

YOUNG VOICES PROTEST CHÁVEZ'S MEDIA GRAB

OUR OPINION: OAS, REGIONAL NEIGHBORS FAIL TO STAND AGAINST CENSORSHIP

Opinion

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In 2002, when Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez was briefly ousted from power, a group of Latin American presidents swiftly condemned the break in constitutional rule. Now, however, after Mr. Chávez silenced a media critic in a blatantly undemocratic move, the silence in the region is deafening. What a difference a few years and petro-dollar diplomacy make. Through inaction, the Organization of American States and most of its member countries have failed to protect democracy.

Freedom quashed

In 2002, the regional response was key to Mr. Chávez's return to office. The outcry by the biggest Latin American democracies -- Mexico, Brazil and Argentina -- was notable. A threat to invoke the OAS Democracy Charter, which prescribes diplomatic sanctions, worked to restore Mr. Chávez's rule.

Yet even then, Latin American diplomats warned that the Democratic Charter still might be used against Mr. Chávez should he take unconstitutional measures against the opposition or media. Have the region's democracies forgotten?

Two weeks ago, Mr. Chávez quashed freedom of expression by not renewing the license and taking over the airwaves of the Radio Caracas Television network. He made no secret of his motivation. This was payback for the network's ongoing criticism and support of the opposition in 2002. Such a politically motivated move against a broadcaster clearly violates the OAS Democratic Charter provision that enshrines freedom of the press as fundamental to democracy. Mr. Chávez now controls most national networks. Other privately owned media companies self-censor to avoid reprisals.

Yet at the OAS meeting last week, only the United States and El Salvador argued the importance of free expression in Venezuela. Poor nations that get generous oil and aid subsidies from Caracas may feel compelled to refrain from criticizing. Yet other countries hide behind the doctrine of nonintervention in the internal affairs of neighbors. Why then have a Democratic Charter at all?

Open criticism

Venezuela tried to deflect criticism of Mr. Chávez's actions onto the U.S. Guantánamo prison camp. But, as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice pointed out, Americans freely criticize Guantánamo and other U.S. policies every day.

To their credit, Venezuela's university students have kept up their protests, which are backed by 80 percent of Venezuelans who opposed the shutdown of Radio Caracas Television. These young students are the hope for the country's democratic future. Their newly awakened political consciousness has injected energy into the public arena and could lead to more activism. They are at least speaking out against Mr. Chávez's excesses in a way not heard from the OAS.