil wealth of the Venezuelan people to fund the political campaigns of acolytes throughout the region. He has funneled money to internal groups that sow unrest and agitate against democratically elected governments. He backs political leaders who are committed to dismantling fragile democratic institutions and replacing them with authoritarian, intolerant regimes that thrive on political polarization and social division. These governments cloak themselves in anti-U.S. rhetoric as a cynical tactic to corner their internal enemies and hoard power—and perhaps because the United States is the only country willing to criticize their march backward to strongman populism.

In Bolivia and Ecuador, for example, Chávez spear-carriers are warring with their own people,

and it is difficult to see how any good is coming of their destructive agendas. But that is the way Chávez wants it; he makes trouble for trouble's sake. That is why he:

- arranges warm greetings in Latin American capitals for President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad just as his Iranian regime is defying international nuclear safeguards;
- props up the gasping Castro brothers' regime to prolong the torment of 11 million Cubans;
- distracts weak Central American and Caribbean governments away from free-market solutions with the lure of debt-laden oil deals;
- has willfully surrendered Venezuelan airspace to drug smugglers;
- provides weapons, ammunition, and refuge to a terrorist group that is fighting a democratically

elected neighbor and is preying on his own people;

- invites Russian bombers into the Western Hemisphere as if he is playing the last of his well-worn cards in an old, dangerous game;

So, how can such a rotten leader be so popular at home? The answer is simple: He is not. Although he holds sway with a cadre of poor who rely on his hand-outs, Venezuelans are not fools. They see how he has wrecked their economy and spent billions on vanity projects in foreign countries as their own infrastructure crumbles. They suffer from the rampant street crime bred by his lawless and unaccountable regime. They witness the staggering greed among his corrupt, socialist cohort. They know that no good can come of supporting terrorists.

If elections in Venezuela were not hopelessly rigged, they would have the democratic option of reining in Chávez at the November 23 regional elections. One way or another, expect Venezuelans to tell their reckless leader, "¡Basta, ya!" Enough, already!

Also by Roger F. Noriega:

Article in *Revista Capital* (Chile)

The End of the Bolivarian Age

August 7, 2008

March 1, 2008, may be remembered as the day when the sun began to set on the "Bolivarian empire." Early that morning, Colombian narcoterrorist leader Luis Edgar Devia, alias "Raul Reyes," was killed by rockets fired by Colombian armed forces into his guerrilla camp in neighboring Ecuador. The incident set off a firestorm that may yet consume the reckless and corrupt Venezuelan president, Hugo Chávez.

Months before, in January, Chávez's acolytes in Venezuela's National Assembly applauded thunderously when their maximum leader bestowed legitimate "belligerent" status on the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and the smaller Army of National Liberation and recognized them as part of his "Bolivarian" movement.

Chávez was so outraged that the Colombian government would kill his terrorist chum that he hurled himself and his country into a war they could not win. He ordered his military to deploy tanks to close the border, choking off vital two-way trade with Colombia. Lieutenant Colonel Chávez may be the only military leader in history to attack his own supply lines. . . .

Read more at www.aei.org/publication28414/.