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Well-Funded Western NGOs Whitewashing Venezuela's Right Wing

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In the heated media war over Venezuela, studies produced by well-funded NGOs (usually with ties to powerful states) have been regularly cited by the western corporate media to paint a grim picture of the country.

A Venezuela report released by the International Crisis Group (ICG) in May might give some people the impression that it is an even handed account done by authors committed to decreasing political violence in Venezuela. The report makes a few good recommendations, but it actually reveals that the ICG's commitment to whitewashing right wing extremists is much stronger than any commitment to sensible analysis or to reducing political violence.

In the crucial section of the report where it discusses protest related violence, the ICG claims that there is only "weak evidence" that any opposition supporters ever used firearms:

> In contrast to the abundant evidence linking security forces and pro-government civilians to deaths and injuries, it is unclear whether some in the opposition used firearms. In any case, the evidence on this is weak. The only deaths that appear clearly linked to the protesters are those involving accidents caused by barricades, including the use of barbed wire or other obstacles.

As far as the ICG is concerned, the bodies of several police and other pro government people shot to death while attempting to clear barricades in opposition strongholds are "weak evidence" of firearm use by anyone in the opposition. It might be argued that "concrete proof" of the exact individuals who shot every one of those victims is lacking. However saying that anti-government protesters are not very strongly implicated in the shootings of any government supporters or police is beyond preposterous.

In an attempt to make the evidence appear weak, the ICG mentions one incident in which a journalist working for a right wing business newspaper, *El Universal*, claims that a government supporter shot and killed a policeman at an opposition barricade. This kind of counter claim had also been made by government officials about some opposition protesters who have been shot (some government officials claiming the shots were fired by other opposition people), but the ICG wouldn't dare use these claims to conclude that there is only "weak evidence" that government supporters had ever used firearms. In fact, the ICG discusses the death of opposition protester Génesis Carmona without ever mentioning government claims that she had been shot by another protester. Such inconsistent and biased standards for assessing evidence cannot possibly lead to a reliable version of events.

In addition to various opposition aligned sources, the ICG defers to the New York City based Human Rights Watch (HRW) to assess responsibility for violence. HRW was very recently sent a letter signed by two Nobel Peace Prize laureates Adolfo Pérez Esquivel and Mairead Maguire; former UN Assistant Secretary General Hans von Sponeck; current UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in the Palestinian Territories Richard Falk; and over 100 scholars all requesting that it take steps to close the revolving door between it and the US government. The letter noted:

> In a 2012 letter to President Chávez, HRW criticized the country's candidacy for the UN Human Rights Council, alleging that Venezuela had fallen "far short of acceptable standards" and questioning its "ability to serve as a credible voice on human rights." At no point has U.S. membership in the same council merited censure from HRW, despite Washington's secret, global assassination program, its preservation of renditions, and its illegal detention of individuals at Guantánamo Bay.

Ken Roth, head of HRW, once referred to Venezuela and a few other ALBA countries as the "most abusive" in Latin America – an insane remark as he should know by merely sampling his own organization's reports about Colombia. Daniel Wilkinson, another HRW official, went so far as to lie about the Venezuelan TV media in an op-ed published in the New York Review of Books. HRW's responses to the 2002 coup in Venezuela and as well as the 2004 coup in Haiti were disgraceful. By now, anyone who uncritically cites HRW about any country at odds with the US is, at best, uninformed about HRW's track record.

The ICG's report makes no mention of numerous falsified images the opposition has spread through social media to bolster its allegations of repression. Even a corporate outlet like Reuters made mention of this tactic but the ICG ignored it. The ICG also cites the anti-government newspaper *El National* various times – a newspaper whose dishonesty is so flagrant it has sometimes dismayed opposition people. An atrocious record doesn't "weaken" *El Nacional* articles as evidence in the view of the ICG or provoke any statement of caution.

Attempts to put the 2004 recall referendum results under a cloud

The ICG report made the astounding remark that the opposition merely lacked "concrete proof" of fraud in the 2004 recall referendum that was won by Hugo Chavez. The report stated:

> Concrete proof [of fraud] was not presented, though a peer-reviewed statistical analysis of the results later found significant anomalies. Maria M. Febres and Bernardo Márquez, "A Statistical Approach to Assess Referendum Results: The Venezuelan Recall Referendum 2004", International Statistical Review, vol. 74, no. 3 (2006), p. 379. Jennifer McCoy, Carter Center election observation head in Venezuela, found the anomalies had not affected the referendum outcome.

In fact, elaborate statistical arguments – one of them based on "anomalies" in the distribution of votes – were made immediately after the referendum took place, not years later as the ICG implies. The Carter Center hired a team of very specialized statisticians – not simply Jennifer McCoy as the ICG very sloppily suggests – whose only job was to assess those arguments. The statisticians explained why the arguments did not substantiate

allegations of fraud. The oppositions' various "statistical analyses" received expert scrutiny that decided something far more important than acceptability for publication (which is what peer-review committees decide for journals) and that required extensive review of the arguments made by both sides. One of the key points made by the Carter Center's statisticians was that there was no credible explanation how the government could have perpetrated fraud such that the random audit of the results would have failed to expose it.

The government's victory in the 2004 referendum was subjected to a remarkably severe test. One of the key monitors, the Carter Center, is deeply tied to the US establishment which has been very hostile to Chavista administrations. In spite of all that, the ICG still pretends that there is reasonable doubt about the results. That will encourage the members of the opposition who allege that Chavista victories are stolen no matter how overwhelming the evidence is against them.

It's unsurprising, given the ICG's willingness to smear the 2004 referendum which was very far from close, that it also published a hopelessly one-sided account of the dispute surrounding the vastly closer presidential election of April 2013. The ICG absolved the opposition in advance for any act of violence by stating that the government must "clarify" the validity of the results or face "violent consequences". In reality, the Election Day audit of the results, as CEPR has reported, already proved that the odds of a Capriles victory were less than one in 25 thousand trillion. The audit was, nevertheless, expanded.

It is quite clear to anyone who has been paying attention that opposition claims of electoral fraud are not driven by the facts but by the level of support they expect from the US government, foreign media and groups like the ICG.

Speaking the opposition's language

In section IX of the report the ICG contrasts the "left leaning regimes" of the Bolivarian Alliance for our America (ALBA) with "those representing more market-friendly, centre and right-leaning governments". On the left the ICG describes "regimes" while elsewhere on the political spectrum it describes "governments".

Some political scientists use the word "regime" in a neutral way, but it is most commonly used to describe an oppressive and undemocratic government. I can find no example of the ICG ever referring to US government as a "regime" despite its abysmal human rights record and money-dominated political process. However it is very easy to find ICG reports replete with the word "regime" to describe states that the US government opposes.

The ICG also adopts the use of the word "coletivo" to mean an armed government supporter. It acknowledges that this is highly partisan usage by noting that it "is a term that covers pro-government community organisations of various kinds, most of them non-violent. But it has come to be used in particular for armed groups of the revolutionary left that have proliferated under chavista governments."

In short, the opposition media (whom the ICG attempts to hide through the use of passive voice "has come to be used") has demonized the word "colectivo" and the ICG reflexively follows suit.

Tamara Pearson, a proud colectivo member who has been living and working in Venezuela for several years, remarked about the media vilification campaign:

> Where previously everything, even the drought or the actions of big business, were Chavez's fault, now it must be "the collectives". Now that Chavez is gone and the opposition still hasn't got its electoral victory, they have realised it's not enough to call the current president a "dictator" and belittle him because of his lack of formal university education, they need to demonise the active and organising people too. Because they aren't going away.

A few good suggestions completely undermined

The ICG said that "the opposition can, and should, drop calls for the Maduro administration to step down". This is a sound suggestion, no doubt, but one that is hypocritical and ineffective coming from the ICG. Whitewashing opposition violence and impugning clean elections, as the ICG does, is a propaganda gift to the "regime change" crowd.

The ICG recommends that Venezuela's "international partners" should "help de-escalate the violence by sending clear messages that only peaceful methods will be tolerated." UNASUR, and even the OAS which has traditionally towed Washington's line, have already sent that message. The ICG is sending the opposite message.

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