

THE VENEZUELAN FIASCO: SHOULD WE CARE?

By John W. Graham, Chair of FOCAL and former Ambassador to Venezuela

Caudillo is the Latin American term for a tough, authoritarian leader. Usually it refers to a dictator. The term also covers those who have been constitutionally elected, but who run roughshod over the checks and balances of the democratic process. Since taking office with a huge majority three years ago, President Hugo Chávez has earned that epithet. He has also presided over a weakening economy and a society so polarized that it has been on a collision course. Two weeks ago the collision took place followed by the spectacle of a revolving presidential stage, which might have been entertaining, except that over 100 people were killed, many apparently by thugs acting in support of the government.

Should we on the Northern rim of this hemisphere be troubled? Yes, indeed. Venezuela is our second most important export market in South America and one of the primary sources of our offshore petroleum. Another major reason is that the erosion of democracy in Venezuela and the indifference of the hemisphere to that erosion would send the wrong signal to many countries in Latin America whose institutions are fragile and whose commitment to democracy is no longer robust. Canada has been one of the architects of policies designed to defend democracy in the hemisphere. Twenty five years ago most of the region was controlled by military dictatorships. By the 80's all but Cuba could be painted in democratic colours (more or less). Citizens were encouraged to believe that a commitment to democracy would mean not only political choice, but improved prosperity and security. In many countries this equation has not lived up to expectations. Human security is in much greater peril and in no other continent is the imbalance between wealth and poverty so marked. In Venezuela, Chávez exploited this disenchantment with populist recipes, Castro-like rhetoric and the militarization of many senior public offices - all of which accelerated the retreat of investment, rising unemployment and explosive tensions in a country with an abundance of almost every imaginable natural resource. A swelling broad-based and non-violent opposition had become a powerful political force, but it was ultimately betrayed by a very small cabal of corporate leaders and generals - led by Pedro Carmona, the president of the National Business Federation. Carmona, riding a wave of popular indignation, conspired with a number of key military officers to violate the constitution and coerce Chávez out of office. The swift unravelling of the coup d'état was the result of Carmona's bungling (ironically mirroring the incompetently staged and failed coup attempted by the disgruntled Lieutenant Colonel Chávez a decade ago), the repudiation of him and his arbitrary measures by many senior military officers and by most leaders of civil society's opposition, including Venezuela's largest labour union.

The restoration of Chávez contains another significant irony. Denouncing the Carmona coup and promoting the return of Chávez were many of his most highly placed critics, the leaders of Latin American countries gathered for a Hemispheric security meeting in Costa Rica. They and, soon after, the Organization of American States, roundly condemned the coup and invoked the recently agreed - and up until that moment untested - Democratic

Charter which contains language specifically authorizing the Organization to take measures, including suspension from the Organization, “ in the event of an unconstitutional alteration of the constitutional regime that seriously impairs the democratic order in a member state.” The Bush Administration, preoccupied by other concerns and by the strategic importance of Venezuelan oil, was less enthusiastic about condemning the Carmona plot. In the end it supported the resolution, but lost credibility in the region and leverage with a resurrected Chávez.

The Canadian position remains consistent. At the Quebec City Summit of the Americas Canada had encouraged the heads of state and government to endorse the development of an Inter-American Democratic Charter to reinforce existing OAS “instruments for the active defense of representative democracy.” This phrase caught in the gullet of President Chávez who wanted a toothless charter and one where the term “representative” would be replaced by “participatory” - a term more accurately reflecting Chávez’s own practice of having selected government policies approved by plebescite.

The position of the OAS undoubtedly had some bearing on the turn of events in Caracas. We can hope that President Chávez recognizes that the international community was defending the principles of democracy in the region and not his own unsavoury record - and, because that may be expecting too much - Canada should be urging the OAS to hold Chávez to the newly minted hemispheric standards.

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