

Venezuelan violence sparked by vote fraud

by Alfonso Rodríguez

A new wave of violent demonstrations, with their sequel of looting, injuries, deaths, and material losses on the order of some \$15 million, hit Venezuela during the week of Feb. 15-19, with the focal points of the protests in the states of Barinas and Sucre. The detonator was the decision of Venezuela's Supreme Court to suspend new elections, scheduled for March 14, for governor of those states.

The Supreme Court decision, issued on Feb. 15, was in response to a suit by the ruling Democratic Action (AD) party demanding suspension of an earlier ruling by the Supreme Electoral Council ordering new elections. Last Dec. 6, the AD party had lost its bid to stay in the governor's house of those two states. The Social Christian (COPEI) party claimed victory in Barinas, and the Movement to Socialism (MAS) party claimed victory in Sucre. By a 5-4 vote, the Supreme Court ordered the outgoing AD governors to resume their posts on an interim basis while the legitimacy of the December elections was pondered.

When the vote was revealed, enraged mobs took to the streets, burning AD party offices and looting stores in the main cities of Barinas and Sucre. The government headquarters in both states were occupied by supporters of the disenfranchised opposition candidates, in an attempt to keep the AD officials from resuming office.

This social explosion is not just a reaction to the dictatorial imposition of state governors by the Carlos Andrés Pérez government, but is an expression of the accumulated outrage of the population against that despised government itself: its economic policy, as dictated by the International Monetary Fund; its unrestrained corruption; and its arrogance in the face of the people's will. These attitudes have already produced two coup attempts in the past year, and innumerable demands for Pérez's resignation.

On the first day of the riots, there was at least one death and more than 70 injured in Sucre's capital city of Cumaná. COPEI congressman Lorenzo Tovar charged that tear gas and bullets were sprayed upon the population from helicopters, and he charged Deputy Minister of the Interior Gustavo Luis Vasquez with responsibility. He also accused AD "armed bands" of encouraging the looting and street violence. A COPEI leader in Barinas, Enrique Carmona, similarly charged that armed groups headed by Civil Defense Director Giomar Durán had been placed at the service of the

AD, primarily to prevent COPEI candidate Behard Cartay from taking office.

Jorge Ahmar, the president of Sucre's Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Production, declared his organization in an emergency because of the violence in that state. Ahmar reported that more than 50 stores had been sacked and destroyed, causing unemployment for more than 400 Venezuelans in this impoverished state.

While rumors were spreading in Caracas of an impending new uprising comparable to the so-called "Caracazo" of Feb. 27, 1989, the protests began to spread to other states. In the western city of Mérida, for example, one student was killed during a demonstration, which led to student protests in Caracas; in La Victoria, in the state of Aragua, the AD headquarters was burned down; in the central state of Carabobo, transport was paralyzed by piles of burning tires. Transportation between the cities of Barcelona and Puerto La Cruz, near Cumaná, was also interrupted by the burning of vehicles.

The drug factor

Poverty-stricken Sucre, in the east, is largely a coastal state. Bordered on the east by the Orinoco River delta, it is considered by experts to be a key part of the drug-trafficking route to the Caribbean and the Bahamas. The state of Barinas, largely farming and cattle-raising, is in the western plains where the traffickers' illegal airstrips abound. Several analysts have drawn the conclusion that the AD's insistence on remaining in power in those states is not unrelated to this factor.

Ironically, on the same day that the Supreme Court ruling was made known, the daily *El Nacional* published a full-page article based on a report of the United Nations' Narcotics Council, which stressed that "Venezuela is the largest money-laundering center in Latin America." According to the report, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration estimates that some 200 tons of cocaine passed through Venezuela in 1992, on its way to the United States, Canada, and Europe. It is estimated that the drug money laundered in Venezuela runs in the billions of dollars.

On Feb. 16, *El Nacional's* reporter Berenice Gómez published several interviews with anti-drug experts in the Judicial Technical Police (PTJ), the National Guard, and the DISIP (political police), who all concluded that "the financial facilities that the country offers for major capital deposits are comparable to those existing in the Cayman Islands and the Bahamas."

Researchers told the reporter that "there really does not exist the will to take either the political or fiscal measures necessary to confront the problem, because a simple review of taxation of profits could uncover the existence of frontmen." They were referring to statistics of the finance minister regarding the invasion of luxury imported cars and the construction of luxury buildings in the midst of the spreading depression.