

Will Venezuelan Destabilization Follow the Honduran Coup?

By [Stephen Lendman](#)

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After ten and a half years in office, Hugo Chavez is very savvy about America's intentions. On January 17, even before Obama's inauguration, he said "Barack Obama has the 'stench' of his predecessor as US president and was at risk of being killed if he tries to change the American 'empire.' "

He added that frayed ties with Washington were unlikely to improve despite the departure of Bush, the man he called the 'devil.' Now there's a new "devil" with his fingerprints all over the June 28 Honduran coup. More on that below.

At a January political rally on a historic Venezuela battlefield, Chavez said "I hope I am wrong, but I believe Obama brings the same stench, to not say another word" and do little to change his predecessor's policies.

After earlier hoping for better US - Venezuelan relations, he reacted to Obama's rhetoric, accusing him of obstructing Latin American progress and exporting terrorism. In late March on his Sunday radio/television program (Alo Presidente), he voiced the same concern in calling Obama an "ignoramus" and suggested "he should read and study a little to understand reality....the obstacle to development in Latin America has been the empire (he) preside(s) over today."

Its State Department February 25, 2009-released "2008 Human Rights Report: Venezuela" provided more proof. While calling Venezuela a "constitutional democracy," it accused the government of outrageous, groundless offenses:

(1) Numerous human rights abuses, including:

— arbitrary or unlawful deprivation of life; mistreating prisoners in custody; unlawful killings by security forces; disappearances; torture and abuse of detainees; harsh prison conditions; arbitrary arrests and detentions; denial of fair public trials; incarcerating political prisoners; violating personal privacy; and more.

(2) censoring the press and free speech, including

— harassing the private media; using government-controlled outlets to air unsubstantiated charges against their owners; using a pro-government organization to fire tear gas canisters at Globovision's headquarters; and changing the penal code to make criticizing the president a crime.

(3) numerous other charges were over:

- compromising Internet freedom;
- free assembly, association, and movement;
- limiting religious freedom and attacking Catholic bishops and the Papal Nuncio for commenting on political issues;
- anti-Semitism;
- protection of refugees;
- electoral irregularities;
- government corruption and transparency;
- trafficking in persons;
- obstructing the right to organize and bargain collectively; and more.

Overall, the report described America, not Venezuela and its constitutionally mandated freedoms, making it the hemisphere's most open and democratic society, with Chavez its most popular leader after ten and a half years in office. In America, George Bush left office with the lowest approval rating ever for a president, and Obama's poll numbers are sinking fast after less than seven months as chief executive. His hostility toward center-left Latin American democracies won't improve them.

On July 20, AP reported that a "US congressional report on drug trafficking in Venezuela charges that corruption within the government and military led to a permissive environment that allows smuggling to flourish." Released by the US Government Accountability Office (GAO), it also charged the government with "extend(ing) a 'lifeline' to Colombian rebels and other illegal armed groups that rely on drug sales for financing 'by providing significant support and safe haven along the border.' "

In addition, the GAO said "available data indicate that drug trafficking through Venezuela is increasing," the police and National Guard are involved, bribes facilitate it, and cooperation between Washington and Caracas has decreased because fewer DEA agent visas were approved.

Chavez called the report "a new lie," like so many others, and another effort to vilify him and his government. He also accused America of being "the top drug trafficking country on this entire planet" and added that recent large drug seizures and arrests show his resolve to fight Colombian cocaine smuggling.

The recent mid-April Summit of the Americas highlighted growing regional disenchantment with Washington under a new administration no different from its predecessor and in some respects worse. It demands everything and offers nothing but failed policies and rhetorical promises that leaders like Chavez and others know are hollow.

James Petras is a long-time Latin American expert. In his new book due out in August titled "Global Depression and Regional Wars," he addresses what he also discussed in his May 21 article, "Obama's Foreign Policy Failures: Diplomacy, Militarism and Imagery."

He explained that the US financial collapse and “accompanying economic depression has led to a major crisis and conflict between North and South America with profound long-term consequences,” including hundreds of billions of repatriated US dollars harming regional countries dependent on American capital, “financial protectionism,” and the virtual “de-capitalization of Latin America” to the detriment of credit-starved regional exporters and importers.

America first policies and stepped-up militarism are contrary to “any ‘harmonization of interest’ and strengthen nationalist, regionalist and statist political and economic policies and governments in Latin America.” Like his predecessor, Obama’s policies have “accelerat(ed) the shift in Latin America away from US dominance.” It’s evident in Ecuador, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, for half a century in Cuba, and the reason their governments are targeted.

Spinning the News – Dominant Media Efforts to Vilify Chavez

In America, Chavez bashing remains in vogue with major media contributors especially vocal after he accused the State Department, CIA, and Pentagon of being behind the Honduran coup with clear evidence it’s true after decades of US meddling in the region.

A July 31 Washington Post editorial headlined “Rockets for Terrorists” in accusing Chavez of supporting FARC-EP “insurgents.” It cited “extensive evidence that the government of Venezuela had collaborated with a Colombian rebel movement known for terrorism and drug trafficking....The evidence was contained on laptops captured (from) a guerilla base in Ecuador.”

In fact, none existed, according to INTERPOL’s forensic experts after examination discovered “no evidence of modification, alteration, addition or deletion in the” supposed user files from “three laptop computers, three USB thumb drives and two external hard discs seized during a Colombian anti-narcotics and anti-terrorist operation on a FARC camp on 1 March 2008.” INTERPOL also acknowledged that Colombia likely manipulated the contents, rendering them bogus and fraudulent.

At the time, Chavez denounced the documents as forgeries to vilify him. But like indigestion, they’ve resurfaced with new charges, that, according to the Post, “will be even more difficult to ignore” even though they’re as baseless as earlier ones.

This time they’re over late July claims that “sophisticated Swedish-produced antitank rockets” sold to Venezuela years ago were captured in a raid on a FARC-EP camp. Supposedly, the same laptops referred to “a FARC operative in Caracas” discussing them in 2007 “with two top Venezuelan generals, including the director of military intelligence, Hugo Armando Carvajal Barrios.”

Calling Chavez a “caudillo,” (a strongman or military dictator), the editorial accused him of “public bluster” after withdrawing his ambassador and diplomatic staff from Colombia and “threaten(ing) to close the border to trade” for reasons the Post omitted.

Colombia is a corrupted narco-state and the region’s most repressive death squad democracy that targets unionists, human rights activists, and legitimate resistance groups like the FARC-EP. Chavez acted in response to America’s stepped up military presence there and intention to supply the government with new weapons and technology plus billions

through Plan Colombia in support of the “Uribe doctrine” that’s hard right, corporate-friendly, and militarized for enforcement.

Stepped Up Gunboat Diplomacy

During his late June White House visit, president Alvaro Uribe gave the Pentagon access to seven new military bases – three airfields, two naval installations, and two others later revealed. The largest is Palenquero Air Base, north of Bogota. Another is the Malambo Air Base near the Venezuelan border. The two navy bases are at Cartagena and Bahia Malaga, and the Florencia army base as well, near the Ecuadorean border, along with nine other military installations currently stationing US forces supplemented by the reactivated Fourth Fleet in April 2008 (headquartered at Florida’s Mayport Naval Station) after a 60 year hiatus.

It was created during WW II for Latin America and the Caribbean, disbanded in 1950, and now again operating to “conduct varying missions including a range of contingency operations, counter narco-terrorism, and theater security cooperation activities.” According to US Naval Forces Southern Command chief Adm. James Stevenson last year, “the Fourth Fleet will send a message to Venezuela and the region.” Commandant of the National War College, General Robert Steel, said at the time:

“The United States’ obsession with Venezuela, Cuba and other things indicates they are going to use more military force, going to use that instrument more often.”

With Fourth Fleet strength including aircraft carriers, submarines, other sophisticated attack ships, and nuclear weapons, indeed it may, and that has regional leaders worried, given the increased US military presence in Colombia.

The move sparked regional outrage with Chavez saying “They are surrounding Venezuela with military bases” and may “soon start sending thousands of North American soldiers to Colombia....These are contract soldiers who are nothing more than paramilitary mercenaries and assassins. Airplanes, radar, sophisticated weapons, bombs – and, of course, they say it’s to fight drug trafficking.”

Ecuador’s Minister of Internal and External Security, Dr. Gustavo Larrea, warned of “an increase in military tension” with more US forces in Colombia.

On the pretext of fighting drugs trafficking and hemispheric security, militarizing a close Washington ally is meant to intimidate Venezuela, Ecuador, and other center-left governments. They threaten Chavez and his allies and will replace the Manta, Ecuador base, now closing, after president Rafeal Correa declined to renew its lease last year. At the time, The New York Times called it “a critical platform in the fight against narcotics smuggling.” In fact, it’s part of America’s global footprint with over 1000 bases on every continent and a key factor behind growing animosity against its intrusive presence.

Nonetheless, the Post cited the above GAO report about Venezuela’s “permissive environment for FARC that had allowed the group to massively increase its cocaine smuggling across the border.” According to the Post:

“This all sounds an awful lot like material support for terrorism — which raises the question of whether the State Department will look again at whether Mr. Chavez’s government or its top officials belong on its list of state sponsors of terrorism,” an action even the Bush administration never took although talk surfaced that it might after earlier reckless charges

were made. That's unfinished business for Post writers and Washington hard-liners who suggest that Obama should focus on "those in the hemisphere who have been caught trying to overturn a democratic government (meaning Colombia, not Honduras) by supplying terrorists with advanced weapons."

The New York Times' Simon Romero produces similar reports from his Caracas post. On July 20, it was about the "State Ruled by Crime and Chavez Family" in highlighting Barinas for being "the bastion of the family of President Hugo Chavez and as the setting for a terrifying surge in abductions." He called it "anarchy (where the Chavez family) accumulates wealth and power" while others fear for their lives.

Then on August 2, he jumped on the claim that "Venezuela Still Aids Colombia Rebels, New Material Shows" in saying they indicate "detailed collaborations between the guerrillas and high-ranking (Chavez government) military and intelligence officials as recently as several weeks ago" despite the above-cited proof that earlier "evidence" was fraudulent and baseless. Even so, Romero says it confirms that "the FARC operates easily in Venezuela....despite repeated denials by President Chavez."

An August 3 Bloomberg.com report headlined "Venezuela Media Closings Hurt Freedom, Executive Says" in calling the "closing of 32 radio stations and two television broadcasters....an example of 'Cuban-style' repression." While stating that the July 31 action followed from their "fail(ure) to comply with an order issued last month to update documents at the government regulator," it failed to explain that their licenses had expired, they violated regulations, and community media serving all Venezuelans will replace them.

Telecommunications (CONATEL) and Housing and Infrastructure Minister Diosdado Cabello said the stations were operating illegally, hadn't registered, and failed to pay required fees. In addition, another 206 stations may face similar penalties for violating broadcast regulations. But hundreds of private stations operate freely throughout the country because they comply with the law. Many other non-profit, non-commercial community ones also that make Venezuela perhaps the freest, most open society in the world, not one enforcing censorship as the State Department and anti-Chavistas contend.

Cabello explained that the state cracked down against lawbreakers by "recovering the concessions that were being used illegally for more than 30 years. It is an act of justice that has to do with giving power to the people," not an attack on media freedom, as Bloomberg suggests, or an attempt to accelerate a "push for a government-run economy" by takeovers of private industries.

In fact, they operate freely and profitably in Venezuela, but unlike in America, they're held accountable for law violations. In the US, corporate lawyers and lobbyists write business-friendly legislation and regulations, contrary to the public interest. That's a major difference between the two countries and why Chavez is targeted for the good example he represents.

Implications of the Honduran Coup

There's no debate about the Honduran coup despite media efforts to distort it. It was made-in-the-USA like most others in the region over many decades. Since the late 19th century, America has directly meddled in Latin and Central American states well over 50 times, a record unmatched by any other nation, and abuses keep mounting. They involved invasions, bombings, occupations, assassinations, and coups as well as countless destabilization and

election rigging interventions.

Against Honduras alone:

- in 1903, American Marines invaded to protect US business interests;
- in 1907, they intervened during a war with Nicaragua;
- in 1911 - 1912, they came to support a coup against the liberal Davila regime, aided by two US mercenaries, one of whom became Honduras' army commander-in-chief; US forces remained for months to protect American interests;
- in 1919, they intervened in Honduras' election campaign;
- in 1924 - 1925, they came again for the same reason;
- in 1980, US aid began supporting the Nicaraguan contras, given sanctuary in Honduras to launch cross-border attacks; and

From 1982 - 1990, America used Honduras as a land-based aircraft carrier to support the Contra insurgency against the Nicaraguan Sandinista government. Mass killings and atrocities were committed. Over \$1.6 billion in military aid was provided. A US military presence was established at Soto Cano Air Force Base. American forces remain there today in close liaison with Honduran commanders who wouldn't blow their noses without first asking permission. Through close Pentagon - Honduran military ties, the June 28 coup was coordinated along with the US State Department.

All Honduran officers from captains on up are trained at the School of the Americas where they're taught how to torture, repress, exterminate poor and indigenous people, overthrow democratically elected governments, assassinate targeted leaders, and suppress popular resistance when it erupts.

The June 28 coup against President Manuel Zelaya was a coordinated State Department - Pentagon project working with Honduran commanders and top opposition political figures to establish a de facto dictatorship. The scheme followed similar tactics against earlier Latin American governments, including:

- Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala (1954);
- the failed Bay of Pigs invasion against Cuba (1961) and hundreds of subsequent unsuccessful assassination attempts against Fidel Castro;
- Juan Bosch in the Dominican Republic (1963) followed by a 1965 US invasion to crush popular support to return him to power;
- Joao Goulart in Brazil (1964);
- Salvador Allende in Chile (9/11/73);
- Uruguay's military junta takeover from a civilian democracy (1973);
- Isabel Peron in Argentina (1976),

- Carlos Humberto Romero in El Salvador (ousted by a right-wing El Salvador junta – 1979);
- the assassination of Panama’s Omar Torrijos (1981);
- Maurice Bishop in Grenada (1983);
- Manuel Noriega in Panama (1989);
- Jean-Bertrand Aristide twice (1991 and 2004); and
- Manuel Zelaya in Honduras (2009) who was blamed for the action to legitimize the coup d’etat government long enough, destroy his image, weaken his authority if a negotiated return is arranged, and effectively render him impotent until the November 29 presidential and parliamentary elections after which a new president will take office since Zelaya can’t succeed himself.

Will Chavez Now Be Targeted?

Throughout his tenure, numerous attempts were made to destabilize his government, discredit his leadership and policies, oust him in the aborted April 2002 coup, and again in the failed August 2004 recall referendum. In addition, Chavez and others claim assassination schemes were hatched, the latest one forcing him to cancel his June 1 El Salvador trip to attend President Mauricio Funes’ inauguration.

In his place, Foreign Affairs Minister Nicolas Maduro said it was learned that “ultra (Venezuelan) right wing groups....linked to ultra conservative coup sectors, together with the international ultra right,” hinting Washington primarily, were behind an assassination plot.

Chavez said he got reliable information about a scheme “to launch one or several rockets at the Cubana airline plane that was already to leave from (Caracas’) Maiquetia” airport. His regular plane was being repaired, so Cuba provided a substitute. He and Bolivia’s Evo Morales planned to travel together, so perhaps there was a plot to kill them both.

Chavez also accused former Venezuelan military personnel of involvement, some of whom entered San Salvador earlier. “I know them,” he said, “they have sworn to me that they were going to kill me because they say it’s my fault that they lost their jobs and didn’t reach the highest military ranks. The government of the United States is behind all this,” specifically suggesting the CIA, not Obama himself.

Earlier suspected plots were also uncovered. As a result, Chavez is very watchful for future ones, given his troubled relations with America, not at all eased since the accession of Obama. On numerous occasions, US-Venezuelan lawyer and Chavez confidante, Eva Golinger, has said that schemes are always underway to destabilize the government, vilify Chavez, and look for ways to oust him, thus far without success.

As recently as August 3, she said:

After CONATEL’s suspension of media licenses, “opposition groups in Venezuela (are again) trying to provoke a coup against Chavez....They are calling for destabilization activities throughout the nation....and using this situation as an excuse to call for protests (and on) the international community to support their destabilization actions.”

For the past ten and a half years, Washington and Venezuelan oligarchs have targeted Chavez relentlessly and won't let up while he's in office. Whether the Honduran coup signals stepped up efforts ahead remains to be seen. Perhaps so given Washington's regional history of intolerance of democracies that place national interests above America's. Chavez explained it well saying Obama "risk(s) being killed if he challenges the American empire." So far, there's not a hint of it in sight.

Stephen Lendman is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization. He lives in Chicago and can be reached at lendmanstephen@sbcglobal.net.

Also visit his blog site at sjlendman.blogspot.com and listen to The Global Research News Hour on RepublicBroadcasting.org Monday - Friday at 10AM US Central time for cutting edge discussions with distinguished guests on world and national issues. All programs are archived for easy listening.

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About the author:

Stephen Lendman lives in Chicago. He can be reached at lendmanstephen@sbcglobal.net. His new book as editor and contributor is titled "Flashpoint in Ukraine: US Drive for Hegemony Risks WW III."

<http://www.claritypress.com/LendmanIII.html> Visit his blog site at sjlendman.blogspot.com. Listen to cutting-edge discussions with distinguished guests on the Progressive Radio News Hour on the Progressive Radio Network. It airs three times weekly: live on Sundays at 1PM Central time plus two prerecorded archived programs.

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