

Fujimori warned that, while he did not know all its details, he feared it would only prolong the conflict, not win it, and become “the beginning of a new Vietnam.” “I cannot conceive that, in a South American country, there could be a force which is foreign to that country, and that it is invaded, or advised, by foreign agents,” he said.

Colombia’s former Army Commander, Gen. Harold Bedoya (ret.) echoed President Fujimori’s warning, in interviews given to several Peruvian radio and television stations after the announcement that the Peruvians had broken up the FARC arms ring. The FARC and the international drug mafia which it supplies is a threat to the entire Amazon region, General Bedoya emphasized, but Plan Colombia is absurd. How could it be otherwise, when it is based on the Colombian government giving “political rights” to this group of drug traffickers and terrorists, while the military aid it provides—30 refurbished Vietnam-era helicopters now, and 30 modern helicopters two years from now—is insufficient, except to prolong the war.

South America for the South Americans

It is in this heightened state of regional crisis that the 12 heads of state of South America will gather for their first ever summit in Brasilia. The official agenda of the summit, from which a final declaration is expected to be issued, covers everything from democracy and fighting drugs, to integrating transport infrastructure, communications, and energy generation and distribution in the region.

Wall Street and the State Department have been nervous about this summit since the Cardoso government began organizing it earlier this year. They are suspicious that it, along with Brazil’s drive to create a South American free-trade zone by unifying Mercosur (whose members are Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay) and the Andean Pact (most of the rest of South America), are part of a Brazilian strategy to set up an independent body, under its own sphere of influence, separate from, and perhaps counterposed to the North American Free Trade Agreement bloc.

Despite its free-trade parameters, the upcoming South American Summit has become a wild-card, under today’s crisis conditions. President Cardoso briefed Albright that the goal of the summit is to intensify relations between the 12 South American countries, by going outside bureaucratic procedures and by increasing the number of agreements on common infrastructure and transportation projects. Foreign Minister Lampreia has said they will seek the physical integration of the subcontinent, “which would have political effects upon the cohesion of South America in any international negotiation,” according to the report by Clovis Rossi, *Folha de São Paulo*’s senior journalist and member of the editorial board.

The concept taking shape, according to Argentina’s *Clarín*, is that it is Brasilia’s intention to argue at the summit that the best formula to resolve conflicts in the region, is “South America for the South Americans.”

Venezuela

Chávez: a Circus Abroad and Vote Theft at Home

by David Ramonet

The U.S. State Department, along with much of the international news media, made a great deal of fuss over the visit of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez Frías to Iraq in August, where he met with President Saddam Hussein and invited him to an Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) summit that will be held in Caracas in September.

Less concerned about that are the Venezuelan people, who are more worried about the economic and political disaster over which Chávez is presiding at home, and in particular, his shameless theft of votes in the July 30 national elections. There already exist multiple legal suits, as well as opposition street protests—with at least one person dead so far—against the “cynical and arrogant electoral fraud” through which Chávez was legitimized in the Presidency.

Despite notable irregularities in the electoral process, and the flagrant dirty tricks by means of which the Chávez forces claimed victory not only for the Presidency, but also for 16 of 23 state governorships and 60% of the 165 seats in the National Assembly, it appears that neither former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, nor the observers from the Organization of American States, nor the outgoing U.S. Ambassador to Venezuela, John Maisto, could discover any hints of illegality.

It is worth contrasting this silence with the worldwide scandal that the U.S. State Department raised around the recent Presidential elections in Peru, after which the Venezuelan elections had to be postponed from their original May 28 date, because National Electoral Council directors could not conceal the mountain of irregularities that existed then, and which continued to exist at the time of the election.

One returns then to the question that is circulating in political layers throughout the Andean region: What does Chávez have that Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori doesn’t, that the U.S. State Department is so conciliatory toward the one, and so opposed to the other? What comes to the mind of any sharp observer is that Chávez, all his radical hyperbole aside, feels very comfortable with globalization, and in particular with the ongoing dialogue that the State Department has approved with Colombia’s FARC narco-terrorists, while Fujimori defends the sovereign nation-state against that same narco-terrorist threat.

The Numbers Don't Add Up

Ever since last Dec. 15, when the new Bolivarian Constitution of Venezuela was passed, the country has been living in “temporary legality,” as interpreted by the Chávez regime’s “strongman,” veteran leftist Luis Miquilena. As head of the National Constituent Assembly, Miquilena has named the “temporary powers”: a National Legislative Commission (also known as “the little congress”), which he heads; a committee to “restructure” the Judicial Power, headed by his “former” partner Manuel Quijada; and a Supreme Court of Justice (TSJ), temporarily named by both him and Quijada.

It was hoped that the election of the National Assembly, the unicameral legislative power which now reigns, would open the doors to a pluralist grouping that could supersede the “temporary legality” status. But the July 30 elections sank the possibility of any kind of credible legality, given that the Chávez forces unexpectedly succeeded in controlling the absolute majority of the new congress. The National Electoral Council awarded 77 seats to the Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) of Chávez, and 21 seats to his allies in the Movement to Socialism (MAS). With three “indigenous” deputies and another five minor groups, Chávez’s forces took 111 seats, a two-thirds absolute majority. The result is that the Chavistas could now name the magistrates of the TSJ, the Prosecutor General, the Comptroller, the People’s Defender, and the board of the National Electoral Council (CNE).

Strangely enough, of the 322 mayoralities up for grabs, some 150 of them were won by the traditional parties—the social democratic Acción Democrática took more than 100, and the social Christian COPEI party won 47—versus only 80 going to the MVR and 20 to its MAS allies. It is strange indeed that these vote results on the local level do not correspond to the votes apparently obtained by the traditional candidates to the National Assembly.

In two of the gubernatorial races (in the states of Táchira and Cojedes), the MVR won through a dirty deal with the CNE, which agreed to combine the votes of the Patria Para Todos (PPT) party with those of the MVR, in a last-minute deal. So suspicious were the local CNE officials, that the first tallies released did not agree with this, and it wasn’t until the MVR began to put on the pressure that the Chavista vote tallies suddenly began to climb. What made a definite difference was what has been dubbed “the miracle of the nulls”—because the automatic voting machines registered a large amount of null votes, the MVR was able to impose its victory with a margin of scarcely tens or hundreds of votes.

There are more than 100 legal challenges pending before the CNE and TSJ at the present time, but despite the strong substantiation of many of them, it is not expected that they will cause any change in the final electoral results.

There are also doubts about Chávez’s own victory. He

won with *more* votes than in December 1998, which is truly stunning in view of the very evident disenchantment with his government that can be perceived on the street. During this year and a half of “temporary” government, Chávez has lost a large part of the support he had among the educated middle class, the organized working class, and the agricultural sector, those now most strongly affected not only by the economic recession, but also by the constant diatribes and threats of President Chávez himself. It was expected that, while he would win the Presidential elections, Chávez would be receiving between 10-15% less than in 1998.

However, the CNE gave Chávez 3,757,773 votes, against 2,359,459 votes won by his main rival, Francisco Arias Cárdenas, less than that won by Chávez’s rival in 1998. At that time, Chávez won 3,674,021 votes against 2,613,814 by his main adversary, Henrique Salas Romer.

Circus Without Bread Continues

Chávez has announced a plan for jobs and street kitchens, to ease the effects of the recession on the population. For the moment, thanks to the fact that the price of Venezuelan oil has remained above \$32 per barrel, in contrast to the \$15 per barrel that had been calculated for the budget, the public budget has been raised by more than 50%, from the 12 trillion bolívares of last year, to more than 19 billion this year. However, this flood of money is not apparent in the economy, despite the fact that the government insists that the economy began to grow as of the second half of this year. Inflation is contained, estimated to reach 15% by year’s end, thanks to the brutal decline in consumption by the population, and in expenses of the private sector.

There is, in fact, nothing in sight to allow for predictions of an economic recovery, and the private business sector continues to be nervous. In a discussion at the headquarters of the Andean Development Corp. in Caracas, President Chávez rejected “the development model of the developed nations,” arguing that they consume too many natural resources. According to his calculations, if all the countries of the world wanted to be at the development level of the industrialized nations, we would have to take over several Earths. Thus, in his worldview, there is only room for the small, which in practice translates into officially organized street hawking.

Most recently, Chávez gave us all a glimpse of what he has in mind. He states that during his trip to Europe, he was especially inspired by the windmills of Holland, by means of which wind energy could be converted into electricity. He said that this was an example of what could be done in the Venezuelan plains. For 20 years, the World Bank has been “educating” the leaders of the so-called Third World to forget cutting-edge technologies, machine tools, and other heavy industry, because they could not afford such “luxuries” while simultaneously paying off their foreign debt. It would appear that in Chávez, they have a ready pupil.