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Cuba's Stake in the Chávez Presidency

Deepening privation is making Cubans restless. Oil from Venezuela is essential to the regime's hold on power.

By MARY ANASTASIA O'GRADY - October 8, 2012

All eyes were on the Venezuelan presidential election Sunday on the off chance that incumbent Hugo Chávez might be forced to accept defeat. But few could have been watching more intently than the elite of the Cuban military dictatorship, who in recent years have become heavily dependent on virtually free Venezuelan oil, courtesy of Mr. Chávez, for its survival.

The day went relatively smoothly despite a heavy turnout that the Chávez-controlled National Electoral Council seemed ill-prepared to handle. Some voters claimed to have waited six hours in line but there was no violence.

It was after 10 p.m. when the CNE emerged to announce that Mr. Chávez had beaten Henrique Capriles Radonski, the governor of the state of Miranda. It was hardly surprising given how the cards were stacked against the challenger, as I explained in this space last week. Yet despite the Chávez "victory," Cuba still has plenty of reason to worry about the loss of oil flows. It has been preparing for the possibility for months.

On Thursday, state security detained journalist Yoani Sánchez as she traveled to the city of Bayamo. Ms. Sánchez was assigned to cover the trial of Spanish democracy advocate Angel Carromero there for the Spanish daily El País.

Mr. Carromero—who was at the wheel when Cuban human-rights defenders Oswaldo Payá and Harold Cepero were killed in a car wreck in July on the eastern end of the island—stands accused of vehicular manslaughter. Payá was a popular and charismatic leader of Cuba's growing dissident movement, and after the crash rumors were flying that the Spaniard's rental car had been forced off the road. If found to be true, it would badly damage the Castro brothers' attempts to gain legitimacy on the international stage.

The Payá family has called for an independent investigation. The government has ignored their request. Foreign journalists were allowed to sit in an adjacent room at the courthouse and watch the Friday "trial" on closed-circuit television. But secret police kept the Payá family away from the premises. No verdict has been handed down. Ms. Sánchez and her husband were released late Friday.

Silencing critics, making examples of meddling foreigners and running closed, summary trials are nothing new. But Cuba watchers say that as the dissidents have grown in

number and have increasingly learned how to organize, the regime has been ratcheting up the repression.

The same day Ms. Sánchez was detained the regime also arrested 22 "pro-democracy activists who sought to attend a peaceful gathering in the town of Santa Clara to discuss a petition titled, 'Citizens' Demand for Another Cuba,' " according to the website Capitol Hill Cubans. The arrests are part of a wider assault on government critics, among them the Ladies in White, who won the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize in 2005.

Deepening economic privation is making Cubans restless. And that privation is likely to get worse if Venezuela stops supplying oil to Cuba. According to Jorge Piñon, an energy expert at the University of Miami, Mr. Chávez has been sending almost 100,000 barrels of oil a day to the island. In exchange, Cuba ships doctors and social workers to Venezuela to serve the poor.

But it is highly doubtful that Venezuela is getting its money's worth. Mr. Capriles said last week that the 40,000 Cubans that Venezuela receives have a value of some \$800 million per year while the oil sent to Cuba annually is worth \$4 billion. He warned that if elected he would change the policy. "If we need Cuban doctors, we will pay for them," he announced. But "we cannot give away" the oil.

Even the "re-elected" Mr. Chávez will be under heavy economic pressure to revise the terms of the oil-for-doctors exchange, because the gap between Venezuelan spending and revenues will undoubtedly grow in the coming year. Roads and bridges are rapidly deteriorating, hospitals are in disrepair, and public security is almost nonexistent. Analysts expect a large devaluation of the Venezuelan bolivar next year.

Last week the Venezuelan daily El Universal reported that "as many as 80 Cuban physicians have left [Venezuela] on a monthly basis over the last 90 days." The paper also said that this year "the exodus may exceed the figure recorded in 2011—500 doctors." Yumar Gómez, who now lives in Miami, is one of them. "Let me tell you this," Mr. Gómez told El Universal, "many do not want to return to Cuba."

In a 2010 paper for the Cato Institute, Ms. Sánchez wrote: "Now that the state is out of money and there are no more rights to exchange for benefits, the demand for freedom is on the rise." No one understands that better than Raúl Castro, which is why the dictator and his friends were celebrating the news from Venezuela Sunday night.