

Andean Report by Valerie Rush

Venezuela heading toward civil war

Carlos Andrés Pérez's stubborn clinging to power is fueling the economic and political crises.

Facing a growing fiscal deficit, Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez demanded on Jan. 30 that Congress immediately pass new tax hikes, in order to return to compliance with agreements with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Economic analysts derided the move as insufficient to head off the looming devaluation, even if Congress were to pass the hikes, and Pérez's demand that it do so is no guarantee that Congress will comply.

What is guaranteed, however, is that more austerity will further fuel the national rebellion against the hated President, a rebellion which is turning against the system of rule by political parties, not law, which has driven Venezuela into chaos.

Partidocracia, as this system is known, is rapidly devolving into violent conflict between armed bands deployed by every political party. In the states of Sucre and Barinas, for example, there have been non-stop violent protests following the Pérez government's refusal to acknowledge the election victories of two opposition governors last Dec. 6.

On Jan. 26, Pérez imposed emergency rule on both states, and the Supreme Electoral Council called new elections for March 14. But the polarization is already such that, as one journalist declared on Jan. 25, "the germs of civil war [are] incubating." Wrote another, "We are sitting on a powder keg. My impression is that any day there could be a real coup d'état, by the generals."

Much of the violence in Sucre and Barinas was provoked by the ruling

Democratic Action (AD) party. In Sucre, the governor-elect from the opposition Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) party demanded Army protection after the national secretary general of AD, Humberto Celli, threatened to use "blood and fire, if necessary," to install the AD candidate in the governor's palace. AD state legislators froze the bank accounts of the state government, preventing the MAS governor from meeting the state payroll or budget needs. The crisis has spread to the state police force, where both the MAS and AD party machines have named their own police chiefs.

The opposition forces are fighting fire with fire. With daily demonstrations in the streets, the governor of neighboring Araguas state, also from the MAS, sent his police agents across state lines into Sucre to defend MAS members there. The resulting mob atmosphere on both sides has paralyzed all economic activity, aggravating tensions.

In the state of Barinas, the candidate of the Christian Democratic (COPEI) party was proclaimed the winner of the December gubernatorial election, but has been unable to take office because of AD insistence that its candidate was victorious. On Jan. 24, the party headquarters of AD in Barinas was set afire.

The intransigence of the parties is being fed by Washington. U.S. Ambassador Michael Skol, acting every bit a pro-consul, meets daily with politicians. His message is blunt: While some of the more egregious corruption must be cleaned up, if Venezuela breaks with *partidocracia* and IMF policies, it

will face the wrath of the United States.

Skol has spent a great deal of effort promoting the tiny Radical Cause party, called Causa R, as an alternative to the discredited traditional parties. Skol has invited its leaders to his home, attended their functions, and praised them publicly. This display of U.S. support has raised eyebrows in Venezuela: Causa R members are well-known friends of Castro's Cuba, and members of the Cuban Communist Party's would-be regional Comintern, the São Paulo Forum.

Causa R argues that only a "clean" party can politically impose the levels of austerity required, and had begun organizing in the military, where the rebellion against Pérez and *partidocracia* is most intense, behind the State Department's line. As presidential candidate Andrés Velázquez told *El Universal* on Jan. 21: "I call upon the national Armed Forces not to despair; to wait for us until December. With us, things are going to change for the better."

Others are less confident that the system can hold together that long. Former President Rafael Caldera, a founder of COPEI, for example, has left that party to run for president as an independent. His charge that the political parties have become simply vehicles for lining the pockets of their leaders at a campaign event on Feb. 1 sent COPEI leaders screaming.

On Jan. 26, the archbishop of Mérida, Msgr. Baltazar Porras, issued an open letter to AD chief Humberto Celli, charging that Venezuela's political parties have operated for 35 years as "genuine studies in immorality," teaching their members to steal votes by any means. "This electoral piracy is a crime, is a sin," he wrote. "The verbal violence of the politicians will unleash other violence with unforeseeable affects."