

Venezuela's endangered democracy

Revolutionary justice

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A crackdown on the opposition

AFTER winning a referendum to abolish presidential term limits on February 15th, Venezuela's president, Hugo Chávez, said he was embarking on the "third phase" of his "Bolivarian revolution". On the evidence so far, one of its main traits will be the repression of dissent and the concentration of even more power in Mr Chávez's own hands. As a result, Venezuela's democracy is in "serious danger of collapse", the country's Catholic bishops said in an Easter message.

The government is picking off its main opponents one by one. Manuel Rosales, the mayor of Maracaibo, Venezuela's second city, and the opposition's defeated candidate in the 2006 presidential election, has gone into hiding to avoid arrest on corruption charges. The government claims he has left the country, although his family and his lawyers deny this.

Officials say he should defend himself in court. But since Mr Chávez has said he would personally jail Mr Rosales, he can hardly expect a fair trial. The president already controls the judiciary. But a bill soon to become law sets up a new executive-dominated judicial commission which would rank higher than the supine supreme court.

On April 2nd, General Raúl Baduel, a former defence minister, was arrested at gunpoint in front of his wife by military-intelligence agents. Also accused of corruption, he was a key ally of Mr Chávez but has been treated by the regime as a traitor since he went into opposition 18 months ago. Several other opposition leaders, as well as former *chavista* politicians, face similar accusations. Others have been banned from standing for election on the same grounds. Yet Mr Chávez shows no inclination to investigate the many claims of corruption concerning his government.

He has been even less subtle with Antonio Ledezma, an opponent who was elected mayor of Caracas last year. His offices have been taken over by *chavista* mobs. A law is being rushed through parliament to render his post largely symbolic, by creating a powerful, appointed vice-president for Caracas. According to Mr Ledezma, the government "is acting outside the constitution," while the courts are more like "firing-squads".

He was referring in particular to the sentencing on April

3rd of three of the capital's former police chiefs to 30 years in jail without parole. Accused, without evidence, of complicity in the murder of several *chavistas* who died during a coup attempt in 2002, they have already spent years in windowless cells.

The government also has plans to tighten legal controls on the media. New government-controlled workers' councils will undermine the trade unions. A planned "international co-operation law" would make it hard for human-rights groups to obtain foreign funding.

Mr Ledezma this week tried to deliver a letter to parliament protesting against the new law for Caracas. He was halted by security forces, tear-gassed and sprayed with a red liquid. Tarek el Aissami, the interior minister, said he should have sought written permission—to march through the streets he is supposed to be governing. One way and another, Mr Chávez is doing his best to prove the bishops' point.

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