



# STUDENT DEMONSTRATIONS IN VENEZUELA

Recent news sources have reported on a series of university student demonstrations in Venezuela in response to a set of constitutional reforms that will be subjected to a national referendum scheduled for December 2, 2007. The reports have made misleading claims about the student demonstrations and the government response to them. The reports also fail to recognize the steps the government has taken to expand access to university-level education for all Venezuelans.

## Recent Student Demonstrations in Venezuela

While there have been student demonstrations this year in Venezuela, the media has failed to report on the many accommodations made for students and their concerns.

The largest demonstrations, with estimated attendance of 6,000 university students (of the 200,000 in Caracas alone), have enjoyed the full protection of Venezuela's police forces. These protections are guaranteed under Article 68 of the 1999 Constitution, which protects the right of all Venezuelans to peaceably assemble. Unlike during past governments, when student demonstrations were regularly repressed by police forces, students linked to opposition political parties like Primero Justicia and Bandera Roja have recently been granted high-level meeting with government officials and institutions:

*This year alone,  
opposition  
university students  
have met with high  
government officials  
on six separate  
occasions*

On **June 5, 2007**, a group of students met with the president of Venezuela's National Tribunal of Justice, Luisa Estela Morales, to whom they presented a petition protesting the government's decision not to renew the broadcast license of a television station, RCTV.

On **June 6, 2007**, students met with Venezuela's Attorney General, Isaias Rodriguez, to discuss the RCTV case.

On **June 7, 2007**, a group of university students addressed a session of Venezuela's National Assembly, where they expressed their disagreement with the government over the RCTV case. Speaking

at the session, which was broadcast on national television, National Assembly President Cilia Flores stated, "Let us listen to the different viewpoints, the different tendencies. Then everyone can come up with their own conclusions."

On **November 1, 2007**, a group of students met with the directors of the National Electoral Council and presented a petition to delay a national referendum set for December 2 to the directors of Venezuela's National Electoral Council, the independent body that oversees elections.

On **November 7, 2007**, a group of 10 student representatives met with President Morales of the National Tribunal of Justice, to whom they presented a petition calling for the delay of a national referendum scheduled for December 2.

On **November 12, 2007**, Minister of Interior and Justice Pedro Carreño met with the presidents of 20 universities in Venezuela, to whom he restated the government's respect of university autonomy and the right of students to peaceably assemble.

These frequent meetings make clear that the government has been open to student demonstrators and their concerns, an accommodation rarely offered by governments in other countries.

## Media Coverage of the Demonstrations

Criticism of the government in response to student demonstrations has been caused by distorted media coverage. This is not the first time this has happened – during the events that led to the coup of April 2002, the media falsely circulated news claiming that supporters of President Chavez had violently attacked opposition demonstrators. This was proven to have been false.

Regarding the constitutional reforms, opposition student protests in various cities have received significantly more media coverage than pro-reform protests, giving the impression that Venezuela's students are overwhelmingly opposed to the changes. The media has thus far minimized or outright



ignored demonstrations by students in favor of the reforms. Similarly, legitimate police actions against illegal activity by opposition protestors have been portrayed as “repression” and some confusing events had been described as a product of violence caused by supporters of the government. As occurred during the April 2002 coup, supporters of the government are described in negative terms while supporters of the opposition are regularly described as “peaceful” and “democratic.”

One of the incidents that has received the most media coverage occurred on November 7, as students returned to the campus of the Central University of Venezuela after a march to the headquarters of the National Tribunal of Justice. As students later testified in the National Assembly, a group of opposition students stormed the School of Social Work – whose students had peacefully advocated in favor of the constitutional reforms – and set the building on fire with people inside.

After the building was set on fire, police forces were alerted, but, in keeping with Article 7 of the Law of Universities, did not enter the campus of the university. (Article 7 allows them to enter only when approved by the university president.) University employees, members of Civil Protection groups and government supporters arrived to evacuate the building, thus preventing serious injuries or death to the students inside. In the midst of the events, opposition student leaders claimed on live television that they were being attacked by people aligned with the government. Opposition students showed pictures of armed men, failing to mention that these individuals were helping evacuate the School of Social Work to allow the trapped students to safely escape. Recent videos from bystanders and local media outlets have shown the violent acts perpetuated by opposition students and other unknown individuals around the School of Social Work.

This event was exploited by the mainstream media as evidence of government repression of students opposed to the government. The event was an unfortunate expression of longstanding political conflicts within the university community. Some students claimed that their actions against the School

of Social Work were a response to the burning of an empty bus earlier that day, indicating an internal political dispute between students.

In another incident, after a meeting with the directors of the National Electoral Council on November 1, one group of student demonstrators attempted to chain themselves to the building while another charged through a police line. The resulting melee left six police officers injured and one student demonstrator facing charges for possessing 20 liters of gasoline. After the incident, the president of the National Electoral Council, Tibisay Lucena stated:

*Due to the government's education policies, the number of university students in Venezuela almost doubled from 1998 to 2006, while seven new universities have been opened since 1998*

“We were surprised at our good faith effort when, at the conclusion of this meeting, a group of them tried, aggressively, to chain themselves to the stairs of the headquarters of National Electoral Council, thus violating the cordial and peaceful spirit that was present during the meeting. These acts constitute a meaningless and unjustifiable aggression to what has been a democratic practice of the electoral council.”

### University Students in Venezuela

The government of President Hugo Chavez has made universal access to higher education a priority. In 1992, there were 362,000 university-level students in Venezuela, a number that grew to only 366,000 by 1998. As of 2006, there were **774,000 university-level students**. This drastic increase was caused by the construction and opening of **seven new universities** during President Chavez's presidency, a dramatic increase as compared to the one new university opened in Venezuela during the years of 1983 and 1998.

The government of Venezuela respects the rights of students and of all Venezuelans to peaceably assemble as granted by Article 68 of the 1999 Constitution. The government also expects students and all Venezuelans to respect the rule of law. The record shows that no other government in contemporary Venezuelan history has granted students as much access to high-level government officials and institutions to hear their grievances.