

Pots and pans could bring down the IMF

by Valerie Rush

"The Pots Shook the Country," blared the headline of one Venezuelan daily, in the aftermath of the March 10 "pots and pans" protest demonstration which demanded the resignation of Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez and an end to his International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity policies. Said another headline, "All of Venezuela Shouts: Get Out, Carlos Andrés!"

Across the country, from the rich "country club" neighborhood to the poorest slums, Venezuela's population heeded the call of the imprisoned military leaders of last month's suppressed coup attempt to come out at 10 p.m. and bang pots and pans, blow whistles, turn lights on and off, and sing the Venezuelan national anthem. On-the-ground observers in Caracas say the noise was "deafening," that entire buildings had set up loudspeakers to blare their protest, and that the city was in a total uproar. Every state in the country reported the same, with the population exhilarated by the extent of the protest.

This "spontaneous plebiscite against Pérez," as the historic protest demonstration has been dubbed by Reuters news service, marks the first stage in what analysts now admit is a revolutionary upsurge with the potential to light similar fires across the continent. In countries from Colombia to Brazil, Peru to Honduras, protests against the IMF's destruction of the continent are now surfacing from both civilian and military layers.

'Democratic' thuggery

In response to this outpouring of opposition to his government, President Pérez deployed street thugs to stage provocations and threaten violence. Several scores of people were wounded and arrested, and at least eight people—including two children—were killed by individuals said to be police provocateurs. Early morning rallies of flag-bearing citizens were dispersed with water cannons and tear gas. Latest reports are that the Pérez government has ordered police raids against trade unions, town hall assemblies, and other popular rallying points.

If Pérez is nervous, his sponsors in Washington—who managed to keep all word of the Venezuelan demonstrations out of the U.S. press—are even more so. U.S. Ambassador to the Organization of American States Luigi Einaudi was sent to Caracas March 13, to meet with government officials

and assure them of the Bush administration's continued support. According to *El Diario de Caracas*, "there exists profound concern in Washington over the 'extremely delicate situation Venezuela is facing.'" Bush, according to international analysts cited by *El Diario de Caracas*, will do whatever he can "to keep Venezuela within the democratic orbit."

At the same time, the Bush government is sending its Assistant Treasury Secretary David Mulford, otherwise known as "Mr. IMF" in Washington, to Brazil, on what has been strikingly dubbed "a political visit." The government of Fernando Collor de Mello in Brazil, which has committed itself to imposing IMF austerity measures comparable to those which have triggered the Venezuelan protests, is also on increasingly shaky ground. Brazilian Foreign Minister Francisco Rezek was forced to publicly warn that the resignation of Venezuelan President Pérez would be tantamount to a coup, something which Brazil opposes "in every country in Latin America."

'One, two, many Venezuelas?'

But the ferment continues to spread. In Bolivia, 10,000 students and workers marched in La Paz in early March to protest that government's IMF-dictated economic measures, and EFE news service is reporting that a "group of discontented military officers" with the sympathies of the Bolivian Labor Confederation could undertake "an action similar to the one attempted recently in Venezuela."

In Peru, the Fujimori government was just forced to roll back a number of drastic austerity measures personally demanded by IMF director Michel Camdessus, after a universal outcry against them prompted a split in Fujimori's cabinet and forced the Peruvian Congress to consider declaring the measures unconstitutional. In Honduras, former President José Ascona urged that country's current head of state Rafael Callejas to "follow the example of his Venezuelan colleague" Pérez, in "modifying" his monetarist economic policies.

The César Gaviria government in Colombia, which just nervously granted an unprecedented 45% wage hike to the Armed Forces' middle-level officer corps, has imposed a total news blackout on the Venezuelan "pots and pans" demonstration. President Gaviria is reportedly on the verge of introducing a new IMF "shock package" similar to the Peruvian one, and is clearly worried about the implications. He has every reason to be nervous, following the disastrous mid-term elections March 8, which were boycotted by an unprecedented 80% of the Colombian electorate as their own silent "day of protest."

Just two days before the Colombian election, newspaper editor Fidel Cano wrote in the daily *El Espectador* that the Gaviria government was "incapable of confronting the disaster it has caused," and said "a new government is required. Widespread rejection of the government's policies, declared Cano bluntly, requires "the appointment of a new President by means of Congress or a plebiscite."