



THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN VENEZUELA

“...I am anxious to work with countries to help make sure that the institutions, universal institutions of democracy become entrenched in society — freedom to worship, freedom of the press, rule of law.”

—President George W. Bush

The United States’ goal in the Americas is to promote democratically elected governments that govern responsibly, expand economic opportunity for their people, and work cooperatively with their neighbors. Of increasing concern to the U.S., its hemispheric partners, and international bodies is the assault on Venezuela’s democratic institutions.

ABANDONING DEMOCRATIC TRADITION

The election of Hugo Chavez in 1998 came at a time when Venezuelans were looking for an alternative to the lethargy and corruption of old-line political parties. The Venezuelan electorate gave Chavez the opportunity to create a new consensus around the development and modernization of the country. Instead, Chavez embraced a repressive political agenda that has polarized the country, created political upheaval, marginalized the opposition, suffocated the democratic debate, and resisted external efforts to support democratic political activity.

There is growing consensus that democracy in Venezuela is in grave peril, as documented by international human rights groups, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and independent Venezuelan non-governmental organizations, among others. Human Rights Watch Americas has called the state of rule of law in Venezuela “extraordinarily grave” and in need of intervention by the Inter-American countries. There is unchecked concentration of power in the executive; politicization of the judiciary, the electoral authorities, and the legal system; political persecution of civil society and the democratic opposition; intimidation of the press; and threats to free association.

AREAS OF CONCERN

The Judiciary

Actions taken to undermine the independence of the judiciary have

HOW THE U.S. PROMOTES DEMOCRACY IN VENEZUELA

- Working with the Organization of American States, the European Union, the Council of Europe, and other international organizations to support Venezuelan civil society, speak out against abuses of democracy, and hold the Venezuelan Government accountable to its democratic commitments under the Inter-American Democratic Charter.
- Reaching out to human rights and other non-governmental organizations to help create an international network to support and defend Venezuela’s civil society.
- Working within Venezuela to preserve political and civic participation for increasingly at-risk groups by establishing links with organized labor, independent media, NGOs, and religious institutions to offer the checks and balances that Venezuela’s Government institutions are no longer able to provide.

continued unabated since Chavez turned his back on the Venezuelan electorate. Human Rights Watch called the politically motivated expansion of the Supreme Court “a severe blow to judicial independence,” and a move that would “degrade” and “betray” Venezuela’s democracy. Politicization of the lower courts has deteriorated the judicial system, causing as a result a rising climate of impunity, criminality, and violence.

The Press

Freedom of expression is being eroded in Venezuela. Enactment of laws that place arbitrary restrictions on broadcast content has imposed a self-censorship by media outlets and the termination of certain radio and TV programs. Amendments to the Criminal Code to expand the reach and increase criminal penalties for “contempt” of public officials are intended to stifle press freedom and intimidate government critics.

Civil Society

There is continued persecution of political opponents. Many vocal government critics have been denied basic government services (including passports and national identity cards), forced from their jobs, and excluded from government contracts as a punishment for exercising their constitutional right to petition their government. There is a reported 13% increase in politically motivated detentions.

The Electoral Process

The upcoming legislative elections will test the transparency and fairness of the electoral authorities and the electoral system in Venezuela. International observers will monitor preparations for this election at a time when voter turn-out and confidence among the electorate is at an all-time low. Recent polls show that over 60% of Venezuelans do not trust the electoral system. The abstention rate is predicted at 80%.