

LATIN AMERICA - Tariq Ali on Hugo Chávez, the Axis of Hope and His New Book 'Pirates of the Caribbean'

Tariq Ali & Amy Goodman, Democracy Now!

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Tuesday, October 17th, 2006 - [Democracy Now! News Program](#) - Voting in the race for Latin America's open seat on the UN Security Council will go into a second day after delegates failed to end a deadlock between frontrunners Venezuela and Guatemala.

Neither country obtained the 125 votes needed to win, but after ten rounds of voting, Guatemala established a wide lead with 110 to Venezuela's 77. The balloting resumes Tuesday and could last days until one country prevails or the Latin American group decides to bring forth a compromise candidate. Guatemala's bid for the open seat is heavily backed by the United States.

Venezuela's President, Hugo Chavez, has become one of the foremost challengers of neo-liberal policies and a constant critic of American foreign policy. First elected in 1998, Chavez's influence continues to be felt throughout the region. Just this weekend, presidential elections were held in Ecuador that resulted in a run-off between two candidates - leftist economist Rafael Correa will face-off against Alvaro Noboa in a run-off next month. Correa is a close ally of Chavez, while Noboa is openly pro-Washington. Chavez's social-democratic reforms and his constant taunting of the Bush administration have brought intense hostility from Washington. Venezuela's U.N. Ambassador Francisco Arias Cardenas has complained that the US is actively trying to prevent Venezuela from winning the rotating seat on the U.N Security Council.

Well a new book examines Chavez, his influence and his legacy. In *Pirates of the Caribbean: Axis of Hope*, author Tariq Ali looks at how Chávez's views have polarized Latin America and examines the aggression directed against his administration. Ali also analyzes the leaders of two other countries - Cuba and Bolivia and looks at how together with Venezuela, they are sharply challenging American foreign policy.

[...] Tariq Ali is author of several books including *Bush in Babylon: The Recolonization of Iraq and Clash of Fundamentalisms*. *His new book is called Pirates of the Caribbean: Axis of Hope.*

AMY GOODMAN: Tariq Ali joins me in the studio today. We thank you for joining us.

TARIQ ALI: Good to be with you, Amy.

AMY GOODMAN: Are you following this vote in the UN?

TARIQ ALI: I am following this vote very closely, and I know that the United States is strong-arming even tiny countries, who obviously can't resist the pressure. And the fact that the United States takes this vote that seriously in a situation in Latin America indicates how much they fear Hugo Chavez, because otherwise this would have been a routine vote. It didn't matter to them which Latin American country sits on the Security Council. There's no right to veto. But they are fearful that the Venezuelans will use the Security Council as a platform to put an alternative view forward, and we live in a world where alternative views aren't permitted.

AMY GOODMAN: So what do you foresee happening at the United Nations?

TARIQ ALI: Well, I fear that the Venezuelans will not make it. I think that the United States will probably get its way and that Guatemala, a country with the worst human rights record in Latin America probably, is going to be the representative of Latin America on the Security Council, when a majority of Latin American countries would prefer Venezuela. The majority of Latin Americans are voting for Venezuela, but the United States wants Guatemala, because they will not tolerate a Venezuelan presence on the Security Council.

AMY GOODMAN: We're talking to Tariq Ali. Your last book was on Iraq. Can you talk about how Iraq relates to Latin America?

TARIQ ALI: Well, I just felt, Amy — I mean, we all write about Iraq. We talk about Iraq. The situation is incredibly depressing, as some of the images on your own program showed today. And I felt, because I've been traveling to Latin America a great deal, that we needed a book out which gave some sense of what is possible in this world and that people were getting incredibly weighed under the constant reports of violence coming out of the Arab world. And here was a part of the world where the only violence was that being directed against popular movements by those who the United States backs, and Chavez and Evo Morales were winning democratic elections and actually giving the people what they had promised them in these campaigns.

So, calling it Pirates of the Caribbean was, of course, tongue-in-cheek, but the Axis of Hope is the strong part of this book, that it shows that you can wake the world up from a neoliberal sleep, in which it has sunk, and that the Latin American leaders have a social vision, which offers some hope to the world at the present time. I mean, what we get from the Middle East is at the moment three occupations and constant battles and struggles and resistance and violence.

AMY GOODMAN: I wanted to go to a clip of a film, going back to the attempted coup in Venezuela. On April 11, 2002, President Hugo Chavez was removed from power by a coalition of military officials and business leaders. But the attempted coup d'état failed, and Chavez returned to office two days later.

Two Irish documentary filmmakers, Kim Bartley and Donnacha O'Briain, happened to be in the presidential palace in Venezuela, both when Hugo Chavez was removed and when he returned. They chronicled this period in a remarkable documentary called *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*. This is a clip from the film. We start with then-White House press secretary, Ari Fleischer, giving the Bush administration's response to the coup.

ARI FLEISCHER: Let me share with you the administration's thoughts about what's taking place in Venezuela. [...] We know that the action encouraged by the Chavez government provoked this crisis. [...] The Chavez government suppressed peaceful demonstrations, [...] fired on unarmed, peaceful protestors, resulting in ten killed and 100 wounded. [...] That is what took place, [...] and a transitional civilian government has been installed.

NARRATOR: Despite the blackout by the Venezuelan private media, members of Chavez's government have managed to communicate with international television networks, getting the message back to Venezuela via cable TV that Chavez had not resigned and was being held captive. Very quickly, the word began to spread.

Chavez had not been seen or heard of since he had been taken away two days earlier. That morning, as we drove around Caracas, the atmosphere was electric. Despite police repression, people had decided to march on the palace.

With so many people out on the streets, the palace guard who had remained loyal to Chavez decided to act. Behind Carmona's back, a plot was being hatched by Chavez's men to retake the palace. The plan was for the guard to take up key positions, surround the palace and to wait for a given signal.

With all their positions secured, the signal was given. The presidential guard moved in. Several members of the newly installed government were taken prisoner, but in the confusion, Carmona and the generals

had managed to slip away.

As the guards secured the building, Chavez's ministers, who had been in hiding for the last two days, began to arrive back to the palace to try and reestablish the legitimate cabinet.

AMY GOODMAN: The Revolution Will Not Be Televised, the film that was made in the palace during the attempted coup. Tariq Ali, your response?

TARIQ ALI: Well, I was there a year later, Amy, when they were celebrating the victory and the defeat of the coup, and I saw the first viewing of this film in Caracas with 10,000 citizens of that city, and they were going absolutely wild. And, of course, what the film showed is that it was popular support for Chavez, both amongst the poorer sections of the community and amongst rank-and-file soldiers, which made the coup impossible for the United States and the Venezuelan oligarchy. And this, of course, has been Chavez's big, big strength in that country. He has now won five elections in a row, and he's probably going to win the next one, too, with a big majority.

And what people do not seem to understand, within the establishment in the United States and its state media hacks, is that you can have political leaders today in parts of the world who are extremely popular because they give the people what they promised to give them. And politics elsewhere has become so isolated and alienating from the population that people just don't expect this anymore. And I think this is what explains the popularity of Chavez. And, of course, using oil money to push through mega-spending on health, on education, on building homes for the poor, free universities for the poor, this is not permitted in this world. He does it, and at the same time he challenges U.S. foreign policy in a very sharp way.

AMY GOODMAN: What about those who say he's increasingly authoritarian?

TARIQ ALI: Well, they've been saying this from the first time he won the election. You know, if he were increasingly authoritarian, how come that not a single private television station or newspaper, who denounce him day in and day out, have been touched? I mean, I cannot imagine, by the way, Amy, any Western country, this country or Britain, where you had the bulk of the media against you, which denounced you, which slandered you, and the governments would just sit back and take it. I think, you know, it's crazy to say that he's authoritarian. Some of the criticisms made by him from within the Bolivarians is that he's not tough enough with the opposition. So it's exactly the opposite.

AMY GOODMAN: And the significance of his speech at the United Nations?

TARIQ ALI: Well, that was a historic speech. I mean, the images weren't fully shown. But in other parts of the world, they were shown, and you saw the bulk of the delegates applauding him. It was like a breath of fresh air. And he took on the Bush administration's foreign policy, and lots of people came up to him afterwards from the Arab world, from other parts of the world, and said, "You say something which we can no longer say. We are just too frightened." And that is what gives it its support.

I mean, I think he went over the top a bit. I'm personally opposed to attacking Bush personally, in personal terms. Whether he's an alcoholic or what is not significant. But I think the administration has been attacking Chavez so hard, trying to get rid of him, telling lies about him, as we saw in that clip from the White House press secretary, that he's a very spontaneous guy and lost his cool a bit. But overall, the speech had a tremendous impact, and it made him a cult figure globally. And then, of course, it made Noam Chomsky a bestseller in this country, Amy, which is the other side of it.

AMY GOODMAN: Yes, I think Noam Chomsky's book *Hegemony or Survival* has hit number five on the New York Times bestseller list, the one that he held up.

TARIQ ALI: But, you know, this is a very interesting development, that a foreign head of state comes to the United Nations, denounces the American government, advises U.S. citizens to read Noam Chomsky, and they flock out and buy his book.

AMY GOODMAN: The New York Times had to issue a correction, by the way, because they reported twice that afterwards Chavez said he wished he could have met Noam Chomsky, but unfortunately he was dead. And that's what the Times reported twice.

TARIQ ALI: It was not true, because Chavez was talking about Galbraith.

AMY GOODMAN: Yes, that he wished he could have met Galbraith, but that he had not said that about Chomsky.

TARIQ ALI: He wished he could have met John Kenneth Galbraith. Yeah, but he certainly knows Chomsky is alive. I think Chomsky at the moment is probably on his way to Venezuela, as we speak. But there's no question about that, but that's very interesting, because this is a president — the other thing about him is he genuinely reads books. There are very few politicians who do. He reads books.

AMY GOODMAN: Evo Morales, the Bolivian president?

TARIQ ALI: Evo Morales, I have met once. I met him in Caracas. Incredibly honest, sincere, devoted politician. The first Native South American to be elected president of a republic.

AMY GOODMAN: Indigenous.

TARIQ ALI: Indigenous American. And I think that's had a mega impact. I'm nervous about the situation in Bolivia, because there's a lot of talk going on. The oligarchs there are incredibly unhappy and [inaudible] with the army. But again, if they try and topple Evo, you will have a very, very fierce resistance, because he came to power on the basis of gigantic social movements, which I try and explain in this book, that it's not that these people suddenly emerged. They have been part of social movements, both in Venezuela, where the first big revolt against neo-liberalism took place in 1989 and 3000 people were killed — that's what produced Chavez — then in Bolivia, where you've had giant social movements taking place.

And what they've also done is broken the isolation of the Cubans. You know, there's no doubt about that, that Cubans are less isolated now than they've been for a very, very long time. And the human capital that Cuba, this island of 12 million people, has produced in terms of doctors and teachers now flooding into Venezuela and Bolivia to help people there. So there are good things going on.

AMY GOODMAN: What's happening in Cuba now with President Castro sick?

TARIQ ALI: Well, I think he is ill. I think, you know, of course, Fidel, being a total atheist, has no illusions about where he's going to end up after he dies. He knows he's going to be six foot under the ground. There's no hell or no heaven. He doesn't believe. He's never been a believer.

The question is: what will happen to Cuba? And the big question dominating discussions behind the scenes is: what will Miami do, what will Washington do? My own view is that they will try and flood the island with money and buy it. That's what they will do, after all 12 million people. But from that point of view, I think the Cuban leadership has really to push through certain reforms themselves — they've been very lax in it — but, I mean, you know, proper reforms, not neoliberal reforms, but actually make available to the population a media which reflects criticism and discussion, opens up the country to diverse thought processes. It's important for that government to do it, and I have said this to them, and at the same time, opens up the economy to a certain extent, learns some of the lessons, positive lessons, from Venezuela, etc., and try and keep Miami at bay.

It would be a total disaster for Cuba if Miami really reentered Havana, because with it would come everything that existed before, and all the gains that the revolution has made, which even people hostile, like Colin Powell, admit that Castro has done a lot for the people of his country, that would go if it became a neoliberal island. And so, the Cuban leadership now needs to discuss how to stop that happening.

AMY GOODMAN: Tariq Ali, thank you for joining us. His book is *Pirates of the Caribbean: Axis of Hope*.

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