

US Seen Undermining Latin American Democracies

by Janine Zacharia
Oppo Research
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At January's Summit of the Americas in Mexico, a gathering of nearly every nation in North and South America, President Bush took his push for democratization to the United States' backyard. "At past summits, we resolved that democracy is the only legitimate form of government in this hemisphere and that the peoples of the Americas have an obligation to promote it and defend it," Bush said. "Our unity and support of democratic institutions, constitutional processes, and basic liberties gives hope and strength to those struggling to preserve their God-given rights, whether in Venezuela, or Haiti, or Bolivia."

Unfortunately, the White House's recent actions don't match its lofty rhetoric. In several countries, the United States has tilted the political playing field against flawed but democratically elected left-wing leaders. Working through government-linked organizations, Washington has funneled money to opponents of former Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and Latin American presidents, promoting opposition politicians rather than democracy itself. "The people of our hemisphere watched this administration turn its back on democracy and walk out on a democratically elected president," Representative Bob Menendez, ranking Democrat on the House International Relations Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, said last week. "They watched, and they got the clear messages that this sent: This administration will not stand up for a democratically elected head of state they do not like." Unfortunately, he's right.

U.S. intervention in Latin America is more subtle than it used to be. Overt tactics, such as fomenting a coup (as the United States did in Guatemala in 1954), are no longer acceptable. So it is unlikely Aristide was "kidnapped" by the United States and dragged out of Haiti against his will, as he has alleged. James Dobbins, the Clinton administration special envoy to Haiti from 1994 to 1996, says there is no evidence the United States forcibly removed Aristide. After all, Aristide wrote a resignation letter (which he later claimed, with no evidence, was forged) and, at first, appeared to leave of his own free will.

But the White House, and key congressional Republicans, clearly had no love for Aristide--or for Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, another leftist leader. During the Clinton administration, which returned Aristide to power in 1994, American officials maintained contact with the Aristide government. After the disputed May 2000 elections--won by Aristide's party--direct aid to the Haitian government was halted temporarily because of White House concern about fraud in the election. When it came into office, the Bush administration essentially made the aid cut-off permanent, blocking all direct aid to the Haitian government.

The White House's Haiti decision was not surprising. After all, during the '90s, Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina, chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, had been among the most strident critics of the Clinton administration's decision to restore

Aristide to power. (On the Senate floor, Helms once denounced Aristide as a "psychotic.") Helms's chief Haiti adviser was Roger Noriega, now assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, and the man responsible for the administration's Haiti policy. "Roger Noriega has been dedicated to ousting Aristide for many, many years," Robert White, a former U.S. ambassador to El Salvador and Paraguay, told reporters last week. In fact, in 2002, as U.S. envoy to the Organization of American States, Noriega said Washington could not help build democracy in Haiti while Aristide was in power. "When I met with Assistant Secretary Noriega, I got the distinct impression that the [Haiti] policy of this government is regime change," agreed Senator Bill Nelson of Florida at a congressional hearing in February. In recent months, Noriega has worked closely with National Security Council Latin America envoy Otto Reich, who also has strongly denounced Aristide and leftist leaders in Latin America, and who had contacts with some of the opposition forces who tried to overthrow Venezuelan President Chavez two years ago. Before Chavez was briefly deposed, Reich held a series of meetings with anti-Chavez forces. After the coup, Reich seemed to welcome Chavez's overthrow.

The Bush administration has exerted its influence in Haiti by pumping cash into programs that empower political opposition groups while withholding aid for the Aristide government. Much of this cash was distributed through the International Republican Institute (IRI), a Washington-based nonprofit that tries to "advance democracy worldwide." In most of the roughly 50 countries where IRI runs programs, it provides programming to both the ruling party and the opposition. But, in Haiti, programs sponsored by IRI only include opposition groups; with a few minor exceptions, the same holds for Venezuela. In late 2001, the U.S. Agency for International Development, which provides the funding for IRI and similar organizations, convened consultations on how to promote democracy in Haiti. According to an IRI official, there wasn't "a reluctance per se to work with [Aristide's] Lavalas Party." The ruling party, the official said, simply looked strong "and didn't need our help," even though IRI helps both incumbents and challengers in many other countries. Perhaps sensing IRI's wariness, Aristide's party did not reach out to IRI.

Having decided to only steer funding to Aristide's opposition, in December 2001 and again in April 2002 IRI brought nonviolent Haitian opposition leaders to a Miami hotel to assess their needs. Between September 2002 and January 2004, IRI then hosted seven workshops in the Dominican Republic for opposition leaders. The trainings were led by Republican political consultants and even some Republican state representatives and involved seminars on party structure, political communication, and fund-raising. Similarly, earlier this month *The New York Times* reported that Sumate, an opposition group that helped plan the current effort to recall Chavez, received \$53,000 from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a group similar to IRI. The *Times* reported that, over the past two years, NED "has funneled hundreds of thousands of dollars" to a spectrum of Venezuelan opposition organizations. (IRI has funded programs for the Venezuelan opposition as well.)

As in Venezuela, the amount of money the Bush administration spent helping the Haitian opposition is relatively small; the total U.S. budget for democracy training in Haiti in 2004 is \$2.9 million. But Haiti is the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, and three million dollars is not an insignificant sum there. More important, by not spreading

the money around, experts say, the Bush administration sent a message to Haitians that opposition groups alone enjoy America's backing. "This administration continued to provide counsel and moral support to the opposition but ... provided no assistance to the Haitian government," says Dobbins. "The result was a somewhat unbalanced relationship in which they seem to have an intimate relationship only with the opposition." That alone may have led Aristide's opponents to believe that, if they tried to depose Aristide by force, the United States would not stop them.

It turned out they were right. The White House did little to tamp down the violent anti-Aristide rebellion once it began in January. When asked about the crisis erupting in Haiti on February 25, President Bush did not condemn the rebels but simply said, "I have made abundantly clear to the Coast Guard that we will turn back any refugee that attempts to reach our shore." In fact, the White House essentially gave veto power over any political solution to Aristide's opponents: When the rebels rejected a compromise deal proposed by other Caribbean nations, the United States said that Aristide had to leave. The White House showed "it will stand idly by as rebels, thugs, and prisoners topple a democratically elected government," Menendez has said.

One might argue that, given Aristide's and Chavez's authoritarian tendencies, undermining them is tantamount to promoting democracy. Yet there is little evidence that the opposition groups that benefit indirectly from U.S. policies have a genuine commitment to democracy. Aristide's opponents include former members of the notoriously brutal Haitian military and several men accused of being drug traffickers. "The [Haitian] opposition ... became just as dependent on criminal elements," Dobbins told the *Baltimore Sun* earlier this month. Meanwhile, the Venezuelan opposition included many former generals.

Robert Pastor, a Haiti expert at American University, says that, because the administration has persisted in supporting one side in Haiti, Venezuela, and Bolivia, "the U.S. has really not developed a pro-democracy policy ... in a matter that would be credible." But the White House seems unlikely to change its strategy. In fact, Chavez could be next in line for U.S. intervention. One Pentagon official told me the Bush administration was now looking closely at the recall in Venezuela, examining whether it was "proceeding the way it's supposed to, ... or has Chavez rendered it impossible to produce a fair, honest result?" If Chavez has meddled with the recall, the official said, "at some point soon we might have to make some decision about what needs to happen" in Venezuela. Sounds familiar.