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## U.S. official: Venezuela democracy at risk

HARRY DUNPHY

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**WASHINGTON** - Democracy in Venezuela is in grave peril because President Hugo Chavez is trying to concentrate power in his own hands, a top State Department official said Thursday.

Newly appointed Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Shannon, in charge of Latin American affairs, told a congressional committee that Chavez's government was "subverting democratic institutions by using them to restrict the rights of those who disagree with it, slowly undermining economic freedoms and rejecting the opportunities of globalization."

Shannon's remarks were the latest in a verbal battle between the Bush administration and Chavez. At this month's Summit of the Americas, Chavez led a protest against U.S. policies and opposed President Bush's efforts to win support for a hemisphere-wide free trade zone.

The Venezuelan government did not immediately respond to Shannon's comments.

Chavez, first elected in 1998 and up for re-election next year, insists he supports democracy and accuses the U.S. government of falsely branding him authoritarian because it disagrees with his socialist policies. He has close ties with Cuban leader Fidel Castro.

Shannon said Chavez was centralizing power in the executive and politicizing the judiciary.

"The impact on the civic, political and economic life of the country is evident in increased self censorship by the media, lack of public confidence in the electoral system, reluctance to express disagreement with government policies for fear of retribution and capital flight," Shannon said.

Shannon said the Bush administration was working with the 34-nation Organization of American States, the European Union and others, "sensitizing them to the threat to regional stability posed by the Venezuelan government's arms shopping spree and its support for radical political movements."

In May, the Chavez government signed an agreement with Russia to purchase 100,000 Kalashnikov assault rifles. Bush has expressed concern the weapons could fall into the hands of groups such as leftist rebels in Colombia.