

Latin America: the attack on democracy

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John Pilger argues that an unreported war is being waged by the US to restore power to the privileged classes at the expense of the poor

Beyond the sound and fury of its conquest of Iraq and campaign against Iran, the world's dominant power is waging a largely unreported war on another continent – Latin America. Using proxies, Washington aims to restore and reinforce the political control of a privileged group calling itself middle-class, to shift the responsibility for massacres and drug trafficking away from the psychotic regime in Colombia and its mafiosi, and to extinguish hopes raised among Latin America's impoverished majority by the reform governments of Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia.

In Colombia, the main battleground, the class nature of the war is distorted by the guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, known as the Farc, whose own resort to kidnapping and the drugs trade has provided an instrument with which to smear those who have distinguished Latin America's epic history of rebellion by opposing the proto-fascism of George W Bush's regime. "You don't fight terror with terror," said President Hugo Chávez as US warplanes bombed to death thousands of civilians in Afghanistan following the 11 September 2001 attacks. Thereafter, he was a marked man. Yet, as every poll has shown, he spoke for the great majority of human beings who have grasped that the "war on terror" is a crusade of domination. Almost alone among national leaders standing up to Bush, Chávez was declared an enemy and his plans for a functioning social democracy independent of the United States a threat to Washington's grip on Latin America. "Even worse," wrote the Latin America specialist James Petras, "Chávez's nationalist policies represented an alternative in Latin America at a time (2000-2003) when mass insurrections, popular uprisings and the collapse of pro-US client rulers (Argentina, Ecuador and Bolivia) were constant front-page news."

It is impossible to underestimate the threat of this alternative as perceived by the "middle classes" in countries which have an abundance of privilege and poverty. In Venezuela, their "grotesque fantasies of being ruled by a 'brutal communist dictator'", to quote Petras, are reminiscent of the paranoia of the white population that backed South Africa's apartheid regime. Like in South Africa, racism in Venezuela is rampant, with the poor ignored, despised or patronised, and a Caracas shock jock allowed casually to dismiss Chávez, who is of mixed race, as a "monkey". This fatuous venom has come not only from the super-rich behind their walls in suburbs called Country Club, but from the pretenders to their ranks in middle-level management, journalism, public relations, the arts, education and the other professions, who identify vicariously with all things American. Journalists in broadcasting and the press have played a crucial role – acknowledged by one of the generals and bankers who tried unsuccessfully to overthrow Chávez in 2002. "We couldn't have done it without them," he said. "The media were our secret weapon."

Many of these people regard themselves as liberals, and have the ear of foreign journalists who like to describe themselves as being “on the left”. This is not surprising. When Chávez was first elected in 1998, Venezuela was not an archetypical Latin American tyranny, but a liberal democracy with certain freedoms, run by and for its elite, which had plundered the oil revenue and let crumbs fall to the invisible millions in the barrios. A pact between the two main parties, known as *puntofijismo*, resembled the convergence of new Labour and the Tories in Britain and Republicans and Democrats in the US. For them, the idea of popular sovereignty was anathema, and still is.

Take higher education. At the taxpayer-funded elite “public” Venezuelan Central University, more than 90 per cent of the students come from the upper and “middle” classes. These and other elite students have been infiltrated by CIA-linked groups and, in defending their privilege, have been lauded by foreign liberals.

With Colombia as its front line, the war on democracy in Latin America has Chávez as its main target. It is not difficult to understand why. One of Chávez’s first acts was to revitalise the oil producers’ organisation Opec and force the oil price to record levels. At the same time he reduced the price of oil for the poorest countries in the Caribbean region and central America, and used Venezuela’s new wealth to pay off debt, notably Argentina’s, and, in effect, expelled the International Monetary Fund from a continent over which it once ruled. He has cut poverty by half – while GDP has risen dramatically. Above all, he gave poor people the confidence to believe that their lives would improve.

The irony is that, unlike Fidel Castro in Cuba, he presented no real threat to the well-off, who have grown richer under his presidency. What he has demonstrated is that a social democracy can prosper and reach out to its poor with genuine welfare, and without the extremes of “neo liberalism” – a decidedly unradical notion once embraced by the British Labour Party. Those ordinary Venezuelans who abstained during last year’s constitutional referendum were protesting that a “moderate” social democracy was not enough while the bureaucrats remained corrupt and the sewers overflowed.

Across the border in Colombia, the US has made Venezuela’s neighbour the Israel of Latin America. Under “Plan Colombia”, more than \$6bn in arms, planes, special forces, mercenaries and logistics have been showered on some of the most murderous people on earth: the inheritors of Pinochet’s Chile and the other juntas that terrorised Latin America for a generation, their various *gestapos* trained at the School of the Americas in Georgia. “We not only taught them how to torture,” a former American trainer told me, “we taught them how to kill, murder, eliminate.” That remains true of Colombia, where government-inspired mass terror has been documented by Amnesty, Human Rights Watch and many others. In a study of 31,656 extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances between 1996 and 2006, the Colombian Commission of Jurists found that 46 per cent had been murdered by right-wing death squads and 14 per cent by Farc guerrillas. The para-militaries were responsible for most of the three million victims of internal displacement. This misery is a product of Plan Colombia’s pseudo “war on drugs”, whose real purpose has been to eliminate the Farc. To that goal has now been added a war of attrition on the new popular democracies, especially Venezuela.

US special forces “advise” the Colombian military to cross the border into Venezuela and murder and kidnap its citizens and infiltrate paramilitaries, and so test the loyalty of the Venezuelan armed forces. The model is the CIA-run Contra campaign in Honduras in the

1980s that brought down the reformist government in Nicaragua. The defeat of the Farc is now seen as a prelude to an all-out attack on Venezuela if the Venezuelan elite – reinvigorated by its narrow referendum victory last year – broadens its base in state and local government elections in November.

America's man and Colombia's Pinochet is President Álvaro Uribe. In 1991, a declassified report by the US Defence Intelligence Agency revealed the then Senator Uribe as having "worked for the Medellín Cartel" as a "close personal friend" of the cartel's drugs baron, Pablo Escobar. To date, 62 of his political allies have been investigated for close collaboration with paramilitaries. A feature of his rule has been the fate of journalists who have illuminated his shadows. Last year, four leading journalists received death threats after criticising Uribe. Since 2002, at least 31 journalists have been assassinated in Colombia. Uribe's other habit is smearing trade unions and human rights workers as "collaborators with the Farc". This marks them. Colombia's death squads, wrote Jenny Pearce, author of the acclaimed *Under the Eagle: US Intervention in Central America and the Caribbean* (1982), "are increasingly active, confident that the president has been so successful in rallying the country against the Farc that little attention will shift to their atrocities".

Uribe was personally championed by Tony Blair, reflecting Britain's long-standing, mostly secret role in Latin America. "Counter-insurgency assistance" to the Colombian military, up to its neck in death-squad alliances, includes training by the SAS of units such as the High Mountain Battalions, condemned repeatedly for atrocities. On 8 March, Colombian officers were invited by the Foreign Office to a "counter-insurgency seminar" at the Wilton Park conference centre in southern England. Rarely has the Foreign Office so brazenly paraded the killers it mentors.

The western media's role follows earlier models, such as the campaigns that cleared the way for the dismemberment of Yugoslavia and the credibility given to lies about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. The softening-up for an attack on Venezuela is well under way, with the repetition of similar lies and smears.

Cocaine trail

On 3 February, the Observer devoted two pages to claims that Chávez was colluding in the Colombian drugs trade. Similarly to the paper's notorious bogus scares linking Saddam Hussein to al-Qaeda, the Observer's headline read, "Revealed: Chávez role in cocaine trail to Europe". Allegations were unsubstantiated; hearsay uncorroborated. No source was identified. Indeed, the reporter, clearly trying to cover himself, wrote: "No source I spoke to accused Chávez himself of having a direct role in Colombia's giant drug trafficking business."

In fact, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime has reported that Venezuela is fully participating in international anti-drugs programmes and in 2005 seized the third-highest amount of cocaine in the world. Even the Foreign Office minister Kim Howells has referred to "Venezuela's tremendous co-operation".

The drugs smear has recently been reinforced with reports that Chávez has an "increasingly public alliance [with] the Farc" (see "Dangerous liaisons", *New Statesman*, 14 April). Again, there is "no evidence", says the secretary general of the Organisation of American States. At Uribe's request, and backed by the French government, Chávez played a mediating role in seeking the release of hostages held by the Farc. On 1 March, the negotiations were

betrayed by Uribe who, with US logistical assistance, fired missiles at a camp in Ecuador, killing Raúl Reyes, the Farc's highest-level negotiator. An "email" recovered from Reyes's laptop is said by the Colombian military to show that the Farc has received \$300m from Chávez. The allegation is fake. The actual document refers only to Chávez in relation to the hostage exchange. And on 14 April, Chávez angrily criticised the Farc. "If I were a guerrilla," he said, "I wouldn't have the need to hold a woman, a man who aren't soldiers. Free the civilians!"

However, these fantasies have lethal purpose. On 10 March, the Bush administration announced that it had begun the process of placing Venezuela's popular democracy on a list of "terrorist states", along with North Korea, Syria, Cuba, Sudan and Iran, the last of which is currently awaiting attack by the world's leading terrorist state.

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