

Chavez concerned over US hostility

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By [Tim Holmes](#)

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From its involvement in the removal of the Allende government of Chile in 1973 and the installation of the more “congenial” General Pinochet to the defeat of the Nicaraguan Sandinistas through the of funding insurgents and later direct bombing attacks, to the more recent intervention, in February 2004, in Haiti to remove the democratically elected Jean Bertrand Aristide from office following allegations of continued extra-judicial killings and torture, United States foreign policy has long cast a shadow over the South American continent.

The Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez might be forgiven, then, for recently claiming (with typically bombastic rhetoric) that if he is assassinated the person responsible will be the President of the United States. “I will not hide, I will walk in the streets with all of you ... but I know I am condemned to death” he told assembled listeners last month.

Chavez is undoubtedly right to think that Washington has its eye on him. The fourth largest exporter of oil to the US, Venezuela is of massive strategic concern to the Bush administration. Some of Chavez’s policies, however, have made the relationship an icy one.

Chavez’s government has nearly doubled taxes on foreign oil companies and regained control of the state-owned PDVSAoil company. Increased oil revenues, opposed by the IMF, along with a substantial land reform programme have been a key part of Chavez’s progressive redistribution policies.

Government funding has been poured into literacy, health and other social programmes, teaching, so it claims, over a million adults to read and write in the last year – the biggest literacy programme in history.

Wealthy sectors of society – or rather “the squalid ones” in Chavez’s framing – are not enthused. Nor, it seems, is the U.S. government. The Bush administration has always regarded the Chavez’s democratically elected government as lacking “legitimacy”. Condoleeza Rice, US Secretary of State, recently described Venezuela as a “negative force” in Latin America, accusing Chavez of turning the country into a totalitarian society.

Chavez’s government has recently drawn criticism after the appointment of seventeen new Supreme Court judges, who many feel are on side with the government, in what has been seen as an attempt to gain complete control over the Judiciary.

His support among the poor majority, however, still remains high, being consistently victorious in popular votes, most recently last August, when he was returned to office enjoying 60 percent of the vote.

Chavez’s fear of a potential coup attempt might have been seen as paranoid and implausible, had one not already been attempted.

In April 2002, Chavez was kidnapped and forced out of office by a combination of business leaders and a clique within the military; massive popular unrest quickly forced the coup plotters to reinstate him.

Recently declassified CIA documents reveal that Washington was well aware of the imminent coup attempt before it happened. Moreover, as a U.S. State Department internal investigation into Washington's role in the coup noted that the US had provided substantial support programmes totalling about \$3.3 million to Venezuelan organisations and individuals, some of whom are understood to have been involved in the the coup.

Why, though, should Chavez's policies in Venezuela be quite so provocative in Washington? As some have suggested, the upper echelons of the American government seem to regard its refusal to play ball as deeply threatening.

"America can't let us stay in power", Miguel Bustamante Madriz, a minister under Chavez said. "We are the exception to the new globalization order. If we succeed, we are an example to the Americas." Whether or not they do succeed – and what the U.S. has left in store for Mr Chavez is yet to be seen.



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