

Setting the Record Straight on Venezuela and Hugo Chavez

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With so much misinformation circulating in different media outlets around the world about Venezuela and President Hugo Chavez, it's time to set the record straight. Venezuela is not a dictatorship and President Chavez is no dictator. Just last evening the Venezuelan head of state participated in a meeting with a group of housing activists, who not only criticized – live on television – government policies and inaction on tenant and housing issues, but also proposed laws, regulations and projects that were received with open arms by Chavez himself. And last week, the Venezuelan President vetoed a law on higher education that had been approved by the prior year's majority pro-Chavez legislature, calling for more “open and wide” debate on the subject, to include critics and those who had protested the bill. That is not the behavior of a brutal dictator.

As someone who has been living on and off in Venezuela for over 17 years, I can testify to the extraordinary transformation the country has undertaken during the past decade since Chavez first was elected in 1998. He has been reelected by landslide majorities twice since then.

When I arrived to Venezuela for the first time in 1993, the country was in severe turmoil. Constitutional rights had been suspended and a nationwide curfew was imposed. Repression was widespread, the economy was in crisis, several newspapers, television and radio stations had been shut down or censored, and the government had imposed a forced military draft targeting young men from poor communities. There was an interim president in power, because the actual president, Carlos Andres Perez – hailed by Washington as an “outstanding democrat” – had just been impeached and imprisoned for corruption. Perez eventually escaped confinement and fled to Miami, where he resided until his death last month, living off the millions he stole from the Venezuelan people.

Even though a new president was elected in 1994, constitutional rights remained suspended on and off for years, until the elections in 1998 that brought Chavez to power. Since then, despite a short-lived coup d'état in 2002, an economically-shattering sabotage of the oil industry in 2003 and multiple attempts against his government during the following years, President Chavez has never once limited constitutional rights nor imposed a curfew on the population. He hasn't ever ordered a state of emergency that would limit rights or shut down any media outlets. He even issued a general pardon in 2007 giving amnesty to all those involved in the 2002 coup, with the exception of individuals directly responsible for crimes against humanity or homicide.

Under the Chavez administration, poverty has been reduced in half, universal, quality free healthcare and education have been guaranteed for all Venezuelans, new industries have

been created and more and more political power has been placed in the hands of “ordinary” people who were previously excluded by the elite that ruled the country throughout the twentieth century.

So why do so many newspapers and broadcast media classify him as a dictator?

You may not like Hugo Chavez’s way of speaking, or the fact that he was born into poverty, comes from the military, is a leftist and doesn’t fit the stereotypical image of a head of state. But that doesn’t make him a dictator.

In Venezuela, more than 80% of television, radio and print media remain in the hands of private interests critical of the government. So, despite what some international press claim, there is no censorship or violation of free expression in Venezuela. Calls to overthrow the government or to incite the armed forces to rebel against the state, which would clearly be prohibited in most nations, are broadcast on opposition-controlled television channels with public concessions (open signals, not cable). Just last month, the head of the Venezuelan chamber of commerce, Fedecamaras, gave a press conference broadcast live on television and radio stations, during which he called the armed forces “traitors” who would “pay the price” if they didn’t disobey government orders and “obey” the dictates of business operators.

I can only imagine if a business leader in the United States were to go on television and call the US Army “traitors” if they didn’t disobey the federal government. Secret Service would arrest the man immediately and the consequences would be severe. But something like that would never happen in the US, since no television station would ever broadcast anything that constituted a call to rebellion or disobedience against the government. That’s illegal.

So, not only is there no censorship in Venezuela, there is an excess of “free” expression. One positive aspect of the permissive attitude assumed by the Chavez government with regards to media has been the proliferation of community and alternative media outlets throughout the nation, which have provided space and voice to those ignored by mainstream corporate media. During governments prior to the Chavez administration, community and alternative media were banned.

Recently, the Venezuelan legislature passed a law called the Law of Social Responsibility in Radio, Television and Digital Media. The law does not censor internet or any other form of media. What it does do is disallow calls to assassinate the president or other individual, as well as prohibit incitement to crime, hate or violence on web sites operated from Venezuela. This is a standard in most democracies and is a sign of civility. The law also instills on media a responsibility to contribute to the education of citizens. Media have a huge power over society today. Why shouldn’t they be responsible for their actions?

Another issue widely manipulated in mass media is the Enabling Act that was approved last month by the Venezuelan parliament. This law gives “decree” powers to the Executive to legislate on specific issues as stipulated in the bill. The Enabling Act does not usurp, inhibit or limit legislative functions of the National Assembly, nor is it unconstitutional or anti-democratic. The parliament can still debate and approve laws as usual within its authority. The Enabling law, which is permitted by the Constitution, was requested by President Chavez in order to provide rapid responses to a national emergency caused by torrential rainfall that devastated communities nationwide at the end of last year and left over 130,000

homeless. The law will not affect any constitutional rights nor impose a “dictatorship” on the country, it is merely a valid, legitimate response to an emergency situation that needs quick solutions.

And speaking of the Venezuelan legislature, there is a lot of deceitful information repeated and recycled in media worldwide about the composition of this year’s new parliament. Venezuela had legislative elections in September 2010, and opposition – anti-Chavez – parties won 40% of the seats. Some say this is a majority, which is very strange. The pro-Chavez PSUV party won 60% of seats in the National Assembly, as the Venezuelan legislative body is called. That’s 97 out of 165 seats, plus 1 more which was won by the pro-Chavez PCV party, for a total of 98.

On the other hand, the opposition bloc won 65 seats represented by 13 different political parties that don’t necessarily agree on most issues. Two other seats were won by a third, independent party, PPT. So, the PSUV party won 97 seats in parliament and the next party in line is Accion Democratica (AD) with 22 seats. Who has the majority?

In 2005, the opposition parties boycotted the electoral process, and lost the near 50% they had in parliament from the year 2000. Now, their bloc has been reduced to 40%, yet they claim to have “grown” in numbers. This perspective has been reiterated in mainstream media, despite its erroneous and manipulative nature.

The opposition bloc has already announced it will seek foreign intervention to help overthrow the government. Not only is this illegal, it’s incredibly dangerous. Many of the candidates and most of the parties that conform the opposition in Venezuela have already been receiving millions of dollars annually in funding from several US and international agencies, such as the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), both financed with US taxpayer monies. The stated purpose of this funding has been to “promote democracy” in Venezuela and help build the opposition forces against Chavez. This is a clear violation of Venezuelan sovereignty and a waste of US taxpayer dollars. US citizens: Is this the way you want your hard-earned money to be spent?

This week, opposition leaders will meet with their counterparts in Washington. They have already said their mission is to seek more aid to help remove President Chavez from power. Unfortunately, their undemocratic actions have already been welcomed in the US Capitol. Representative Connie Mack (R-FL), now head of the House Sub-Committee on Foreign Relations for the Western Hemisphere, announced on the first day of Congress that his one goal this year is to place Venezuela on the list of “state sponsors of terrorism”. And Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), now head of the House Foreign Relations Committee, has backed that objective, even going as far as to publicly state she would welcome the “assassination of Fidel Castro or any other repressive leader” such as Hugo Chavez.

On January 1, President Chavez held a brief, informal and amicable encounter with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Brasilia, during the inauguration of Dilma Rousseff, Brazil’s new president. No agreements were reached, but the exchange of hands and smiles stabilized an escalation in tensions between both nations, which had produced a diplomatic crisis at the end of last year. But upon her return to Washington, Clinton was severely criticized by media, particularly The Washington Post, which accused her of being too “soft” on Venezuela.

The Washington Post's calls for war against Venezuela are dangerous. Remember, conditioning of public opinion is necessary to justify aggression against another nation. The campaigns of demonization against Saddam Hussein, Iraq and Islam were essential to initiate the wars in the Middle East which have yet to cease. Is the public willing to be influenced by media that have a political (and economic) agenda that seeks to oust a democratically-elected and popularly supported government just because they don't like its policies?

With the recent tragic events in Arizona it should become even more evident that media have power and influence over individual actions. Hate speech, demonization campaigns, manipulative and deceitful information are dangerous and can lead to abominable consequences, including war.

It's time to stop the escalating aggression against Venezuela and accept the facts: Venezuela is not a dictatorship, and while many of you may not like Hugo Chavez, a majority of Venezuelans who voted for him do. And in this scenario, they're the ones who matter.

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