



Office of Transition Initiatives

VENEZUELA



OTI MISSION STATEMENT

To support U.S. foreign policy objectives by helping local partners advance peace and democracy in priority countries in crisis. Seizing critical windows of opportunity, OTI works on the ground to provide fast, flexible short-term assistance targeted at key political transition and stabilization needs.

FAST FACTS

Start Date: August 2002
Budget: \$7.45 million (FY09)

USAID/OTI

<http://www.usaid.gov> –
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PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

In August 2002, USAID initiated a program in Venezuela to provide assistance to maintain democratic stability and strengthen the country's fragile democratic institutions. The program operates out of the U.S. Embassy and is part of a larger U.S. diplomatic effort to promote democracy in Venezuela.

The specific objectives of the Venezuela program are to enhance access to objective information and peaceful debate on key issues, provide support to democratic institutions, and promote citizen participation and democratic leadership. USAID works with several implementing partners drawn from the spectrum of civil society focusing on dialogue, public debate, citizen participation and training for democratic leadership, offering technical assistance for political parties and providing technical support to human rights practitioners and the supporting civil society.

ACTIVITIES

Support for Nonpartisan Election Campaigns – OTI works with local counterparts to generate civic participation from all sectors and political parties and also supports forums on good governance principles. During the year, OTI provided support for voter registration campaigns, to stimulate debate on key issues, and for forums on the tenants of democratic governance principles and the value of citizen responsiveness.

Enhance Access to Objective Information and Peaceful Debate – OTI supports the promotion of political debate among students to raise the level of discourse on some of the most important issues for Venezuelans. OTI also works with local partners to strengthen new media tools that can improve access to information and allow open and productive debate on the Internet.

Provide Support to Democratic Institutions – OTI works through civil society and offers technical assistance to all political parties to support democratic systems. Accordingly, OTI partners use materials and technical expertise to provide objective and tested support to improve the effectiveness and responsiveness of local governments, political parties, and systems to help local governments and citizen groups exchange ideas.

Promote Citizen Participation and Democratic Leadership – Recognizing that strong democratic institutions and access to objective information requires citizen involvement and strong leaders, OTI supports citizen participation in local and national policymaking, often with involvement and guidance from

community and locally elected leaders. OTI supports community leaders and local organizations to improve their access to locally elected leaders and to increase their ability to provide input into participatory budgeting and policy discussions. This process results in strengthened leadership, as communities increasingly recognize that they have a productive role to play and as oversight of elected offices is improved.

COUNTRY SITUATION

Venezuela saw significant developments on political and international fronts during the year. Domestically, central government power was both challenged and consolidated during two national ballots, the government continued its efforts to exert control over democratic institutions, and street protests increased in response to new policies.

National Elections – Both the government and the opposition claimed victory in the municipal and gubernatorial elections held on November 23, 2008. President Hugo Chavez’s governing PSUV (Partido Socialista Unido Venezuela) retained control over 17 states; however, the opposition won governorships in 5 states containing nearly 45 percent of the population. At the mayoral level, PSUV candidates captured a majority of the open positions, although the opposition won a hotly contested campaign in greater Caracas. Immediately following the elections, second-term President Chavez brought forth a constitutional referendum to repeal term limits on all elected offices, including the office of the president. The lead-up to the referendum was contentious, and the government expended significant state resources in its campaign for a “yes” vote. The effort successfully shifted public opinion: Polls indicated that 65 percent of voters opposed the referendum at the end of 2008, but on February 15, the bill was approved by a 54 percent majority.

Centralized Control of Government, Media, and Social Services – Since the regional elections, the government has used its control over the judiciary and the military to prevent opposition governmental and nongovernmental leaders from governing and acting. According to the Venezuelan Penal Forum, more than 2,000 of President Chavez’s opponents have gone to trial during the last seven years over charges stemming from their participation in protests. The trend of using the courts to undermine rivals continued in 2009. For example, criminal charges were brought against Manuel Rosales, the mayor of Maracaibo and a former candidate for president. The charges eventually led Rosales to seek and receive asylum in Peru.

Caracas Mayor Antonio Ledezma, a leading opposition leader, was effectively stripped of his mayoral powers. Under the Capital District Law, the President appointed a chief of government to preside over Ledezma, effectively transforming Caracas from a municipality to a national entity. Similar undermining of local authority continued throughout the year. President Chavez also called for the central government to take administrative control of the country’s ports and airports from state governments. Claiming national security concerns, the president ordered the army to occupy the port facilities of Maracaibo, Puerto Caballo, and Porlamar, which are in states (Zulia, Carabobo, and Nueva Esparta, respectively) where opposition leaders hold power. The ports and airports have traditionally been a major source of revenue for state and local governments.

The central government also continued to increase control over previously independent segments of civil society. The National Telecommunications Commission (Conatel) announced that it will take 240 private radio stations (154 FM and 86 AM) off the air and shift them into government hands. The Venezuelan Chamber of the Broadcast Industry estimated that the move will affect nearly 40 percent of Venezuela’s radio stations and described the decision as a “direct attack on the freedom of expression.” To date, several dozen stations have been taken off the air, and new requirements for government sponsored messaging and programming have been imposed on the private radio and cable television stations that remain.

The National Assembly passed several laws that were hotly contested by civil society and opposition groups, notably an education bill that critical groups charge will open the way for President Chavez’s government to indoctrinate children with socialist ideology. Under the bill, education would be based on the “Bolivarian Doctrine,” a term derived from the name of 19th-century independence hero Simon Bolivar and used by Chavez to describe his socialist political movement. The legislation would also give state-funded neighborhood-based assemblies a key role in the “administration, maintenance, evaluation, and supervision” of schools in their communities. The bill would broaden the government’s control over 8,000 private schools by forcing them to adopt curriculums used in the country’s 27,000 public schools and setting limits on the fees charged.

Increased Social Unrest – Throughout the year, opposition leaders, student groups, and other activists vocalized their discontent with the tightening of governmental control. In January, officers in riot gear scattered more than 2,000 students that were demonstrating against the proposed constitutional amendment. Tear gas, plastic bullets,

and water cannons were used to deter the protesters after they set out from a Caracas plaza. Over the summer, Caracas Mayor Antonio Ledezma conducted a hunger strike outside of the offices of the Organization of American States (OAS), demanding that the group address the government's actions undermining his ability to govern. In September, more than 150 Venezuelan students participated in a week-long hunger strike, demanding an investigation into alleged political persecution by Chavez's government. In response, representatives of the human rights agency of the OAS invited a student delegation to Washington.

International Diplomacy – On the international front, President Chavez continued his outreach to Iran, Russia, and the rest of his partners in the ALBA process (a model of economic integration established as an alternative to the free trade model), signing a number of agreements in order to strengthen ties between them. Last October, Chavez revealed an agreement with Iran to pursue a nuclear program, asserting that both countries have the right to develop nuclear energy.

At the Summit of the Americas in Trinidad in April, President Chavez expressed hopes to “reset” relations with the United States after nearly a decade of tensions between Caracas and Washington. In June, Venezuela and the United States announced that they will restore their ambassadors more than nine months after President Chavez expelled the U.S. envoy in his final diplomatic bout with the Bush administration. But Chavez signaled that he still has major differences with Washington, accusing the United States of having a hand in recent protests in Iran and playing a role in the recent military coup of Honduran President Manuel Zelaya.

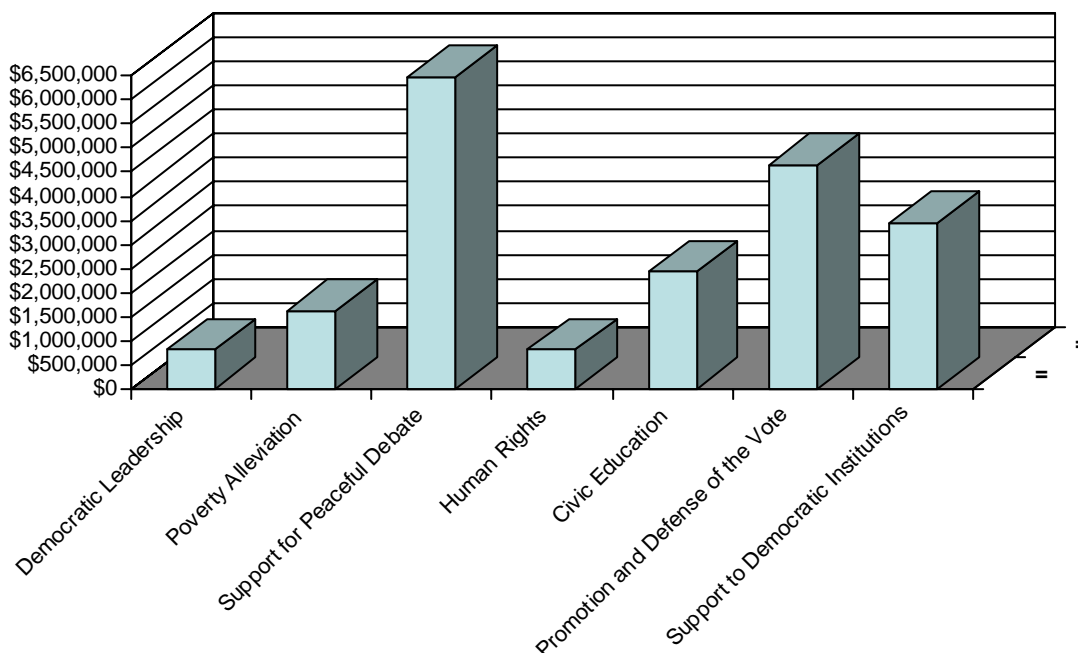
Following the coup in Honduras, the country's interim government ordered Venezuelan diplomats to leave the country, accusing Venezuela of meddling in its affairs and of threatening to use its armed forces against Honduras. Similarly, Venezuelan relations soured with Colombia; Chavez cut imports following accusations that Venezuela had provided arms to Colombian rebels and as U.S. armed forces increased their use of Colombian military bases.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Municipal Council and National Assembly elections are anticipated in 2009 and 2010. The election for mayor of Maracaibo, which is necessary because former mayor Manuel Rosales went into exile following allegations of corruption, and other local elections are slated for later in 2009. While it is unclear when the elections will take place, national elections often distract from other initiatives and will likely impact OTI activities.

GRANTS SUMMARY

Since August 2002, OTI, through its implementing partner, has funded 611 small-grant and technical assistance activities totaling \$20,229,691. Funding by sector breaks down as follows: democratic leadership (4%); poverty alleviation (8%); support for peaceful debate (32%); human rights (4%); civic education (12%); promotion and defense of the vote (23%); support to democratic institutions (17%).



PROGRAM APPRAISAL

The program has strived this year to take recent lessons learned and implement them going forward. Efforts have been made to focus debate on issues that are relevant to average Venezuelans and to work with willing partners in making government more responsive and accountable.

Reports and public activities by grantees were successful in diffusing information about areas critical to a functioning democracy, including free and fair elections, human rights, and other important social issues. These activities show the successful work of building up the capacity of civil society organizations to play a meaningful role in Venezuelan society.

The Venezuela program is like USAID programs in other countries in this hemisphere and around the world in that it seeks to strengthen democracy and its supporting institutions. The program in Venezuela is designed to strengthen civil society and political parties, the key components of a healthy democracy and the channels through which citizens often express their desires, needs, and concerns as well as find ways to collectively address them.

There continue to be threats against program counterparts, who fear for their well-being and ability to operate and help build a strong and independent civil society. Staff will continue to monitor these threats. Physical threats against human rights defenders have continued unabated throughout the quarter.

NEXT STEPS

OTI priorities for the next year include the following:

- Continue to implement recently signed agreements with local partners on citizen participation, democratic leadership, and enhanced information and peaceful debate;
- Continue to support human rights defenders as they improve their ability to research, report on, and present cases of human rights abuses; and
- Maintain responsiveness to constantly changing dynamics in Venezuela and provide needed support to Venezuelans struggling to maintain a strong, independent civil society.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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