

## *U.S. Shadow Over Venezuela*

By Conn Hallinan

Regardless of the final outcome of the recent military coup and counter-coup in Venezuela, two things are clear: Venezuela is not just another banana-oil republic; and the United States has, once again, deeply damaged itself in Latin America.

In the hours following the April 11 arrest of President Hugo Chavez, the Bush administration signaled that it was firmly behind the takeover. "We wish to express our solidarity with the Venezuelan people and look forward to working with all democratic forces in Venezuela to insure the full expression of democratic rights," State Department spokesperson Phillip Reeker told the press.

When, two days later, a tidal wave of Chavez supporters—spearheaded by poor slum dwellers and backed by key military officers—returned the president to office, the White House warned that Chavez had better correct his ways and govern "in a fully democratic manner."

The April 11 coup sent a collective chill down the backs of countries from Mexico to Argentina, a number of which endured U.S.-supported military dictatorships in the '60s and '70s. While Americans tend to have short memories about things like the 1973 U.S.-backed coup in Chile, no one in Latin America can afford such forgetfulness. And, during their two heady days in power, Venezuela's coup makers followed a grimly familiar course: suspending the constitution; dissolving the legislature, Supreme Court, election commission, and other democratic institutions; and beginning a round-up of Chavez officials and supporters.

U.S. endorsement of the coup quickly isolated Washington in the region. Latin leaders condemned "the constitutional interruption" and made it clear they would not recognize any government installed by the military, thus adhering to the Organization of American States' charter,

requiring members not to recognize any government that comes to power via a coup.

For months, a Venezuelan coup had seemed almost inevitable. Media images were of a pro-Cuban "strongman" whose undemocratic and authoritarian rule had brought the country to the edge of chaos, and who had finally gunned down peaceful demonstrators. But image and reality, as in the novels of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, are fluid concepts in Latin America.

President Hugo Chavez, overwhelmingly elected three years ago, took on one of the most entrenched oligarchies in Latin America—and made some mistakes in the process.

Part of his problem is the reality of Venezuela: an oil-rich nation where 80% of the people are officially designated "poor," where 2% of country controls 60% of the land, and where virtually none of the \$30 billion in annual oil revenues trickles down to the vast majority of the population. Changing those demographics would be daunting under any circumstances.

On occasion, Chavez' photo ops with Castro and Ghadafi and his long-winded rhetoric got him in trouble. His reform promises sometimes outran what he could deliver, and cabinet turnover was constant, making policy implementation difficult. Former Chavez supporters joined the oligarchies, the church, and the old guard of the trade unions in opposition.

At the same time, Chavez added one million children to the nation's schools. He increased economic growth by 4 percent. Infant mortality and unemployment dropped, and literacy and minimum wages increased. He also rewrote agreements with Phillips Petroleum and Exxon/Mobil to give Venezuela a bigger slice of its oil revenues, and appointed new directors to the state-owned oil company to keep prices in line with the Organization of Petroleum

Exporting Companies. Venezuela has long been a “ratebuster,” pumping more oil and selling it for less than OPEC did, thus denying the country the income from higher prices. Of all his accomplishments, this may have been the fatal one. Mess with big oil under the Bush Doctrine at your own peril.

A lot remains unclear. The circumstances surrounding the shooting of demonstrators last week are murky at best. It appears, for instance, that more Chavez supporters might have been shot than anti-Chavez demonstrators. But what most Latin Americans will see in all this is the hand of Washington, and it is hard to argue with them.

Last November, the National Security Agency, the Pentagon, and the State Department held a two-day meeting on Venezuela. Soon afterwards the administration began accusing Chavez of supporting “terrorism” in Colombia, Bolivia, and Ecuador. Being accused by Washington of supporting terrorism is a pretty scary business these days. It certainly gave a green light to elements in the military and the opposition to foment the coup. According to the *Washington Post*, dissident leaders were repeatedly received at the U.S. Embassy, where they sought support for toppling Chavez. If most Latin Americans see a link between the November meeting and the White House’s endorse-

ment of the takeover, one can hardly blame them.

While Washington’s meddling fell short of gunboat diplomacy, the signs of interference remain all too clear. For now, democratic institutions have been returned to Venezuela and Chavez has taken the high road, offering conciliation and dialogue with his opponents. The Bush administration should reciprocate.

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