

Coup-Proof Venezuela?

Editor's Note: Venezuela's recent history provides us with a notable example of how a dictator can thoroughly co-opt the military and other security forces to inoculate a regime against a military coup. Now-deceased dictator Hugo Chávez came to office in a democratic election in 1998, during which he promised to alleviate wide-spread poverty by establishing a socialist system that promised redistribution of confiscated wealth. Gradually pushing the country toward the adoption of a Cuban-style Marxist state, he garnered fanatical support among the impoverished segment of the Venezuelan populace by implementing large-scale social welfare programs that were paid for in part by the Venezuelan government's oil wealth, but also by nationalizing foreign holdings and redistributing confiscated assets. Once established firmly in power with a popular base of support mainly among the poorer classes, he used the opportunity to rewrite the constitution to strengthen his personal power over the government, remove anybody in the military officers' corps and judicial branches suspected of personal disloyalty to him, and appoint military cronies into key government positions not only in the military but also in other key positions overseeing the economy, irrespective of personal background or technical competence. As a result, prior to his death, Chávez successfully put in place a large network of loyal and thoroughly corrupt generals who today continue to use the military, large sectors of the economy, and administration of government programs primarily for personal gain. The generals and government officials in this network not only continue to use the military and domestic security forces to personally enrich themselves and their families but also have now broadened their reach by using their positions of authority to protect and advance the interests of drug cartels based in Colombia, other international criminal syndicates that specialize in international counterfeiting and human trafficking, and terrorist organizations with ties to the Middle East. This network of generals and the forces they control to eliminate political opponents has been mentored and greatly reinforced by an estimated fifteen thousand to thirty thousand Cuban intelligence operatives imported



Hugo Chávez speaking 18 April 2010. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

under the regime of Chávez, who are now deeply embedded in all aspects of the government security apparatus. As a result, the Cuban government now controls virtually every aspect of Venezuelan internal security including overseeing operations to eliminate the emergence of organized political opposition to the government. The conjunction of these factors, especially the dominant influence of Cuba on the government, is not well understood or appreciated by other nations concerned about antidemocratic developments in Venezuela. The Venezuelan kleptocracy is so well established that a successful military coup in Venezuela is extremely unlikely, whoever the titular head of the government is, and irrespective of the amount of suffering by the general populace of Venezuela. For articles providing insight into each facet of the domestic plight of Venezuela as described above, see *Military Review* Hot Spots at <http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Special-Topics/World-Hot-Spots/Venezuela/>.