

Venezuela: the truth about Chavez

By Dr. Constantine Menges

Published by **The Washington Times**, April 28, 2002

The recent events in Venezuela were dramatic. Yet much of the discussion in the United States began and ended with the fact that President Hugo Chavez had been “democratically elected” in 1998. Ignored were his record of anti-democratic governance since taking office in 1999, his alliances with terrorist partner states like Cuba, Iraq and Iran, his sponsorship of state terrorism and the implications of these facts for the future.

On April 9-10, 2002 hundreds of thousands of peaceful protesters from pro-democratic political parties, labor unions, business and civic associations, walked in the Venezuelan capital to show their opposition the latest anti-democratic actions of Chavez. In response, Chavez mobilized his para-military armed thugs, the “Bolivarian Circles” and they were televised shooting the unarmed protestors killing and wounding more than 100 while others sped around Caracas on motorcycles looking for journalists to attack. Chavez also sent armed supporters to close down television reporting of the protests.

When Chavez ordered the military to use force to halt the peaceful demonstrations, thirty senior officers refused to obey. They said Chavez had violated “democratic principles” and that they would no longer recognize his authority because they wanted to “avoid more spilling of blood and the destruction of our brave people and their institutions”. From their point of view, those military leaders were joining a broad based civic movement calling for the end of the emerging Chavez dictatorship, just as had occurred in 1945 and again in 1958 when a civil-military coalition removed a dictator and Venezuela began its four decades as a political democracy.

Understanding the reasons all the pro-democratic groups in Venezuela oppose Chavez requires a brief review of his anti-democratic actions which have been mostly ignored outside of Venezuela. Chavez moved Venezuela through four principal phases: First, the use of illegal and pseudo-legal means to invalidate the existing constitution (in force since 1961) and have a new constitution written by his supporters (1999). Second, under the new constitution, having himself eligible to be president for two six-year terms and obtaining a unicameral legislature that would give him predominant federal powers. Third, beginning his “social revolution” by using presidential decrees in the fall of 2001 to begin confiscating private property. And, the fourth phase, begun in January 2002 when Chavez established the Political Command of the Revolution under his direct control to supervise the “Bolivarian Circles,” an armed militia of Chavez supporters who would intimidate, preempt and if necessary seek to defeat the political/civic opposition and the Venezuelan armed forces. This militia was intended to assure his indefinite continuation in power.

In April 1999 Chavez called a referendum to decide whether a Constituent Assembly should be convened to write a new constitution for Venezuela. The major democratic parties did not feel there was any need for a new constitution, but demoralized and intimidated, they made virtually no effort to contest the issue. The lack of citizen

support for a new constitution was seen in the fact that only 39% of Venezuelans voted. Venezuelans voted and passed the referendum.

In July 1999, elections were held to choose the delegates for the Constituent Assembly. Chavez supporters were confident, active and intimidating while those representing the pro-democratic parties were fearful and only beginning to return to political activity. The groups opposing Chavez received 38% of the votes compared to the 42% for the pro-Chavez slates of candidates. Nevertheless, by a fraudulent process the pro-Chavez 42% of the votes was translated into 93% of the seats in the Constituent Assembly while the opposition parties received only 7% of the seats.

In August 1999, the Chavez-dominated Constituent Assembly assembled and immediately took actions to neutralize and usurp the authority of the existing judiciary and of Venezuela's elected Congress, where Chavez supporters had won only 20% of the seats.

On August 25, 1999 the Constituent Assembly, in violation of the existing constitution, declared a "legislative emergency" and forbade the elected national Congress from meeting. From that time on, the elected national Congress was sidelined; this marked the Chavez regime in complete violation of the Venezuelan constitution and as antidemocratic. Democratic political leaders in Venezuela appealed to the OAS, the Clinton Administration, and other countries to speak out against these unconstitutional actions but heard only silence.

Under the new constitution, Chavez obtained reelection as president and a new legislature where his supporters held 60% of the seats, but the democratic opposition parties held the rest, a sign of their revival. But independent observers such as the Catholic Church questioned the accuracy of the vote counting process for both the presidential and legislative elections.

Chavez now moved to use pseudo-electoral means to put his loyalists in control of the powerful independent labor unions grouped together in the Venezuelan Confederation of Labor (CTV). It has a long history of supporting political democracy, opposing dictatorship, and a well organized membership of more than one million strong. On December 3, 2000, Chavez held a national referendum on whether all the union leaders should be dismissed from their positions. With turnout only 23 percent, the referendum passed. Labor leaders claimed the referendum violated the Chavez 1999 constitution, provisions of which protect union leaders from state intervention. Nevertheless, the CTV leadership was required to resign and run in new union elections for office where 80% of previous CTV leaders were reelected. Having escaped the Chavez takeover attempt, the CTV labor unions have been all the more vigorous in their campaign for the restoration of democracy and opposition to Chavez. They have called a major demonstration for May 1st, 2002.

Actions against journalists have been systematic but hidden. They include anonymous threats, ostensibly criminal attacks, and - perhaps most intended to intimidate- sending journalists verbatim transcripts of their conversations with

democratic opposition leaders whether on their cell phones, in their offices, or elsewhere. This disguised repression of a free press will undoubtedly increase.

Internationally, Chavez has established alliances with Cuba, Iraq and Iran, all state supporters of terrorism. He has provided the Castro regime with free oil, probably worth two billion dollars, and worked closely with Castro in support of the communist guerillas in Colombia and other anti-democratic movements attacking nearby countries. Even the Clinton Administration departed from its silence on Chavez, stating in December 2000 that he was supporting “violent movements opposing the government of Colombia, Bolivia and Ecuador”. There has been an increasing flow of credible evidence, including from Chavez’s former chief of intelligence, that the Chavez regime has been and remains a state supporter of terrorism through its aid for the Colombian communist guerillas and other radical groups. If and as Chavez consolidates his control in the coming weeks and months, his actions will threaten democracy in Colombia, Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru and Brazil.