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News

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Venezuelan assembly acts to curb outside funds

Venezuela's National Assembly is discussing a bill that would allow the government to ban international funding of nongovernmental organizations.

BY PHIL GUNSON
Special to The Miami Herald

CARACAS - A bill now before the Venezuelan National Assembly has caused concern among human rights organizations and foreign diplomats that leftist President Hugo Chávez is trying to place restrictions on nongovernmental groups.

The draft International Co-operation Law, which has already received initial approval, would allow the government to forbid nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to receive funds from abroad if their activities are deemed unacceptable.

Pro-Chávez legislators have complained that many NGOs use the facade of human rights or development work to disguise what are essentially anti-government activities. They dismissed a letter from 72 NGOs criticizing the proposed law.

"These are the same organizations that backed the coup [against Chávez in April 2002]," Congressman Carlos Ezcarrá of the president's Fifth Republic Movement (known as the MVR) told the Assembly during the debate on the bill.

"Of course we are going to control the NGOs," said another MVR legislator, Iris Varela, "because that's what the people are demanding."

Saúl Ortega, who chairs the legislature's foreign affairs commission, described concerns about the bill as "political fantasies." He told The Miami Herald that "in the majority of countries, among them the U.S.A., this type of fund transfer is regulated."

He pointed out that the bill is also designed to regulate the burgeoning overseas donations the Chávez government is making.

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Marino Alvarado, who heads the long-established Venezuelan human-rights group Provea, said no one questioned the right of the state to establish regulations, but that nonprofit organizations already operated within a tight regulatory framework.

"Our great fear," said Alvarado, "is that regulations of this type will be applied in a biased way that discriminates against groups that are critical of the government."

Human rights organizations complain that many civil registry offices already refuse applications from new NGOs that could be critical of the government, even when their papers are in order. Alvarado says the cost of legal registration -- more than \$400 -- is also prohibitive for many groups.

A foreign diplomat who asked not to be named because she was not authorized to comment publicly said there was "deep concern" over the bill among governments that provide funds to nongovernmental organizations in Venezuela.

"We've compared this bill with legislation in force in Russia, Zimbabwe and Uzbekistan," she said, adding that it most closely resembled that in Uzbekistan, which was the most restrictive of the three.

Since Chávez first took office in 1999, his government has adopted a hostile attitude toward NGOs outside its direct control or influence.

In 2000, the Supreme Court ruled that organizations receiving funds from abroad could not participate in the selection of senior officials whose appointments -- under the 1999 constitution -- are partly in the hands of the so-called "civil society" groups such as NGOs.

Leaders of Súmate, which helped arrange a failed recall vote against Chávez in 2004, are on trial for allegedly seeking to destroy Venezuela's system of government after receiving grants from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a bipartisan body funded by the U.S. Congress.

The Venezuelan government regards NED as merely a front for the Central Intelligence Agency and says the funds -- which were granted for an electoral education course -- were intended by the Bush administration to further its alleged aim of overthrowing Chávez.

LITTLE DIALOGUE

Alvarado, whose Provea group does not receive U.S. funds but defends the right of Súmate to do so, complains that the government turns a deaf ear to human rights groups. "There has been practically no dialogue," he says.

The view is shared by other groups, which point out the total lack of discussion on the new bill, despite constitutional provisions requiring citizen consultations over legislative initiatives. The text of the bill is not available on the National Assembly's website.

DEBATE DEFERRED

Legislator Ortega says it is normal that public debate over the bill should not take place

and government, and Chavez has at times presented NGOs as tools of foreign intervention.

But several analysts agreed the law is in part a response to U.S. support for the opposition-affiliated electoral group Sumate, which was crucial in helping Chavez adversaries convoke a recall referendum on Chavez' rule in 2004.

Sumate accepted \$31,000 from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a U.S. organization founded in 1983 that receives most of its funding from the U.S. government, for electoral education workshops that the government said were actually used for political campaigning. This prompted state prosecutors to charge Sumate with treason, which critics -- including the U.S. State Department -- have called political persecution.

Responding to an inquiry about U.S. support for Venezuelan NGOs, the State Department said in a statement that "support for civil society in Venezuela is no different from anywhere else in the world."

TENSIONS WITH U.S.

However, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice earlier this year said the international community needs to be "more active in supporting and defending the Venezuelan people" in response to Chavez' "particular brand of Latin American populism that has taken democratic governments down the drain before."

Chavez accuses the United States of plotting to invade Venezuela, and he charges some U.S. financing went to organizations involved in the 2002 coup that toppled him briefly with tacit White House approval.

A recent NED report entitled "Backlash Against Democracy Assistance" says Venezuela is not the only nation working to curb foreign aid. The report cites Venezuela, China and Russia among many nations using "new restrictive measures of a legal and extra-legal nature, specifically directed against democracy promotion groups."

For Riordan Roett, director of the Latin American Studies program at Johns Hopkins University, the International Cooperation Law represents "a slight ratcheting up of tensions between Caracas and Washington."

"If the United States is going to use democracy assistance as a major policy vehicle, I would expect the Venezuelan reaction would be to try to stop it," he said.