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Vargas Llosa Sees Democracy Coming Adrift in Venezuela

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By Jeremy Morgan
Latin American Herald Tribune staff

CARACAS – Prize winning Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa had vowed to speak his mind and duly did so on Thursday, warning that Venezuela was slowly drifting away from democracy and economic freedoms.

While Vargas Llosa made few direct references to Venezuela at a press conference on the fringes of a democracy forum at the Cedice Libertad center, it was more than clear just who, what and where he probably had most in mind as he homed in on the government's economic policies.

"Satanizing the private sector businessman is political suicide," he intoned. Countries which held that social property was above private property had "done away with the productive apparatus of those countries."

As an example, he pointed to his own country during the dictatorship of General Velasco Alvarado, whom, he said, had destroyed the fishing industry in a short time. Thousands of unemployed had been left on the streets.

The concept of "collective" property made private property disappear because that property passed not into the hands of the people but into the hands of bureaucrats, Vargas Llosa argued.

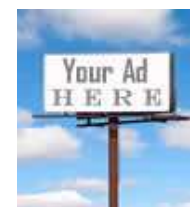
What had taken countries forward, he continued, had been respect, with governments promoting work in partnership with private companies, and respecting private property within a democratic political framework and economic liberty.

"Neither communism nor statism have brought progress," he declared. "Economic freedom demands that there's political freedom."

Then Vargas Llosa turned specifically to the case of Venezuela. "There's no doubt that what's on course here is a communist dictatorship and the removal of liberal democracy," he said. "There are spaces of liberty that are still here and I believe these have to be taken advantage of if we don't want Venezuela to stop being a democratic society and converts into a communist dictatorship, which is where this country could go if this process continues."

Vargas Llosa's remarks were not entirely negative. He applauded the initiatives taken by President Hugo Chávez' government in education and reducing illiteracy in Venezuela. But, he added, doing away with illiteracy didn't necessitate doing away with freedoms or promoting populist politics.

Education only became a means of generating equality of opportunity in democratic systems, he said. While countries with "statist" or communist economies apparently achieved



advances in education and health, he claimed that on examination all this was found to be “part of a strategy of political propaganda.”

As to the idea of “indefinite” re-election – Chávez finally got a ban on more than one successive re-election removed at a referendum last February – Vargas Llosa pointed to the dangers of one man permanently occupying power.

Elections in general did not always produce positive results, he warned, pointing out that Adolf Hitler in Germany and Alberto Fujimori in Peru had both got to power by electoral means. “If there isn’t democratic conviction after the elections, a dictatorship can arrive.”

Vargas Llosa also had praise for President Barack Obama of the United States. It had been “intelligent” of Obama to open dialogues with countries such as Cuba and Venezuela, and that should be supported, he said. Dialogue with adversaries was indispensable.

The world famous novelist had been delayed for between two and three hours on his arrival in Venezuela on Wednesday, during which time officials were said to have taken away his passport and rummaged through his luggage and personal correspondence.

Reports from Lima said that President Alan García had condemned the incident as an attack on freedom of thought and expression, and an example of an “intolerance” that was anti-democratic.

Vargas Llosa claimed that a Venezuelan official at the airport had warned him that he was not to “adopt political positions” during his stay in Venezuela, and that if he did he could be expelled. García said he found it hard to believe that anyone would try to shut up “a man of such prestige who essentially defends freedom and democracy.”

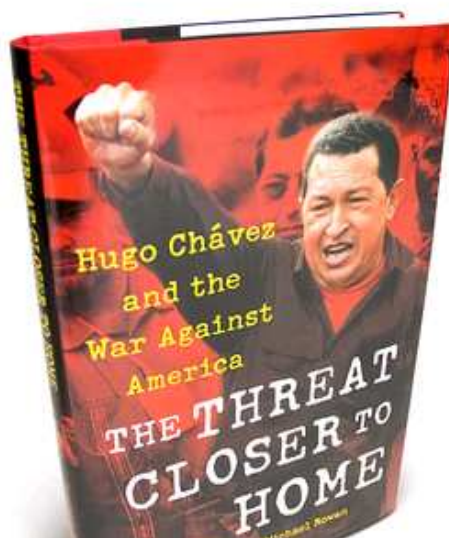
The reception handed out to Vargas Llosa at the airport predictably hit the headlines in the Peruvian press on Thursday.

What had been notable, commented Mirko Lauer, a columnist in a left-of-center newspaper had not been Vargas Llosa’s criticism of Chávez “but the reaction to them.”

The incident showed that Chávez had moved into the “camp of those governments that restrict freedom of opinion” and Chávez was out to provoke his critics both inside and outside Venezuela, Lauer wrote. But the treatment meted out to Vargas Llosa would backfire by undermining the favourable image created by Chávez’ “more or less cordial meeting” with Obama at the Americas Summit.

A legislator at the Peruvian Congress demanded that the Foreign Ministry should formally protest to Venezuela, as should Spain (Vargas Llosa has dual nationality). The incident at the airport had shown the “authoritarian streak” of the Chávez government, claimed Luis Gonzales Posada, a government supporter and former foreign minister.

Vargas Llosa was not the only guest at the forum in Caracas to express doubts about Chávez. Former Bolivian President Jorge Quiroga claimed that Chávez’ political project posed the “biggest threat to democracy in the history of Latin America.”



In Bolivia, Quiroga claimed, President Evo Morales had become the “property of the regime in Venezuela.” As to the state oil corporation, Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) it was the biggest example of privatization of which he knew because PDVSA had passed from the hands of a country into the hands of one person.

Echoing comments from other participants of official harassment at the airport, Joaquin Lavín, a rightwing Opposition former mayor of Santiago, Chile and presidential candidate, claimed that a “government agent” had told him that, having arrived as a tourist he could not criticize the president or Venezuelan institutions.

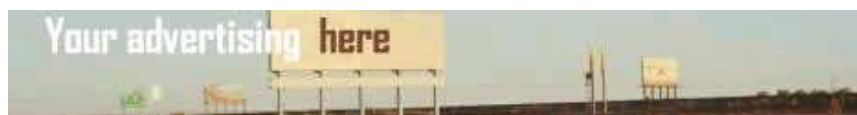
Numerous Venezuelan government agencies harassed the Cato Institute event, called Universidad El Cato-CEDICE, or "Cato University," which took place in Caucagua, Venezuela. The event is co-sponsored by the Venezuelan free-market think tank Centro de Divulgación del Conocimiento Económico por la Libertad (CEDICE) and was organized to teach and promote the classical liberal principles of limited government, individual liberty, free markets and peace.

During the course of the event on Monday, the National Guard, state television and a state representative from a ministry of higher education interrupted the seminar, demanding that the seminar be shut down on the grounds that the event organizers did not have permission to establish a university in Venezuela. When the authorities were told that neither Cato nor CEDICE was establishing a university and that the Cato Institute has long sponsored student seminars called Cato Universities, the authorities then insisted that the seminar was in violation of Venezuelan law for false advertising.

After two hours of groundless accusations, the Chávez representatives left but their harassment has continued. One of the speakers at the seminar, Peruvian intellectual Alvaro Vargas Llosa, was detained by airport authorities Monday afternoon for three hours for no apparent reason. He was released and told that he could stay in the country as long as he did not express political opinions in Venezuela.

"The government's attacks on freedom of speech are part of a worrying pattern of abuse of power in Hugo Chávez's Venezuela," said Ian Vásquez, director of Cato's Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity, from Caucagua. "But they have so far not managed to alter the plans of the Cato Institute here, and will hopefully not do so, as we continue to participate in further meetings the rest of this week."

Writer and Former Venezuelan President Romulo Gallegos and Mario Vargas Llosa



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