

# Bashing Venezuelan Democracy

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In November/December 2006, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting's (FAIR) Steve Rendall explained that "Hugo Chavez never had a chance with the US press." It's been a constant since his December 1998 election, and hasn't let up to this day, with language all too familiar:

- a "would-be-dictator;
- an autocratic demagogue;
- a modern caudillo;
- a divisive and demagogic leader;
- a communist;
- (his) increasingly authoritarian tilt;
- (his) militariz(ing) the government;
- (his) terrible human rights record;
- (his) consolidated one-party rule;
- emasculat(ing) the country's courts;
- intimidat(ing) the media;
- hollow(ing) out Venezuela's once-democratic institutions;
- erod(ing) confidence in (its) economy;" and
- the latest accusations in the run-up to a constitutional referendum to let presidents, National Assembly representatives, governors, mayors, and state legislators run indefinitely for re-election.

Under Article 230 of Venezuela's Constitution: "The presidential term is six years. The President of the Republic can be re-elected, immediately and only once, to an additional term." Currently, Chavez can't run again when his term expires in 2012.

Under Article 192: "Deputies of the National Assembly shall hold office for a term of five years, with eligibility for re-election to no more than one additional term."

Other elected officials are also restricted to a two-term limit.

Last December, Chavez proposed February 15 for a national referendum to let Venezuelans vote up or down for constitutional change. He chose this date because it's when Simon Bolivar spoke at Angostura, "in the recently inaugurated congress of the city in 1819." At the time, presidential elections weren't held, and Bolivar warned against lengthy rule. The opposition is using this in its "Angostura" campaign in spite of how different Venezuela is today – a participatory democracy where people choose and can recall their presidents and other elected officials.

Article 72 of Venezuela's Constitution states:

"All magistrates and other offices (including the president) filled by popular vote are subject to revocation. Once half (their) term of office....has elapsed, 20% of (registered) voters (by petition may call for) a referendum to revoke such official's mandate. When a number of voters equal to or greater than the number of those who elected the official vote in favor of revocation (provided the total is 25% or more of registered voters), the official's mandate shall be deemed revoked...."

Try finding that explanation in the dominant media or how near-impossible it is to remove US elected officials regardless of popular sentiment. No US president was ever removed by impeachment, and short of a national convulsion, none likely ever will be – even one as reviled as George Bush.

Chavez supporters collected 4.7 million signatures for a national referendum to current constitutional law. On January 14, the National Assembly modified and approved it (156 – 6) without naming a date.

The provision reads:

"Do you approve amending articles 160, 162, 174, 192, and 230 of the Constitution of the Republic, as submitted by the National Assembly (AN), to expand the people's political rights with the goal of allowing any citizen, in his or her function as a popularly elected official, to run for office as a candidate for that same office, for a constitutionally established time period, as long as their election is the exclusive result of the people's vote?"

On January 16, AN President Cilia Flores submitted the proposal to the National Electoral Council (CNE). It has 30 days to organize and convene a referendum. Sunday, February 15 is the scheduled date.

Assembly representative Luis Tascon said he voted to proceed because no suitable Chavez successor has emerged. "Given that reality, I'll stay with Chavez." Another lawmaker explained he's for it "so that all legally able citizens can run for election and the people can choose from them without limitations of any kind."

After their 91st Plenary Assembly, the (right-wing allied) Bishops' Conference of Venezuela asked Chavez to reconsider his proposal to be seek indefinite re-elections. They accused him of "extending power into the future (by) illegitimate means."

Chavez said his intention isn't to stay in office indefinitely. "What we have here is a national independence project that still needs more work to consolidate....They say my personal goal is to perpetuate myself in power; nothing could be further from the truth."

Longtime Latin American expert James Petras agrees in his January 11 article titled: "Venezuela: Socialism, Democracy and the Re-Election of President Chavez:"

At a time of "world recession/depression, the collapse of the neo-liberal model and the incapacity of capitalist economists to offer any viable alternative, there is all the more reason to re-elect President Chavez who backs a socialist, publicly directed and controlled economy, which protects and promotes the domestic market and productive system."

Given today's dire state of things and no expected change under Obama, "the world looks to President Chavez as the world's foremost humanitarian leader, the outstanding defender of freedom, peace and self-determination." Much more is at stake than a referendum vote. "With its outcome rides the future of democracy and socialism in Venezuela and the hopes and aspirations of hundreds of millions who look to (this leader as an inspiration and) example in their revolutionary struggle(s) to overthrow militarists and depression-racked capitalist states."

#### Anti-Chavez Media Rhetoric

Marc Plattner is co-editor of the "Journal of Democracy, vice-president for research and studies at the National Endowment of Democracy (NED), and co-director of the International Forum for Democratic Studies. NED is a US government-funded body that functions to subvert democracy, help oust popularly elected leaders, and serve the interests of capital.

On January 13, Plattner got Washington Post op-ed space for his article titled: "Democracy's Competitive Edge - Why Authoritarian Economies Could Have More to Fear From (the current economic) Crisis." His view is that no matter how discredited global capitalism is, "the economic crisis could bring gains for democracy (against) the emergence of nondemocratic (authoritarian) political systems that can claim to offer attractive models. He cites four examples: China, Russia, Iran and Venezuela and says "until late last year (they) were riding high." No longer as the global crisis affects all nations to one degree or other.

Nonetheless, Plattner claims that "authoritarian capitalist regimes," not based on "a coherent ideology" with wide popular support, will fare worst. "As long as they deliver the economic goods, most of their citizens may be willing to accept the accompanying limits on their political freedom."

Plattner ignores Venezuela's model democracy, Chavez's overwhelming popularity, 10 years of social progress, the reduction of poverty, and the uplifting of millions of Venezuelans unlike anything ever before in the country. No nation anywhere runs freer elections. No president better serves his people, who directs more of his nation's resources for social needs, who's an example for leaders everywhere, who shames America's sham democracy, publicly denounces tyranny and repression, opposes foreign wars, doesn't invade his neighbors, practice torture, or undermine other heads of state. He supports human rights, seeks conciliation, rejects conflict, and serves all Venezuelans admirably.

Yet Plattner calls Venezuela "undemocratic" and says American-style "democracy has often displayed a remarkable ability to reform and renew itself....to take a punch and outlast its glass-jawed competitors (and prove its) resilience that may (be) decisive in the competition with its more brittle authoritarian challengers."

Plattner's NED spent the last 10 years trying to undermine Venezuelan democracy, the kind

unimaginable in America.

The Wall Street Journal's Mary O'Grady never met a democrat she didn't bash with Chavez again targeted in her January 12 op-ed headlined: "Dictatorship for Dummies." She's deeply disappointed that low oil prices haven't weakened him and notes how defeating him "remains a formidable task."

Even in today's global economic climate, "the jackboots of the regime (are) still firmly planted on the nation's neck (as) popular discontent with chavismo has been rising as oil prices have been falling." Why so? Because Chavez "used the boom years to consolidate power and destroy all institutional checks and balances." As a result, he "has little incentive to return the country to political pluralism even if most Venezuelans are sick of his tyranny." Watch out – he may "become more aggressive and dangerous as the bloom comes off his revolution in 2009 and he feels more threatened."

It gets worse. Venezuelan elections don't matter. "Mr. Chavez now controls the entire electoral process, from voter rolls to tallying totals after the polls are closed. Under enormous public pressure," he accepted constitutional defeat in 2007 to "make him president for life." With another referendum coming, he'll "repeat this exercise until the right answer is produced. All police states hold elections (but they) quash dissent. Venezuela is a prime example."

It's a "military government. (He) purged the armed forces" and installed his own loyalists. He's "taken over the Metropolitan Police in Caracas, imported Cuban intelligence agents, and armed his Bolivarian militias, whose job it is to act as neighborhood enforcers. (He indoctrinates school children) in Bolivarian thought, stripped the media of independence and dominates all free television in the country."

He stirs up trouble "against foreign devils like the US, Colombia and Israel." He lets "Iran use Venezuelan aircraft for arms trafficking and Venezuela gets military aid in return. (Besides this), his most effective police state tool (is his) control over the economy. The state freely expropriates whatever it wants....economic freedom is dead....The private sector has been wiped out, except for those who have thrown in their lot with the tyrant."

What to say about such rubbish – so bad, it's not even poor fiction. O'Grady is a Wall Street tool. Her style is agitprop. Her space is a truth-free zone. Her language – hateful and vindictive. Her tone – malicious and slanderous. Her manner – bare-knuckled thuggishness. Her material – mendacious, calculating, and shameless. Yet it appears weekly in her Americas column, and she wins awards for it. Wall Street takes care of its own.

O'Grady fronts for power and highlights the state of today's journalism and why growing numbers turn elsewhere to be informed. Imagine the difference if everyone did.

On January 12, Patrick Esteruelas' Foreign Policy Magazine article headlined: "Hugo Chavez rolls the dice." He says 2009 may prove tough for Chavez with low oil prices "sap(ping) the country's economic strength and compromis(ing) the president's ability to maintain the lavish spending that buttresses his government's popularity."

"This is a crucial moment for Chavez and Venezuela, because (he's) about to put his popularity to a crucial (and very public) test. He called a national referendum (most likely for February to win voter approval to) remove presidential term limits." Earlier he failed.

“Chavez will probably lose again. Most Venezuelans like their president (but not enough to make him) president for life....So why is (he) doing this now? (It) may be (his) last chance to extend the life of his presidency.”

“If he loses, he won’t recover easily.” His hold on power will be weakened enough to give the “opposition an opportunity to gain new political momentum. But the larger worry is that a ‘no’ vote (will threaten Chavez and) could undermine Venezuela’s democracy. If he loses (he may consider) more radical and authoritarian” measures.

Esteruelas isn’t O’Grady, but his article is painfully inaccurate about Venezuela and Chavez. Chavez wants to strengthen democracy and enhance Bolivarianism, not be “president for life.” He’s also gracious in defeat and showed it December 2007. When his constitutional referendum failed to pass, he said: “To those who voted against my proposal, I thank them and congratulate them....Venezuelan democracy is maturing (and) I understand and accept that the proposal was quite profound and intense.” Changing 69 constitutional articles in one bite proved too much and too easy for opponents to attack.

This time is simpler. The National Assembly approved a single question referendum asking voters up or down on whether to end term limits for presidents, National Assembly representatives, governors, mayors, and state legislators.

On January 9, the Miami Herald’s Andres Oppenheimer headlined: “Chavez, allies manipulating anti-Israeli views.” Chavez and Hamas’ “main state sponsor,” Iran, are exploiting the Gaza conflict for political advantage. Why so? “He is in trouble because of falling oil prices, and needs a conflict with Washington to justify his increasingly authoritarian rule.”

Oppenheimer berates some Latin American journalists for “failing to remind their audiences that Hamas is waging a religious war that officially calls for the annihilation of the state of Israel, constantly launches rockets into Israeli territory and triggered the latest conflict by breaking a cease-fire....Unlike Israel, Hamas terrorists intentionally target civilians....and then use the civilian population as human shields....”

This type rhetoric mirrors much pro-Israeli agitprop. It mischaracterizes Hamas, supports Israeli war crimes, and in this case, accuses Chavez for condemning the aggressor, not the victims.

Francisco Toro is a Caracas-based contributor to The New York Times, Washington Post, Financial Times, and was editor of the English language version of Veneconomy, a leading Venezuelan bilingual business magazine. Last December, he headlined an article titled: “Why Chavez Wants To Be President for Life” in which he sounds much like O’Grady.

He calls Chavez a “narcissist-Leninist president, (but) 14 years (isn’t) long enough to crush capitalism....Will Venezuelans (give him what he wants) the second time around? It’s not at all clear (as he’s) genuinely popular,” but polls show he’s vulnerable. Most voters like him, but far lower numbers “express confidence in his ability to solve the country’s problems. Majorities dislike his endless televised rants, question key parts of his socialist ideology, reject the Cuban model (and criticize him) on all kinds of bread-and-butter issues. (They also) get a serious case of the heebie-jeebies (about) this enormously volatile and endlessly pugnacious leader potentially run(ning) the country for life...”

Anyone who disagrees with him “is instantly identified as an agent of evil: a fascist running dog of American imperialism, and more than likely, a traitor on the CIA’s payroll. Chavez’s basic MO is....dissent = treason.” Yet, he’s “clearly popular and keeps winning elections. What could possibly be so undemocratic about that?”

For Toro, it’s not about democracy or dictatorship but rather an “old fashioned cult of personality....something that doesn’t have a name yet....(a combination of a) leader’s megalomania and his followers’ atavistic drive to submit to his tsunami of histrionics....for the benefit of a political sect masquerading as a revolutionary movement (calling itself) a democracy.” Now they want “open-ended re-election.” Their “worldview” only holds as long as Chavez stays president and continues “this mad experiment.”

Toro lives in Caracas and can follow Chavez close-up. But he hasn’t a clue about Venezuelan democracy and a decade of impressive social achievements. Its why Chavez stays popular, not about “megalomania, histrionics, (or an) old-fashioned cult of personality.” His new referendum may pass this time because Venezuelans support Bolivarianism and the leader they trust to pursue it.

### Students Rally to Support the Referendum

On January 22, thousands of university and high school students marched in Caracas and other Venezuelan cities to support passage of the February 15 referendum and against anti-Chavez provocations. Higher Education minister Luis Acuna joined them.

Student leader Andrea Pacheco said re-asserting the student movement was also at issue. The Chavez government “swapped repression for scholarships, inclusion, and new universities.” Everyone has access to free education. Millions of Venezuelans want to keep it and have Chavez remain president. Opposition groups have demonstrated violently against him with more likely planned in the run-up to mid-February.

### Chavez’s 2008 Annual Report

On January 14, Chavez presented it to the National Assembly and a national television and radio audience. He laid out the nation’s progress and future plans:

- since 1999, 2.7 million Venezuelans no longer are impoverished, 437,000 in 2008 alone; extreme poverty stood at 42% earlier in the 1990s; today it’s 9.1%;
- in 2008, 62.9% of Venezuelans bought subsidized food from the Food Market Network (Mercal);
- in the past year, important agricultural progress was made; seven laws passed for development, including for food sovereignty and integral agricultural health; in addition, the percent of large landowners declined 32% since the early 1990s; over two million hectares were recovered from them, and Chavez sees ahead to “when there isn’t even one large landowner in Venezuela;” the government is increasing production of numerous crops and other food products; livestock breeds have been brought in from Cuba, Argentina and Nicaragua; in the past three years, the National Seed Plan created nearly five million kilos of seeds for planting; tractors were distributed across the country;
- under Venezuela’s “Sowing the Oil Plan,” 55 additional billion barrels of crude were certified as part of the nation’s reserves; Chavez predicted that Venezuela’s will soon be the



largest in the world; according to the US Department of Energy, they already are, including 1.36 trillion barrels of extra-heavy oil (90% of the world's total) plus over 80 billion proved light sweet reserves;

- in May 2008, Oil Minister Rafeal Ramirez said proved reserves totaled 130 billion barrels, including heavy oil; in January 2009, HeavyOilinfo.com reported Venezuelan reserves at 152.56 billion barrels in December 2008 (including heavy oil) with a target to reach 316 billion barrels by 2010;

- the National Electric Corporation was created in 2007; billions have been invested in equipment, centres, transmission, distribution networks, and maintenance; 98% of Venezuelans receive electricity, up 4.3% since 2007;

- new polyurethane and other factories created 6000 jobs; 11 others are under construction; the government took control of three gold mines; Chavez predicts gold production will almost double this year and said takeovers improved working and living conditions for miners and their families; diamond mines and other nationalizations were made;

- international currency reserves quadrupled in the past ten years to \$43 billion; at the same time, public debt decreased 70% as a percent of GDP; Venezuela's per capital reserves are among the highest in the world at \$1700; and

- 2008 GDP growth was 4.9% at a time most world economies were faltering; social services increased 9%; for 2009 - 2013, \$125 billion in oil-based investments are planned as well as another \$100 billion in others; Chavez said no economic adjustments are planned in response to the global economic crisis, and unlike America and the West, high finance interests won't get millions or billions in aid; no banks in Venezuela are insolvent; no housing bubble exists; and financial institutions aren't supported by "garbage paper."

#### A Final Comment

For 10 years under Chavez, Bolivarianism has flourished, and the greater its success the harsher it's critics. America flounders in corruption, economic chaos and decline. Venezuela's star is rising. One man made it possible:

- its model participatory democracy;

- its free, fair and open elections;

- respect for the rule of law and human rights;

- using the nation's resources for the people;

- providing essential social services to the needy;

- promoting global solidarity, equality and social justice;

- advocating peace and denouncing wars;

- working cooperatively with his neighbors;

- building socialism in the 21st century based on "solidarity, fraternity, love, justice, liberty

and equality;"

- rejecting exploitation and capital interests over people; and
- pursuing a Bolivarian vision that works.

Imagine a future America like Venezuela today. Imagine a caring, not a predatory nation. Imagine a leader in Washington like Chavez. Imagine a groundswell enough to get one.

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