



## Chavez's Pick for Top General a 'Major Insult to Democracy,' Critics Say

By Joshua Rhett Miller

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In what critics are calling a "major insult to democracy" in Venezuela, President Hugo Chavez has promoted to his nation's highest military level a controversial general who has vowed not to cooperate with opposition leaders if they win the South American nation's presidential election in 2012.

Gen. Henry Rangel Silva, who has served as the operational chief of Venezuela's armed forces, was to be promoted to general-in-chief on Tuesday, Chavez announced during his Sunday television and radio program, "Hello President." In a newspaper column, he characterized Silva as a "revolutionary soldier" and praised his "merits and virtues."

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But Chavez's critics are warning that Silva has been accused of having links to drug trafficking and that he has said the military would not accept an opposition victory in 2012.

If Chavez loses at the polls, "It would be like selling out the country," Silva told the newspaper *Ultimas Noticias*. "The people aren't going to accept that -- not the armed forces and even less the people. [The army] doesn't have half loyalty, but rather full loyalty ... to the commander in chief."

Those comments have raised fears that Chavez and Silva -- who the United States says has strong links to the narcotics trafficking activities of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) -- could effectively turn one of South America's oldest democracies into a dictatorship.

In fact, some experts say, that may already have happened.

"Venezuela stopped being a democracy a long time ago," said Ian Vasquez, director of the Cato Institute's Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity. "It only formally engages in the exercise of democratic elections, but there is virtually no separation of powers.

"[Chavez] has control of every institution in the country, from the Supreme Court to the military to Congress."

In September 2008, the U.S. Treasury "designated" two senior Venezuelan government officials -- Silva and Hugo Armando Carvajal Barrios -- for materially assisting the narcotics trafficking activities of FARC, a narcotics trafficker identified by President George W. Bush in 2003.

Treasury officials said Silva, then the director of the country's Directorate of Intelligence and Prevention Services, was in charge of intelligence and counterintelligence activities for the Venezuelan government and sought greater cooperation between the government and FARC.

The 2008 action froze any assets Silva and Barrios may have under U.S. jurisdiction and prohibited U.S. citizens from conducting financial or commercial transactions involving those assets.

Vasquez called Silva's promotion "just one more confirmation" of Venezuela's shift to authoritarian rule. He said it proves the military will support Chavez regardless of the outcome of the 2012 election.

"The message is fairly unambiguous," Vasquez said.

Though Chavez has denied he plans to retain power by force, Silva's statement that the armed forces will not cooperate with opposition leaders amounts to a coup d'état, said Gustavo Coronel, an independent consultant on geopolitics of energy and Latin American public policy.

"The reaction of President Chavez was to promote this man to general-in-chief, the highest military level in the country, and one that should only be given for exceptional behavior in the battlefield," Coronel, a Venezuelan, wrote in an e-mail to FoxNews.com.

"Obviously this represents a major insult to Venezuelan democracy and to our rule of law. There can be no further pretense that Venezuela is under a democratic government. It is a dictatorship, and, I would add, a narcostate."

Coronel said Silva was second-in-command during Chavez's failed 1992 military coup that killed nearly 200 people.

"He is a rogue military officer, a coupster and an unconditional follower of Chavez," Coronel wrote. "His political views? Greed for power and wealth."

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