The Anti-Venezuela Election Campaign

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Venezuela's election is not until September, but the international campaign to delegitimise the government has already begun

Venezuela has an election for its national assembly in September, and the campaign has begun in earnest. I am referring to the international campaign. This is carried out largely through the international media, although some will spill over into the Venezuelan media. It involves many public officials, especially in the US. The goal will be to generate as much bad press as possible about Venezuela, to discredit the government, and to delegitimise the September elections – in case the opposition should choose to boycott, as they did in the last legislative elections, or refuse to recognise the results if they lose.

There's no need for conspiracy, since the principal actors all know what to do. Occasionally some will be off-message due to lack of co-ordination. A fascinating example of this occurred last week when Senator John McCain tried to get General Doug Fraser of the US Southern Command to back his accusations that Venezuela supports terrorist activities. Testifying before the Senate armed services committee on March 11, General Fraser contradicted McCain:

> "We have continued to watch very closely … We have not seen any connections specifically that I can verify that there has been a direct government-to-terrorist connection."

Oops! Apparently Fraser didn't get the memo that the Obama team, not just McCain, is in full campaign mode against Venezuela. The next day, he issued a statement recanting his testimony:

> "Assistant Secretary Valenzuela [the state department's top Latin America official] and I spoke this morning on the topic of linkages between the government of Venezuela and the Farc. There is zero daylight between our two positions and we are in complete agreement.
>
> "There is indeed clear and documented historical and ongoing evidence of the linkages between the government of Venezuela and the Farc … we are in direct alignment with our partners at the state department and the intelligence community."

Well it's good to know that the United States still has civilian control over the military, at least in the western hemisphere. On the other hand, it would be even better if the truth counted for anything in these Congressional hearings or in Washington foreign policy circles generally. The general's awkward and seemingly forced reversal went unnoticed by the

media.

The “documented and historical and ongoing evidence” mentioned by General Fraser refers to material alleged to come from laptops and hard drives allegedly found by the Colombian military in a cross-border raid into Ecuador in 2008. Never mind that this is the same military that has been found to have killed hundreds of innocent teenagers and dressed them up in guerrilla clothing. These laptops and hard drives will continue to be tapped for previously undisclosed “evidence”, which will then be deployed in the campaign against the Venezuelan government. We will be asked to assume that the “captured documents” are authentic, and most of the media will do so.

US secretary of state Hillary Clinton‘s attacks on Venezuela during hertrip to South America were one of the opening salvos of this campaign. Most of what will follow is predictable. There will be hate-filled editorials in the major newspapers, led by the neocon editorial board of the Washington Post (aka Fox on 15th Street). Chávez will be accused of repressing the media, even though most of the Venezuelan media – as measured by audience – is still controlled by the opposition. In fact, the media in Venezuela is still far more in opposition to the government than is our own media in the United States, or for that matter in most of the world. But the international press will be trying to convey the image that Venezuela is Burma or North Korea.

In Washington DC, if I try to broadcast on an FM radio frequency without a legal broadcast licence, I will be shut down. When this happens in Venezuela, it is reported as censorship. No one here will bother to look at the legalities or the details, least of all the pundits and editorial writers, or even many of the reporters.

The Venezuelan economy was in recession in 2009, but will likely begin to grow again this year. The business press will ignore the economic growth and hype the inflation, as they have done for the past six years, when the country’s record economic growth cut the poverty rate by half and extreme poverty by 70% (which was also ignored). Resolutions will be introduced into the US Congress condemning Venezuela for whatever.

The US government will continue to pour millions of dollars into Venezuela through USAid, and will refuse to disclose the recipients. This is the non-covert part of their funding for the campaign inside Venezuela.

The only part of this story that is not predictable is what the ultimate result of the international campaign will be. In Venezuela’s last legislative elections of 2005, the opposition boycotted the national elections, with at least tacit support from the Bush administration. In an attempt to delegitimise the government, they gave up winning probably at least 30% of the legislature.

At the time, most of the media – and also the Organisation of American States – rejected the idea that the election was illegitimate simply because the opposition boycotted. But that was under the Bush administration, which had lost some credibility on Venezuela due to its support for the 2002 coup, and for other reasons. It could be different under an Obama administration.

That is why it is so ominous to see this administration mounting an unprovoked, transparently obvious campaign to delegitimise the Venezuelan government prior to a national election. This looks like a signal to the opposition: “We will support you if you

decide to return to an insurrectionary strategy," either before or after the election.

The US state department is playing an ugly and dangerous game.

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