

The dead end of Chavez's "revolution"

Coup warnings grow in Venezuela

Bill Vann

10 September 1999

The protracted constitutional crisis unleashed by the election of former military officer and coup leader Hugo Chavez in Venezuela has increased the danger that the Venezuelan military may be preparing to seize power in an attempt to squelch potential social unrest. The threat of military intervention looms nearer following the eruption of street battles outside the Venezuelan Congress August 27 between supporters of Chavez and the newly elected Constituent Assembly and backers of Venezuela's traditional ruling parties which still control the legislative body.

Militarized units of the National Guard joined with police in breaking up the warring mobs outside the parliament, while the country's Catholic Church hierarchy worked to broker a compromise between the Chavez regime and Venezuela's old ruling parties.

Chavez, a former paratrooper who rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel, staged an abortive coup attempt in 1992 against the government of Carlos Andres Perez and was jailed for his efforts. Six years later, he was elected president as head of the Patriotic Pole, an electoral front comprised of his own Fifth Republic Movement and various parties of the petty-bourgeois nationalist left.

The meteoric rise of "Comandante" Chavez is a measure of the putrefaction of the bourgeois forms of rule in Venezuela. The two parties that have monopolized political power for more than 40 years, regularly taking their turns in the presidential palace—Democratic Action (affiliated with the Social Democratic international) and COPEI (Christian Democratic)—are completely discredited political instruments of Venezuela's corrupt ruling elite.

One of the richest countries in Latin America by virtue of its immense petroleum reserves, Venezuela nonetheless has 80 percent of its population in poverty. Thirty percent are unemployed and 50 percent of those classified as economically active make their living off the so-called informal sector, working as street vendors, collecting scrap or doing odd jobs. The middle class has seen 70 percent of its buying power wiped out over the last 20 years, while the national debt, the fourth largest in Latin America, consumes fully 40 percent of the national budget. The entire political and economic life of a country of 23 million people has been subordinated for decades to the maintenance of the living standards of a tiny elite and meeting the interest payments on foreign debt controlled by Wall Street banks.

The repudiation of the parties identified with this oppressive

setup found expression in Chavez's 56 percent majority in the February presidential race and even more overwhelmingly in the election of the Constituent Assembly, in which parties backing the new government took 92 percent of the vote, gaining 120 of its 131 seats. In the Congress, whose members were elected before Chavez's rise to power, parties supporting the new president hold only 33 percent of the seats.

While Chavez's populist demagoguery and denunciations of the ruling elite have won him popular support, his policies are well within the guidelines set by the International Monetary Fund and Wall Street. Despite predictions of massive spending, salary increases and exchange controls, the new government has reduced public spending by 20 percent compared to last year. Public sector wages have been frozen, while a new natural gas investment law provides some of the most favorable conditions for foreign capital enacted anywhere in the hemisphere. The government has also floated proposals for the privatization of the aluminum and power sectors.

Chavez has used the Constituent Assembly to declare a "state of emergency" and to begin a project of uprooting the old political institutions of the Venezuelan state. The ostensible mission of the assembly was to draft a new constitution to replace the one adopted in 1961, in the wake of the 10-year US-backed military dictatorship of General Marcos Perez Jimenez. Soon after its formation, however, the assembly began to constitute itself as a battering ram against the existing legislative and judicial branches of the government as well as Venezuela's national trade union federation, the CTV, or Confederation of Venezuelan Workers.

The street brawl between Chavez supporters and backers of the traditional ruling party was provoked by a move on the part of the Constituent Assembly to close down the legislature and assume all of its powers. While the action prompted the president of the Chamber of Deputies, Henrique Capriles, to warn that Venezuela is "on the path to civil war," the confrontation was notable for its lack of any mass mobilization. Groups of a few hundred leftist backers of Chavez traded insults and punches with a similar number of political hacks from COPEI and Accion Democratica, prompting about 200 guardsmen to break up the confrontation with tear gas.

A political compromise negotiated by the Catholic Church and announced on September 9 provides for a brief period of political "cohabitation" between the Congress and the Constituent Assembly. The truce provides for Congress to continue its

functions until mid-December, when the new constitution would be put to a national referendum and new elections would be called for the legislative body.

While emergency decrees remain in effect, the Chavez regime appears to have taken a more cautious approach to its intervention into the legislative and judicial branches of the government, to a large degree because of fears of opposition within the military command.

According to the Spanish newspaper *El Pais*, Chavez appealed directly to the general staff last March to support his reorganization of the state structure and his dissolution of the Congress. He failed to win the support of the commanders. The military appears as divided today as it was when the ex-lieutenant colonel attempted his coup seven years ago. A group of younger officers, mostly captains and majors, who backed the coup, continue to support the new president. But other commanders, who opposed Chavez in 1992, suppressing his uprising, remain cool toward the new government. Many of those who stood with then President Andres Perez in 1992 naturally won promotions and rose to the top positions within the military command. The concern among this senior layer is not only over Chavez's populist rhetoric, but more concretely that he will begin interfering with the military's system of promotions and rewards, elevating his own supporters at the expense of those who previously stood against him.

Even among Chavez's comrades-in-arms from the 1992 coup there are serious fissures. Many view with distaste the new president's alliance with Venezuela's petty-bourgeois left, including ex-guerrillas-turned-politicians, such as the leaders of the MAS, or Movement toward Socialism, whose secretary general, Leopoldo Puchi, served as Minister of Labor in the first months of the Chavez government.

Not unconscious of the disquiet within the officer corps, the leaders of the traditional parties made a direct call upon the armed forces to "defend the constitution" against the Chavez government. Cesar Perez Rivas, chief of the COPEI parliamentary faction, issued the statement in conjunction with Accion Democratica and the conservative Venezuelan Project party, protesting the intervention into the Congress by the Constituent Assembly.

Together with the opposition of the military, there are the statements from Washington expressing "growing concern" about the constitutional crisis in a country which is a leading supplier of petroleum to the United States. International capital has also expressed its reservations with a 40 percent decline in direct investments over the past year.

Meanwhile, the Chavez regime has also backed down somewhat from its initial vows to abolish the CTV, which comprises some 4,000 unions and more than 2 million members. Instead, the new government has halted the subsidies that the government has granted the union bureaucracy for the past four decades and is initiating an audit of the CTV's \$24 million annual budget. As the CTV is known for its corruption, the inflated salaries of its leaders and its suppression of strikes, there is little danger that these actions will provoke resistance from the Venezuelan workers. Meanwhile, leaders of some of the left-nationalist parties have identified themselves with the government's "labor reform," seeing

it as a vehicle for supplanting the old bureaucracy linked to Accion Democratica.

Many left-wing nationalists in Venezuela, and in Latin America generally, have hailed the ascendancy of Chavez as a revolutionary development. Eager leftist journalists from Buenos Aires, Mexico City and elsewhere have breathlessly reported their pilgrimages to Miraflores, the presidential palace in Caracas, for personal interviews with the paratrooper president.

These people represent a sociopolitical layer which is incapable of either forgetting or learning anything. The same tendencies hailed the "anti-imperialist" credentials of the likes of Gen. J.J. Torres in Bolivia, the "humanist revolution" of Velasco Alvarado in Peru, Panamanian General Omar Torrijos's "revolution for the dispossessed" and the "revolutionary nationalist" orientation of General Rodriguez Lara in Ecuador. Like Chavez, many of these military rulers adopted radical reformist rhetoric and evinced a friendly attitude toward Cuba.

In each case, however, these figures merely paved the way for more reactionary regimes, often military dictatorships, which quickly took away whatever meager reforms had been implemented and waged a merciless assault on the political rights and social conditions of the working masses of these countries. The support of petty-bourgeois leftists for the "revolutionary" officers served only to disorient the working class and leave it politically disarmed as the general staffs in these countries dispensed with nationalist-reformist pretenses and turned sharply to the right.

Indeed, Venezuela's own history provides the clearest example of this often-repeated political trajectory. In 1945 a group of young officers tied to Accion Democratica seized power, forming a civilian-military junta which sought to revise the constitution and initiated various reforms. Seeing their interests threatened, other sections of the military, backed by Washington, the petroleum companies and the right-wing opposition parties, launched their own coup, installing the police state regime of Perez Jimenez, which ruled the country for 10 years.

Chavez has attempted to draw a sharp distinction between his actions and those carried out by the Venezuelan officers in the mid-1940s. But the developments over the past few weeks reveal a growing threat of just such an outcome so long as the fighting capacity of the Venezuelan working class remains subordinated to the political maneuvers of the Chavez regime.



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