

Venezuela's insurrection against IMF sparks continent-wide revolt

by Valerie Rush

The Feb. 4 military coup attempt against Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez (or CAP, as he is known), and the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) model free-trade "democracy" is in worse straits than before. The imprisoned rebel leaders have become national heroes to the majority of Venezuelans, and mass protests against the government, and even new coup attempts, are considered imminent. CAP's hold on power is tenuous, at best, and his like-minded Ibero-American colleagues are being strongly advised to read the handwriting on the wall.

In a statement from Argentina's Magdalena jail issued Feb. 12, political prisoner Col. Mohamed Alí Seineldín identified his own nationalist movement and that of the Venezuelan rebels as part of a continent-wide "resistance movement" which would serve as "the foundation stone upon which the new independence of our peoples will be built" (see *Documentation*). He identified the IMF and its policies of free trade and usury as the strategic enemy to be defeated.

The president of Brazil's Military Club, the association of retired officers, Gen. Nilton Cerqueira, compared the situation in Brazil and Venezuela, insisting there was "submission to foreign interests" by both governments. He added that this was an "urgent concern" of the Brazilian military, and warned that "there is always the possibility of behavior out of the norm." In Peru, retired Gen. Germán Parra Herrera told a television audience Feb. 9 that both Seineldín and Venezuelan rebel leader Lt. Col. Hugo Chávez were "courageous men," who had taken full responsibility for their actions. Parra went on to offer a strong defense of Chávez's nationalist program.

In Bolivia, an anonymous military movement modeling itself on the Venezuelan one, sent a document to the Bolivian Congress appealing for actions in defense of the population and in rejection of U. S. policy impositions, "to avoid events like Caracas."

U.S. Ambassador to Caracas Michael Skol commented on post-coup statements of solidarity from Pérez's Ibero-American colleagues: "There is a feeling that if they support one [of their number] in crisis, it can not only help, but one can be helped later on. It is like deposits in a blood bank."

The insurrection in Venezuela has created a strategic

opening for nationalist forces continent-wide, and has international ramifications, for it occurs at a moment when the Anglo-American financial establishment is desperately trying to convince the new republics of eastern Europe to submit to the same IMF austerity which triggered the Venezuelan revolt. Indeed, columns have already begun to appear in the Ibero-American press warning that the fate of Romania's Nicolae Ceausescu and the former U. S. S. R.'s Mikhail Gorbachov awaits those leaders who serve the IMF rather than the needs of the people who elect them (see *Documentation*).

A civil-military alliance

CAP has repeatedly denounced the jailed rebel leaders as "Nazis" and "tyrants," in hope of isolating them from their huge civil-military base of support. Such Anglo-American mouthpieces as the *New York Times* have gone so far as to describe them as "blood-thirsty," "hate-filled," and pro-Saddam Hussein. But Venezuelans, many of whom held spontaneous celebrations upon learning of the coup attempt, are calling them national heroes.

One opposition congressman declared, while handing out copies of the rebel's program inside the Congress, that Chávez is "a symbol, a kind of hero. Already the teachers are saying that they owe the victory of their strike to him; the elderly say they owe their transport bonus to him . . . and if tonight the council of ministers approves a minimum wage increase, of course the citizens are going to say it is thanks to Chávez."

Former Venezuelan Minister of Mines and Energy Humberto Calderón Berti said that "it is undeniable . . . that there has been national sympathy for the insurgents." On Feb. 7, the Argentine daily *La Prensa* reported that "34% of the Venezuelan population backed the coup d'état, according to a poll taken by Mercanálisis."

The Feb. 12 *Washington Times* quoted one Caracas student, "I support democracy. But almost everyone I know thinks Chávez could have saved the country." The *Wall Street Journal* commented, "Indeed from shantytowns to posh neighborhoods, many Venezuelans express support for Chávez." The *Los Angeles Times* of Feb. 12 reported CAP's claim that the rebels had no serious civilian backing, but

added the comment of a Venezuelan government official that CAP "does not wish to test that contention by investigating non-military support for the attempted coup."

Much of the intense hatred against Pérez is in response to his murderous economic policies, designed largely to boost the country's foreign exchange for debt repayment. According to a government report issued last August, per capita income has fallen by 55% since Pérez took office in early 1989. The number of people suffering "critical poverty"—that is, able to buy only half the basic foods necessary for an adequate diet—has tripled since 1984, going from 11% in that year to 33% in 1991. As many as 80% of the Venezuelan population are categorized as "living in poverty."

And yet, in his desperation to prove to the international creditor banks that their confidence in him is well-placed, CAP is doing everything possible to guarantee that the popular support for Chávez turns into a full-scale revolution. He has repeatedly denied that his economic austerity and free-trade policies will be altered in the slightest. "I think it would be a dramatic error for my government to change its economic policy," he told the *Wall Street Journal*. "We are not going to control prices, nor establish exchange controls. Our policy has yielded indisputable successes."

The same fantasy is shared by the Wall Street investment house Salomon Brothers, which issued a press statement immediately after the coup: "The week's events amount to a moderate short-term setback for the Pérez administration and for Venezuela. . . . The evidence available suggests to us that there is minimal additional downside risk and that there is an upside potential because of the longer-term likelihood that economic reforms will be kept on track." According to a Reuters wire published Feb. 8 in the Colombian daily *El Tiempo*, "Citibank Vice President William Rhodes said in London that Pérez had assured him by telephone that Venezuela would move ahead with its reform program."

And, perhaps protesting too much is the IMF itself, whose Managing Director Michel Camdessus told the press during a Feb. 11 interview in Cartagena, Colombia that the Venezuela coup was "not the consequence of our policies. I don't see the invisible hand of the Fund."

Former Venezuelan President Luis Herrera Campins offered a different view of the situation, when he told the press Feb. 10 that "the coup attempt in Venezuela must be taken advantage of by the government of this country, to convoke the nations of Latin America, to issue a joint statement against the International Monetary Fund and the creditor banks, for the purpose of rewriting the payment terms of the continent's foreign debt."

'IMF democracy' shows its true colors

In refusing to abandon the austerity policies that have driven his country to revolution, CAP has left himself no choice but to employ the weapons of a full-scale dictatorship.

Under a 10-day suspension of constitutional rights, he has ordered raids in every part of the country, against civilian and military opponents alike, and imposed a censorship against the press which has provoked strong criticism domestically and abroad.

Publishing photographs of rebel leader Chávez was cited as sufficient cause to shut down and/or confiscate entire newspaper and magazine editions, and government censors have been placed in every major publishing house. Some newspapers were appearing with blank spaces stamped "censored," where coverage "not contributing to the tranquility of the public" was reportedly found. Attorney General Ramón Escovar Salóm protested that while the censorship was legal under the state of emergency, it was "excessive, arbitrary, and politically motivated." Miguel Enrique Otero, the co-owner and vice president of the major Caracas daily *El Nacional*, whose entire Feb. 11 edition was confiscated by an elite police unit, said, "The government is very scared . . . because the coup almost succeeded."

On Feb. 11, some 200 prominent Venezuelan journalists marched through Caracas chanting, "Democracy with censorship is dictatorship." The group entered the congressional building and crowded into the gallery of a standing session, eventually commandeering a microphone to demand that "the Congress not turn its back on the people, who have the right to hear the truth." That same day, *El Nacional* published a multitude of statements from press associations, the Catholic Church and political opposition forces denouncing the government for abusing its constitutional powers. The Colombian daily *El Espectador* editorialized Feb. 12 on CAP's abuse of power: "All America rejects his behavior and observes how his loss of calm confirms that the charges against him were true."

Especially scandalous was the Feb. 8 arrest of Gen. Jacobo Yépez Daza (ret.), president of the Retired Military Officers Institute (Iorfan), one day after the group published a statement defining the real issue behind the coup attempt as the CAP government's betrayal of the nation's political, economic, and territorial sovereignty, and demanding respect for the lives and rights of the imprisoned rebels (see *Documentation*). CAP has ordered a purge of the Armed Forces, and perpetual rotation of command, in hope of staving off new coup attempts.

But the winds of revolution blow in different ways. Andrés Velásquez, the governor of the state of Bolívar and leader of the Causa R party, told the daily *El Nuevo País* Feb. 12 that his party was proposing "a referendum to see if the people want to maintain this government or not, and if there is interest in advancing the elections." The same idea was echoed by congressman José Rodríguez Iturbe from the Social Christian (COPEI) party, who proposed moving the presidential elections, planned for December of 1993, up one year, and suggested that a mass resignation by COPEI congressmen might be necessary to force such a move.

Voices of the rebellion

The following proclamation was issued on Feb. 4 by rebel leader Lt. Col. Hugo Chávez Frías:

To the people of Venezuela and to our comrades in arms

The military action that will be immediately carried out is intended to oust from the government those who have slowly degraded the soul of our Republic of Venezuela.

We, as the military inheritors of the Army of the Liberator, cannot remain indifferent to what is going on today. The immense degree of corruption that plagues every area of our country, the huge number of privileges which some have, the failure to punish those whom we all know are guilty of having stolen public monies, the economic policies which have placed the plainest Venezuelans in deplorable conditions, the sale of our most basic companies to foreign consortiums, the inability of the great majority of Venezuelans to satisfy their most basic needs, the inefficiency of the health system and of all public services, and, finally, the denial of our sovereignty in all its aspects, forces us to take action to recover democracy.

If these invoked reasons are not sufficient, one more is indisputably sufficient reason to undertake an action that places our lives at risk: the President of the republic is not trustworthy to represent the country in negotiations over the Gulf of Venezuela. He says one thing one day and another the next. He is not a man of his word. No one can place their trust in his statements. In the high command of the republic, there must be individuals who can be believed, and whose clear ties to Venezuela's interests are evident to all.

The recovery of our Venezuelan identity and the renewal of democracy are more than adequate reasons to undertake an armed action, and they are ideals for which it is worth taking risks, even unto death. Truly, we have been trained in the military academy to defend these principles.

If our movement is victorious, we will hand power over to our people, so that they can actively exercise it, and Venezuelans who wear their nationality with pride will be called upon to administer public affairs. If our movement does not achieve its desired objectives, we know that lies will be used to denigrate us, and that the most merciless torture will be used against our bodies, as is the habitual practice of those who rule us. If this last should occur, we leave the defense

of our lives in the hands of our people and of our most worthy compatriots.

On the eve of our action, we hope that Venezuelans will exercise their constitutional right to rebellion, as we will now exercise ours, and we hope that our comrades in arms, educated in the thought and action of the father of our country, will be capable of behaving according to the ideals of Simón Bolívar.

Retired military leaders speak out

The following is selected from a full-page ad published in several Venezuelan dailies on Feb. 7, by Iorfan, Venezuela's Institute of Retired Armed Forces Officials:

The leaders of different sectors of society have all come out condemning the acts of violence, an attitude which we legally share. What surprises us is that there have been no references to the serious circumstances that induced these young officers to break with the uninterrupted and unconditional support we members of the National Armed Forces have given the democratic system. . . .

Apparently those doing the condemning have "ignored" the fact that we are facing a situation produced by multiple causes. . . . This blindness is inconceivable, given the warnings that many individuals and sectors of national life have periodically made clear in the mass media.

It is worthwhile to remember the article by Col. Luis Alberto Peña, "Discontent in the National Armed Forces and Coup d'état," which establishes the premise that if the National Armed Forces are the armed branch of the people, and the people are discontented, discouraged, frustrated, and angry, it is easy to infer that this "armed" part of the people should be in the same state of discontent. . . . Colonel Peña adds that "many public men . . . have proposed wage increases, under the belief that in this way the discontent will dissipate, as if they were dealing with a pack of mercenaries who are only happy with their pockets full of money, and not with men of thoughtful and patriotic sentiments, who love their country to the depths of their being."

In this sense, we should remember what has been stated before and what is indisputable: the national power, in its three main branches, has violated the constitutional postulates which define the Venezuelan democratic system. The Executive branch has demonstrated a great inconsistency and inability not only to provide our people with the most minimal social welfare, but also a foolhardy failure to defend vital interests in the Gulf of Venezuela. The Legislative branch has proven incapable of faithfully and fully interpreting the genuine aspirations of the people who elected it; and the Judicial branch has been characterized by the administration of "injustice" in the name of equity, thereby frustrating the expectations of a people yearning for order and justice.

Because of all this, it must clearly be stated that the true causes which gave rise to the recent events lie in the inability of the political leadership to combat corruption, to provide

security for individuals and their goods, efficient public services, order, and equality for all; in sum, to comply with the Constitution and the laws of the land . . . and—are we not, constitutionally, the guarantors of the fulfillment of these laws? . . .

We fully share the conceptual position of the minister of defense in his call for reflection over the painful events that have occurred. It is appropriate to point out that this reflection should be directed toward analysis and rectification by all sectors of the country. Thus we transcribe for this purpose the pronouncement made by . . . Iorfan, dated June 12, 1991 and published in the country's leading newspapers, which states: "Sectors of national life, without considering the consequences, have created mechanisms of corruption which have penetrated the principal cells of the social fabric, and of public and private institutions. . . .

"Those personalities who have reached important leadership positions have allowed themselves to be seduced by the ease of using ill-gotten monies to finance their political campaigns, availing themselves of ingenious mechanisms to extract millions of bolivars from the public treasury—in complicity with the private sector—for their electoral campaigns, and turning their backs on their responsibility to fulfill the postulates set forth by the Constitution and the laws of the republic, whose first order is . . . the 'right to a dignified life and to equally share in the wealth of the state.' " . . .

Compliance with the individuals' rights consecrated in the juridical order must be guaranteed. Prior experience leads us to demand that treatment of their persons be in accordance with respect for their human condition and, further, that at no time will there be retaliation or ill-treatment of their families, who have no connection to the events that occurred. . . .

For all these reasons, we will establish ourselves as jealous guardians, so that, through the appropriate institutions of the state, the relevant letter and the spirit of the law are fulfilled. . . .

Continent sees itself in Venezuela's mirror

Argentina

Col. Mohamed Alí Seineldín issued the following declaration, entitled "Carapintadismo and the New Act of American Emancipation," on Feb. 12 from Magdalena jail:

Those who have closely followed the events of Dec. 3, 1990 and what happened a few days ago in Venezuela, will understand that it is impossible to not find a relationship, or

common denominator, between one event and the other.

We who were the direct protagonists of one of them (Dec. 3, 1990), know that underlying them there is a unifying cause, which is nothing other than the greatness of our respective Fatherlands.

For them, it is Venezuela, for us, Argentina, but for both it is the cause of San Martín and Bolívar; it is the cause of Latin America, as our forefathers dreamed of it.

We understand and value the reason for their struggle, because we have been in prison for over a year for the same causes. Circumstances have had it that neither they nor we have achieved victory, and have remained a testimonial which, sooner or later, will be the foundation upon which the new independence of our peoples will be built.

Those who say they do not understand us should not fool themselves. For just as in the last century our forefathers legitimately fought for the independence of our peoples because we were already mature enough to separate ourselves from our parents and travel the road of liberty in a sovereign manner, so today, we who uphold the traditional values of our Fatherlands, who defend the most essential of our national being, we also struggle for independence, but in resistance against an Anglo-Saxon empire which, using the International Monetary Fund as its instrument, seeks to subject our peoples to the worst of dependencies, that of hunger, misery and culture, seeking that we renounce all for which our fathers fought.

In Venezuela, as in our country, lamentable deaths have occurred during the events, lamentable deaths not sought by we who rebelled; but we also do not forget that these deaths occurred because military groups, motivated by profound national consciousness and love of their peoples, have attempted to prevent the deaths which assault them daily, as a result of neo-liberal economic policies which generate terrible social injustices.

The principal mission of a politician, is none other than to seek the common good among the citizenry, and this will never be achieved by sacrificing part of the population. As the Holy Father said in Brazil: "The foreign debt cannot be paid with the hunger of the people."

The fuse of resistance and the new independence was lit in Argentina on Dec. 3, 1990; it reached Venezuela Feb. 4, 1992; and it will continue to spread throughout all those countries of Latin America which refuse to enter a new order which for them means misery, hunger, and submission to foreign interests.

We have been pleased to learn of statements of support from prominent political figures who have come out in defense of the legitimacy of the action carried out in Venezuela, as well as of the Venezuelan people, who understood that a democracy based on sacrifice, the impoverishment of its people, and the absence of ethical and moral values, stops being a democracy and becomes the worst of dictatorships.

The retired military men of Venezuela have gone even

further, and have given a real lesson to their Argentine counterparts, when 62 senior officers, including 10 generals and four vice admirals, demanded absolute respect for the rebel officers and non-commissioned officers, and blamed the politicians for Venezuela's grave crisis, while stating: "We will establish ourselves as jealous guardians (referring to the future trials of the rebels), so that, through the appropriate institutions of the state, the relevant letter and spirit of the law are fulfilled."

Time will tell if an independent judicial branch exists in Venezuela, which will base itself on the truth to achieve justice, or if it will be as in Argentina, merely a simple instrument of political power securing its interests.

Brazil

"A Warning to the Banks and the IMF," Jornal do Brasil, Feb. 6, column by Nelson Franco Jobim:

The incomplete and unacceptable military uprising in Venezuela, the country with the most democratic recent past in South America, serves to alert all countries which are subjected to the rigid requirements of the IMF [International Monetary Fund], demanded by the international banks for renegotiating foreign debts. Amongst them, Brazil. Also with the brutal recession we are passing through; inflation remains at around 25% a month; what will be necessary to fulfill the goal of 2% in December, forecast in the Letter of Intent sent to the IMF?

The only country which rigorously fulfilled its foreign debt commitments was Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, one of the last Stalinists, who exported meat, other basic foods, coal, and everything which could generate foreign exchange. When the revolt exploded, he was overthrown, summarily tried, and executed, in the only violent democratic revolution in eastern Europe. He paid with his life for the implacable dictatorship and for the misery and suffering imposed on Romanians. [Venezuelan President Carlos] Andrés Pérez barely escaped.

Neither could Mikhail Gorbachov—the most important postwar world leader, who ended the Cold War, communism, and nuclear terror—defend himself. After the Group of Seven meeting in London last July, he returned to Moscow with empty hands. . . . One month later, it was Gorbachov whose life was at risk. . . .

The same warning holds for Latin America and eastern Europe, for the international banks, the rich countries or the IMF: adjustment programs which only take into account macro-economic statistics, ignoring the reality . . . of economic desperation, creates fertile soil for popular revolts and nationalist *caudillo* adventures. With atomic weapons at stake, as in the old Soviet republics, the situation would be much graver. The so-called new world order would be at serious risk.

"Military Chief to Collor: Brazil Could Repeat Venezuela," Relatorio Reservado, Feb. 10-16:

There are real possibilities that the Brazilian government will have to confront focal points of convulsion, mainly in the periphery of large cities, and that this socially explosive situation could generate movements of dissatisfaction, of a civilian and military nature, along the lines of what happened in Venezuela. There are enormous differences, it is clear, between the two realities. But the neighboring country is today the scenario for the possible development of the Brazilian situation.

This evaluation was made by the military ministers, who met almost daily last week to analyze events in Venezuela. In a grave tone, they sent to President Collor and to Congress the warning that, despite the fact that the countries have different structures, there is a serious risk that Brazil could face the same kind of situation.

Pressured by U. S. State Department agents, who seek to transform them into police forces to combat the drug trade or militias involved in social questions . . . the Armed Forces analyzed in detail, according to the military minister, what happened in Venezuela. The objective was to . . . combat the idea that they will lose their function, and, nowadays, can be dispensed with. . . .

Colombia

"Echoes of the Coup," El Tiempo editorial, Feb. 6:

What happened poses interesting questions for Colombians. . . . What motivated the great popular discontent? . . . Corruption had fed up Venezuela. That is the primary reason that civilians and military, rich and poor, enter a moment of democratic disillusionment.

Colombia has a dangerously high level of corruption. . . . Colombians cannot complain if, as criminality advances, they arrive at dangerous hours such as faced in Venezuela. Immorality, the economic crisis—accentuated by the level of inflation in our country—are specters which threaten democratic leaders.

Former Foreign Minister Alfredo Vázquez Carrizosa, in El Espectador, Feb. 7:

The lesson to be derived from the events in Venezuela for the other governments in Latin America affiliated with the neo-liberalism [free trade and usury] of the IMF, is that the masses of all the continent will no longer endure generalized impoverishment, in exchange for promises of what could be imported one day which has no date, and which no one knows when it will arrive.

Fernando Buitrago, in La República, Feb. 7:

[The Venezuelan coup attempt] should serve as an example to other Latin American governments, puffed up with pride over their privatizations and market economy. . . .

These governments, including that of Colombia, must realize that neo-liberalism will not be the solution for the problems of our peoples. So-called savage capitalism, which is no different than Stalinist socialism, is a closed system that doesn't permit alternatives.