

THE OPPENHEIMER REPORT

In Venezuela, there's no freedom 'after' expression

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Critics of Venezuela's narcissist-Leninist President Hugo Chávez often joke that in Venezuela there is freedom of expression, but not freedom after expression. Last week, their pun proved right.

Twelve students were wounded at the state-run Central University of Venezuela in Caracas as they were returning from an 80,000-strong opposition protest in front of the Supreme Justice Tribunal.

They were demanding a postponement of a Chávez-convoked Dec. 2 referendum that would grant the president extraordinary powers to suppress fundamental freedoms and be reelected indefinitely.

The protest had ended, and the students were arriving back at the university when a group of hooded gunmen on motorcycles showed up and started shooting at them, witnesses say. Photographers from The Associated Press saw at least four hooded gunmen shooting at the students.

Víctor Márquez, president of the UCV teachers association, accused Chávez-backed urban militias of staging the attack. He said the gunmen were identified as members from three paramilitary groups -- the Colectivo Alexis Vive, Los Carapaicas and Los Tupamaros.

Similar attacks took place in recent days at the University of Los Andes in the state of Mérida, where 75 students were injured, five of them with bullet wounds; the Experimental University of Táchira and the University of Los Andes in San Cristóbal, in the state of Aragua.

Human rights activists say the incidents are part of a systematic pattern of Chávez government intimidation of political opponents. While Chávez allows a semblance of freedom of expression to help make his regime more tolerable to the international community, his strategy has long been to allow some protests, but later clamp down on protesters to deter others from joining them in the future.

"This last incident [at the Central University] is especially worrisome, because everything seems to indicate that the police not only stood idly by, but allowed the motorized gunmen to enter into the university grounds," says José Miguel Vivanco, head of the Americas department of the Human Rights Watch advocacy group in Washington, D.C. "That's very serious."

While there have been similar incidents of masked gunmen on motorcycles attacking anti-Chávez protesters in the past, they have increased substantially since Nov. 2, when students took to the streets vowing to protest peacefully against the government's decision to hold the Dec. 2 referendum, Vivanco said.

Chávez, as usual, blamed the United States for the violence. He said Friday at the XVII Ibero-American summit in Santiago, Chile, that the student protests were "a fascist offensive" encouraged by Washington and the Venezuelan oligarchy.

The escalation of Venezuela's repression on dissidents comes after Chávez revoked the license of RCTV, Venezuela's oldest television network, earlier this year. Chávez allowed the network to broadcast until its license was up for renewal, then took it off the air, and replaced it with a state-run network.

But perhaps the most blatant example of Chávez's after-the-fact repression strategy was the "Maisanta List" of about 3.4 million Venezuelan citizens who had signed a petition for a referendum on Chávez's rule in 2004.

Chávez allowed the petition signing, but his backers immediately released the list of those who had signed, and turned them into Apartheid-styled second-class citizens. The list was used to deny business people government contracts, fire public employees, and to discrimination against those whose names appeared on it.

My opinion: Venezuela is about to become a constitutional dictatorship with staged elections designed to reelect Chávez, allowing only cosmetic spaces for the opposition.

The constitutional changes proposed by Chávez -- sweetened with an offer to reduce the workday from eight to six hours, which will be hard to resist for millions of Venezuelans -- include proclaiming the country a "socialist state," ending the autonomy of the Central Bank, and allowing indefinite states of emergency in which Chávez will be allowed to suspend freedom of speech.

Too bad that the 22 presidents meeting at at Ibero-American summit didn't even express a hint of concern about the erosion of fundamental freedoms in Venezuela, as Latin American leaders once did when former Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori tried to assume extraordinary powers in his country. The summit used to make calls for the collective defense of democracy in the region, but has since become a largely social event, with occasional bilateral disputes.

Soon, there won't be freedom of expression or freedom after expression in Venezuela.