

Freedom for Joaquín Pérez Becerra!

Tuesday 31 May 2011, by [RIDDELL John](#) (Date first published: 17 May 2011).

The Colombian government must ‘immediately release independent media activist Joaquín Pérez Becerra,’ says the Socialist Alliance of Australia, in a statement published May 15 in the weekly newspaper, Green Left Weekly [\[1\]](#).

Pérez Becerra, a political refugee from Colombia and a Swedish citizen, was deported to Colombia on April 25 by the Venezuelan government. Socialist Alliance called on the Swedish and Venezuelan governments to do all possible to defend Pérez Becerra’s human rights.

Forced to leave Colombia in 1993 to escape a state-sponsored terror campaign that claimed the lives of his wife and more than 4,000 other leftist activists, Pérez Becerra became the director of the New Colombia News Agency (ANNCOL), Colombia’s fourth most widely read website. ANNCOL published attacks on human rights violations in Colombia, including information sourced from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), which the Colombian government accuses of being a “terrorist” organization.

“For this work,” says the Socialist Alliance, “the Colombian government has accused Pérez Becerra of being the ‘FARC’s ambassador in Europe’ and ‘conspiring in and helping finance terrorism,’” accusations that he vehemently denies. The Colombian government is notorious for repression and death-squad assassinations of political and union activists, of whom more than 7,500 are now in jail.

The Canadian connection

Despite its long terror campaign against its people, the Bogotá regime has enjoyed strong support from the Canadian government. Ottawa lists the FARC as an organization associated with terrorism, which makes it a crime in Canadian law to “contribute to, directly or indirectly, any activity” of a listed group. The Canadian government charges the FARC with conducting an insurgency that seeks to replace the current government in Colombia with “a leftist, anti-American regime that would force all United States interests out of Colombia and Latin America.”

The ban against the FARC, backed up by an apparatus of secret court proceedings hearing secret evidence, has been utilized by Ottawa to intimidate and harass Colombian political refugees in this country. Canada’s complicity in Colombian government repression underscores the urgent need for human rights advocates here to demand freedom for Pérez Becerra and other Colombian political prisoners, as well as an end to “anti-terrorist” harassment of dissidents in this country.

Establishing context

Venezuela’s role in extraditing Pérez Becerra into the hands of his Colombian jailers has come in for a great deal of criticism and condemnation on the left. In this discussion, the comments of Luis Bilbao, director of the Venezuelan-based journal América XXI, stand out in establishing the political context of the incident.

“I’d defend this man even if he were ... a leader of the FARC,” Bilbao says. “He should not be deported to his country of birth. Not because he’s a Swedish citizen ... but because he’s an enemy of the Colombian oligarchy – the crudest and most brutal on the continent – he should be protected.”

(See Spanish and an English text.)

Nonetheless, the circumstances of his deportation are curious, Bilbao notes. Pérez Becerra was detained at the Caracas international airport on April 23 on the basis of a “Code Red” alert from Interpol. However, “it seems – there isn’t any precise information – the classification was changed abruptly during the flight [to Caracas],” Bilbao says. The Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos then called Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez – during the flight – and demanded Pérez Becerra’s extradition. Santos even knew Pérez Becerra’s seat number, passed on by two Colombian government agents travelling with Pérez on the flight.

“The day that Joaquín Pérez Becerra arrived in Caracas,” Bilbao comments, “the foreign ministers of all of Latin America and the Caribbean started to arrive as well, for a preparatory meeting of the CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean states). On 5 July this organization will be launched in Caracas, and for the first time, there will be a regional organization without the presence of the United States [and Canada, we might add]. In other words, it’s the death certificate of the sinister OAS [Organization of American States]. An unprecedented victory against U.S. imperialism.”

Bilbao asks who had the greatest interest in attempting to sabotage CELAC’s formation. “Wasn’t it an obvious aim of the CIA to portray Venezuela as a FARC sanctuary, in order to abort the [CELAC] founding conference? Didn’t Pérez Becerra’s presence in Caracas at that time fit imperialist provocation like a glove?”

This is a plausible explanation for Chávez’s comment on the incident, made at a May Day march in Caracas: “They set a trap for him [Pérez Becerra] in order to get at me.” The Venezuelan government was caught in a lose-lose situation.

A pattern of provocation

The trap was sprung in the context of Venezuelan-Colombian relations that in recent years “reached the point of extreme tension and potential armed conflict,” Socialist Alliance notes. The Colombian government has “repeatedly accused Chávez of supporting the FARC” and of “harbouring FARC bases inside its territory.” WikiLeaks revelations demonstrate Bogotá’s willingness to send its troops into Venezuelan territory. Meanwhile, the U.S. has moved to escalate its war-making power in seven military bases within Colombia.

More recently, however, the Colombian government has taken steps to loosen its diplomatic alignment with Washington and strengthen ties with other countries of Latin America. When Juan Manuel Santos assumed the presidency on August 7, 2010, notes André Maltais of Quebec’s *L’aut’journal*, “his initial speeches stressed national reconciliation, human rights, the struggle against corruption and protection of trade-union rights.”

Such fine words were not followed by moves to halt the government’s systematic repression of its population, which Santos, previously minister of defense, had maintained and justified. Nonetheless, when the neighbouring Ecuadorian government was shaken on September 30, 2010, by a rightist-supported coup attempt, Santos was quick to join with Chávez and other South American presidents in giving strong backing to the legitimate government of President Rafael Correa.

Joint mediation in Honduras

At the beginning of April, Santos took part in brokering an initiative to resolve the political crisis in Honduras created by a U.S.-encouraged military coup on June 28, 2009. Sustained mass resistance to the illegitimate coup regime and its “president” Porfirio Lobo Sosa, compounded by diplomatic

isolation and economic crisis, led Lobo to approach Santos, seeking an accommodation with the mass opposition movement, FNRP (National Front for People's Resistance). Lobo then met with Santos and Chávez, after which Chávez contacted the ousted legitimate president, Manuel Zelaya, now exiled but still serving as a delegate of his country to the Central American parliament. Zelaya, general coordinator of the FNRP, consulted the Front.

The FNRP set four conditions:

- Safe return of all exiles, including Zelaya.
- An end to political repression and punishment of those responsible for violations of human rights.
- Initiation of a process to convene a national constituent assembly on a participative, inclusive, and democratic basis.
- Recognition of the FNRP as a militant political and social movement.

"The mediation is fragile," the FNRP stated May 9, but "positive so far"; the fact that Lobo approached Santos seeking a deal with the resistance "reveals the de facto [Lobo] government's impotence." Insisting on full implementation of the four conditions, the FNRP called for continued mass pressure and international solidarity. Lobo has not yet either accepted or rejected the four conditions.

The CELAC initiative reflects the same pattern of Colombia's integration into its region. CELAC will include 33 states of Latin America and the Caribbean, 29 of which were present at the April 2010 Caracas meeting, reports Rachael Boothroyd in *Venezuelanalysis*. Notably excluded are the United States and Canada. Structurally, CELAC is thus an alternative to the Organization of American States, which has served for decades as a pliant tool of U.S. hemispheric domination. Significantly, it is co-chaired by the governments of Venezuela and Chile, which are positioned at the left-wing and right-wing poles of continental politics. Colombia's participation is indispensable to its success.

The need to defend the CELAC initiative may not excuse Pérez Becerra's deportation - Bilbao believes it does not - but CELAC reflects Venezuela's continuing role in spearheading progress toward Latin American and Caribbean unity and sovereignty in the face of imperialist domination.

Venezuelan policy

The Pérez Becerra expulsion must also be measured against Venezuela's overall policy on the FARC.

"Venezuela has clearly stated that it believes Colombia's guerrilla forces, which Chávez has characterized as 'belligerent' forces, are not terrorists," notes the Socialist Alliance. "Chávez has called on these organizations to lay down their arms and seek a political resolution to the more than 40-year-old civil war.

"Chávez has rightly pointed out that any active support for the FARC on the part of Venezuela 'is the perfect excuse for imperialism to attack the people of Venezuela.'

"Chávez has also clarified that he has never accused Pérez Becerra of being a terrorist and that he hopes 'the Colombian government respects his human rights and his right to a defense.'"

Despite Colombia's participation in some useful recent initiatives, Pérez Becerra's incarceration is testimony that the human rights crisis in Colombia continues unabated. Our efforts to defend Latin American and Caribbean sovereignty must include active defense of Pérez Becerra and all

Colombian political prisoners.

John Riddell on May 17, 2011

P.S.

* <http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2011/05/17/freedom-for-joaquin-perez-becerra/>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.greenleft.org.au/node/47564>