



# Venezuela

**Assessment:** Fair

**Trend:** ↓↓

Capital: Caracas

Type of Government: Federal Republic

Head of State: President Hugo Chávez  
(since 3 February 1999)

Minister of Foreign Affairs: Roy Chaderton

Population: 23,916,810

Human Development Index Ranking 2002: 69

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Venezuela has a **fair** record of support for democracy abroad. It has not been at the forefront of democracy promotion initiatives, but has participated in multilateral efforts to deter threats to democracy within Latin America. Since 1992, the Venezuelan government has distinguished between support for democracy and what it considers to be intervention in the sovereign affairs of neighboring states. For example, it has reacted strongly in clear cases of coup attempts, but has shied away from condemning fraudulent elections, as Venezuela views elections to be internal matters that should be decided by the citizens and institutions of the country in question. Like many other countries in the region, Venezuela has pursued a policy of engagement with dictatorships in the hemisphere and elsewhere.

Venezuela's sensitivity to coup attempts is derived from its own recent struggles with democratic rule. Until 1992, Venezuela counted itself amongst the oldest democracies of the Americas. The country had a consolidated democracy since 1958, with relatively stable civil-military relations. However, in the past ten years, Venezuela has suffered three coup attempts, one as recently as April 2002. The current President, Hugo Chavez, led two coup attempts against President Carlos Andres Perez in 1992, but was later released from jail by President Rafael Caldera and went on to win the presidency in free and fair elections in 1998.

## FOREIGN RELATIONS BACKGROUND

Venezuela's stated foreign policy priorities include advancing democratization in the international community, promoting Latin American and Caribbean integration, consolidating and diversifying its international relations with other developing countries as well as increasing its contacts with other regions and, finally, strengthening Venezuela's position in the international economy to increase its exports, especially oil. Political and economic integration in South America have been of particular importance to the Chavez government, which has worked with its neighbors in such areas as energy integration.

Nonetheless, tensions have risen between Venezuela and Colombia due to ongoing border disputes between the two countries and Colombian allegations that the Chavez government is backing insurgents in its country. Further, Chavez has spoken out against the military aspects of "Plan Colombia," a U.S.-backed strategy which seeks to rid the country of armed guerrilla and paramilitary groups that have taken over large parts of Colombia, arguing that it threatens to "Vietnamize" the conflict.<sup>1</sup> Chavez aspires for a more "multipolar world" as a counterweight to U.S. hegemony. "Interventionism," as his Foreign Minister has said, "is often motivated by good intentions but it cannot override the principle of national sovereignty."<sup>2</sup> His efforts to strengthen the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) also form part of this initiative.

Since the 1960s, Venezuela's response to crises of democracy abroad at times has been guided by the "Betancourt Doctrine" of refusing to maintain diplomatic relations with governments that came to power by force.<sup>3</sup> Current President Hugo Chavez's anti-American, anti-globalization and anti-liberalism stance has gained him much support among the poor of Venezuela, who elected him in the hopes that he could single-handedly eliminate corruption and restore the economy. His proclaimed "Bolivarian revolution" has led to

erratic and at times controversial foreign policy decisions. His suspected covert support for left-wing subversive groups in Colombia and other neighboring countries has weakened Venezuela's overt support of democracy.

### **RESPONSE TO THE OVERTHROW OF DEMOCRATICALLY-ELECTED GOVERNMENTS**

Venezuela has regularly opposed the overthrow of democratically-elected governments in the region. However, the severity of its response has been inconsistent and driven by domestic considerations. In most cases, Venezuela has acted through the OAS and other multilateral bodies to express its support for the restoration of democracy in the threatened country, and apart from the Peruvian case, it tended not to use bilateral mechanisms in this effort.

During the *autogolpe* (self-coup) crisis in Peru in 1992, Venezuela was the only country in the Americas to cut diplomatic ties with the Fujimori regime. On 16 April 1992, all Venezuelan diplomats were asked to return home leaving only consular personnel behind. This was a very prompt and abrupt response, which other Latin American governments considered excessive. Further, the Venezuelan government was unsatisfied with the position taken by the OAS at the *ad hoc* meeting of Foreign Ministers. The OAS "profoundly deplored the events in Peru and expressed its most serious concern" while the Venezuelan Foreign Minister went much further and called for an all out condemnation of Fujimori.<sup>4</sup> Venezuela also supported the exclusion of Peru from the Rio Group and was not anxious to have it return to the group even when Argentina, with the backing of Uruguay and Ecuador, called for its return.<sup>5</sup> Venezuela further voted in favor of freezing approved loans by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) to Peru.<sup>6</sup>

Venezuela's strong response to events in Peru can be explained by its own internal struggle with democratic rule. President Perez had suffered an attempted coup d'état only two months earlier on 4 February 1992, and dissension within the military was continuing to destabilize his presidency. The Perez government, therefore, had a clear interest in pursuing a tough line against Fujimori's auto-golpe, as a way to deter threats to his own rule, refusing to renew diplomatic relations even as members of the Venezuelan legislature, along with a former President, were

urging him to do so.<sup>7</sup> It must be remembered that the *autogolpe* in Peru was supported by 70 percent of the Peruvian population,<sup>8</sup> a factor that influenced other Latin American nations' preference to work quietly through the OAS and the Rio Group to restore democracy in Peru.

Outside of the Peruvian case, Venezuela has acted within the framework of the OAS and the Rio group to support democracy in the Americas. Venezuela's response to the Guatemalan *autogolpe* in May of 1993 was somewhat less forceful than in the Peruvian case. The government condemned the actions of President Serrano and supported the application of Resolution 1080 by the OAS, which authorized the Secretary General to undertake a special mission to Guatemala to negotiate the restoration of democracy. Venezuela called back its ambassador for questioning but did not sever diplomatic ties. During an *ad hoc* meeting of Foreign Ministers at the OAS, the representative for Venezuela called on the OAS to support members of civil society in Guatemala who were trying to restore democracy to the country. In Guatemala, unlike in Peru, the majority of the population opposed the suspension of democracy, and civil society groups and the media decried the government's actions. Venezuela supported the call for sanctions against the Serrano government, and through a declaration by the Rio Group on 26 May 1993, called on the Serrano government to conform to its international obligations.<sup>9</sup>

The September 1991 coup in Haiti led to an international regime of sanctions and a trade embargo, which Venezuela supported in a letter to the OAS Secretary General.<sup>10</sup> As of October 1991, the Venezuelan government also unilaterally suspended the supply of oil to Haiti.<sup>11</sup> When the Haitian government prevented the reinstatement of President Aristide in 1993, Venezuela was one of the first Latin American nations to support the return to power of the ousted Haitian leader, who spent part of his exile in Venezuela. Through the Rio Group, Venezuela declared that the non-compliance of the Haitian government would lead the Group to support the reinstatement of economic sanctions in conjunction with the United Nations.<sup>12</sup>

During the short-lived coup attempt of 16 April 1996 in Paraguay, Venezuela, along with its OAS counterparts, declared its support for the democratically elected government of Paraguay. Then President Rafael Caldera, in a show of

support for Paraguayan President Juan Carlos Wasmosy, celebrated the consolidation of democracy in a speech before the National Congress of Paraguay in September 1996.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to the relatively strong record set forth above, the Chavez government did little when a coalition of indigenous groups and military officers led a short-lived coup which ultimately forced the resignation of the President of Ecuador in 2000, calling only for democracy to be restored through dialogue and negotiation. Then Foreign Minister Jose Rangel made no reference to Venezuela's position regarding the ousted President, Jamil Mahuad, and said only that it supported the decisions taken by the Ecuadorian people and its institutions.<sup>14</sup> Allegations of close ties between Chavez and Col. Lucio Gutierrez, the coup leader, have fed speculation that the Chavez government encouraged the unconstitutional overthrow.<sup>15</sup>

#### **RESPONSE TO MANIPULATION OF ELECTORAL PROCESSES**

Venezuela has a weak track record for the support of free and fair elections abroad. It has been reluctant to involve itself in the electoral issues of its neighbors and views elections as the domain of citizens and domestic institutions. In both Peru and Haiti in 2000, the Chavez government kept a low profile.

When Peru's elections were deemed fraudulent by international observers in May 2000, Venezuela energetically rejected the United States' call for sanctions and condemnation of the Peruvian election and rebuffed Washington's attempt to invoke Resolution 1080. Venezuela declared that the government and the people of Peru should be the ones to decide whether their elections were fraudulent. The Venezuelan Ambassador to the OAS testified that all the Andean countries were united in opposition to any kind of intervention and that others like Uruguay, Mexico and Brazil were also opposed.<sup>16</sup>

The Haitian elections in 2000 were widely viewed by the international community to be less than free and fair. However, Venezuela took the same position as in the case of Peru. It supported multilateral investigations into the elections, but was clear to express its belief that only the Haitian people and their institutions could declare whether the elections were legitimate, and said little else.<sup>17</sup>

#### **PROMOTION OF INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRACY**

The promotion of international democracy through organizations such as the OAS and the Rio Group has figured prominently on the foreign policy agenda in Venezuela. Further, as a member of the Andean Community, Venezuela has affirmed the need for democracy as a requirement for the consolidation of sub-regional integration. However, since President Chavez assumed office, his regime has been accused of promoting ties between his government and left-wing insurgents in other neighboring countries. In particular, he has been accused of undermining democracy in Colombia by protecting Colombian FARC insurgents, which has provoked serious tensions between the two neighbors.

As a member of the OAS, Venezuela has supported electoral observation missions in other countries. Moreover, it has received electoral observers on its own soil. Electoral observation missions have been especially important in the past three years. In December 1998, the Presidential elections were delayed because it was apparent that the National Electoral Council was not adequately prepared to hold them. Venezuela has received observers from such bodies as the OAS, the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute and the Carter Center.<sup>18</sup> Its cooperation with these bodies indicates a high level of support for democratic elections in Venezuela, and serves as an example to its neighbors.

#### **POLICY TOWARDS ENTRENCHED DICTATORSHIPS**

Over the past ten years, Venezuela has preferred a policy of engagement towards the Castro regime. Venezuela downgraded its relations with the island when the Cuban government started to support communist insurgents within Venezuela. Cuba's interference in Venezuelan affairs led to its expulsion from the OAS in 1962. However since the 1970s, Venezuela has become a principal advocate for lifting sanctions against Cuba, and the two countries reestablished diplomatic relations in 1974.

Under the government of Hugo Chavez, the two countries have become very close friends. When Hugo Chavez left jail in 1995 after serving his sentence for an attempted coup

in 1992, he visited Cuba and was received with great honors as a revolutionary leader. Both Fidel Castro and Chavez have found common ground in their revolutionary zest. Additionally, Venezuela has helped to alleviate Cuba's serious oil shortage. Venezuela now supplies 60 percent of Cuban oil needs and does so on highly advantageous terms.<sup>19</sup>

Chavez's policy towards entrenched dictatorships extends beyond the region. He has personally sought improved relations with Iraq's Saddam Hussein and Libya's Moammar Qaddafi and as a member of the Organization of Petroleum

Exporting Countries (OPEC), has worked closely with authoritarian regimes from the Middle East. Chavez however, has gone out of his way to showcase his ties to dictators like Hussein and Qaddafi as a way to gain domestic support by challenging American foreign policy, a theme that resonates among many of his supporters. Since Chavez's government itself suffered a coup attempt this past April 2002, it is unclear whether he will reduce his antagonist stance towards the United States and slow down the pace of rapprochement with known dictatorships.

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Ellner. "Venezuela's Foreign Policy: Defiance South of the Border." Z Magazine November 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> "Venezuela Breaks Diplomatic Relations With Peru." U.P.I 15 April 1992.

<sup>4</sup> "Venezuela: Government Suspends Diplomatic Links with Peru." Inter Press Service 15 April 1992.

<sup>5</sup> "Latin America: Peru's Re-Entry into Rio Group Postponed." Inter Press Service 30 November 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Thickner, Arlene, ed. Sistema Interamericano y Democracia: Antecedentes Historicos y Tendencias Futuras. Bogota, Colombia: Ediciones Uniandes, 2000, p. 206.

<sup>7</sup> "Venezuelan President Urged to Restore Diplomatic Ties with Peru." The Xinhua General Overseas News Service 18 June 1992.

<sup>8</sup> "Venezuela: Government Suspends Diplomatic Links with Peru."

<sup>9</sup> Declaration of the Rio Group on Guatemala 26 May 1993.

<sup>10</sup> Letter from Fernando Ochoa Antich on MRE/RES. 4/92 dealing with Haiti, Republic of Venezuela Permanent Mission to the OAS, 14 January 1993.

<sup>11</sup> Venezuela. Ministry of External Relations. Relaciones Diplomaticas entre Venezuela y Haiti (1864-2000)." <[www.mre.gov.ve/sumario\\_biblioteca/boletin\\_8/contenido\\_haiti.htm](http://www.mre.gov.ve/sumario_biblioteca/boletin_8/contenido_haiti.htm)>.

<sup>12</sup> Declaration of the Heads of State and Governments of the Rio Group on Haiti 15 October 1993.

<sup>13</sup> "La democracia se ha consolidado con actitud de EUA y militares, indico el presidente Caldera en Paraguay." El Universal 6 September 1996.

<sup>14</sup> "Pronta respuesta internacional." El Universal 22 January 2000.

<sup>15</sup> Vilma Petrash., Department of Social Sciences, Simon Bolivar University. <http://www.cipe.org/events/conferences/lac/venezuela>.

<sup>16</sup> Bauman, Everett. "Caracas defiende soberania de Lima." El Universal 1 June 2000.

<sup>17</sup> Rafael Quevedo, Current Political Representative in the Venezuelan Embassy to the United States, Washington, DC, 29 May 2002.

<sup>18</sup> Maria-Teresa Romero, Professor at the School of International Studies, Universidad Central de Venezuela in Caracas.

<sup>19</sup> "Venezuela Generals Tap Businessman to Lead; Fall of Chavez Means Castro Gets No More Oil." The Washington Times 13 April 2002.