

The New Politics of Political Aid in Venezuela

US sponsored "Destabilization Plan"—An "Action Agenda" for Democracy

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Five years after U.S.-funded groups were associated with a failed coup against Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez, the U.S. government's political aid programs continue to meddle in Venezuelan domestic politics. A new focus of the "democracy builders" in Venezuela and around the world is support for nonviolent resistance by civil society organizations.

In the name of promoting democracy and freedom, Washington is currently funding scores of U.S. and Venezuelan organizations as part of its global democratization strategy—including at least one that publicly supported the April 2002 coup that briefly removed Chávez from power.

When he first heard the news of the coup, the president of the [International Republican Institute](#) (IRI) praised those "who rose up to defend democracy," ignoring the fact that Chávez was the twice-elected president of Venezuela. Despite this declared support for a coup against a democratically elected president and for the opposition's blatant disregard for the rule of law, IRI still runs democratization programs in Venezuela that are underwritten by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

The IRI, a supposedly nonpartisan institute established to direct U.S. democratization aid for which Sen. [John McCain](#) (R-AZ) is chairman, is one of five U.S. nongovernmental organizations that channels funding from USAID to Venezuelan organizations and political programs. USAID also funds the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) and three U.S. nongovernmental organizations: [Freedom House](#), Development Alternatives Inc., and Pan-American Development Foundation.

The United States has supported democratization and human rights groups in Venezuela since the early 1990s, but funding for "democracy-building" soared after Chávez was elected president in 1998. Both USAID and the [National Endowment for Democracy](#) (NED), which funds IRI and NDI, sharply increased their funding to Venezuela's business associations, its official labor confederation, human rights organizations, and political party coalitions.

USAID's Transition Initiative

Several months after the unsuccessful April 2002 coup in Venezuela, the U.S. State Department established an Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) in Caracas, using money from USAID. Operating out of the U.S. Embassy, OTI has two stated objectives, according to the agency: to "strengthen democratic institutions and promote space for democratic dialogue," and "encourage citizen participation in the democratic process."

USAID established OTI with the all-but-explicit intention of aiding efforts to oust President Chávez. According to USAID, the new office would “provide fast, flexible, short-term assistance targeted at key transition needs.”

Although it did not spell out what would be the desired “transition,” USAID warned that Chávez “has been slowly hijacking the machinery of government and developing parallel non-democratic governance structures.” In its 2001 job description for the new OTI director in Caracas, USAID stated that the director’s responsibilities would include “formulating strategy and initiating the new OTI program in close coordination with U.S. political interests” and “developing an exit strategy and operational closeout plan.”

Rather than directly funding Venezuelan organizations and political parties, OTI channels USAID funding through U.S. nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that in turn fund scores of Venezuelan NGOs and political party projects. In its January-March 2007 report, USAID reported 139 subgrants to Venezuelan entities working in 19 of the country’s 23 states.

OTI, which has directed an estimated \$30 million in democratization aid to Venezuela, is not the only source of U.S. political aid. The office describes itself as part of a “comprehensive assistance program to shore up the democratic voices and institutions in Venezuela,” such as the NED and other State Department initiatives, including “educational” trips to the United States for selected members of the Venezuelan media. As U.S. economic aid decreases, OTI is seeking local funding to complement its own programs, noting in its January-March 2007 report that it succeeded in leveraging \$3.5 million in local contributions in the year’s first quarter.

In its January-March appraisal of its “transition initiatives,” OTI boasts: “The partnerships that have formed between NGOs and citizens eager to participate directly in their own governance attest to the success of the program ... that is filling an important need that is laying the groundwork for a sustainable democratic future.”

Although the NGOs funded by the U.S. government insist they are independent, they closely coordinate their programs among themselves and with U.S. officials. In February 2007, OTI’s “team leader” visited Venezuela to participate in “a strategic planning” session with the “five implementing partner organizations,” according to USAID.

OTI has also been organizing a meeting with two dozen Venezuelan NGOs “that promote citizen participation in local democratic spaces.” In its January-March evaluation of ongoing operations, OTI says that “given the political parties’ growing appreciation of the importance of democratic spaces, the meeting will provide opportunities to discuss the synergistic overlap between civil society and political parties.”

With OTI support, IRI and NDIIA offer “technical assistance for political parties,” working directly “with political parties to improve their capabilities in constituency outreach and institutional development,” according to USAID. Both institutes say they offer their services to both government and opposition parties—although apparently only the opposition parties avail themselves of this “democracy-building” aid.

Freedom House is best known for its widely cited *Freedom in the World* and *Freedom of the Press* reports. But it is not commonly known that Freedom House is a major recipient of U.S. government funding—directly from USAID or through the government-funded NED.

Relying almost exclusively on government funding for its overseas operations, Freedom House says it works “directly with democratic reformers on the front lines in their own countries” in Central Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Latin America, the former Soviet Union, and the Balkans. According to Freedom House, its overseas activity “acts as a catalyst for freedom by strengthening civil society, promoting open government, defending human rights, and facilitating the free flow of information.”

With USAID funding, Freedom House sponsors a “Human Rights Defenders” program in Venezuela that it promotes as “facilitat[ing] the interaction of Venezuelan civil society with counterparts in Latin America to help them improve domestic human rights reporting and to expand protections for human rights.” The “longer-term goal,” says Freedom House, is “to assist groups who will strive to safeguard and improve the functioning of democratic institutions in Venezuela.”

For its part, in early 2007 the Pan-American Development Fund provided funding to Venezuelan NGOs to “document the following activities: the constitutional reform process, discrimination based on political affiliation, and persecution of human rights practitioners.” Meanwhile, Development Alternatives Inc. has focused on “training in democratic leadership and values, increasing citizen participation at the local level, and supporting NGO participation in international events.”

“Destabilization Plan”—An “Action Agenda” for Democracy

In May 2007, Eva Golinger, Venezuelan-American author of *The Chávez Code* and a prominent critic of U.S. aid programs in Venezuela, accused Freedom House and other U.S. organizations receiving U.S. government funding of orchestrating a “destabilization plan” (see Venezuelanalysis.com, May 26, 2007). Golinger claimed Freedom House was designing a campaign of nonviolent resistance to the Chávez government.

Freedom House collaborates with the Belgrade-based Center for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies (Canvas), which has singled out Venezuela along with Zimbabwe and Ukraine as principal targets for its training programs. Describing Canvas’s approach to political transitions, the center’s website says: “Mass political defiance has occurred in Burma, Zimbabwe, Venezuela, and Tibet in recent years. Although those struggles have not brought victory over dictators, they badly harmed the authority of those oppressive regimes both in the countries and in the international community.”

At a May 2007 press conference in Caracas, Golinger noted that the clenched fist featured on the flyer for a protest against the closure of RCTV, the country’s largest television station (accused by the government of having supported the attempted coup), is the same logo used in opposition campaigns in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine—it is also the symbol featured on the Canvas website.

USAID and NED funding of NGOs in Venezuela reflects the U.S. government’s conviction that the democratic process is badly flawed and that such political aid will contribute to a “transition” to more democratic governance—or at least, to a leader more acceptable to Washington. The focus on NGOs shown by recent democratization aid is also a reflection of a new trend in aid that regards NGOs’ nonviolent resistance as the most effective instrument for moving dictatorships to democracies.

This new method of instigating regime change has been promoted by NED, Freedom House,

Albert Einstein Institution, and the Council for a Community of Democracies. In recent years Freedom House prominently advocated nonviolent civil action to overturn dictatorial regimes. Its 2005 study, entitled “How Freedom is Won,” concluded that 50 of the 67 “transitions to democracy over the previous third of a century” were driven in large part by “civil resistance, featuring strikes, boycotts, civil disobedience, and mass protests.”

Freedom House Board Chairman Peter Ackerman, who is also the founding chairman of the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict and coauthor of *Strategic Nonviolent Conflict*, is a leading proponent for international funding of NGOs engaged in nonviolent organizing against non-democratic states. Freedom House, according to a March 2007 address given by Ackerman, is “making every effort to improve the substance and scalability of training tools” for civil society groups engaged in nonviolent action.

Another prominent advocate of the U.S. government funding nonviolent resistance is Mark Palmer, a State Department official who played a key role in founding NED and who now serves as the vice-chairman of Freedom House. In his June 8, 2006 testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, entitled “Promotion of Democracy by Nongovernmental Organizations: An Action Agenda,” Palmer called for the “radical strengthening of our primary frontline fighters for freedom”—namely, NGOs.

Palmer, who was instrumental in the creation of the Council for a Community of Democracies, lamented the fact that U.S. NGOs and “their governmental and private funders” have not made the funding of foreign NGOs involved in building “national movements” their primary objective. He advocated a major increase in government funding for “NGO programs focused on dictatorships.”

Current U.S. funding of an array of NGOs and community groups in Venezuela, including training and consultation offered by organizations such as Canvas and the Albert Einstein Institution, raises concerns that the overriding objective may not be so much the advance of freedom, democracy, and human rights, but rather the furthering of U.S. strategic interests.

By including a democratic state such as Venezuela among the targets of national movement building, the independence and integrity of “democracy builders” in the United States can be called into question. Chávez supporter Golinger, for example, advised Venezuelans: “For the defense of the nation, it would be wise to end the actions of groups like Freedom House and the International Republican Institute, which serve as a front for the State Department and the CIA, and which operate openly in the country.”

Democracy and Intervention

There is little doubt that democracy is being put to the test in Venezuela. With a history of democratic governance since 1958, Venezuela has had a relatively stable democratic tradition. But a large part of that stability resulted from a pattern of elections in which well-established parties of the elite alternated in power. By breaking that pattern, Hugo Chávez disrupted that vaunted stability and at the same time made politics more inclusive. For the first time, the country’s rural poor and urban workers had a voice in government.

Winning several highly contested elections since 1998 by impressive majorities, Chávez has earned legitimacy as a democrat. However, in his drive to consolidate his bases of support and to usher in “21st-century socialism,” he has sparked widespread concerns from human rights and press freedom organizations, including Human Rights Watch and Reporters

Without Borders, that his government is riding roughshod over the democratic process of governance.

Questions about the integrity of U.S. democratization aid are now being used by the Venezuelan government to press its National Assembly to pass a new law that would subject all NGOs that receive foreign funding to governmental scrutiny and approval. If such an intrusive measure is instituted, at least part of the blame will lay with Washington and will constitute part of the antidemocratic legacy of U.S. democratization strategy.

It's past time for the U.S. democratizers to shut down their operations in Venezuela and make their exit. By intervening in Venezuela through NGOs, Washington lends credence to claims by Chávez and others who charge that the U.S. government is pursuing a policy of regime change in Venezuela.

The first step toward a more constructive foreign policy toward Venezuela should be an expression of support for the country's self-determination in its political and economic affairs. Concerns about the state of democracy, media freedom, or human rights in Venezuela could then be expressed through normal diplomatic channels without fueling suspicion that the United States and its shadow institutions are part of a campaign to undermine the elected Venezuelan government.

As things stand, however, Washington and its phalanx of democracy-building NGOs are not just raising concerns, but are also operating to influence internal politics inside Venezuela. Washington would not permit foreign countries and their agents to inject themselves into its own political process; it should assume no right to do unto others what it would not have done to itself.

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