

Which Way Venezuela? By Eric Farnsworth

Even as global democracy advocates and human rights observers are using the Olympic Winter Games in Sochi to call attention to the abuses of a Russian regime allegedly intolerant of opposition views, they have overlooked the deteriorating situation in Venezuela which is arguably more serious. Disgusted by what they see as a rapidly deteriorating economy, spiking crime, and a deeply polarized political environment, students went to the streets earlier this week to protest; they were met by police and government supporters and in the aftermath three lay dead and many more were injured.

Although government and opposition voices have both appealed for calm, additional protests are possible, especially in the run up to the one year anniversary of the death of Hugo Chavez on March 5. The government has called for its own counter-protests, and has taken steps to limit news reporting while issuing arrest warrants for opposition figures. At the same time, Venezuela's leader, Nicolas Maduro, has called opposition members "fascists," and a member of the ruling party in the National Assembly has called opposition leader Leopoldo Lopez a "cowardly assassin." Mass protests have brought down previous governments in Venezuela, and the current regime is clearly anxious that the situation not spin out of control.

Unfortunately, the government has no real answer to the protesters main concerns. It has thoroughly politicized the primary revenue producer, national energy company PDVSA, to the point where production is down even in a strong global energy market and prospects for turnaround are bleak. It has pursued a full scale assault on the other economic driver, the private sector, confiscating assets, arbitrarily determining prices, and restricting access to hard currency. Investment has dried up, production is off, and galloping inflation has obscured normal price signals skewing markets and creating severe shortages of basic goods. Even China—which has previously offered billions of dollars in loans tied to oil exports—is losing interest in throwing good money after bad, as shown by recent negotiations between Beijing and Caracas for additional economic support. In the meantime, statistics show that criminal activity is accelerating as the social fabric frays, a circumstance that became all too apparent at the beginning of this year with the murder of former Miss Venezuela, Monica Spear.

Is it any wonder that students in Venezuela see little hope for a productive future under current conditions and are willing to head to the streets in protest?

Rather than addressing their grievances, however, which are long-standing and increasingly urgent, the government has chosen to address the symptoms, and to do so in a manner that violates normal democratic practices. Opposition leaders have been targeted with threats and harassment, independent broadcasters have been forced off the air, and subsequent public protests have been banned. Little emphasis has been given at this point to calls for a transparent and impartial effort to bring to justice those who killed the protesters. Within this context, a useful role for the international community outside Venezuela would be to speak out with one voice to condemn anti-democratic actions and

to insist on policies consistent with the Inter-American Democratic Charter that Chavez signed on behalf of Venezuela in 2001.

The question now is what comes next, and which way will Venezuela go? Much of this depends on the opposition. Despite regime efforts to tamp down further protests, it is very possible that that opposition is now energized to the point where it is no longer willing to accept the path on which Venezuela has been headed for 15 years. If so, and if the protest movement expands to the broader population, the regime may be tempted to react strongly. This would be a tragedy, with no winners. Alternatively, the regime could reverse course in an attempt to address popular concerns, but this seems unlikely. Undoubtedly, the hope of the government is that protests now wane, and the wider world continues to overlook Venezuela. If it can maintain control without violating democratic principles further, so much the better, but that is not likely the government's overriding concern at the moment. One year after Chavez' death, Venezuela's direction remains very much undetermined.