

Global Journalist: As the World Eyes Iraq, Venezuela and Ecuador Face Challenges

Abstract: In this Jan. 9, 2003 episode of Global Journalist, guest-host Byron Scott interviews four panelists about the political strife plaguing Venezuela and Ecuador at a time when many eyes were only turned to Iraq.

Host: Byron Scott

Guests:

- [Miguel Otero](#), Caracas
- [Paulo Sotero](#), Washington D.C.
- [Tim Johnson](#), Washington D.C.
- John Netevade, New York City

Producers: Colleen Stitura

Director/engineer: Pat Akers

Tags: Ecuador, Venezuela, Brazil, Chavez, United States, Caracas, oil, government, lawmakers, strike, Latin America, opposition

Runtime: 28:30

Byron Scott 00:08

Welcome to Global Journalist. This is Byron Scott, I'm sitting in for Stuart Loory who is on his way to London. He'll come to you from there next week. With today's show, we'll be talking about the situation in the southern hemisphere, particularly in the two countries of our southern neighbors in Latin America, Venezuela, and Ecuador. We have as our guests four journalists who are keeping close to the situation. And I'll introduce them. Miguel Otero, editor of El Nacional in Caracas, Venezuela. Hello, Miguel.

Miguel Otero 00:43

Hello.

Byron Scott 00:43

Yes, Miguel is actually right now sitting in his automobile waiting to get gasoline in line in Caracas. Paulo Sotero, who was correspondent of Estado en Sao Paulo speaking to us from Washington, DC. Hello, Paulo.

Paulo Sotero 00:59

Good morning.

Byron Scott 01:00

Good morning. Then Tim Johnson, Latin Affairs Correspondent of the Miami Herald, also speaking to us from Washington. Hello, Tim.

Tim Johnson 01:08

Good morning.

Byron Scott 01:09

Morning. And John Netevade, producer of La Voz de Ecuador, a correspondent for Telesistema en Ecuador, and also a correspondent for Diario Expreso and other publications. And he is, he is speaking to us from New York City. Hello, John.

John Netevade 01:26

Hello, hi.

Byron Scott 01:27

Yes. I, I think here in the United States, as we're, as we're focused elsewhere in the world, we perhaps have not paid particular attention to what is happening in Venezuela and Ecuador. Two of our primary trading trading partners, two of our great providers of oil where considerable economic and political strife is going on. And Miguel, we will give precedence to the man in Caracas and the man in the line for his, for gasoline. And Miguel, I wonder if you could bring us up to date. What's, what's going on in Caracas?

Miguel Otero 02:08

Well, in Venezuela we have a very critical situation. We have a general strike which is partially (unintelligible) means it has been going on for about, uh, five weeks and a half. That's the longest strike we have in Venezuela. And we have people on the (unintelligible) for all this time, fighting against Chavez, and making lots of pression for him to calm down and that means to go to an election he doesn't want. And we have also a military division (unintelligible) and violence in the streets. (unintelligible) this situation which has been going on for a year, family member a month ago, Chavez was overthrown by a coup.

Byron Scott 03:12

Yes. Hugo Chavez, yes.

Miguel Otero 03:15

And that didn't stop because immediately we had the opposition continued to fight against him and he has been going up until this moment where we have this very very strong situation against him. And he wants the population to collapse. There are two million signatures for a referendum. And this referendum is supposed to be a two year on second of February. But Chavez is saying that he doesn't want the referendum and he's trying all his methods with the two pin cards and things like that. So that the referendum can really take another (unintelligible). It's a critical situation.

Byron Scott 04:09

And I understand from CNN today that even the banks have considered joining the strike.

Miguel Otero 04:19

Well we have a, let's say 80 (unintelligible) banks closed today. Maybe we have more approaching on the middle of the today. And we have expecting a transport strike also on Monday. And a big match on Saturday.

Byron Scott 04:39

An amazing, an amazing situation. Miguel, let me cut you off there just briefly and ask John to tell us a little bit about the situation in Ecuador, where the president and he is, who is to be inaugurated next week is also under fire. John?

John Netevade 05:02

Yes. This situation from Ecuador, I think is very good in the matter of the next.... January 16th, the Ecuador recently elected president the general Lucio Gutiérrez. Want to take at the odd and the Congress. Finally after so many, you know, situations between the lawmakers, I mean, the new Congress of Ecuador. And all (Lucas?) gonna be, you know, with certain friction and a feature with a congress because the, the big party of Ecuador - I mean the most powerful body of Ecuador - is the social christians. The common span is Social Cristianos. Gonna try to dominate the Congress at the moment. So it's gonna be difficult. President Gutiérrez tried to push his ideas or new changes he want to make. I mean, they would Gutiérrez wants to slash the numbers or lawmakers and remove political influence from the local courts. And also the influence that lawmakers have these Social Christians. This is the base of the confrontation. The analysts, political analysts, seem in the future. Anyway, President Gutierrez finally, confirm all his cabinet, the administration what he wants to... I mean to work with in the government.

Byron Scott 07:10

There had been some doubt, had there not John, that that President Gutiérrez or President-elect Gutiérrez might even refuse to be inaugurated. Was there not?

John Netevade 07:23

No, exactly. He refused to inaugurate in front of the Congress because he considered non-constitutional the way they was conformed, the Congress right now, without President of the Congress. In other words, who is in the front of the Congress actually is the two vice presidents. Ad this is what, for the simple reason that there was not a lack the president. There was for corresponded to the Christian Party. I mean for the Social Christian body. According to the Constitution, the president of the Congress is supposed to be the, the candidate from the party who has more votes and the election. And that does exact - I mean, the the lawmakers, that was elected more.

Byron Scott 08:34

That's quite a quite a contrast to the situation here in the United States where we're, at least until this past November, the opposition party is usually controlled, has conventionally controlled Congress.

John Netevade 08:50

In this case, that's exactly what it's gonna be. I mean, the opposition parties get together and the last election, there was about two weeks ago. And they, they, but according to the, the regulations of the Congress to to make possible not confrontations, in the Congress. They make this new laws that was possible for the party ascend control of the, who was elected with more votes. In this case, they are the Christian party. I mean, they were they call it the Social Christian party, was, is controlled by a director or president as Mr. León Febres Cordero who was, who was a former president of Ecuador.

Byron Scott 09:51

Let me, let me ask this to move on here for a moment John, and we will come back to that.

John Netevade 09:56

Yes. All right.

Byron Scott 09:57

That complex situation. Paula Sotero, can you speak to us a bit about the situation from Brazil? And particularly, the help that is given to Venezuela and the Chavez government?

Paula Sotero 10:12

Yes. We have a newly inaugurated president in Brazil. Well, our situation is very different from that. Of the two countries, both in Ecuador and in Venezuela. What you have is the emergence of leaders outside of the framework of traditional parties in Brazil. In contrast, you have a president that comes from the, actually a party that is the only grassroots party in Brazil with the only party that would really deserve the name of a political party, the Workers Party, that was created in 1980 in opposition of the military dictatorship there. Brazil has a tradition of having very good and peaceful relationship with all its neighbors. Brazil is one of the few countries in the world that has ten, nine or more neighbors. We have actually 10 if you count the Department of Guyana that belongs to France. And in the case of Venezuela, I think that what is happening is a continuation of the previous policy with a little tone of difference. Brazil will have - and that has been the tradition in Brazil - Brazil will have good relations with whoever governs Venezuela and the other neighbors. This is just a position in principle of the country now. What happened more recently is that Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the new president, two weeks ago still as president-elect, sent a special envoy to Caracas to talk to President Chavez with whom he has had personal relationships and to the members of what this called the democratic opposition, looking for a way in which Brazil could be helpful to find a solution to end this confrontation. This is, this aspect of it is new, because Brazil traditionally does not volunteer its services. Its, its mediation capacity. It has to be asked. The reaction from what we understand from Caracas, from the opposition in Caracas, was not very positive. But I know that from yesterday for instance, there was two very active contacts between Brazil and Caracas. I think that Brazil is supporting actively the efforts of Secretary General of the Organization of American States César Gaviria that has been trying against hope to find a path of understanding, of negotiation, and frankly, you know, as Lula da Silva, the new president of Brazil, said the problem with Chavez is that Chavez is a military man, although duly elected by the people, is a military man that doesn't understand civil society. And obviously he has alienated most of support he had initially among the Venezuelan people. Although he had still a core group of support, which explains why he is capable of staying power.

Byron Scott 13:36

Let me, let me - if I can Paulo, ask Tim Johnson to chime in here and give us a little perspective of the importance particularly for those of us in the Northern Hemisphere. Tim, is this, is this a hard story to sell these days with our focus on Iraq?

Tim Johnson 13:55

It is in some parts of the country, but I think that as reporters what we do point out that Venezuela traditionally, has probably been the most loyal supplier of crude oil to United States for the longest period of time for many decades. And it provides traditionally 14% of US imports of crude oil. And to give a little perspective about what's at stake here in this power struggle over Chavez, one has to realize what the state oil company in Venezuela is like. It's Petróleos de Venezuela, PDVSA it's called and it's, at one point was considered one of the best run oil companies anywhere in the world. Chavez came to office after his election in 1998, accusing PDVSA of being a state within a state. I think that objectively when one looked at the situation that was probably true. It was a very efficient, you know, world class company. Run with the salaries for top executives that compared to any oil company anywhere in the world. And once you walked out of the headquarters of PDVSA, you were confronted with a situation that was far different. Government bureaucracies, fairly corrupt and so forth. So Chavez wanted, I think that he is really looking to remake PDVSA into a more political organ at the service of his government or future governments. And that has obviously huge implications not only for the United States, but also for Venezuelans.

Byron Scott 15:33

We're going to take a short break right now. Just to give our panelists a break, and to remind you that this is Global Journalists, broadcast to you from KBIA in Columbia, Missouri, in cooperation with the Columbia school, with the Missouri School of Journalism. And you can listen to us on the web at kbia.org or our for our own show globaljournalist.org. There is also a link from the homepage of the International Press Institute in Vienna, Austria, ipi.org. We'll be back in just seconds. We're back. Back to Global Journalist and we're discussing again the situation in Latin America, particularly the situation involving Venezuela and Ecuador and its partner and the largest economy in in the southern hemisphere, Brazil. Gentlemen, let me, let me ask you: is this... from the northern hemisphere perspective, this seems to be a reversion to the politics of 20 years ago or more. It... how can we, how can we view this, this combination of political strife and economic hardship in these nations. Miguel, let me, let me ask from your perspective from sitting in the gas line in Caracas.

Miguel Otero 17:11

So first of all, there is the way Chavez reaches a decision is, he has been working on the alliance, he has a very strong alliance with Lula, who is the Ecuadorian president (sic). But in the real world, what happened is that in the, in this oil strike Brazil sent a boat to (unintelligible) with gasoline. It was on a commercial basis. But the the opposition is very.... I mean things in Venezuela are very like dire. People start to protest to the (unintelligible). I'm sure that that has nothing to do with the strong (unintelligible) surprise with Chavez. That's one thing. The other problem is that this, I don't know how Chavez is going to last long in this situation. He's not far away from going out of the presidency. And the impact of the oil strike in the world is very, very strong because we have the Iraq situation and for

the United States was a reliable provider of oil for 50 years, 70 years. Actually, (unintelligible) on United States and the supply oil is going out because, I mean, the strike. But something they don't understand in the United States that that question is why they sending oil to Cuba and not to Citgo, which is our gas stations in United States. So that's something that the Department of State has been saying, we're not going to supply oil to our station because we are sending oil to Cuba. That's a reason they say.

Byron Scott 19:29

Interesting point of view. Paulo, how does, what is the feeling that in Brazil in regard to this, this friendship between Chavez and Castro?

Paulo Sotero 19:42

Well, we should not overdo the friendship between Castro and Lula. Or in this case, Chavez and Lula, because actually the gasonline and was sent by the previous government, President Cardoso.

Byron Scott 19:54

Alright.

Paulo Sotero 19:55

Chavez asked Lula, went to his inauguration on the first of January, asked him to give him some technical expertise to help with (unintelligible), which meant to break a strike. And obviously Lula is a former union man and his spokesman immediately said that that kind of help would not be given. Now, what is here, I think important to see is that what is the difference compared with the situations 20 years ago. 20 years ago, you did not have the Democratic Charter of the American or.... the Organization of American States. What the previous government of Brazil was saying and what this current government in Brazil will continue to say is that the important thing is to find a constitutional solution for the crisis. It's obvious that Chavez is an incompetent politician. It's obvious that he overplayed his hand and he helped to create this very sad situation Venezuela lives, but it's also true that the opposition to Chavez had not shown much talent either. They probably miscalculated badly by betting on something more than the referendum that the Constitution of Venezuela allows in the month of August. It looks (low?) and even in the US press you can see it now that apparently Chavez has won this round, that he has capacity to stay in power. This confrontation will continue. And, but again, I think that if you overplay this whatever friendship between Lula and Chavez you'll make a mistake because Lula is interested in what counts for Brazil. He was elected to defend Brazilian interests. Brazil is interested in a stable Venezuela. We will continue to have, we'll continue to work as much as possible to find, to help finding a solution there, but very clearly, this is something that if the Venezuelans don't want to settle, don't want to find a solution internally. And the thing is that the solution has to be constitutional. Because if it's not, any new government that is a product of that solution will not, will have a very difficult time being recognized by all the other countries in the Americas because there is now the Charter of the Democratic Charter of the OAS.

Byron Scott 22:32

Let me move on then to Ecuador. John, your country is not an insignificant exporter of oil to the Northern Hemisphere and also a very significant trade partner in other, in other products. Are we making progress or is this regression?

John Netevade 22:53

Well, yes. I mean, Ecuador, I understand right now is providing the supply to the United States. part of the Venezuela can do right now. I mean, there was a stop the, the expectation. And so Ecuador, currently the Minister of Energy, he was trying to supply the base in Ukraine. Ecuador has a... next year is going to have a new power line. I mean, there was made with a larger discussion in the in the Amazon area of Ecuador. I mean, what we call El Oriente. And there was many oil in that area. So there would be exporting a lot, too. And they are planning to give out 800,000 barrels a day. Obviously, I mean, Ecuador is a small comparison with Venezuela, who provide, who was... you know, it's probably around 2 million barrels a day. But right now, as I understand, they don't might even, not even grant 150,000. So the United States is happy with the Ecuador provide that minimum power but it can help. And in the other hand, Ecuador economy is much better because the barrel of oil right now is as they pay around \$32 a barrel, and the past was up around \$20 a barrel. So you see, it's very substantial for Ecuador-

Byron Scott 24:55

That, this has great ramifications for those of us here at the pumps in the United States. Tim Johnson, what is your perspective and and what is your view into the OAS as we're running out of time here.

Tim Johnson 25:08

Yeah. Well, I would agree definitely with Paolo that the Democratic Charter is a, is an innovative instrument that has, that really has a potential to change the panorama of US relations with other governments in Latin America. It's the only region of the world that is enmeshed with a legal document like this that empowers and obligates member states to step in before there's a democratic crisis. And there's a lot of back and forth among diplomats at the OAS and those going to the State Department here over exactly what should be done in regards to Venezuela, and in regards to other crises that may erupt. Obviously the situation in Ecuador is somewhat unique with, and with parallels to what's going on in Venezuela in the sense that you have a former Army officer who led a push against a democratically-elected government gaining great popularity. And I think that's symptomatic of how a democracy has not brought the rewards that a lot of people in the street of Latin America expect. So they're, you know, armed forces, in many cases, have a lot of prestige among people. Opinion surveys show that people respect the military as an institution, number of countries such as Ecuador, and previously perhaps in Venezuela. What the OAS will do now is still to be seen. There was a suggestion a few weeks ago that maybe a foreign minister should be convoked for meeting, but at this point, there's no unanimity in terms of what kind of role the rest of Latin America should have in in trying to deal with that crisis.

Byron Scott 26:51

Well, for any number of reasons, I believe we here in the Northern Hemisphere need to continue to follow these stories from our Latin American neighbors. But right now I'm going to have to conclude this discussion regretfully. I want to thank for their participation Miguel Otero, editor of El Nacional, sitting in a gas lane line in Caracas. Paulo Sotero, correspondent for Estado en Sao Paulo, speaking to us from Washington DC. Tim Johnson, Latin Affairs Correspondent for The Miami Herald - my alma mater, by the way, Tim. Many years ago. Also speaking to us from Washington DC. And last but not least, from New York City, John Netevade, correspondent for Diario Expreso, producer of La Voz de Ecuador,

correspondant from Telesistema en Ecuador. Gentlemen, thank you very much for your participation and we look forward to having you on the show again in the future.

All 27:50

Thank you.

Byron Scott 27:51

This is Global Journalist, and again for Stuart Loory who is in London and will be back with you next week. This is Byron Scott. Thank you in behalf of Pat Akers, our engineer. Colleen Stitura, our producer, Good night.