

As Washington eyes Latin "axis of evil"

Coup attempts continue in Venezuela

Bill Vann

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An attempt by a ring of 14 high-ranking Venezuelan officers to spark a military rebellion against the government of President Hugo Chavez appeared to have fizzled Thursday when army units failed to respond to their call for "disobedience."

The officers are among those who were suspended and are under investigation for their roles in a US-backed coup that briefly brought a civilian-military junta to power last April and led to Chavez's imprisonment for two days. The coup collapsed in the face of mass demonstrations and rioting by supporters of the Chavez government centered in the impoverished neighborhoods of Caracas.

The dissident generals on Tuesday occupied Plaza Altamira, the square that is the center of one of the wealthiest zones in Caracas, declaring it "territory liberated by the institutional armed forces." There they were joined by hundreds of well-heeled demonstrators banging pots and pans, and were hailed by elements that helped organize the coup six months ago. These included Carlos Fernandez, who heads the Venezuelan business association Fedecamaras, and Carlos Ortega, president of the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV).

Both Fedecamaras and the CTV bureaucracy participated in the planning of the last coup, organizing a mass march on the presidential palace that degenerated into violence which left 19 people dead. The big business organization and the trade union federation joined again on October 21 in organizing a 12-hour strike/lockout that shut down light industry, banks and the retail sector to press the demand for Chavez to resign.

The CTV enjoys the closest collaboration with the US union federation, the AFL-CIO, of any union movement in Latin America. It has been the recipient of hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants funneled by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) through the AFL-CIO-directed American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS). Both the NED and the ACILS were set up by the US government in the 1980s to provide a cover for political operations that had previously been conducted by the CIA.

Meanwhile, the Venezuelan media, together with the Spanish-language network of CNN, have given unabashed support to the efforts to organize another coup, broadcasting the generals' appeals and lionizing the opponents of Chavez. One report from Venezuela described the media as attempting to turn the CTV's Ortega into a "tropical Lech Walesa."

In a public statement Wednesday, Chavez charged that the 14 senior officers demonstrating in the square had "tried unsuccessfully to push a military insurrection." He added, "No one can doubt that what is being cooked up is a crime ... As they have failed, the officers are now looking to see how they can get out of this show they put on."

The dissident generals denied that they were attempting a coup and

cited a clause in the Venezuelan constitution allowing citizens to resist an undemocratic government. They and other opponents of the regime have put forward demands that Chavez resign or call another election in December. The twice-elected Venezuelan president's term runs until 2006, and he has rejected any vote until next August, when the constitution allows for a referendum on his government.

Statements by some of the dissident officers leave little to the imagination. Venezuelan Army General Nestor Gonzalez, for example, told Union Radio network earlier this month that Chavez is "a lunatic," and urged the senior commanders of the country's armed forces to "stop wearing your uniforms only for the benefits you obtain and take responsibility for the historic function that must be carried out." Others in the group warned of bloodshed within the armed forces unless they united behind the effort to oust Chavez.

The spokesman for the protesting commanders, General Enrique Medina, charged Chavez with fomenting "class hatred" in Venezuela. The country is among Latin America's most polarized and the sharp recession that is gripping the entire continent has further sharpened tensions.

Venezuela's economy has shrunk more than 7 percent in the first half of the year alone, while nearly half a million workers lost their jobs. Both foreign and domestic investors have fled the Venezuelan market, with capital flight estimated at over \$10 billion over the same period. In a stark indication of the mounting poverty that plagues the majority of the country's population, food purchases are down 10 percent from last year.

Despite growing misery, Chavez retains a substantial base of support within the working class and among the poor, both because of his populist denunciations of the oligarchy and "neo-liberalism," and because these sectors recognize in his enemies the most determined defenders of wealth and privilege.

The social and political polarization has led to widespread warnings that the country may descend into civil war. Armed clashes have already taken place in the western state of Tachira, where a group calling itself the United Self-Defense Forces of Venezuela—apparently modeling itself on the right-wing paramilitary organizations in neighboring Colombia—has assassinated dozens of government supporters.

Meanwhile, the Chavez regime and its opponents at the state and municipal level are engaged in a tug-of-war for control of various state and local police agencies that could play a role in another coup attempt. There are reports that private militias have been formed and are training at the haciendas of wealthy opponents of the government.

The Caracas daily *El Universal* has also reported that junior officers who back Chavez have been touring the nation's barracks urging soldiers and non-commissioned officers to defy any order from senior

commanders to participate in an overthrow of the government.

Organization of American States Secretary General Cesar Gaviria offered again to mediate between the two sides, while condemning the generals' demonstration. "Attitudes and demands [made by the rebel officers] betray the constitutional loyalty that officials of the armed forces owe to President Chavez," he said.

The US State Department issued a statement urging a "constitutional, democratic and peaceful" solution to the Venezuelan political crisis. Unlike the OAS, however, Washington pointedly omitted any condemnation either of last April's coup or the latest generals' rebellion.

US Assistant Secretary of State Otto Reich declared that the Bush administration is concerned about the "difficult situation" in Venezuela, and urged Chavez's government to disarm pro-regime civilian militia groups—including members of the so-called Bolivarian Circles. He added that since the president "obviously has the power and the weapons, it's up to Chavez to initiate a dialogue (with the opposition) and take measures that guarantee peace."

Reich, a right-wing Cuban-American who played a key role in the Reagan administration's illegal contra war against Nicaragua in the 1980s, was in direct contact with the plotters before and during last April's abortive coup.

While the first coup failed and the demonstration by the 14 generals was dismissed by the Chavez government as "clowning," there is every reason to believe that Washington and the Venezuelan oligarchy will stage another attempted military overthrow. The key US concern is oil. Venezuela is the world's fifth-largest oil exporter and the third-largest source of imported oil for the US, sending it about half the 3 million barrels it produces daily. Bush administration policy-makers have become increasingly preoccupied with Venezuela in the context of their plans for a war to conquer Iraq. They are determined to have a reliable regime in Caracas to assure steady and possibly stepped-up oil deliveries in the event of a disruption of supplies from the Middle East.

There has been speculation that a coup will come either in advance of a US strike on Baghdad, or in the very midst of an invasion, when the CIA's dirty work in Venezuela would be far overshadowed by the carnage in Iraq.

His populist appeals notwithstanding, Chavez has made obvious attempts to convince Washington of his reliability. Speaking in London on October 18, the Venezuelan president said he would not support an Arab oil blockade in response to a US invasion of Iraq. "We cannot use oil as a political weapon, and OPEC should be fully aware of this," he said.

The last coup attempt came after Chavez attempted a shakeup of the management of Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA), the state-owned oil company. He has since sought to placate the directors of this Venezuelan state-within-a-state, and oil production proceeded without interruption during the recent employers' strike.

Despite these overtures, as well as Chavez's acceptance of conditions dictated by the International Monetary Fund for the repayment of the country's \$38 billion foreign debt, the Bush administration sees the former paratrooper colonel's populism as dangerous, and his friendly ties to Cuba's Fidel Castro as unacceptable.

The right-wing Republican circles that form the Bush administration's key base of political support are speaking in hysterical terms about the threat of upheaval in Latin America and are demanding a more aggressive US policy.

Constantine Menges, a senior fellow in the Washington office of the Hudson Institute and a leading figure in the Reagan administration's National Security Council, wrote a recent column in the *Washington Times* asserting: "We must prevent a nuclear-armed Axis of Evil in the Americas." He predicted that the anticipated election October 27 of Workers Party (PT) candidate Luiz Inacio "Lula" da Silva in Brazil would strengthen both Chavez and Castro and form the basis for an anti-American bloc. Menges branded Lula "a supporter of terrorism," and predicted he would "permit covert support to be given to bring about anti-American regimes in Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru."

Similarly, Faith Whittlesey, chairman of the Institute of World Politics and a Senior White House aide under Reagan, wrote a column warning, "As Washington focuses on Afghanistan and Iraq, a time bomb ticks in our hemisphere."

She continued: "Brazil—which occupies half a continent, has borders with every country in South America save two, and has more people and a larger economy than Russia—would soon be ruled by a radical anti-US leftist." Whittlesey echoed the charge that Lula and the PT are supporters of terrorism and suggested that he be denied a visa should he attempt to visit Washington.

These extreme right-wing circles that dominate US foreign policy are responding to the accelerating political disintegration in Latin America, under the impact of mounting economic crisis, poverty and unemployment. Recent elections have seen the electoral collapse of the traditional ruling parties and unanticipated success for a series of candidates making populist denunciations of the economic policies prescribed by Washington and the IMF.

Lula's projected two-to-one victory over the candidate of the ruling coalition, Jose Serra, in Sunday's Brazilian ballot is only the most prominent example. In Ecuador, Lucio Gutierrez, a retired colonel who led the storming of the Congress in Quito in 2000, resulting in the downfall of the government of President Jamil Mahuad, won the first round of presidential elections last Sunday. Unemployment in the country is nearing 10 percent, while the number listed as underemployed stands at 32 percent. More than 2 million have left the country in search of work. Earlier this year in Bolivia, Evo Morales, who denounced the IMF and ran as the advocate of the country's coca growers, came close to winning the presidential race.

While all of these candidates have—like Venezuela's Chavez—combined populist rhetoric with pledges to uphold the essential framework of "structural adjustment" economic policies introduced by former regimes, the administration in Washington sees the evident shift in Latin American politics as a threat to its undisputed hegemony in the region. It likewise fears that the turn toward populism will arouse rising expectations among the Latin American working class and oppressed masses, posing the danger of a new wave of revolutionary upheavals on the continent.



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