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Dictatorship for Dummies

Learn how to quash dissent Chávez-style.

By MARY ANASTASIA O'GRADY



Optimists have long theorized that Venezuela's Hugo Chávez would meet his Waterloo with the burst of the petroleum bubble. But with oil prices down some 75% from their highs last year and the jackboot of the regime still firmly planted on the nation's neck, that theory requires revisiting.

It is true that popular discontent with *chavismo* has been rising as oil prices have been falling. The disillusionment is even likely to increase in the months ahead as the economy swoons. But having used the boom years to consolidate power and destroy all institutional checks and balances, Mr. Chávez has little incentive to return the country to political pluralism even if most Venezuelans are sick of his tyranny. If anything, he is apt to become more aggressive and dangerous as the bloom comes off his revolutionary rose in 2009 and he feels more threatened.

Certainly "elections" can't be expected to matter much. Mr. Chávez now controls the entire electoral process, from voter rolls to tallying totals after the polls have closed. Under enormous public pressure he accepted defeat in his 2007 bid for constitutional reforms designed to make him president for life. But so what? That loss allowed him to maintain the guise of democracy, and now he has decided that there will be another referendum on the same question in February. Presumably Venezuela will repeat this exercise until the right answer is produced.

All police states hold "elections." But they also specialize in combining the state's monopoly use of force with a monopoly in economic power and information control. Together these three weapons easily quash dissent. Venezuela is a prime example.

The Venezuelan government is now a military government. Mr. Chávez purged the armed forces leadership in 2002 and replaced fired officers with those loyal to his socialist cause. Like their counterparts in Cuba, these elevated *comandantes* are well compensated. Lack of transparency makes it impossible to know just how much they get paid for their loyalty, but it is safe to say that they have not been left out of the oil fiesta that compliant *chavistas* have enjoyed over the past decade. Even if the resource pool shrinks this year, neither their importance nor their rewards are likely to diminish.

Mr. Chávez has also taken over the Metropolitan Police in Caracas, imported Cuban intelligence agents, and armed his

own Bolivarian militias, whose job it is to act as neighborhood enforcers. Should Venezuelans decide that they are tired of one-man rule, *chavismo* has enough weapons on hand to convince them otherwise.

Yet the art of dictatorship has been greatly refined since Stalin killed millions of his own people. Modern tyrants understand that there are many ways to manipulate their subjects and most do not require the use of force.

One measure that Mr. Chávez relies on heavily is control of the narrative. In government schools children are indoctrinated in Bolivarian thought. Meanwhile the state has stripped the media of its independence and now dominates all free television in the country. This allows the government to marinate the poor in Mr. Chávez's antimarket dogma. His captive audiences are told repeatedly that hardship of every sort -- including headline inflation of 31% last year -- is the result of profit makers, middlemen and consumerism.

The Orwellian screen is also used to stir up nationalist sentiment against foreign devils, like the U.S., Colombia and Israel. The audience has witnessed violence in Gaza through the lens of Hamas, and last week Mr. Chávez made a show of expelling the Israeli ambassador from Caracas.

Investments in revolution around South America may have to be pared back as revenues drop. But outreach to Iran and Syria is likely to continue since those relations may serve as a source of financing Mr. Chávez's military buildup. In December, the Italian daily La Stampa reported that it has seen evidence of a pact between Caracas and Tehran in which Iran uses Venezuelan aircraft for arms trafficking and Venezuela gets military aid in return. This month Turkish officials intercepted an Iranian shipment bound for Venezuela that reportedly contained materials for making explosives.

Despite all this, the most effective police-state tool remains Mr. Chávez's control over the economy. The state freely expropriates whatever it wants -- a shopping center in Caracas is Mr. Chávez's latest announced taking -- and economic freedom is dead. Moreover, the state has imposed strict capital controls, making saving or trading in hard currency impossible. Analysts are predicting another large devaluation of the bolivar in the not-too-distant future. The private sector has been wiped out, except for those who have thrown in their lot with the tyrant.

The drop in oil revenues may impoverish the state, but the opposition is even poorer. Organizing a rebellion against a less-rich Chávez remains a formidable task.

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