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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

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•(1310)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): Order, please.

Today, May 6, we are holding our 13th meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

[English]

Just before we introduce our guest, I want to remind committee members of several things.

On Tuesday we will be looking at the human rights situation in Mexico, and on Thursday we will be looking at two separate things: human rights in Afghanistan, followed by *la situation de Nathalie Morin*. Because we're discussing two topics, we are beginning earlier. We will begin at 12:30 rather than at 1:00 on Thursday. You should be aware that we will probably not be in this room. We'll probably be over in the Wellington Building or the West Block, so you should give yourself the necessary extra time to get over there.

Mr. Silva.

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I just wanted to inform the committee that we're still in the process of trying to get Dr. Jalal that visa from our embassy in Kabul. Anything we can do as a committee to assist, that would be greatly appreciated. Otherwise, it will not be possible to have that hearing on Wednesday.

The Chair: Just so the committee knows, we've had a bit of a discussion about this off-line. We'll obviously be keeping members of the committee apprised of that.

Until we know otherwise, though, we'll assume that we will have both witnesses on Thursday.

Today our guest is Victor Armony, who is a professor in the department of sociology and is director of the Observatory of the Americas at the Montreal Institute of International Studies.

Dr. Armony, welcome. Please begin your testimony.

[Translation]

Mr. Victor Armony (Professor, Department of Sociology and Director of the Observatory of the Americas, Montreal Institute of International Studies, Université du Québec à Montréal): Thank you for giving me the opportunity to present my remarks to the Subcommittee on International Human Rights. I am here to give

you my perspective as a university professor, therefore as a researcher and a teacher, on democracy and pluralism, particularly in Latin America. My role as Director of the Observatory of the Americas at Université du Québec à Montréal as well as my position as chief editor of the Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies inform my perspective on the region and on relations between Canada and the rest of the hemisphere.

On a more personal note, because I am appearing before you as an individual and not on behalf of the institutions I am professionally associated with, I would like to point out that because I lived under one of the barbaric military regimes in South America until I was 19 years old, I am very hesitant to politicize or instrumentalize the issue of human rights, because that ultimately trivializes it. If I have anything to contribute to your reflections and debates, it will be a modest contribution which may serve to add to the context.

Latin American nations were born two centuries ago with a revolutionary promise of equality and liberty but the majority of their populations have experienced mainly exclusion or oppression. Latin America is the region in the so-called third world with the longest history of fighting for social justice and yet it is now the region where there is the most inequality on the planet with respect to the concentration of wealth. That is why superficial speeches, moral lessons, and generic categories are rarely useful to understand Latin American reality. Furthermore they are an affront to Latin Americans themselves.

Am I saying that the notion of human rights has to be adjusted or adapted in order to be applicable to Latin America? Not at all. But we absolutely do have to agree on our definitions and apply them consistently before passing judgment. You'll understand that the picture I am giving you of Venezuela in terms of human rights is neither black nor white. It goes without saying that several recent events in the country have been extremely troubling, especially with respect to the restriction of freedom of expression and the weakening of the separation between executive, legislative and judicial authorities. This can all be connected to the personality cult around the president.

The fact that some observers are interpreting these problems in light of the Venezuelan government's ideology or foreign policy is in my view questionable. It is clear to me, as it is for many specialists in Latin American policy that these troubling departures, contrary to a true democracy, are not necessarily exclusive to or associated with left-wing regimes. I will not attempt to justify to you the obviously populist side to the president, Hugo Chávez, by stating that even in the most developed western societies, from France to Italy to the United States, the blurring of politics and electoral marketing, partisan control of information, questionable management of public finances, demagoguery or the demonization of one's adversaries have unfortunately become all too common. In the Latin American context, messianic presidencies, supported by the people but authoritarian in how they are exercised, and intent on staying in power forever, have an annoying habit of repeating themselves, in various shapes, whether they be conservative, neo-liberal or socialist.

• (1315)

I will repeat: the human rights situation in Venezuela is of concern in several ways. I don't need to repeat the list of incidents that have attracted your attention since the beginning of your deliberations. There are essentially three main themes to understand.

First, there is the political sphere itself. The Chávez government is using its parliamentary majority to achieve its goals and it is not afraid of pushing the limits of what is legitimate or of reinterpreting what is legal to its own advantage. It goes without saying that in our ideal democratic world we use negotiation and compromise, but it seems to me that politics in Venezuela, even if you take into account the numerous blunders and the climate of aggressiveness that has overtaken relations with the opposition, are still acceptable in light of regional standards. In other words, it is my opinion, which is informed by, among other things, very respected sources such as PROVEA and Red de Apoyo, that institutional life in Venezuela is facing considerable challenges and has significant shortcomings, but that does not give us the right to declare from outside the country that this democracy, more than others in Latin America, is in imminent danger.

The second main theme is that of Mr. Chávez's inflammatory rhetoric. Far be it from me to minimize the significance of the gaffes of a president on a public stage who insults some and hurls abuse at others. Combative words from a charismatic leader, we know very well, can become, in some people, an authorization for pernicious behaviour. The cases of intimidation that the Venezuelan Jewish community have been a victim of were raised in your exchanges and were also the subject of very severe criticisms in the latest report of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Of course, we have to be vigilant about this situation but it would be a mistake to speak of a persecuted or systematically disregarded minority, or to give the impression that Venezuelan society has become intolerant. The Jewish community in Venezuela is well integrated into national life and actively participates in the rich culture of the country, and plays an important role in many civilian society organizations.

I would say then that these two themes—the actions of a government that has firm control of power and benefits from significant popular support and is sometimes pushing the limits, flirting with political illegitimacy and engaging in combative speech, and, under certain conditions, stirs up tension in society and even

encourages some excited individuals to act—are no doubt relevant in a discussion of the situation in Venezuela but they do not prove that this country stands out completely compared to the others in this region.

It is also necessary to understand that the role of the media in Venezuela, and throughout Latin America, must be examined beyond the over-simplified view that the private sector is the only guarantee of a diversity of voices. Media issues are very complex and include political as well as economic dimensions.

The third theme, however, is more problematic. Here I'll be referring obviously to intimidation, harassment, censorship and punishment that target certain members of the opposition, critical journalists, or quite simply citizens who openly express their disagreement with the government. In my opinion I still don't think there is any reason to talk about a repressive regime or general political violence or extra-judicial coercion. It is however clear that the expression of dissident or challenging views, which are fundamental issues in a democracy, have become more fragile in Venezuela.

• (1320)

When citizens do not support the broad objectives of their government, whether it be a war against the axis of evil or a Bolivarian revolution, when citizens are called anti-patriotic or traitors, democracy suffers, but when social protest is arbitrarily criminalized, when individuals are singled out by those in power because of their opinion or when accusations of a political nature are made against opponents, while cloaking the whole operation in a type of legality, there must be a firm response on the part of civilian society and the international community. Canada must never remain indifferent when this type of transgression takes place in Latin America, regardless of the party in power.

Before I conclude I would like to talk about something I alluded to at the beginning of my opening remarks, the issue of definitions and priorities. I stated that I do not at all support human rights being contextualized. A violation is a violation, regardless of the historical or cultural context, but the absolute nature of fundamental rights does not give us the right to simplistic interpretations. Thus, the Economic Commission for Latin America—the ECLA—that prestigious United Nations organization whose headquarters are in Chile, suggested a holistic approach in 2007 to assess the situation of a community, using indicators that measure, among other things, the right to life, to health, to fertility and family choices, to dignity, to intimacy, etc. That approach is absolutely in line with human security, a key element in Canada's foreign policy in the 1990s. Human security combines the protection of fundamental freedoms with the battle against economic hardship and it tries to strike a balance between individual rights and collective well-being, between material needs and cultural or identity imperatives.

Do I have five minutes left? I can conclude if you give me two more minutes.

• (1325)

The Chair: You've used up 12 minutes and 30 seconds. I would like you to quickly wrap up.

Mr. Victor Armony: Allow me to read you one last point.

Most analysts agree in saying that this shift to the left that has been happening in Latin America over the past 10 years, and whose most flamboyant variant Hugo Chávez represents, has not overall had a demonstrably negative effect on the quality of democracy in the region.

There are two Venezuelas, two countries that are clashing over sensitive issues that should not be simplified to pro- or anti-Chávez caricatures. At the same time, one shouldn't ignore that this left-right polarization in Venezuela reflects to a certain extent the division between social classes.

Personally, I will not be silenced in my criticism of abusive power on the part of Latin American governments, including Venezuela's, but I would say respectfully to you that I would be very disappointed to see Canada focus on the issue of human rights on the basis of ideological affinities or economic interests, which would, in fact, end up hurting its reputation as a force for conciliation and mediation in the hemisphere.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you professor.

[English]

Given the amount of time we have, I think we'll go for eight-minute rounds. That will take us pretty much to the end.

I'll just alert all committee members to the fact that Professor Armony did submit his remarks. They're in only one official language right now, so we'll have them translated and then distributed as soon as possible.

We'll start with the Liberals.

Mr. Silva, I guess you're splitting your time?

Mr. Mario Silva: We'll see. Maybe for now it will be mine.

[Translation]

Thank you Mr. Armony.

Last week, our Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs testified before this committee. He shared his concern with respect to the decrease in democratic space in Venezuela. I'd like to talk to you about that too. In that context, you are perhaps aware of Mr. Manuel Rosales' situation. He is an opponent of Mr. Chávez and he was elected mayor of Maracaibo. I believe he won the elections in 2006 but he was prohibited from occupying that position up until now.

Mr. Victor Armony: Just a minute, I did not hear you properly.

Mr. Mario Silva: You didn't hear my last sentence?

Mr. Victor Armony: I did not hear the last part.

Mr. Mario Silva: Based on the information I received, Mr. Manuel Rosales won the election in 2006. He was elected mayor of Maracaibo.

Mr. Victor Armony: It's Maracaibo.

Mr. Mario Silva: I believe it is Venezuela's second largest city. It has three million citizens. But he was prevented from taking up his position as mayor of this city.

Can you tell us a little more about this? What happened to Mr. Rosales?

Mr. Victor Armony: I don't know the details of that situation, but I can tell you that, generally speaking, it's part of a trend which, of course, is worrisome. As you mentioned, it reflects the shrinking of the public space. It is truly disheartening. As a result, this type of situation reduces, rather than strengthens, democracy in Venezuela.

That being said, this same type of operation happened in Caracas. You may be aware of the events relating to the mayor of the capital of Venezuela. In that regard, many things were done to reduce the power of municipal authorities, and the power at other levels of government, when the situation did not correspond to the ideology or the policies of the central government. I want to emphasize that these events are extremely worrisome. They were well documented in reports, including a report of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

The purpose of my presentation was to explain the gray areas. Although what is happening reflects the challenges and weaknesses of Venezuela's political system and its democracy, one cannot say that the law, in the strictest sense of the word, has been violated. The government uses and mobilizes its popular support, and the support it receives from Parliament, to pass laws which, according to us and according to many Venezuelans, are illegitimate. However, this must not prevent us from acknowledging, as far as we can tell, that the Constitution of the country has not been violated. As I mentioned, however, people have repeatedly pushed up against the limits of what is legal and what is legitimate. Based on our understanding of democracy, this is fairly negative. Nevertheless, we cannot say that this is an undemocratic regime.

• (1330)

Mr. Mario Silva: Last month, I was in Bangkok for a meeting of the Interparliamentary Union. I noted that for most western democracies, and other Latin American countries including Brazil, there were representatives from the government, but also from the opposition. Every time I attend this annual meeting, I notice that Venezuela only sends representatives who support Chávez. No member of the opposition is allowed to be part of an international delegation. Therefore, the government wants to give the impression that it controls all of the legislature and that there is no opposition.

This worries me greatly. I believe it shows that the system is not as democratic as in other countries.

Mr. Victor Armony: Of course, it is always worrying to know that there is no active opposition to monitor the government's actions. This goes against even the most basic definition of what a democracy is, of course.

That being said, we cannot forget that the opposition boycotted the election in Venezuela, for one, which greatly decreased the number of opposition members in government. On the other hand, this worrying situation—namely that a national party is attempting to be the sole representative on the political scene, which is bad for a true democracy and true debate—reflects a trend whereby power is becoming increasingly centralized, especially the executive power, nationally and elsewhere in Latin America, as well.

In other words, this trend unfortunately does not wear any political colours, which is what I was trying to say. The centralization of power by the national executive is a phenomenon which is taking place in Venezuela, as well as in other countries in that part of the world that are not necessarily moving to the left, as some people claim the trend has been, starting in 2000.

• (1335)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Deschamps, please.

Ms. Johanne Deschamps (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome.

Professor, I have two questions. However, I would like to go further, if I may. Could you talk to me about human rights, or tell me, after giving us a very brief history of it in your preamble, about the situation concerning human rights before Chávez and under Chávez?

Second, could you compare Venezuela to other Latin American countries in terms of human rights? I am thinking of Colombia and Honduras, among others, following the recent coup d'état.

Mr. Victor Armony: That is quite true. I did not read documents I brought concerning human rights and fundamental freedoms statistics. As the term states, it is, of course, fundamental. As you mentioned, and as I tried to say right from the start, it is also essential to talk about what we can call the right to an adequate standard of living, acceptable living conditions, human dignity and so forth.

To come back to your question, the current situation is not ideal, as to be expected. However, it is important to compare this to a previous time, even if Venezuela did not undergo a military dictatorship in the 1960s or 1970s as was the case almost everywhere else in that part of the south, including Argentina—my home country—Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, etc. Obviously, a majority of Venezuelans, during this previous era, found themselves in a very unenviable position in terms of respect for human rights as well as in the broader sense of human rights: access to education, health care, etc. It cannot be denied, the Chávez government has made considerable progress. With regard to the social dimension of rights, everyone recognizes this. It is important to stress this.

For example, was social protest illegal before Chávez? Of course. Did the prison conditions, police brutality, military action in domestic operations exist before Chávez? Of course. That is why I want to highlight this context. We must take into consideration the previous situation, as you mentioned, in order to better understand what is happening today in Venezuela. I also want to talk about another dimension in Latin America, and Venezuela is part of that regional reality: this is the most unequal continent in the world. This means that the majority did not have access to all kinds of rights, including political rights, until the advent of democracy. Venezuela has made major progress with regard to the rights of the lower classes.

It is important to understand that the political and ideological division within Venezuela is also, to some extent, a class division. The lower classes support Chávez because their living conditions have substantially improved. Today, is the situation perfect or ideal

in terms of fundamental freedoms? No, we have just seen that there are troubling incidents and trends. However, if we draw the comparison with Colombia, of course you are quite right. Once again, without denying the existence of problems evident in Venezuela, it is important to also look at what is happening in Colombia, Honduras and elsewhere, in Argentina and Chile. Sometimes there is a so-called left-wing government sometimes it is a so-called right-wing government. I want to stress that the situation in Venezuela is troubling and of concern, but is not abnormal in relation to other contexts. Targeting Venezuela because of its government's ideology seems to be at the very least unfair, in my mind.

The Chair: You still have two minutes.

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: It is difficult to assess a situation from the outside, as an observer. The fact that certain people would like to have us only see certain aspects of Venezuela is probably related to the fact that it is a leftist government, something which perturbs the international community.

That said, within the country there is opposition. The opposition must have its own dreams. There was a coup d'état. It is rarely discussed, the situation has been relativized. The opposition plays a role, it must be said, in the area of human rights.

• (1340)

Mr. Victor Armony: That's correct. We should not create an image in our minds. That is one of the aspects I would like to submit to your deliberations. The situation in Venezuela should not be viewed as a type of totalitarianism, and I use this term loosely, where people do not have the right to express their views or indicate their disagreement with government policy. That is not the case. Political debate takes place. There are civil society organizations. I mentioned PROVEA, for instance. It is the largest human rights NGO, and it produces annual reports. I have them here with me, I have studied them closely. I can tell you that this organization, which has a great deal of credibility, is very critical of what is happening in Venezuela. However, some of this contributes to defining a genuine social debate. Therefore, the opposition does express its views. Obviously, it is not unfettered, there are problems when it comes to freedom of expression, but in a general sense, Venezuela should not be seen as a society which is closed to discussion or dissension. As I mentioned, the trend within some circles is troubling, but overall, it is far from being a society that has shut down political debate and dissension.

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

Mr. Marston, please.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): First I want to apologize for how warm it is in here.

An hon. member: Yes.

Mr. Wayne Marston: I think we're all suffering. Some of us took off our jackets.

Thank you for your presentation. When you're down the line for questions, sometimes you're left wondering just what you're going to ask, so I always make tons of notes as I go.

One of the things I would say is that when we look at Venezuela through the lens of human rights as opposed to...as I heard in your remarks earlier, as opposed to economics or as opposed to politics. But if we look at the human rights record of this country, if you compare it to Colombia or if you compare it to Honduras or other South American countries, how do you think that comparison is? How well are they doing, first of all, today?

Speaking historically, we had witnesses before us on Tuesday who were very enthusiastic about things like the fact that, as they said, on the streets they were in dialogue, in conversation, about their constitution, and engaged. The average person was more engaged than at any other time in their history.

So I'd like your view on that in comparison to those other countries—if that's true, number one, that the dialogue is there.

They also spoke of the fact that the army was close to the people. Oftentimes when we think of South American nations we think of the people in great fear of their own army or associated squads that go with that. I wouldn't mind your comment on that, to begin.

[Translation]

Mr. Victor Armony: Thank you.

I will use the term "populism", which is well-known to Latin Americans and analysts covering Latin America. The word takes on a different meaning in Latin America as opposed to North America. It refers to a type of politics which is quite widespread over the continent. These are governments that are close to the people, which corresponds to our image of things, but there is also a vision according to which the state is getting closer to the people. Latin American populism always has a positive side, namely with regard to its capabilities—you mentioned the army—and the fact that institutions can get closer to the people. I stress the fact that it is not all people, but a targeted majority of people who, over the course of Venezuela's long history and that of other countries, have faced social injustice.

In a situation where the state, rather than turn to the elite, turns to more disadvantaged people, those who may have been set aside for decades, even centuries, populism may be viewed as a very interesting phenomenon. It engages citizens and according to political experts it leads to people's involvement in politics, for one. That is something we can see in Venezuela, as was seen in 1940s Argentina under Juan Perón.

That said, populism involves some downsides, of course. We should not deny that. Populism which enjoys popular support and rests on the image of one charismatic figure and his inflammatory rhetoric tends, as I mentioned, to centralize power and use state institutions to serve its political agenda. In that case, it can be dangerous. Is populism always positive or negative? It depends. In Latin America, it can lead to the involvement of men and women that have been excluded but it can also lead to authoritarianism. That has been the case in a number of countries. I believe that in Venezuela there are some worrisome trends. That said, the political system and Venezuelan society in general have both the instruments and the will needed to find a way to support true democracy, which may one day include the fundamental freedoms and social rights I referred to earlier on.

● (1345)

[English]

Mr. Wayne Marston: Well, true democracies are things that always come with risk. If you have a situation where there's a populist leader and you have misguided efforts on their part, damage can be done. But also, on the converse side of that—and that was the purpose of my question, about comparative to Colombia, comparative to the other parts of the region—it appears to me that there have been strides made, not just moves but strides, toward true democracy, as messy as it may be. That's why I was asking that particular question.

Very directly, do you believe today that Venezuelans are better off than they were 25 years ago?

[Translation]

Mr. Victor Armony: Certainly.

[English]

Mr. Wayne Marston: Do you believe that they have more of a true democracy today than 25 years ago?

[Translation]

Mr. Victor Armony: Yes—

[English]

Mr. Wayne Marston: Now, I'm not trying to set you up with those questions.

[Translation]

Mr. Victor Armony: As a professor, I always like to point to the subtle nuances. That is why I would say "yes, but".

[English]

Mr. Wayne Marston: You've already expressed concerns, and I think those concerns are things that we should be attending to from the perspective of this committee. But again, through the lens of human rights and through the lens of the history of that part of the world, it appears to me that there have been dramatic moves, although there are areas we can be concerned about.

You know that this government has negotiated a free trade agreement with Colombia, about which we have raised major concerns. That was the purpose of my question. If you compared those two countries on the level of human rights, I think Venezuela would have a better record on human rights.

[Translation]

Mr. Victor Armony: Yes, of course. Earlier on I briefly mentioned the criminalization of social protest. It is an extremely troubling phenomenon we are seeing throughout Latin America. It exists in Mexico, and in fact, I believe, you will be discussing the matter, as well as in Colombia, where it is extreme. Of course, in Colombia, the actions of the paramilitary endanger the safety of human rights workers. In Venezuela, the government has taken steps in the direction of criminalizing social protest. That has also happened in Argentina, in Chile and elsewhere. If you want to speak of drawing comparisons, I would say that in Colombia, the situation seems even more troubling.

You could use other points of comparison, but that one illustrates what you were saying rather well.

[English]

Mr. Wayne Marston: The picture you're painting, and the picture that previous witnesses have painted for us, is significantly different from what we see on the entertainment news on CNN and other places. We see far more conversation about democracy. In other places, Mr. Chavez is put forward as quite the tyrant, quite the dictator.

One of the things we have to be careful of in our analysis of any country, I think, is that the leader is only a part; he's only the face. And for that democratic process and engagement that you and others have been talking about actually to be taking place across the broader government, there has to be an acceptance of democracy in a way that's quite new to that part of the world. Would you agree with that?

• (1350)

[Translation]

Mr. Victor Armony: Yes.

To go even further, I would focus again on the issue of engagement. It is something that I teach my students in a course on democracy. It means two things: effectively engaging in politics, not only voting, but doing a great deal more, and a subjective dimension which gives a person the feeling that he or she is part of the process. I believe that in Venezuela something very interesting is occurring. Many people feel engaged, not only because they effectively have access to certain parts of the political and economic system, in terms of the distribution of wealth, but also because they are proud to take part in a process for social change.

This process can lead to extreme polarization, as we've seen in other countries, namely among our neighbours to the south. We're noticing this currently in Venezuela and elsewhere as well. It is an inherent fault within democracy, especially these days, given the divisions within society, regardless of what the root cause of that might be. In these conditions, excessive rhetoric and even action is unfortunately increasingly widespread. This is something we are seeing in Venezuela.

Is democracy facing an imminent threat in Venezuela, more so than in Colombia or elsewhere? I do not believe so. Venezuela is dealing with specific and serious challenges, but there are challenges in Colombia, in Honduras, as you've mentioned, and elsewhere. It affects left-leaning and right-leaning governments, liberals and socialists, equally.

[English]

Mr. Wayne Marston: Well, you can bring wedge issues in Canada, in our own democracy. I'd like to import some of that engagement here.

[Translation]

Mr. Victor Armony: I did not know that.

[English]

The Chair: Unfortunately, we've used up all the time available to Mr. Marston.

We now turn to the Conservatives.

Mr. Hiebert, please.

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

I thank you for your testimony, Professor Armony.

I have some information here that I'd like to bring to your attention, and then I'd like to get your response to it.

A few days ago, we heard from a group named Hands Off Venezuela. They made some remarkable claims about the state of affairs in Venezuela. I want to contrast their testimony a little bit with your perspective on it, because they said some things that I found a little surprising.

I'm going to be quoting to you from the U.S. State Department 2008 human rights report on Venezuela.

You mentioned PROVEA, the Venezuelan Program of Education-Action in Human Rights, and you stated that the organization had a great deal of credibility.

According to PROVEA, as noted in this U.S. State Department report, there were 205 deaths due to security forces in the past 12 months, just prior to September. Over half of them were characterized as executions, and 5% were the result of torture. Other NGOs have reported as many as 57 political prisoners in the country at the present time. This same report states that while the constitution does declare a right to freedom of expression, there are practical limits that create a "climate of self-censorship", such as a law punishing individuals with six to 30 months in prison without bail for insulting the president, and lesser penalties for lower-ranking officials. The government continues to suppress the organization of labour by restricting the composition of union leadership and by refusing to negotiate collective bargaining.

We know, based on his public statements, that Chavez strongly supports Ahmadinejad in the Iranian regime, a regime whose human rights violations we have spent the last year documenting.

This is what we know, based on a fairly reliable source. You made some reference to some of the atrocities—or some of the "activities", if you want to use a less volatile term—happening there. But then you suggested, at the very end of your testimony, that it should be taken in context.

Actually, you said two things. You said that relativizing human rights is not a good idea. A violation is a violation, regardless of historical context...and then I added your "regional" context. Subsequent to that, you said that Canada should play the honest broker role and not interfere.

How do you juxtapose, or how do you justify, acknowledging some of these atrocities and recognizing that they can't be taken in context, historical or regional, and then state that we shouldn't really get too involved because we might taint our own reputation?

•(1355)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Victor Armony: No, I did not say we should not get involved. In fact, I said quite the opposite. I said Canada should never remain indifferent to this type of transgression and I specified that that should be the case regardless of the political stripe of the government in power. Again, I insist upon this point. Not only did I study reports from PROVEA, but I also printed up some work done by the Red de Apoyo por la Justicia y la Paz, known as Justice and Peace Support Network in English, which is also recognized and respected in Venezuela and internationally. They are extremely harsh in their condemning of police brutality and repressive actions of the state.

I never said that, quite the opposite. From the start, I have been saying we need to consider these aspects and denounce them. I said we needed to continue to condemn all breaches of freedom of expression and any operation or action by the state which violates human rights. As I have stated, as a Canadian citizen I suggest we should contextualize the matter and I would hope that Canada could remain a reliable partner, an honest broker, etc. As a country and as a nation, we must denounce violations of human rights in Venezuela and we must also do the same, as forcefully, when it occurs, for instance, in Colombia or Honduras.

Further, I fear that we tend to find the problems and human rights violations more concerning in some countries we do not have an ideological affinity with or focus our attention more squarely on those countries than on others. We should set aside the context and know that human rights involve a great many things. Obviously, the rights of journalists to say what they want, including to criticize the government, should absolutely be supported and upheld, but we must also advocate for human security, and everything it involves, including the right to life and dignity, access to health care, education and the rest.

We need to have this comprehensive view of the matter to say that the situation in the country of Venezuela is grave in some regards but in others we can say that the country is comparatively better off than other countries in the region.

[*English*]

Mr. Russ Hiebert: You mentioned that we need to be careful not to pay special attention based on differences in ideology. I firmly agree. I think we need to be observant of human rights violations no matter where they occur. But do you have any evidence that our interest or the public's interest in the human rights violations in Venezuela are being motivated by ideological differences? I have no evidence of that. I think we are here to find out why these things are

happening, because they are getting more and more attention. I've never come across any suggestion or indication that the primary reason we're interested in Venezuela has to do with ideology.

Do you have any evidence to suggest that it's due to ideology differences?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Victor Armony: No, not at all. As an observer of Latin America and, in a general sense, when it comes to the relationship between Canada the rest of the hemisphere, as any political analyst, I tend to find that ideological or political affinity directs the actions of various states. It seems perfectly normal to me, but the fact that it is normal should not prevent us from calling these things into question or even criticizing them if need be. From that point of view, I did not say that the Government of Canada was acting based on ideological affinity, I simply said that I would be very disappointed if such were the case.

•(1400)

[*English*]

The Chair: Only one very brief question, Mr. Hiebert, please.

Mr. Russ Hiebert: Very briefly, I would be interested in your comments on the relationship between Iran and Venezuela, and any possible connection between the two.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Victor Armony: I do not have anything substantive to say on that, as I am not an expert on Venezuela's international relations. That said, generally speaking, these relations are indeed troubling or may seem that way. Of course, there is a geopolitical dimension we should not lose sight of.

In the case of Venezuela—and perhaps also in the case of Iran, but I would not venture to discuss that issue—there is a great deal of rhetoric and actions on these facts, but none of it seems to lead to effective action.

I would say that much of what we see as the relationship between Venezuela and Iran calls to mind political rhetoric and the taking of certain positions, especially a type of anti-American posturing. We understand this from a geopolitical standpoint, again, but I do not foresee a long-term strategic alliance there or anything which could amount to a geopolitical threat to the hemisphere.

The Chair: Professor Armony, I thank you for your very informative testimony.

[*English*]

This adjourns the meeting. Thank you.

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