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Tuesday, June 15, 2010

Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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● (1310)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): I call this meeting to order.

We'll deal with a couple of items of committee business before going to our witness.

[*Translation*]

Welcome to the 23rd meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today is June 15, 2010.

Before discussing today's topic on human rights in Venezuela, and hearing from our witness,

[*English*]

I thought it would be appropriate to remind members of an organizational matter. We will be having a special meeting tomorrow from noon to 2 p.m. It will be taking place at 131 Queen Street in Room 8-53, which I assume means it's on the eighth floor.

Do we have to go through security? Will it slow us down, or if people bring their MP passes will they go through?

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Julie Lalande Prud'homme): MPs don't need to go through security.

The Chair: But it is a little ways from the Hill, so you might want to build in some time to make sure you get there on time.

We have three items on the agenda. We're dealing with the Iran report, and Mr. Dorion has several motions. We're dealing with the universal periodic review. Just to give you time to think about this for tomorrow, I propose we deal with those things in that order and leave a full hour for dealing with Mr. Dorion's motions, based upon the fact that they have not necessarily been dealt with quickly. I think at least an hour is appropriate.

It remains to be seen whether we'll be having a meeting on Thursday. At the end of our meeting tomorrow we should leave enough time to discuss whether we want to have a meeting on Thursday.

So those are the organizational matters.

Mr. Rochlin, has your paper come back to you yet?

Dr. James Rochlin (Professor, Political Sciences, University of British Columbia): It has indeed.

The Chair: All right. In that case, we are very glad to have with us today from York University...or from UBC. It says York University on your paper, but it says UBC on your card.

Dr. James Rochlin: I am from UBC.

The Chair: All right. From UBC we have Professor James Rochlin, who is a professor of political science. He re-routed himself on the way back from South America to stop in Ottawa on his way to British Columbia.

We thank you very much. We tried to have good weather for you. We will now turn the floor over to you for your presentation.

Dr. James Rochlin: Thank you very much, Mr. Reid. I'm grateful and honoured to be here today.

I'll speak for approximately 15 minutes, no more, giving a brief schematic on Venezuelan human rights, and perhaps we can talk about some of the points I make afterwards, in terms of discussion.

Regarding my own background, I've researched in Latin America since 1983. I've written four books in the areas of Latin American security and politics, including my first book, *Discovering the Americas*, which is a history of Canadian foreign policy to Latin America up to the NAFTA era.

I've just come back from a six-week trip to Latin America, to Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. In Venezuela I interviewed human rights groups, academics, business groups, and government officials from various ideological perspectives.

My presentation today is in four brief parts. First, I'll talk about the context from which we should view Venezuelan human rights. I'll then turn to a discussion of the issues, what I view as the positive aspects, the negative aspects, and some of the more ambiguous matters associated with human rights in Venezuela. I'll turn then to a question of points of reference—that is, to what should we compare Venezuelan human rights? Finally, and I think very importantly, is the question of what Canada can do vis-à-vis Venezuelan human rights.

Regarding the context, you probably already know, because I know there have been other speakers prior to me, that whenever we're discussing Venezuelan politics or human rights, the discussion is highly polarized. It is highly polarized within Venezuela and highly polarized outside of Venezuela. Within Venezuela, you have a situation where the recently poor, who benefit from Chávez's economic policies, strongly support him, whereas the middle class, the upper class, or those who might be friendly to local or international business find his policies very antithetical to their own interests.

Outside of Venezuela, I think the discussion on Venezuela is equally polarized from those who represent maybe right-wing forces in the United States, who say highly negative things about Chávez without any mention of positive accomplishments. I think that view tends to dominate in the international, North American, and the western European press.

There's another pole, and that would be the left-wing academics and left-wing NGOs who romanticize Chávez. For them, all the problems of Venezuela have to do with what they call U.S. imperialism. What I would suggest to you is that probably the most prudent path would be somewhere in between those two poles, and not to fall to either extreme but to realize what are the positive accomplishments and what are the negative aspects, in terms of human rights.

I'll begin with some of the positive aspects, then turn to some of the negative aspects and then maybe a discussion of some ambiguous questions. I'll talk about these really in sort of headlines that we might be able to develop more fully afterwards.

When we're looking at positive aspects of human rights in Venezuela, the chief accomplishments have been made in the area of social and economic development, particularly a redistribution of income. Based on ECLAC statistics, President Chávez over the last 11 years has reduced poverty by 34%, between 1999 and 2009. When we look at another measure of poverty reduction and social development, the United Nations Human Development Index, which ranks countries from the very best at number one down to somewhere in the 180s—and I would say it is a more accurate measure—Venezuela ranked at number 58 last year, in 2009. Comparatively, that puts it ahead of Brazil at 75, ahead of Colombia at a rank of 77, ahead of Peru at a rank of 78, and ahead of Ecuador at a rank of 80. Venezuela's human development index has improved from 2005 to 2009. In 2005 it was ranked 75, and in 2009 it was ranked 58.

● (1315)

More specifically, there is greater access for education in Venezuela at all levels, from grammar school to university. There is greater access to medical attention; there have been subsidies for housing, for food. There has been limited land redistribution. I don't think we should underestimate the value of those accomplishments. And I would suggest to you that nobody in my generation, and I'm in my mid-50s, has done more to help the poor than Chavez has. At the same time, there are distinct problems with Venezuelan human rights. A trinity of those, or a related threesome of those, would include impunity. And no matter who you speak with in Venezuela, whether they be NGOs, academics, or people on the street, even the government, impunity for crime seems to be a huge and growing issue. Crimes happen or problems happen and they just don't get investigated or followed up.

In terms of crime, violent crime particularly has risen over the Chavez government. As you may know, Caracas is now rated as the second most violent city in Latin America, second only to Ciudad Juárez—that's the border city with Mexico and the United States, which is on the front line of narco wars.

Related to crime and impunity is the third problem of corruption. There's been a major report on Venezuelan corruption by the Organization of American States in which the government has participated, and again this is something that affects people of all social classes, whether you're dealing with a bureaucracy, a judiciary, the police, and so on.

Another clearly negative aspect in Venezuelan human rights is deteriorating conditions for the prison population, which has doubled over the last 11 years, even though crime has soared.

When we turn to the more nuanced aspects of human rights in Venezuela, that is where there are some debates. One of these would include freedom of expression. When we look at complaints regarding freedom of expression, these tend to be concentrated specifically in terms of the electronic media, television and radio, which is where the masses get their information. Complaints tend not to be aimed at the print media. The fact is that six TV stations and 32 radio stations have been closed by the Chavez government over the last two years. Another fact is that a series of journalists have been attacked with impunity by unknown assailants.

Where is the debate here, then? When we look at what the perspective is from NGOs who represent these journalists and say the TV stations have been closed down, they will tell you there's a problem with freedom of expression, with free speech, and there is a growing totalitarianism in the government that's trying to limit free speech. When you ask the government what the problem is, they will tell you these stations have been closed down because they are spreading subversive messages and trying to foment armed activity against the democratically elected government, that this is not a matter of free expression, this is a matter of terrorism, of subversion, of treason. We can develop that debate later.

There has also been a trend toward a persecution of the political opponents of the government. This would include a recent case, the Azocar case, in which an opponent of Chavez has been forbidden by corruption to run. In a similar case, the former governor of Zulia, a major state in Venezuela where Maracaibo is located, has been charged with corruption and was pressured to flee the country. My perspective is that probably those people are guilty of corruption; however, there's a double standard. That is, supporters of the Chavez government are not charged with corruption and probably many of them are as guilty as his opposition. So it has been easy for him to single out opponents based on corruption, but there is a double standard.

● (1320)

Another nuanced problem with regard to human rights would be the style of democracy in Venezuela. In Canada, in northern developed countries, we're used to a style of democracy that's based on checks and balances. The Venezuelan model and the model in other ALBA countries tends to be a model that's based more on referendum. What you get in this kind of situation, I would suggest, although it's democratic enough in terms of vote per vote, is a tyranny of the majority. That is, the same majority dominates in every election, and the minority is constantly shut out.

When we look at who our minorities are or at the protection of minority rights in a country like Canada, we might be looking at people of colour, ethnic groups, religious minorities, people with alternative sexual orientations, and so forth. When we look at the Venezuelan context, it's important to understand that what's going on is class warfare. That perspective, class analysis, is not one that we typically use in Canada, but I would suggest to you that unless you understand that, you're not going to understand what's going on in Venezuela. When we look at this tyranny of the majority, what we're seeing is that the majority population of the poor, or those who have benefited from Chávez's policies, dominate, while the middle class, the wealthy, and business interests find very little space for expression of their interests, and this seems to be perpetuated.

Finally, with regard to nuanced interests, I began by mentioning some of the positive aspects of the Chávez government in terms of social and economic achievements. What we've seen in the last two years have been errors or mistakes committed by the Chávez government that have clawed back some of those achievements or that are creating serious economic problems. As you may know, the economy of Venezuela declined by 5.9% in the first trimester of this year, witnessing the worst and most serious recession of any South American country at the moment.

Highly socialistic policies work in the oil sector. There's an 86% government take in the oil sector; that is, when you add up all the taxes in the program, it's an 86% government take in the oil sector. The government can get away with that because oil is such a precious commodity. When you try similar ideological perspectives in the agricultural or manufacturing sectors, they don't work. When you try those policies in the agricultural sector, farmers stop producing, and the result that's being witnessed now in Venezuela is constant shortages of food products because of those policies. Similarly, when you try those policies in the manufacturing sector, plants close down. They move instead to, say, Colombia, which has a lower tax system. What I'm suggesting, then, is that the kinds of policies that work in the oil sector do not work in the other sectors. They have created food shortages; they have also created higher unemployment, which has exacerbated this economic situation.

Finally, there is an attempt by the government to control the exchange rate of the country, which I think by any measure has not worked. The official exchange rate is 4.3%; I believe the black market is now about twice that, so you have a parallel market that is viewed as the real economy. When that occurs, and when the government tries to catch up to it, one of the results is high inflation. Venezuela is now witnessing one of the highest inflation rates in Latin America; it is estimated to be at about 30% if it keeps up for the rest of the year, and some place it higher. High inflation affects the poor the most, so while there are many achievements, some of the policies, particularly over the last year, seem to be deteriorating.

I'll move to another major point: what is the point of reference? When we compare any South American or Latin American country to Canada, it's going to come up short. What would be the natural point of reference with which to compare Venezuela? The natural one would be its next-door neighbour. It is one that has a similar geography, a similar size, a similar population, and a similar GDP. It's the country that Canada passed a free trade agreement with in the House of Commons yesterday: Colombia.

Anybody will tell you that when you look at Colombian human rights, on the positive side, the situation is improving. The situation in Colombia is more secure than it's ever been, and I've been working in Colombia since 1987. At the same time, the human rights situation in Colombia is absolutely horrendous. There were 286,000 people forcibly displaced last year, 21 union members were assassinated last year, and 90% of the paramilitaries in Colombia who have surrenders have not been investigated. There have been all kinds of scandals, and I could go on with that.

● (1325)

When we look at Venezuelan human rights and we're looking at it in context, I think the situation in Colombia, objectively, is far worse.

Fourth and finally, what can Canada do? As I mentioned, I wrote a book and began my career looking at Canadian foreign policy in Latin America, and what I noticed is that there's been an attempt by Canada historically to participate in conflict resolution. Dating from the Cuban revolution of 1959 to the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua in 1979–89, we saw the Liberals and the Conservatives, under the Trudeau, Clark, and Mulroney governments, successfully resolve conflict and act as a mediator. When we're looking in South America today, one of the things we observe is a huge arms race to the tune of almost $10 billion on the part of Colombia and Venezuela, each, and an entrenchment of polarization and animosity in the region.

I would strongly suggest and urge Canadian foreign policy to orient itself toward conflict resolution rather than entrenchment of polarization.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you for a very interesting presentation, Professor.

We'll go to questions now. We normally go in the order of Liberals, followed by Bloc, followed by the New Democrats, and finally the Conservative Party. Given the amount of time we have left, we can get away with eight-minute rounds, so we'll begin with the Liberals.

Is it Professor Cotler or Mr. Silva?

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): We're splitting the time, actually. I'll just be aware that we only have eight minutes for questions and answers, and I'll give half my time to Professor Cotler.

First of all, I want to thank you very much for coming forward. It was very interesting to hear you. I thought your remarks were overall very intelligent, very thoughtful, and very balanced, so I thank you very much for that testimony.

I just want to touch base on this issue. You said there is increasing violence going on in Venezuela, particularly crime. Has that to do with an influx of drugs? What is the situation happening there on the ground? Maybe you can tell us.

Also, can you relate that to issues of violence toward religious minorities—the Jewish community, for example? Why are they being targeted?

If you can answer me, that would be great, and then I'll turn it over to Professor Cotler afterwards.

Dr. James Rochlin: Thank you for those important questions.

It is very much a conundrum with crime, because what one would expect with these kinds of social programs, with this kind of reduction in poverty, is exactly the opposite. We would expect less crime.

What we're noticing is that crimes are concentrated in the poor barrios. It's the poor who are killing themselves, and most of these violent crimes occur on Friday and Saturday nights and seem to be maybe alcohol-related, partying-related, or related to territorial wars among gangs. I can't explain it more than that.

Mr. Mario Silva: Drugs are not the issue.

Dr. James Rochlin: There is no evidence linking the use of drugs to the crime, although it's probably true that there's a growing drug problem in much of the world, as even there is in my small city of Kelowna. This may be related, but there is no evidence to support that.

With regard to the Jewish community or anti-Semitism, there have been cases in the last couple of years where synagogues have been raided and so forth. The government claims it has had no role in this and that it has investigated.

The government has been very harsh on aspects of Israeli foreign policy, which is distinct from anti-Semitism but some have drawn a connection between the two. There is, I'm telling you, no evidence linking the government to anti-Semitism but some have drawn the link based on the violence happening at synagogues and a policy on the part of the government that is highly critical of Israel.

Mr. Mario Silva: Thank you.

Professor Cotler.

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): We've had witness testimony that was critical of the justice system. I don't only mean the pattern of crime and impunity or corruption but critical of the justice system in a more fundamental sense, such as intimidation of lawyers, judges, and witnesses—indeed the recent jailing of a lawyer. The Law Society of Upper Canada has recently come out with a statement with regard to the imprisonment of Justice Afiuni. Could you address the issue of the justice system, apart from the crime aspect?

● (1330)

Dr. James Rochlin: Right. There have been statements of people being attacked by unknown assailants, not only in the justice system but of opponents more generally. I talked to a number of NGOs who are clear that their phones are being tapped. And there are other kinds of what I would call intimidation policies.

I guess that would be my response to it. Probably intimidation is happening, and the way it happens is in a way that's hard to document, such as when you are attacked by an unknown assailant, or you can hear voices on the line, or when you're being hassled for perhaps ties to corruption, which may or may not exist, in an unfair kind of way.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: What about imprisonment of human rights lawyers or judges who may have taken independent-like decisions?

Dr. James Rochlin: Yes, I know the case you're referring to, the jailing of a particular lawyer who let out a person who was put into prison before. The government views this as a breach of judiciary process. Others view it as intimidation.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Okay.

The Chair: Are there any further questions? You still have some time left.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Okay, what's your judgment?

Dr. James Rochlin: I think the government is trying to intimidate its opponents, and I see that across the board in some very subtle ways. What I hear is that it's really the lower-profile cases that are even stronger, that the government knows that in dealing with a high-profile lawyer there may have to be some legalistic manner where they actually have some evidence, but with the maybe lower-level cases they can get away with it more.

If I could expand that theme more broadly for just 60 seconds, because I know we're limited, I think that the problem for the Chavez government is not the opposition or opposition judiciaries. It may be growing opposition within his own party, the PSUV. Over the last year, the vice-president of the PSUV resigned in protest. Another major supporter of the PSUV, the governor of Lara, resigned, suggesting that Chavez is a megalomaniac, that he wants to concentrate power in himself, that it's more about himself than the revolution, that there's not enough internal debate. So politically, I think we're not only talking about opposition members who are becoming dissatisfied, but about people within his own party, and I think that would be a serious concern.

If I could take another couple of seconds, there's a growing group of people I hear who find themselves alienated not only by government policies but also by opposition policies. That is, so far the opposition has appealed largely to the upper class and the middle class, but has not yet appealed to the masses of people who are poor or recently poor. There's a group among them who are tired of 11 years of the same guy as president and other abuses, for some of the reasons we've discussed, but still don't feel like they can relate to the opposition parties. They're a group called the Ni, which means neither. They have not yet been organized and do not have a leader. I would suggest that in the future that would be an important opposition, in addition to problems within the government's own party.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Dorion, you have the floor.

Mr. Jean Dorion (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, BQ): Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Rochlin. You met with a wide range of groups in Venezuela. Could you list some?

● (1335)

[*English*]

Dr. James Rochlin: Yes, I certainly can.

I met with a journalistic group called Public Space, which was supportive of the view that freedom of expression is being curtailed. I met with a group called PROVEA, which looks at prison responses. I met with a human rights organization that is viewed as the most balanced in Venezuela. I don't have the name of it before me, but I can send that to you. I met with academics Manuel Manrique, Steve Ellner, and others. I met with the second in charge of PDVSA, Venezuela's oil company, the fourth-largest oil company in the world, regarding his view of human rights and journalistic sources.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean Dorion: Sorry, but could you also repeat the United Nations data on the quality of life index, and its progress since 1999?

[*English*]

Dr. James Rochlin: The human development index, yes. One of the ways the United Nations measures social development and human rights, and I think it's generally considered the best index, is called the HDI, the human development index. It ranks countries every year based on a number of considerations: on access to health, access to education, access to food, division of wealth, or the Gini coefficient in the country—across the board, human rights. So it's sort of an amalgamation of a number of indicators. Venezuela in 2009 ranked at number 58. Comparatively, Brazil ranked at 75, Colombia at 77, Peru at 78, Ecuador at 80. So what we find on the human development index is that Venezuela has done very well. Under the Chavez government, there's been a huge access—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean Dorion: Is there a point of comparison in the past? Can we also compare it with the past? Do we have the index for another date?

[*English*]

Dr. James Rochlin: Yes. Well, when we look at the number recently, from say 2005, Venezuela ranked at number 75, and now has advanced to number 58.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean Dorion: Thank you.

As to the report of the Organization of American States and the participation of the government, did the government really participate in it? It is the report on corruption in the government—I assume the government participated.

To what extent did the government participate in that study and what was its interest in doing so?

[*English*]

Dr. James Rochlin: The Organization of American States begins by thanking the Chavez government for full participation and help regarding their investigation of the corruption report. Hugo Chavez has acknowledged that corruption is a problem and is trying to clean it up. I think it's just a very realistic kind of policy that the government loses support if corruption exists. It knows corruption exists; it's trying to work with the situation.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean Dorion: You talked about the synagogue incidents. Were there a number of them or just one? Actually, last week, someone came to talk to us about the desecration of one synagogue and said nothing about other cases. Were there a number of cases or just one?

● (1340)

[*English*]

Dr. James Rochlin: To my knowledge, there's only been one publicized case, and that was reported within the last couple of years.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean Dorion: It was about a year and a half ago.

Are there other religious groups that have problems with the government? How is the relationship with the Catholic church, for example?

[*English*]

Dr. James Rochlin: The government has taken a very critical policy toward the official positions of the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church officially, not Catholic people, but the political position of the church itself, has been highly critical of the government. That's typically what we have seen over the years in Latin America. The Catholic Church has been critical of left-leaning governments.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean Dorion: As I understand it, the opposition currently has no representation in parliament because it boycotted the last elections.

Is it your impression that it will do that again? I feel it thinks it was a mistake. Will there be another boycott of the next elections? And when will they be held?

[*English*]

Dr. James Rochlin: The opposition is participating in the upcoming September legislative election. They have already fielded candidates in the primaries and they recognize their failure to participate in past elections as a very serious error.

What we're witnessing now is that the opposition was concentrated in one party, *Acción Democrática*. Now, because of the severe political mistakes made by that party, other parties are forming in opposition. They don't want to be associated with those mistakes.

The weakness of the opposition parties remains that you have to get the support of the barrios to win in Venezuela. You have to get the support of the poor. It's not enough just to represent the interests of the relatively small wealthy class and the middle class. So far, those opposition parties—one of them is called *Primero Justicia*—have been unable to reach out toward the poor or the formerly poor.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean Dorion: May I continue?

The Chair: Yes, you have one minute left.

Mr. Jean Dorion: Could you expand on Cuba's role and presence in Venezuela?

[*English*]

Dr. James Rochlin: The Cuban presence in Venezuela is highly positive. When we're looking at the aspect of health care, there are approximately 20,000 to 30,000 Cuban paramedics or doctors there, which has had a huge impact on support for President Chavez.

We're talking about people in the countryside who may not have any access at all to doctors and so forth and now have access to a doctor. I've talked to families who would have lost children before, who are not losing children now because they have the visitation of a doctor. There is also a program where 15,000 Venezuelan medical students attend medical school each year in Cuba and are coming back. The first crop just came back last year.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean Dorion: Could you repeat the number? Is it 50,000?

[*English*]

Dr. James Rochlin: Fifteen thousand.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean Dorion: Okay, you said 15,000.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Merci.

Mr. Marston, go ahead, please.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Welcome. We're very pleased to have you here. Your report sounds to me like a very balanced testimony.

I don't want to in any way minimize the attack on the temple, because it certainly had its own significance, but to put that in a relative context, in Hamilton three days after 9/11 we had the fire bombing of a Hindu Samaj, and clearly that was a case of Islamophobia misdirected to the wrong place.

We've had significant testimony here about the fact that the day this attack took place in Venezuela there were certain sayings written on the wall, and later on it was claimed that Chavez used those exact same words in a speech. Are you aware of that?

● (1345)

Dr. James Rochlin: I regret I'm not aware of that case.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Okay.

We've had a variety of testimony, and it's pretty well exactly what you're saying. We've had people come here begging us, saying that this constitution is hugely effective, it has engaged the citizenry, they actually carry the constitution with them, and there are conversations.

On the other hand, we've had testimony regarding the closing of the TV stations and radio. The television station was quoted as being the leader of the main resistance and opposition to him, that it wasn't simply good journalism but that it was financially backed and behind the scenes. What would your comment be on that?

Dr. James Rochlin: Let me give you some facts. We're talking about Globovision. That's the TV station owned by Mr. Zuloaga, who was arrested briefly over the weekend and who claims he is a victim of free speech.

In a major journalists' conference in Aruba in March, Mr. Zuloaga said publicly—and it was recorded—that he had wished the 2002 coup against Chavez had succeeded.

Look at these radio stations or TV stations that have been closed down—for example, RCTV, which became the mouthpiece for the coup in 2002. One way to imagine this would be to imagine there was a military coup supported by a foreign government X in Canada and imagine that the CBC became the mouthpiece for the coup-makers. Is that free speech or is that subversion?

Mr. Wayne Marston: Well, that was exactly what I was looking for, the fact that it's subversion.

You mentioned that people were talking about their phones being wiretapped. As a little bit of an aside here, I used to work for a telephone company. You do not hear a wiretap, period.

Dr. James Rochlin: Right.

Mr. Wayne Marston: If they're hearing voices, they've got a faulty cable.

Dr. James Rochlin: To build on that, though, I honestly believe there is a difference between free speech and subversion. I've given you cases where there are. But there are scores of cases where journalists have been attacked by unknown assailants. There are a lot of these cases.

Mr. Wayne Marston: That's where I was going next.

We were told that the army is close to the people, but that the police is where the main flow of the corruption is and where the hoodlums are. In fact, some people consider the attack on the synagogue to probably have been by the police themselves. But there's a disconnect between the government and the police, and it's the police who are functioning with impunity.

Would you see the situation as similar to that?

Dr. James Rochlin: That's a hypothetical case, and I think in any situation we could find loose cannons, where people take things into their own hands. There have certainly been enough of those cases that I personally believe there is some kind of intimidation happening.

If I could just build on what I was saying once more, in looking at some of the cases where reporters were being hassled or the 32 radio stations were shut down, I pressed the gentleman about this, the one who was a representative of Public Space and a defender of free speech. I pressed him if there were a reason these people were being told they were fired or whatever, and he told me that often in Venezuela journalists are poorly trained. They may get the story wrong, they may not have the facts, and they may say something highly damaging to the government with no factual basis whatsoever. So there are a lot of complications and nuances here.

Mr. Wayne Marston: I want to go back to the anti-Semitism for a moment. You seemed to be careful in how you talked about Mr. Chavez and how he is aggressive towards Israel. There's no doubt about that.

Dr. James Rochlin: He's critical of Israeli foreign policy.

Mr. Wayne Marston: We've had witness testimony here that there are American bases surrounding this country, that he feels under pressure, and thus he's cooperating with Cuba—and Iran as well. But if you come back to what you've told us about the Cuban paramedics being in the country—I think you said 30,000 were in the country—I think that would align nearly anybody out of a sense of desperation for their fellow people, if they could get that kind of support. But I am concerned about the stories we heard about American influence. Have you heard anybody imply or suggest that the CIA is involved?

● (1350)

Dr. James Rochlin: Involved in what?

Mr. Wayne Marston: Involved in any attempts to bring down this government, or set the stage for that.

Dr. James Rochlin: I interviewed two military strategists, two highly respected professors who were critical of Chavez. I asked them, do you think the United States was involved in the 2002 coup? The answer was absolutely yes; they were off the coast with intelligence and they co-directed the situation.

When you listen to interviews with Chavez about who his captors were in 2002, he claims they were American. He told Larry King this. That's his claim, and that's the claim of these professors.

What impressed, albeit maybe not startled, me about the answer I'm relating to you is that had a supporter of the government claimed that the CIA or U.S. was involved, that's one thing, but when I hear critics of the government, very conservative people who are very respected, saying that, I think there's credibility to what they're saying.

The Chair: You have a minute left.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Is there a disconnect now between Mr. Chavez and the original revolution? I'm thinking of the megalomania you referred to a while ago. I'm just curious about that.

Dr. James Rochlin: I find it very important when the vice-president of the party declines and calls him a megalomaniac and says there isn't enough internal discussion and that this revolution has become more about him than the people. I'm concerned about that. I think when any government stays in power for 11 years, it gets a little rusty, and people are—

An hon. member: Or 13.

Dr. James Rochlin: Right. Forgive me.

I think some of these economic policies that were mentioned previously, the high inflation rate, the policies that don't work in the agricultural sector, the bureaucratic red tape.... I didn't have time to go into those, but although there's more access to health care and social programs, there's just a lot of red tape.

I talked to one woman who was working. She said she was trying to decide whether it would be worthwhile to continue working, because she wasn't making that much versus what she would get on a subsidy for not working. If she didn't work, she would spend her days standing in line for subsidized food. There's huge red tape.

Personally, I think there's a group of people who want to see somebody come up the middle, somebody who has a heart for the poor, somebody who doesn't ignore the voice of the majority population but somebody who may not be such an ideologue. I think that coup in 2002 really radicalized Chavez, and it's understandable. It's understandable, yet it comes back to kind of shoot him in the foot.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

For the next round we go to the Conservatives. Are you starting, Mr. Sweet?

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): I'll be brief, Mr. Chair, and then I'll give the rest of my time to Mr. Hiebert.

Thank you, Doctor, for your testimony and also for all the good work you've been doing. You've been studying in the south for almost 30 years now.

You did make the comment that two people who were critical of the government mentioned the U.S. intervention in this. It seems it's convenient for leaders to create an enemy and distract people from problems.

On that note, the other enemy that was mentioned in some other testimony was Colombia. We also had a witness from a very credible NGO who said that's kind of ridiculous, because many Venezuelans were originally Colombians who migrated. Is that true?

Dr. James Rochlin: It is true. What's true is that Colombia and Venezuela depend on each other economically. If you go to the border region of Venezuela and Colombia, you will see more clandestine trade than you can shake a stick at. You see food coming over clandestinely from Colombia. You see cheap gasoline. Gasoline is 15 cents a gallon in Venezuela coming over the border. So yes, the people relate. It's convenient for both the Colombian and Venezuelan presidents to manufacture an external enemy. It's the classic scheme in political science, because it defers your own problems to somebody else.

● (1355)

Mr. David Sweet: Lastly, I just wanted to give you an opportunity to clarify. You had talked about TV stations and radio stations possibly being complicit in the coup. This continues to go on. If it were one or two, but with six TV stations and 32 radio stations, we're now eight to nine years after the coup, and he continues to go on. He continues to intimidate anybody who chooses to report on the government. Of course you had mentioned that some of the people inside say he's actually trying to galvanize and aggregate all the power within his own grasp.

I just want to make sure that we're not dismissing the actions toward free media as something that continues to be justified.

Dr. James Rochlin: No, I think it's important to uphold free speech and to criticize breaches of free speech. I think we see a nuanced situation in which we do have highly placed elements of the TV and radio stations saying things that I would call subversive, or reporters saying highly irresponsible things. We also seem to have a policy of intimidation on the part of the government against opposition journalists. I would say it's kind of a mixed bag there. But we shouldn't forget that some of these stations that have been turned down.... I mentioned Globovisión, because that would be the big one. It would be like ABC or NBC in the States. So when you have the leader of that saying what I would call subversive things, that's questionable.

I would perhaps end with one more comment. The country with which we are on the verge of signing a free trade agreement—Colombia—has no opposition media whatsoever—print, radio, or TV. There are absolutely none. Any expert on Colombia will tell you that. I'm not saying that justifies what Chavez is doing, but if I were to compare the situation of free speech in Venezuela, it's far better and far more variegated than it is in Colombia.

The Chair: Russ.

Mr. Russ Hiebert (South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for your testimony. It's been very interesting, very informative, and I appreciate it.

You mentioned in your comments the HDI, the human development index. I note that the index is made up of primarily three things—life expectancy, literacy and education, and GDP.

Dr. James Rochlin: And health care, and redistribution of income: the Gini index.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Yes, GDP; so it's largely economic-based.

Dr. James Rochlin: No, it's also social-based: access to social health care, access to education. The Gini index is a measure of wealth division, not how big the economy is.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Right.

I guess the point I'm trying to make is that a primary indicator—it would be difficult to quantify—would be the status of human rights in a country if we're talking about economic well-being. It doesn't surprise me that Venezuela has done well, in terms of the price of oil, since 2005. So I just draw that to your attention as a possible explanation.

My colleagues have raised these issues independently. Collectively, putting it all together, what we've heard is that judges are being imprisoned. We had a witness here not that long ago who talked about the case of Judge Afiuni. I don't know if you've heard about her.

Dr. James Rochlin: Yes. That's one of the cases we just discussed.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: There's the Supreme Court justice basically saying that the court itself is not there to be a check on the executive. You talked about there not being proper checks and balances.

As well, we've talked about the attacks on synagogues in the Jewish community.

We've talked about political opponents being prevented from running, or being imprisoned.

We've talked about corruption in the public service. It hasn't been mentioned, but it was told to us that a minister of the government admitted that 15% to 20% of the crime in the country, including violent crime, is being committed by their own police force.

We've talked about the media being closed, about journalists being attacked and intimidated.

It hasn't been mentioned, but there is also legislation, apparently, that requires individuals to serve between six and thirty months in prison for insulting Mr. Chavez.

When you put that whole picture together, it's not a pretty one. It is, from my perspective, cause for concern.

Comparing it to Colombia might be one way of saying it's bad here, but it's worse there. Would that not be a fair assessment?

● (1400)

Dr. James Rochlin: No. I think your assessment is imbalanced, and I think that's part of the problem with Canadian foreign policy right now. Everything I heard you say was a composite of what's wrong with Venezuela. And it is; all those things you mentioned are true. But I didn't hear you mention anything positive. When I hear people mention only the negative and not the positive, I sense an imbalance that's dangerous and that entrenches polarization and that works against conflict resolution.

When I compare it to Colombia, I compare it only in a sense of context. I think these problems are problems. I think it's a problem that Chavez is a megalomaniac. I think there is a problem with all those things you mentioned, in part, but we have to look at it in the context of what are the positive achievements.

One of the things that very much worry me in terms of the broader picture of Canadian foreign policy is that we have been viewed, more and more, as an appendage of the United States without an independent policy. Instead of the kind of even-handed approach we have taken before that has allowed us to be a mediator of conflict with Cuba and that has allowed us to be a mediator of conflict with Central America, if we dig in our heels and entrench, and if we turn a blind eye to one country—to Colombia, say—and see only the negative in Venezuela, I would find that very dangerous.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Is there not a place for the government to point out problems like this? I mean, I hear your argument suggesting that we can't pick and choose, that we can't put the magnifying glass on one country and not on another. But I'm not persuaded yet that as a government we cannot focus on these issues as we find them. It's kind of like the story about the shells on the beach. You have to help the ones that you find.

Dr. James Rochlin: Sure. I think it's important that we criticize the negative aspects of Venezuelan human rights. At the same time, I think we would have far more influence if we went in and said something like this: We very much respect the positive things you've done. We very much respect the redistribution that's happening, and that you have these positive achievements. Yet we are very worried about these human rights abuses in terms of journalists, in terms of the judiciary, in terms of the tyranny of the majority, and in terms of all these other things.

I think when you come out swinging, with only a view that's negative, they're not going to listen. They're not going to listen to our ambassador, they're not going to give Canada meetings with Venezuela, and we are going to be perceived as part of the problem. That's why I try to emphasize an even-handed approach.

I think we should criticize—

Mr. Russ Hiebert: I do have one other question.

Do I have any time left?

The Chair: You're actually out of time. In fact, you're over by a minute and 45 seconds.

We're at the end here, but with the indulgence of the committee, I would like to ask a question.

Is it okay with everybody if I do that?

An hon. member: Go for it.

The Chair: Okay.

You gave the human development index for last year, I guess the most current year—

Dr. James Rochlin: For 2009.

The Chair: —and for 2005.

Mr. Chavez has been in power since 1998, I think.

I'm just curious: do you have the numbers going back earlier? Are they available?

Dr. James Rochlin: I don't, but you could easily look them up.

The Chair: Okay. I'll get our researchers to look them up.

Secondly, you mentioned the trend in Venezuela, but you didn't mention the trend, although you gave the numbers, for some surrounding countries, such as Peru and Ecuador. Have they been staying more or less in stasis in their areas, or have they been moving up as well—or perhaps down?

Dr. James Rochlin: One of the ways you measure inequity—it's probably the way most economists measure inequity—is with the Gini coefficient. The higher the Gini coefficient is, the worse the inequity is. Brazil used to occupy that position, as recently as 2005, I believe. With the policies of Lula, which have come up the middle in terms of being friendly to capital but also being concerned with social welfare, that has been brought down significantly.

The country that remains the highest—

The Chair: So the Gini coefficient has come down, which means that the ranking of Brazil has gone up. Would that be correct?

● (1405)

Dr. James Rochlin: That would be one measure of inequity that's gone up; although I didn't trace the history of what's gone on in Brazil, I suspect it has, based on Lula's policies.

Right now the country that occupies the highest Gini coefficient in South America, and I believe in Latin America, is Colombia—that has not changed—at around 0.59 or 0.60.

The Chair: Right. The number can only go between one and zero, is that correct?

Dr. James Rochlin: That's right.

The Chair: So one is perfect inequity, where one person owns everything, and zero is everybody's equal?

Dr. James Rochlin: Right. I think Canada ranks somewhere around 42 or 43.

The Chair: Okay.

This is an amalgam of different measures of development, ranging from the measures of social equity to access to health care and a whole range of other things. Do the UN statistics break those down and give rankings for countries in those individual components, or is it simply the composite that's done?

Dr. James Rochlin: You can look up in larger reports the percentages that have changed from one year to the next—the percentage of literacy, say, or Gini coefficients, and so forth.

The Chair: All right.

Thank you very much. You've given us a pile of work—which we'll now give to our researchers—so I very much appreciate that.

I very much appreciate everybody giving me the extra time to ask those questions.

Professor, I appreciate the fact that you were willing to take the time to come in and give us your presentation. I think everybody agrees that it was refreshing to have someone here who is not a partisan of one side or the other and who is really making an effort to have an objective overview. I very much appreciate that, so thank you.

Dr. James Rochlin: Thank you so much.

It's an honour to be here. Thank you for having me.

The Chair: All right.

We are adjourned.

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