

# Calls mount to oust Venezuela's Pérez

by Valerie Rush

While Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez (commonly known as CAP) continues to cling to power with his fingernails, the movement to force his resignation took a new leap forward July 8, when a broad coalition of forces committed to ridding the country of its current leadership held a high-profile media event that reached into the home of virtually every Venezuelan.

Some 150 representatives of the most diverse political, social, and economic forces—including bankers, labor leaders, congressmen, industrialists, university professors, and a phalanx of high-level retired military officers—met at a Caracas hotel to call for CAP's resignation. At a prime-time evening hour, four private national television stations and the majority of the country's radio stations devoted free broadcast coverage to the meeting, which heard from such prominents as writer Arturo Usler Pietri; former Venezuelan President Rafael Caldera; former governor of Amazonas state Gen. Alberto Muller Rojas (ret.); Ciro Añez Fonseca, the former president of Venezuela's business federation; and Congressman Raúl Matos Azócar, former planning minister and current spokesman for the Democratic Table, the umbrella group of opposition congressmen who sponsored the meeting.

During the event, which was entitled "For a Solution to the Crisis," all speakers agreed on the urgency of changing the government. Unanimity spanned across the entire political spectrum, all the way from leftist Pedro Duno—author of a book on the groups which made their fortunes during the first CAP government (and which continue to enjoy political and economic influence in the current government), such as the Cisneros, Tinoco, and Febres Cordero families, etc.—to financiers who oppose CAP's monetarist free trade policies, such as Luis Vallenilla and Alfredo Morales.

The most powerful speech was given by General Muller, who denounced the "criminal behavior" of the country's ruling political class for blocking the reforms that could overcome the political and economic crisis wracking the country. Muller accused the Pérez government of committing deliberate provocations against the Venezuelan Armed Forces, including rewarding servility over professionalism. The military wants peaceful change along with the rest of Venezuelan society, he said, but "this change cannot be realized by a

leadership that has lost its legitimacy. . . . This change requires a courageous and responsible President of the Republic to resign his post."

Muller's message was unequivocal: Either CAP resigns, or the military will eventually be forced to take action.

## IMF 'reforms' at issue

President Pérez still refuses to read the handwriting on the wall. He responded to the unprecedented televised meeting by insisting that, come what may, he would finish out his term "to my last day in office." He accused the opposition of seeking to overturn his "economic reforms," and justified his brutal austerity regimen by arguing that the entire world was following International Monetary Fund (IMF) guidelines. "It's not possible that we can all be wrong," he pouted.

Ironically, it is precisely CAP's economic policies—enforced by the same corrupt political elements which have dominated the leadership of both major political parties for decades—which have triggered the present revolutionary upsurge. And it is precisely around the question of economic program where the organized opposition to CAP has failed most miserably.

Exemplary is the case of author Usler Pietri, who insists that CAP must resign, but also insists that the free trade "reforms" he has introduced must be carried through to completion. Usler Pietri is representative of an array of forces within the opposition movement which recognizes in President Pérez's unparalleled popularity a dangerous rallying point for the country's nationalist civil-military alliance that emerged around the Feb. 4 coup attempt. For such people, the sooner the corrupt CAP is out of the presidency, the sooner the banks will be able to recapture control over the country and consolidate their free trade "paradise" in Venezuela.

## The church adds its voice

Another critical voice in the anti-CAP chorus is that of the Venezuelan Catholic church, whose Bishops' Conference issued a strongly worded document just three days after the nationwide Democratic Table broadcast. In their statement, entitled "Where Is Your Brother?" the bishops warn that time is running out for a peaceful solution to the crisis, and that "the credibility of the President is at an all-time low, giving rise to many challenges to his remaining in power."

The document also takes a pot shot at a proposal by some among the opposition to hold a referendum that would presumably shorten CAP's mandate, but which would more importantly take momentum away from the mobilization for serious change in the country. "If the conclusion is reached that there should be a referendum, we would not oppose it. However, a referendum that does nothing more than consolidate the groups that have traditionally dominated the country would make no sense. The path of popular participation must be found."