

# US debacle in Venezuela: Bush administration backtracks on coup

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18 April 2002

The brief overthrow and subsequent restoration of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has left that Latin American country in a state of deep political crisis. There are strong indications that, despite the humiliating debacle suffered by those who carried out an April 11 coup d'etat, new US-backed attempts to remove the elected government are in the offing.

If one accepts the Bush administration's account, high-ranking US officials met on a virtually continuous basis in recent months with the military officers, businessmen and trade union bureaucrats who organized the ill-fated April 11 military coup in Venezuela. But, administration spokesmen insist, these officials repeatedly urged the coup plotters not to take extra-constitutional action.

This self-serving version of the US role was fashioned only after the nascent junta headed by big business association chief Pedro Carmona disintegrated in the face of a popular uprising in the streets of Caracas and growing divisions within the Venezuelan military.

When it appeared that the plotters had succeeded, the White House could not contain its glee, quickly blaming the coup on Chavez and proclaiming the junta's legitimacy.

The composition of the coup leadership further discredits Washington's denials of responsibility. That a group of military officers—several of them graduates of the Pentagon's School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia—and wealthy businessmen would ignore Washington's "advice" and go ahead with a coup d'etat opposed by the US government defies all logic.

Even if taken at face value, this absurd scenario would make the Bush administration an accomplice in the abortive attempt to overthrow an elected Latin American government. Though repeatedly notified that a coup was planned, it did nothing, by its own admission, to warn the Chavez government.

The information that has emerged in the wake of the coup makes it increasingly clear that a right-wing cabal of anti-Castro Cubans and veterans of the CIA-organized "contra" army that attacked Nicaragua in the 1980s worked intimately with those who organized the coup.

According to the Bush administration, within hours of the junta's announcing its seizure of power, Otto Reich, the US Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs, was in telephone conversation with Carmona, advising him on the political tactics to be pursued by the new "military-civilian" regime.

US officials cited the conversations, in which Reich allegedly urged Carmona not to immediately dissolve the National Assembly, as evidence that the Bush administration was defending democratic principles.

But the exchange, as reported by these officials, indicates that Reich was working to prevent the regime from overreaching during its first day in power, fearful that it would provoke popular opposition.

The Pentagon, meanwhile, acknowledged that Rogelio Pardo-Maurer, the Defense Department official responsible for Latin America, discussed the proposed coup in Washington with Gen. Lucas Romero Rincon, chief of the Venezuelan military command. Officials claimed that Pardo-Maurer

warned the general about Washington's concern for democracy and human rights.

The credibility of these claims can best be judged by examining the background of the administration's supposed champions of democracy. Reich, a right-wing Cuban exile, served in the 1980s as the head of the State Department's Office of Public Diplomacy, an outfit set up by Lt. Col. Oliver North to further the illegal US funding and arming of the contra mercenary army in Nicaragua. An investigation concluded that Reich's office had "engaged in prohibited, covert propaganda activities," using CIA and military resources to spread disinformation, vilify the Nicaraguan government and build support for the contras.

Afterwards, Reich became US ambassador to Venezuela, where he established close ties to the extreme right in that country. He distinguished himself by working successfully to free the anti-Castro Cuban terrorist Orlando Bosch, who was jailed for putting a bomb on a civilian Cuban aircraft, killing 73 people.

Pardo-Maurer, meanwhile, spent the 1980s working in Washington as the chief spokesman for the Nicaraguan contras.

Finally, in Caracas, the US installed Charles Shapiro as its ambassador in February, just as preparations for the coup emerged in the open with pronouncements by several military officers against the Chavez government. Shapiro enjoyed close ties with the Cuban reactionaries who have assumed control of the Bush administration's Latin American policy, having served as the head of the State Department's Office for Cuban Affairs before taking the Venezuelan post.

He also is a veteran of the bloody wars fought by the Reagan administration in Central America, having served as the US Embassy's political officer in El Salvador in the mid-1980s. He occupied this post, which is often used as a cover for the top CIA agent in a given country, at a time when the CIA was orchestrating a savage campaign of repression that claimed the lives of thousands of Salvadoran workers and peasants.

These are the figures who were supposedly trying to talk the Venezuelan generals and financial elite out of staging a coup. Given their records, it seems far more likely that they were among the principal instigators and organizers of the military overthrow.

Washington's desire to bring down Chavez is bound up with US strategic interests in the hemisphere and internationally. As the world's fourth-largest petroleum producer, Venezuela's importance to US foreign policy has grown with the spiraling crisis in the Middle East. The Chavez government antagonized the US by providing low-cost oil to Cuba—as well as to Central American and other Caribbean nations—and by supporting tighter discipline on quotas within OPEC to keep up the price of petroleum. He has also refused to cooperate with the US military escalation in Colombia, where the Bush administration has proposed a shift from the "war on drugs" to an open counterinsurgency campaign, which is to include the use of US-backed military units to protect US-owned oil installations and pipelines.

The recent election of a Venezuelan to head OPEC and the Chavez

government's talk of supporting an Iraqi proposal to withhold oil exports in response to Israel's offensive on the West Bank sent US efforts to put an end to his government into high gear.

Chavez's "Fifth Republic Movement" and "Bolivarian Revolution" are cut from a familiar pattern of Latin American military populists, from Argentina's Peron to General Velasco Alvarado in Peru and General Omar Torrijos in Panama. Unlike these predecessors, however, Chavez has done relatively little to expand the public sector and has pursued economic policies that fall well within the parameters established by the International Monetary Fund, passing laws allowing the takeover of the Venezuelan telecommunications sector by the multinationals and assuring the property rights of the foreign oil corporations.

It is a measure of both the rapacious aims of US capitalism and the huge social gap between wealth and poverty in Venezuela, however, that Chavez's limited social reforms in education, health care and land distribution were seen as an intolerable threat. His attempt to place his own appointees on the board of the state oil corporation and to curb the drive to privatize the institution provoked the ire of both native and foreign capitalists.

It also provided the opening for one of the main participants in the coup, the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers, or CTV. This corrupt and bureaucratized organization, which by its own account formally represents barely 12 percent of Venezuelan workers, is among the closest allies of the US AFL-CIO.

Since Chavez came to power in 1998, the AFL-CIO's American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS), the successor to the infamous American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), which provided critical "labor" support for military coups in Brazil, Chile, Uruguay and elsewhere in the 1960s and 1970s, has played an increasingly active role in Venezuela. Funded by the US Agency for International Development and the National Endowment for Democracy, the ACILS sent the Venezuelan CTV "technical advisors" to help prepare the confrontation with Chavez.

It was a general strike called jointly by the CTV and the employers' federation, FEDECAMARAS, headed by Carmona, and the mass demonstration that they both organized in Caracas, which launched the coup. Gunfire that felled about a dozen people was blamed on forces loyal to Chavez and seized upon by the military as the pretext to take power. Investigators have since established that the first shots were fired by sharpshooters operating with the demonstrators, and that the first four victims were among those defending the presidential palace.

While the junta managed to imprison Chavez, it soon fell prey to internal contradictions that grew ever deeper as popular outrage over the coup spilled into the streets of Caracas and other major cities.

Carmona and his military allies carried out measures of the kind imposed by the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile and other extreme right-wing regimes. With a stroke of his pen, the business leader disbanded the National Assembly, abolished the constitution, revoked every law passed by the Chavez government and affirmed the right to dismiss any elected governor or mayor in the country.

Behind Carmona stood the wealthiest and most reactionary sections of the Venezuelan ruling class, which were determined to use the coup to assert their unfettered control over an oil-rich economy that has long yielded them huge fortunes, while leaving 80 percent of the population in poverty.

Among those backing the junta was a single political party, Justicia Primero, or JP, the successor of the Christian Democratic COPEI party, which controls just six of the national legislature's 165 seats. To a large extent, the preparations for the coup were funded by the Perez Recao family, the owners of the Venezuelan petrochemical corporation Venoco, which fielded its own armed bands in the midst of the abortive overthrow. Also reported to have a significant role was Opus Dei, the right-wing

Catholic society.

Faced with a regime controlled by Venezuela's traditional exploiters, masses of workers, students and poor defied the tanks and troops to defend what little they have gained during the Chavez years. Whole neighborhoods erupted in street battles and looting, while the city's poor marched toward the center of the capital.

A Peruvian journalist described the impression made by the demonstrations against the coup: "They came down from the 'cerros' [shantytowns] armed with sticks, rocks and others with guns firing into the air. All with menacing gestures shouted 'Chavez, Chavez.' It is the first time that I was so afraid to go into the street. The police tried to control them, but by noon they were overwhelmed."

While the junta's leaders had arrested Chavez and leading aides and raided the homes of a few hundred of his known supporters, they and their American backers had failed to make the kind of preparations needed to drown a mass movement of working class protest in blood.

The alliance formed under Washington's tutelage quickly began to fracture in the face of popular opposition. After joining Carmona in calling the strike that was to pave the way to the coup, the CTV's chief bureaucrat, Carlos Ortega, accused the business leader of "betrayal" and denounced him for seeking to form a "dictatorship of the right," according to those who were present at their discussions. He announced the withdrawal of his support.

Within the armed forces there were also significant defections. Many in the military high command regarded Chavez—who as a paratroop officer staged his own aborted coup in 1992—as an upstart. Veterans of the counterinsurgency campaigns of the 1960s, they resented his friendship with Cuba, and chafed under his proposals to use army units for social development projects. Others, however, were Chavez's military cronies and had benefited from his presidency, receiving promotions and preferable assignments.

The collapse of the coup has been compared in Cuba and Latin America generally to the debacle of the Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961, when the CIA and the Kennedy administration grossly underestimated the capacity of the Cuban people to fight against the restoration of the hated Batista regime.

The Bush administration has distinguished itself on the international arena by asserting its right to remove foreign governments that it does not find to its liking. This was the policy it pursued in Afghanistan and it is the policy that it attempted to carry out in Venezuela.

The blatant US attempt to overthrow an elected Latin American government has elicited only muted criticism from the Democrats in Congress. In many countries, the revelations that have already emerged about the administration's activities in Venezuela would have provoked a desperate crisis and the likely fall of the government. But the lesson the Bush administration will likely draw from its failure in Caracas is to rely even more heavily on direct US military intervention.

For his part, Chavez has responded to the events with a show of contrition and plea for conciliation that has not been matched by any of those who overthrew and abducted him. He has held round-table discussions with the employers' federation, the union bureaucracy and the Catholic Church, all of which had a hand in the coup. He has agreed to put his regime's limited agrarian reform and the law upholding state control of the oil industry up for discussion.

Justicia Primero, which is the political party most implicated in the coup, has called for Chavez's resignation and the dissolution of all elected bodies in the country.

The CTV bureaucracy has demanded a national referendum "for our people to democratically express their will over whether they want the current government to continue directing the country's destiny." The trade union bureaucrats have also demanded the immediate release of military officers and a handful of civilians who were placed under arrest

for their part in the coup.

Meanwhile, the US State Department has authorized the voluntary departure from Venezuela of all embassy personnel in non-emergency positions and all dependents, while reiterating a warning to Americans against travel to the country, declaring that “the political situation remains fluid and there has been widespread civil unrest.”

All this indicates it is not a matter of if, but when another attempt will be made to bring down the Chavez government. Washington and its local allies are undoubtedly preparing for far more systematic and murderous repression against those who resist the next coup.

For the working people of Venezuela and Latin America as a whole, the events of the past week are a stark warning. Faced with a mounting economic crisis, unprecedented social polarization and growing social revolt throughout the continent, capitalism is driven to revive the methods of counterrevolution and dictatorship. Only by mobilizing its strength independently of all sections of the military and the political establishment on a socialist program will the working class be able to defend its rights against the conspiracies of US imperialism and the native ruling elite.



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