



Venezuela under Chávez: The Path toward Dictatorship

By Roger F. Noriega

Perhaps the most generous interpretation of Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez is that he is a man who wants to help his nation's long-neglected poor majority. He certainly appears to enjoy their support. According to most recent polls, his approval ratings hover around 55 percent. From his earliest days in power, Chávez tapped into discontent among the poor majority of the nation who regard previous governments as corrupt and unaccountable. He has used this political clout and a caudillo style to centralize power under a highly ideological executive. In short, although Chávez has thus far managed to appease outsiders by maintaining the façade of democracy (allowing but harassing the opposition parties and the independent media; and conducting increasingly uncompetitive elections), he and his political allies in the legislative branch and the courts have almost taken complete control over the state.

Many leaders in Latin America and the Caribbean tolerate him because he is generous in spreading Venezuela's oil wealth around to buy influence for his revolutionary, anti-American project. But what happens when Chávez no longer maintains popular support? Will the strong, centralized system allow dissent? As the country prepares for presidential elections in December, it is time for both Venezuelans and the international community to evaluate the state of democracy under Chávez. Historians will likely look back at this period and write of "Chávez the dictator" or of "Chávez the would-be dictator"—depending on whether his people and his neighbors are able to contain his undemocratic project.

Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez has forged an intensely ideological, combative, and intolerant regime, brandishing polarizing rhetoric to divide and incite social classes and mobilizing the tools of the state to suppress and persecute his opponents. Since taking office, he has systematically concentrated power under his so-called Fifth Republic Movement (*Movimiento Quinta República* or MVR). One of his first orders of business after taking office was formulating a new constitution that established the Fifth Republic Movement and cast out checks and balances in order to consolidate power in the executive branch. His 1999 constitution eliminated the Senate and did away with congressional oversight of the armed forces.

Roger F. Noriega (rnoriega@aei.org) is a visiting fellow at AEI.

Chávez's allies in the National Assembly have used their power to place the courts and other public ministries in the hands of hard-core *Chavistas* and to adopt measures to harass the media and other potential opponents. Chávez sealed control of the National Assembly in the December 2005 elections; opposition parties boycotted the process (and 85 percent of Venezuelans did not vote) after *Chavista* electoral authorities refused to take steps to guarantee a free and fair process. And, the military and some police organizations have allowed themselves to be converted from legitimate instruments of the state to partisan weapons to be wielded against fellow citizens. Rather than seek to ameliorate political unrest and social tension, Chávez and his loyalists use polarizing rhetoric and measures to "smoke out" those who do not share their political beliefs and to stifle dissent.

The *Inter-American Democratic Charter*

The Inter-American Democratic Charter, drafted and signed by the thirty-four active member states on September 11, 2001, states, in Article 1, “The peoples of the Americas have a right to democracy and their governments have an obligation to promote and defend it.” Article 3 of the document defines the “essential elements” of “representative democracy” in very specific and inclusive terms, including:

- respect for “human rights and fundamental freedoms, access to and the free exercise of power in accordance with the rule of law, the holding of periodic, free, and fair elections based on secret balloting and universal suffrage”;
- “pluralistic system of political parties and organizations”;
- “separation of powers and independence of the branches of government”;
- “freedom of expression and of the press”; and
- “constitutional subordination of all state institutions to the legally constituted civilian authority.”

Fundamentally, the document asserts that “an unconstitutional interruption of the democratic order or an unconstitutional alteration of the constitutional regime that seriously impairs the democratic order in a member state constitutes . . . an insurmountable obstacle to its government’s participation” in the inter-American system.

SOURCE: *Inter-American Democratic Charter*, September 11, 2001, full text available at www.oas.org/charter/docs/resolution1_en_p4.htm.

Harassed Opposition and Controlled Elections

Several regional leaders—including Organization of American States (OAS) secretary general José Miguel Insulza—have declared that it is not enough for a leader to be elected democratically if he does not govern democratically. The case against Chávez is fairly damning. International observers have found that the voter lists and electoral apparatus are seriously flawed. And, it is difficult to conceive that any future election conducted under the current conditions by the partisan electoral apparatus would “pass muster” with international observers. While opposition candidates certainly face a popular Chávez, they are further impeded by an electoral system largely controlled by regime loyalists. A recent poll by Consultores 21 found that less than half of Venezuelans thought the National Electoral Council was impartial (46 versus 49 percent).¹ Said presidential candidate Teodoro Petkoff,

Chávez “has the entire state apparatus at his service, and he uses it unscrupulously.”²

It is indisputable that Chávez came to power—and has held onto it—through elections with considerable popular support: he was elected twice to the presidency and survived an August 2004 referendum that would have truncated his term in office. The opposition has been unable to prove its claims of fraud in the referendum balloting. However, in legislative elections held in December 2005, despite Chávez’s urgent appeals to the revolutionary fervor to consolidate his hold on power, only around 10 to 15 percent of Venezuela’s registered voters participated.

Opinion polls show that most of Venezuela’s voters support Chávez and consider him a committed democrat. However, Chávez has surely learned from his tutor Fidel Castro that, although a dictator might care about public opinion, the simple fact is that he does not have to—particularly once he brings his opposition under control. And, while he might concern himself with the outcome of a given election, whether to even hold an election is up to him.

Chávez appears not to fear elections—in part because of his string of victories (of decreasing transparency). He appears to have made a cynical calculation that, as long as he conducts open contests, he can blunt any criticism from abroad. He has spared little effort to bring the electoral authorities of the nation under his control, relying on his absolute control of the National Assembly to change the composition of the National Electoral Council. Today, not a single person identified with the opposition serves on the council that oversees national elections.

Most recently, Chávez responded to allegations of flawed democracy in Venezuela by accusing the opposition of plotting to boycott the December presidential elections so that they would not have to recognize his inevitable victory. Should they do so, he threatens to call a referendum to ask the public if they want him to serve until 2031. Chávez has proven himself to be a shrewd politician: he simultaneously allows a fairly vocal opposition while spinning their cries for democracy into reasons to further legitimize his control over the electorate. So, in essence, Chávez has assured his movement of electoral victory—whether the opposition chooses to compete or not.

Chávez has proven himself to be a shrewd politician: he simultaneously allows a fairly vocal opposition while spinning their cries for democracy into reasons to further legitimize his control over the electorate. So, in essence, Chávez has assured his movement of electoral victory—whether the opposition chooses to compete or not.

Chávez's regime does not rely only on legal means to abuse its opponents. Before and since the political crisis that led to his temporary removal from power in April 2002, Chávez's security forces used indiscriminate and excessive force to put down political demonstrators. His opponents have been subjected to extended and unlawful detention and torture. Internationally respected human rights organizations have documented in dramatic detail cases in which Venezuelan security forces used excessive force or caused the death of innocent bystanders.

A nationwide network of so-called Bolivarian Circles (*Círculos Bolivarianos*) and violent groups like the *Tupamaros* consisting of armed thugs routinely attack Chávez's political opponents. Also, the OAS Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has criticized the state for failing to prosecute hundreds of cases of extrajudicial killings and for not investigating "death squads" operating in the country.³

The Judiciary in Chávez's Hip Pocket

"Justice" is meted out swiftly against opponents of the regime, while a pattern of alleged abuses by government security forces goes unpunished. In a 2004 report, Amnesty International issued an extraordinarily damning declaration against what is supposed to be a democratic government, saying, in part:

Over recent years, these [Venezuelan] institutions have failed to fulfill their constitutional role to act with equal impartiality against government supporters and opponents accused of committing crimes related to the ongoing political crisis. This lack of impartiality, combined with long standing structural weaknesses of these key institutions, threatens to strengthen the culture of impunity that has accompanied human rights abuses over many years in Venezuela.⁴

The OAS's commission has also accused the Venezuelan state of repeatedly violating its international commitments by failing to comply with decisions issued by the commission, thereby placing "in peril the lives and personal integrity" of Venezuelan citizens.⁵

Chávez and his allies have worked assiduously to reconstitute the Supreme Court and lower courts in order to ensure the political reliability of the magistrates. The new rules established for the appointment, renewal, and suspension of judges—by a simple majority of the

National Assembly—have had the effect of packing the courts with judges known for their ideological loyalty to Chávez's political movement. The scrupulously impartial OAS Human Rights Commission has asserted that these laws "appear to have helped the executive manipulate the election of judges during 2004."⁶

In December 2004, Chávez loyalist Pedro Carreño, head of the legislative commission nominating new judges, said that not one of the nearly fifty appointees on that occasion could be considered opposition figures. "We're not going to score a goal against ourselves," he said.⁷ Omar Mora Díaz, the current head of the Supreme Court of Justice, boasts of his commitment to armed struggle as a teenager. Although he denies being associated with any political movement, he declares himself a "revolutionary."

The OAS Human Rights Commission has complained bitterly that the Chávez regime has failed to investigate and prosecute accusations of politically related violence and murder. In fact, the regime uses the investigatory powers of the state to harass and persecute its opponents. One infamous example is that of the political witch hunt conducted by *Chavista* prosecutor Danilo Anderson, whose mandate was to ferret out those involved in anti-Chávez activities. On November 18, 2004, Anderson himself was murdered by a car bomb. While the regime has declared him a hero of the revolution and used his murder to widen its assault on its opponents, several have accused Anderson and his team of extorting bribes from would-be targets.

As a new presidential election season nears, the regime continues to use its now well-practiced judicial team to target popular opponents. Henrique Capriles Radonski, the thirty-three-year-old popular mayor of Baruta, a middle-class neighborhood in Caracas, was a target of Chávez's judicial harassment under the assassinated prosecutor Danilo Anderson. Just as the 2004 referendum process was under way, Capriles was charged for crimes he allegedly committed two years earlier. On April 12, 2002, during the period of Chávez's brief ouster, anti-Chávez protestors amassed outside of the Cuban embassy located in Baruta. Fearful of violence, a European ambassador asked Capriles to come to the site to quiet the crowd; he was admitted to the embassy by the Cuban ambassador Germán Sánchez Otero. Capriles urged the crowd to disperse, effectively ending a siege of the diplomatic compound. Capriles was later charged with trespassing, abusing his post, and violating international principles for his actions at the Cuban embassy.

April 2002: The Coup d'État That Wasn't

Most observers misunderstand the events of mid-April 2002 as an attempted coup d'état against Chávez instigated by his political opposition and abetted by a treacherous military. What actually transpired was much more complicated.

On April 11, 2002, between 500,000 and 800,000 opposition demonstrators were converging on the presidential compound in a political demonstration that had been building after weeks of confrontation in which the incendiary Chávez gave as good as he got. Chávez, clearly angling for a decisive confrontation, set off a chain of fateful events when he ordered his military commanders to suppress raucous political demonstrations that had surrounded Miraflores Palace. We see in retrospect that this was not the act of a desperate political leader looking to maintain order, but a logical, ruthless measure taken by a man who cannot tolerate dissent.

Video evidence of the events shows Chávez's civilian henchmen emptying their pistols indiscriminately into the crowd of protestors and Chávez's determination to use military force to crush his opponents. By invoking a long-standing contingency plan for using military means to control the capital—dubbed "*Plan Avila*"—Chávez miscalculated. Perhaps recalling the admonition of Simon Bolivar that a soldier that kills his own people is lost, one by one, unit commanders Major General Manuel Rosendo and Major General Efraim Vásquez Velasco appeared on live television broadcasts refusing to follow the president's orders. Military leaders would cite two articles of Venezuela's constitution as justification—the first forbidding the use of weapons of war against peaceful demonstrators and the second stating that people should "disown any regime, legislation or authority that violates democratic values, principles or guarantees or encroaches upon human rights."

Chávez submitted and was detained by the military until he could be flown to Cuba. The civilian leaders pressed into service as interim leadership badly overreached, acting precipitously to dismiss the congress, the courts, and all elected officials. The military commanders had lost control of events. Major General Vásquez Velasco demanded publicly that the interim government retreat from its far-reaching measures. Before the civilian leaders could react, the military leaders decided to restore Chávez to power. Chávez was flown back to Miraflores Palace aboard a military helicopter.

Three simple facts counter any claim that Chávez was the victim of a traditional coup: First, the opposition suffered many more casualties than did *Chavistas*, with the first victims murdered by gunmen captured on amateur video. Second, Venezuela's Supreme Court and congress—after investigations conducted with Chávez firmly restored to power—failed to charge a single soldier for actions during the supposed coup. Third, Lucas Rincon—who actually appeared on television to announce that Chávez had agreed to resign—was subsequently named by Chávez as minister of defense and as minister of the interior and justice.

NOTE: Article 68 states that "citizens have the right to demonstrate, peacefully and without weapons, subject only to such requirements as may be established by law. The use of firearms and toxic substances to control peaceful demonstrations is prohibited. The activity of police and security corps in maintaining public order shall be regulated by law." Article 350 says, "The people of Venezuela, true to their republican tradition and their struggle for independence, peace and freedom, shall disown any regime, legislation or authority that violates democratic values, principles and guarantees or encroaches upon human rights." The latter has been interpreted by some (including the military leaders) to be the constitutional right to rebellion. For a non-official translation of the Venezuelan constitution in English, see "Bolivarian Constitution," Embassy of Venezuela in the United States, available at www.embavenez-us.org/constitution/intro.htm.

He was jailed for three months and then released in October 2004 after the case was thrown out by appeals courts.⁸ Now that Chávez has a stronger hold on the judiciary and is setting the stage for the upcoming presidential elections, Capriles's case is back in court. He is set to go to trial on June 9.⁹

Also coming before the courts again is the case of María Corina Machado, one of the founders and leaders of Súmate, a Venezuelan nongovernmental organization (NGO) dedicated to promoting democracy. Súmate has been meticulous in documenting electoral tampering and

has been vocal about its findings, making it an obvious target. In February 2004, Chávez announced the investigation into the financing of the group for accepting funds from the U.S.-funded National Endowment for Democracy—which Chávez asserts were used to destabilize his government. Machado was charged with "conspiracy," under the penal code that stipulates that soliciting foreign intervention in Venezuela's domestic policy is subject to eight to sixteen years in prison. The prosecution also has declared Súmate to be a political party (which would make it explicitly illegal for it to receive financial support from

foreigners), even though the National Electoral Council (*Consejo Nacional Electoral* or *CNE*) does not recognize the group as a political party.¹⁰

Machado also has been charged with treason on equally questionable grounds for allegedly signing an anti-Chávez manifesto during his April 2002 ouster. Machado explains that she never signed such a document and that her signature was taken from the guest registry of the presidential palace. In February 2006, the case was dismissed and sent to another court after the European Union ambassadors advised the government that they planned to attend and monitor the court session.¹¹

Media under Assault

It is true that opposition voices are heard regularly through the media. However, since Chávez's rise to power—in which some media moguls actually supported him against the traditional power structure—he has gradually eroded freedom of expression. Using both legal measures and mob violence, his regime has harassed media organizations and individual reporters to reduce the coverage of dissident views and to produce self-censorship. Popular channels have virtually eliminated their opinion and news programming, and national reporters considered unfriendly to the regime have been harassed, detained, and accused of baseless offenses.

Patricia Poleo, a Venezuelan reporter who has earned international acclaim for her investigative reporting, has been the subject of judicial harassment since she embarrassed the Chávez regime by revealing that Venezuelan security forces were harboring international Peruvian fugitive Vladimiro Montesinos. She has been prosecuted at least once and has been summoned to reveal the sources in her investigation of the November 2004 assassination of *Chavista* prosecutor Danilo Anderson. While Poleo asserts that the state is trying to hide the truth behind the Anderson killing, the regime has responded by accusing the reporter of masterminding the car bombing.

In December 2004, the National Assembly approved a media law that international observers—including Human Rights Watch, Reporters Without Borders, and the Inter-American Press Association—have criticized as a tool to stifle freedom of expression. The OAS Inter-American Commission on Human Rights stated, “The use of vague terminology together with the existence of potentially excessive penalties, could have the effect of intimidating the media and journalists and, consequently,

of curtailing the flow of information about matters of public interest.”¹²

Undermining Independent Labor Unions

Chávez has even led an assault on the independent labor movement. In December 2000, his government orchestrated elections of labor leaders in which non-union members were allowed to cast ballots. This transparent attempt to replace independent leaders with *Chavista* loyalists was strongly rejected by the International Labor Organization (ILO). Nevertheless, when elections were finally held in October 2001, the non-*Chavista* slate was reelected, although the regime has failed to accept these results.

Several union leaders are now being pursued by the regime for their role in the April 2002 events in which Chávez was removed from power for forty-eight hours. National labor leader Carlos Ortega was originally charged with “rebellion, sabotage, and treason,” and he fled the country. After returning from exile, Ortega was tried for “civil rebellion” and “incitement to commit a crime” for his role in an opposition-led national strike in 2002–2003. Ignoring a ruling by the ILO in June 2004 that declared the strike a legitimate exercise of workers' rights, Ortega was convicted and sentenced to nearly sixteen years in prison. He is in prison today.

The “Enemies List”

After succeeding Richard Nixon as president, Gerald Ford is said to have remarked, “A man who has to make a list of his enemies has too many enemies.” In 2005, *Chavista* legislator Luis Tascón revealed the existence of a list of over 3 million Venezuelans who signed petitions in 2003 and 2004 calling for a referendum on Chávez's tenure. Tascón published the list on his website prior to the August 2004 referendum.

Venezuelans have complained of having been persecuted for daring to associate with the opposition by signing a petition. Many on the infamous list say they have lost government jobs or contracts. Others have been refused basic public services, including passports. Close to 150 people who signed the petitions have reported being fired from their government jobs, and another 600 have complained of harassment on the job.¹³ Venezuelan minister of health Roger Capela stated publicly that “a traitor cannot have been in a position of responsibility, and this state has a policy and a responsibility to the government in which there is not space for

Citizen Chávez: In His Own Words

“In Venezuela, the Republic is over. . . . There is no social contract, no State, no serious Executive Branch, no real government, no real Legislative Branch that legislates according to the needs of the country, and no Judicial Branch. . . . I will not rule with political parties.”

Tomás Tenorio Galindo, “La posibilidad del autoritarismo” [The possibility of authoritarianism], *Crónica*, December 10, 1998

“In addition to being democratic and peaceful, this Venezuelan revolution is like Allende’s, but with one difference: it is not unarmed. This is an armed revolution, and I will say it again so that there is no mistake: this is a revolution that has arms to defend itself and we already proved that in April 2002.”

“Venezuela Referendum: Chávez Reiterates That without Legality There Will Not Be a Recall Referendum,” *Spanish Newswire Services*, September 7, 2003

“I said it, you all know that the Constitution allows for re-election only once—in my case, that would be 2007-2013. If the opposition tries to pull off one of those ugly tricks I’m talking about or anything else, a coup d’état, or I don’t know what else . . . I would even activate the constitutional mechanism that exists, and you all know what that is, to modify the Constitution and allow for indefinite presidential re-elections, until . . . 2000 and beyond. 2021, well, or something like that.”

Aló Presidente, April 2, 2006, available at www.minci.gov.ve/alo2.asp?id=166

“We are in a truly historic battle: in Venezuela, not all that must die has died yet; in Venezuela, not all that must be born has yet been born. The day that it has died and the new era has finished being born, I will be able to calmly go anywhere, but in the meantime, I will be with you, leading this battle!”

Aló Presidente, May 6, 2006

a traitor . . . those that have signed are fired.”¹⁴ Because this naked political aggression attracted so much attention, the Chávez regime disavows using the list and claims to be investigating its origins.

The list has resurfaced in a new iteration, as an electronic file called *Batalla de Santa Inés Maisanta* that contains the information of more than 12 million registered Venezuelan voters. The file contains not only the address and whether or not the individual signed the

referendum petition, but also codes his political affinities and electoral participation rates.¹⁵ The electronic list is available for purchase both on the streets of Caracas or at MercadoLibre (Venezuela’s version of eBay) for less than five dollars.¹⁶

Although losing a job or a government contract are by no means on the same level as gross human rights violations committed under previous authoritarian regimes in South America, the importance of these practices, particularly for expressing a political opinion or exercising an essential political right, should not be underestimated. Given the overwhelming role of PDVSA (Venezuela’s state-owned oil enterprise), which accounts for roughly one-third of the GDP and almost half of Venezuela’s fiscal income, and the role of the government in the economy more generally—public spending is equal to almost one-fourth of the nation’s GDP—government jobs and contracts are in many cases vital for an individual’s economic well-being. The threat of losing a government post sends a powerful message that not only threatens a citizen’s right to cast a secret ballot but to exercise other constitutional rights in opposition to the government.

Blurring the Military-Civilian Line

Chávez has militarized politics and politicized the military. During the past several decades, Venezuela has never had a strong separation between politics, military, and civilian life—although the military institutions in particular were respected as professional. Under Chávez, these barriers have been eliminated. Chávez

has interfered in military personnel matters and has given civilian posts to trusted military comrades.

Chávez and the Fifth Republic Movement both got their start in the revolutionary faction of the Venezuelan armed forces, the *Movimiento Boliviano Revolucionario 200* (MBR-200). Chávez first made his name as a lieutenant colonel in the Venezuelan army and as one of the junior officers and founding members of MBR-200. The populist movement was based ideologically on the teachings of Simon Bolivar. As early as 1982, the group

began plotting a revolutionary coup against the democratically elected civilian government. A decade later, Chávez made his first television appearance after admitting defeat during a failed coup attempt in April 1992, immediately after which he was imprisoned. Although the coup failed, Chávez was successful in imprinting his name and image in the hearts of those sectors of the public that opposed the existing political order. The ideals of the MBR-200 later were accorded political legitimacy when reconstituted as the Fifth Republic Movement.

The 1999 constitution was the first step in many of reversing some of the de jure checks and balances put in place by previous governments. It further politicized the armed forces by removing the previous constitutional stipulation that the military maintain a “non-deliberative” role, giving standing officers the right to vote, and granting Chávez the power to ultimately arbitrate military promotions. Chávez’s polemics then encouraged opposition voices within the armed forces to retire, while he used his new authority to reward his supporters within the ranks of the armed services. The promotions were not just within the armed forces; he rewarded some supporters with high-level governmental positions (although individuals did have to retire from the armed forces before serving).

Tension between Chávez and apolitical military professionals came to a head in April 2002 when senior military personnel refused Chávez’s order to use military force to quell civilian demonstrations. Chávez took advantage of the ouster attempt to further purge opposition from the ranks of the armed forces.

In an effort to further link the military to the government and then to economic development under his Fifth Republic Movement, Chávez has expanded the role of the military into civilian projects such as his first social assistance program (or *misión*), the *Plan Bolívar 2000*, in which the armed forces replaced state and municipal governments in regional development projects such as building infrastructure and performing mass vaccinations.

Chávez has recently called for restructuring the armed forces, including increased reserves (from 30,000 in 2004 to 150,000 in 2006) and the mobilization of the *Guardia Territorial* (Territorial Guard) to protect Venezuela against invasions. The latter would be a completely civilian

reserve paid \$7.44 per session to train in physical conditioning, the use of assault weapons, and obstacle courses that include using tear gas.¹⁷ Already, 1.5 million civilians have begun the four-month training session; the majority of these come from the poorer regions of Venezuela where Chávez enjoys great popular support. Critics charge that the *Guardia Territorial* responds directly to Chávez, and therefore could be used as an instrument of repression.¹⁸

The OAS’s very
relevance and credibility
are at stake as Venezuela
continues down a path
toward dictatorship and
the organization fails to
respond effectively.

What Is to Be Done

The United States should not seek confrontation with Chávez—but it will not have to because Chávez will persist in provoking his arch enemy. However, the United States must walk a fine line between responding to Chávez’s every provocation and being straightforward in expressing U.S. concerns regarding the deterioration of democratic institutions in

Venezuela and Chávez’s destructive, divisive agenda in the hemisphere. Particularly because so many others nations are reluctant to speak out in defense of common democratic values, the United States should not be silent on these issues. But, explains current assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs Thomas Shannon Jr., “The purpose is not to allow him to define the terms of the confrontation and to make sure that as we engage with him, we are not doing so in a way that harms our larger interests. . . . It would be a mistake for U.S. policy in the region to overly concentrate on the guy. If we allow ourselves to be trapped in the kind of confrontation that he wants to have with us, it lessens our influence with others in the region.”¹⁹

Chávez’s weekly attacks on the United States and President George W. Bush are far from undisciplined outbursts. By squaring off against the “empire” and accusing the United States of planning to invade Venezuela, Chávez achieves two key objectives: he denigrates any opponent inside or outside of the country as a pawn of the United States, and he can portray his domestic opposition as traitorous agents of an enemy power. Indeed, in multilateral fora, most Latin and Caribbean leaders are unwilling to confront Chávez’s excesses at home, in large part because they do not want to be drawn into Venezuela’s internal affairs or a bilateral confrontation between the United States and Chávez.

Latin Americans must recall the history of militaristic regimes that have undermined democracy. They must also remember their commitment under the *Inter-American Democratic Charter* that “[t]he peoples of the Americas have the right to democracy, and their governments have an obligation to promote and defend it.”²⁰ Certainly no one expects a single Latin American or Caribbean leader to confront Chávez. But working as a team—particularly within fora and at meetings at which the United States is not present—they should ponder their unique responsibility to their Venezuelan brothers and sisters. For example, as the Mercosur countries welcome Chávez with open arms, they should consider the implications for their own “democracy clause”—one of the first of its kind in the world. Of course, this requires our friends in the region to educate themselves about what is happening in Venezuela and what Chávez is doing to subvert democracy in their own countries. All of the region’s leaders should think about what they want history to record of their actions, as 30 million Venezuelans find themselves at the mercy of an emerging dictatorship at the dawn of the 21st century.

Chávez’s direct intervention in the electoral campaigns in other countries demonstrates that he respects no limits when it comes to advancing his agenda beyond Venezuela. He has made reckless statements for and against political candidates in Bolivia, Peru, and Nicaragua, and he has signed an oil pact to provide support through the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN)* to influence the ongoing presidential campaign in Nicaragua. His intervention has finally convinced some Latin Americans that they must speak up to defend their sovereignty from his imperial designs.

OAS secretary general Insulza has a mandate from the 2005 General Assembly to devise proposals for the OAS to respond to “situations that might affect the workings of the political process of democratic institutions or the legitimate exercise of power.”²¹ He also has the authority under both the *Inter-American Democratic Charter* and the *OAS Charter* to bring undemocratic practices to the attention of the OAS Permanent Council. The OAS’s human rights institutions have been the most categorical in documenting the abuses of the Chávez regime, although they have failed, thus far, to impose any effective penalties. The OAS’s very relevance and credibility are at stake as Venezuela continues down a path toward dictatorship and the organization fails to respond effectively.

The OAS, the European Union, and others should refuse to observe Venezuela’s 2006 presidential elections until significant changes are made in the rules of the

game. International observers threatened to withdraw their imprimatur from elections in Nicaragua in 1990 and Peru in 2000, and in both cases the regime in question relented. If Chávez refuses to overhaul the electoral machinery of his regime, no international observer should risk its credibility by being associated with another electoral whitewash in Venezuela.

International NGOs—groups of democratic politicians, labor unions, journalists, lawyers, and human rights advocates—must also make a conscious effort to close ranks with their colleagues in Venezuela and take up their cause in international fora. They should also hold their international conventions in Venezuela to try to generate global attention to their plight and create the political space that Venezuelans require to begin to reclaim their future.

The ultimate responsibility for salvaging Venezuelan democracy rests with Venezuelans themselves—not merely those who oppose Chávez, but those who value their own freedom. Whether or not political parties decide to boycott the upcoming presidential elections is a decision they must make for themselves. However, it is an essential *obligation* of the political opposition in a democracy to present an alternative vision. Although they have every right to make substantial election reform a key issue in the public debate (and perhaps a precondition for their participation), they must also be able to present a constructive agenda for the political restoration and social development of a great nation. To be sure, the international community will be much more willing and able to support democracy if the country’s democratic opposition is united, coherent, and engaged responsibly in the political struggle. Given the record amassed by Chávez, one would hope that a majority of Venezuelans would take a stand to secure their essential liberties, to begin to reconcile a divided country, and to back a political alternative that appeals to their hopes and not their fears.

AEI research assistant Megan Davy contributed to this article. AEI editor Scott R. Palmer worked with the author to edit and produce this Latin American Outlook.

Notes

1. “Encuesta versus Estrategia” [Survey versus strategy], *El Nacional* (Venezuela), March 19, 2006.
2. Fabiola Sánchez, “Venezuela Ex-Guerrilla Fighter Pledges to Take on Chávez in Presidential Elections,” Associated Press, April 21, 2006.

3. Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, "Follow-up Report on Compliance by the State of Venezuela with the Recommendations Made by the IACHR in its Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Venezuela (2003)," *Annual Report of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 2004*, OEA/Ser.L/V/II.122 Doc. 5 rev. 1, (Washington, D.C.: Organization of American States, 2005), paragraph 165, available at www.cidh.org/annualrep/2004eng/chap.5b.htm.

4. Amnesty International, *Venezuela: Human Rights under Threat* (London: Amnesty International, May 2004), available at <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engamr530052004>.

5. Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, "Follow-up Report on Compliance by the State of Venezuela."

6. *Ibid.*, paragraph 180.

7. See "Chavez Camp Today Designates 49 New Magistrates," *El Nacional*, December 13, 2004.

8. Jackson Diehl, "In Venezuela, Locking up the Vote," *Washington Post*, April 10, 2006.

9. Henrique Capriles Radonski: *Comprometido Contigo*, "Juicio a Capriles Radonski Tiene Fecha" [Trial for Capriles Radonski has a date], April 10, 2006, available at www.caprilesradonski.org.ve/detalle.asp?id=245&plantilla=3.

10. Elizabeth Núñez, "Imputan a Organización Civil Súmate por Solicitar Intervención Extranjera" [The civil organization Súmate is charged with soliciting foreign intervention], *El Nacional*, December 27, 2004.

11. Jackson Diehl, "Locking up the Vote."

12. Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, "The IACHR Expresses Its Concern over the Bolivarian Republic of

Venezuela's Passage of the Social Responsibility in Radio and Television Bill," news release no. 25/04, November 30, 2004, available at www.cidh.org/Comunicados/English/2004/25.04.htm.

13. Fabiola Sánchez, "List of Venezuelan Government Opponents on Web Site Draws Discrimination Complaints," Associated Press Worldstream, May 13, 2005.

14. Recording of Roger Capela on "Hablemos con Washington," Voice of America News, April 26, 2006.

15. Francisco Olivares, "El Código Chávez" [The Chávez code], *El Universal* (Venezuela), May 21, 2005.

16. "Lista Tascón—Lista Maisanta—Lista Santa Inés—Firmaste?" [Tascón List—Maisanta List—Santa Inés List—Did you sign?] MercadoLibre, available at http://articulo.mercadolibre.com.ve/MLV-4956320-lista-tascon-lista-maisanta-lista-santa-ines-firmaste-_JM (accessed May 8, 2006).

17. Fabiola Sánchez, "Chávez Prepara un Ejército de Civiles" [Chávez prepares a civilian army], Associated Press, April 22, 2006.

18. Greg Morsbach, "Caracas Prepara Guerra de Guerrillas," [Caracas prepares a war of guerrillas], BBCMundo.com, March 6, 2006.

19. Nicholas Kravlev, "Chavez Accused of Ties to Terrorists," *Washington Times*, May 17, 2006.

20. OAS, *Inter-American Democratic Charter*, September 11, 2001, sec. 1, art. 1.

21. OAS, *Declaration of Florida, Delivering the Benefits of Democracy*, AG/DEC.41 (XXXV-O/05), adopted, June 7, 2005.