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“Chavez’ Vision for Venezuela: Adios to Human Rights”

What to say about democracy and human rights in the Venezuela of President Hugo Chavez? The short answer is, “Adios.”

The most prominent news on Venezuela this week is that the government has raised its ownership of major foreign oil projects from a minority share to 60%. But more important news about democracy and human rights is getting too little attention in the United States.

That might seem understandable, because Chavez won reelection in December with over 60% of the vote. So Venezuela is a democracy, right?

Wrong. Chavez is taking advantage of his electoral mandate to squeeze the life out of Venezuelan democracy. Even before the recent election, he already controlled the executive branch, the legislative branch, and the judicial branch. There are literally no opposition legislators. The current judges of the Supreme Court, at their installation ceremony, were required to voice loyalty to Chavez.

He has also cracked down on the free press. After the media angered him by supporting a failed coup attempt five years ago, he has intimidated most of them into silence or mush.

The most important holdout is RCTV – the country’s most popular television network, and the last national TV network openly critical of Chavez. Chavez has now announced that when RCTV’s broadcast license expires May 27, it will not be renewed.

If Chavez succeeds in putting RCTV out of business, we can bid adios to freedom of the press in Venezuela. While one regional TV station remains critical of Chavez, it has little national reach and, in any event, will probably be next on the chopping block.

RCTV is not going down without a fight. It has secured statements of support from the Senate of Chile and from the Secretary General of the Organization of American States (“OAS”). RCTV’s lawyers have filed actions in Venezuelan courts. Its journalists have cases pending before the Inter-American Commission and Court of Human Rights, the human rights watchdogs of the OAS.

The effort to defend RCTV has spurred Chavez to new heights, at least of rhetoric, and possibly of action as well. The most recent trigger was a Caracas newspaper story last week, quoting a Venezuelan human rights lawyer who dared to predict that the Inter-American Court of Human Rights could block Chavez from shutting down RCTV.

Last weekend Chavez responded with disdain. If the Inter-American Court tried to stop him, he declared, Venezuela would pull out of the Organization of American States. After all, he said, Cuba has not participated in the OAS for 40 years, and “Cuba is not dead.”

This might be simply an attempt to intimidate the Court and the OAS. On that theory, if the Court does not try to stop the closure of RCTV, Chavez will remain in the OAS, flaunting his victory.

On the other hand, the threat may be more serious. Chavez delivered it at a conference on the Bolivarian Alternative for Latin America, a sort of anti-imperialist – i.e., anti-US – alliance. He threatened to withdraw, not only from the OAS, but also from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

If he does pull out, Chavez hopes not to go alone. For starters, he would like to take with him his amigos in Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua, as well as several small Caribbean island nations that depend on Venezuela for oil.

In his vision, this might be only the beginning. The Chavez project is nothing short of a new world order – or at least a new hemispheric order.

Many would agree that Chavez is right to challenge the international financial institutions. They have done far more to serve Washington’s interests than the interests of Latin America’s poor.

But the OAS is another matter. Its most important practical impact on Venezuela is its human rights oversight through the independent experts who sit on the Inter-American Commission and Court. If Chavez throws off these international bodies, human rights in Venezuela will be left with no effective institutional defense.

Human rights in Venezuela are already in jeopardy. Chavez prosecutes and jails or threatens to jail political dissidents on phony charges. His critics are ever more cautious in speaking out. Unless he reverses course – which seems unlikely – Venezuela is sliding steadily toward becoming another Cuba.

The United States has zero leverage with Chavez. If his challenge to human rights is to be answered, the response must come from the democracies of Latin America and Europe – especially from governments of the left.

Unfortunately, the prospects are not encouraging. Although the Chilean Senate has spoken out against the closing of RCTV, the vote was opposed by the democratic socialist party of President Michelle Bachelet. The European Union is hamstrung by its requirement of unanimity in foreign policy.

A first step is to inform public opinion throughout the Americas and Europe. Chavez has won a wide following by opposing the US and championing the poor. But his threats to democracy and human rights cannot be – and must not be – ignored.

Doug Cassel’s commentaries are generally broadcast Wednesdays during the noon hour of the Worldview program on Chicago Public Radio, 91.5 FM, and rebroadcast at 9 PM in the evening. Views expressed are personal views of the author and not necessarily those of Notre Dame Law School, the Center for Civil and Human Rights or Chicago Public Radio.