
Ibero-America

Venezuela's Pérez under fire from all sides, as government hangs by a thread

by Valerie Rush

It was bad enough that Venezuela's corrupt President, Carlos Andrés Pérez, got booed and jeered by congressmen when he attempted to deliver his last state of the nation address on March 11, or that his limousine was stoned by angry demonstrators. Worse still was the fact that the Supreme Court that same week declared unconstitutional the summary trials and convictions of some 200 military and civilian rebels who had attempted to overthrow Pérez last Nov. 27. And worst by far, for Pérez, was the decision by Venezuelan Attorney General Ramón Escovar Salom to call on the Supreme Court to investigate Pérez for embezzlement and misuse of public funds.

While Pérez (known to his countrymen as CAP) was squirming on the hot seat, the nation was again being rocked by rumors of an imminent military coup. Reports have ranged from rumored uprisings at military bases to the resignation of the defense minister and CAP's flight from Venezuela. Things have gotten so far out of hand that Defense Minister Gen. Iván Darío Jiménez was recently forced to acknowledge the unprecedented levels of instability, and to admit, "We cannot guarantee anything."

Polarization and discontent

In particular, the country is sharply polarized around the charges by Nov. 27 coup leader Gen. Francisco Visconti (currently in exile in Peru) that CAP's government has violated Venezuelan sovereignty by embracing Washington's demands to reform the charter of the Organization of American States (OAS). That "reform," insisted Visconti in an open letter to Venezuelan Foreign Minister Gen. Fernando Ochoa Antich, would legitimize U.S. intervention into the countries of the southern hemisphere by converting the previously independent Inter-American Defense Board into a supranational military force under the OAS, on the model of the United Nations' blue helmets.

General Visconti's charges received such extensive publicity in the Venezuelan press that Foreign Minister Ochoa Antich was obliged to issue a public response, denying any such endorsement. Minister Ochoa respectfully suggested in his letter that Visconti is perhaps "confused" by a working paper that had been submitted to the OAS's December 1992

extraordinary meeting by the Inter-American Dialogue, which indeed had proposed the formation of such a multilateral military force, but which "was never approved nor endorsed by the Venezuelan government."

General Visconti answered by pointing to CAP's long history of publicly promoting precisely such a "limited sovereignty" doctrine. He further warned that the country could not hope to root out the deep-seated corruption among Venezuela's political elites by waiting until December to dump CAP at the polls.

While the Venezuelan nation thus debates the issue of Carlos Andrés Pérez's treason, the reality of the economic collapse his policies have brought about is making itself felt. That most sensitive of barometers, the Caracas stock market, has gone into free fall along with a new surge of capital flight. And thanks to CAP's merciless enforcement of the International Monetary Fund's "economic adjustment reforms," Venezuela's newly impoverished majority is staging protest demonstrations and strikes across the country. The head of the Venezuelan Workers Confederation César Olarte, is threatening a general strike to demand a minimum wage hike and a freeze on the price of food staples, now soaring beyond the reach of the average Venezuelan.

Venezuela's 'Watergate'

The CAP government is universally acknowledged to be on its last legs. Even the *Washington Times* of March 21 could not resist commenting that "Mr. Pérez, who sounds increasingly like Richard Nixon in the final days of the Watergate scandal, told the nation on television last week that he has done 'nothing, but absolutely nothing, illegal or immoral.'" In that same speech, CAP also insisted that material wealth held no interest for him, and that his sole burning desire was to "make history." Venezuelans who have long been embarrassed by the antics of Cecilia Matos—CAP's high-profile mistress, who has luxury homes around the globe and a proclivity for draping herself in diamonds and rubies—may have found that claim especially hard to stomach.

CAP's international image has also been taking a beating recently. First there was his failure to force neighboring Co-

Colombia to extradite two fugitive military rebels who were arrested in that country while seeking political asylum from CAP's persecution. The two Venezuelan officers had participated in the Nov. 27, 1992 coup attempt against CAP, and their arrest by Colombian authorities triggered such outrage among Colombians and Venezuelans alike that the Colombian government of President César Gaviria was forced to release them to Ecuador, where they are now under government protection.

Then there was the report that Carlos Andrés Pérez was complicit in the 1976 assassination of former Chilean Foreign Minister Orlando Letelier. The details surfaced during the Santiago trial of former Chilean intelligence chief Gen. Manuel Contreras, when Venezuelan attorney and defense witness Pío González confirmed Contreras's claims that the authors of the assassination were CIA-linked agents of the DISIP, Venezuela's political police. CAP was President of Venezuela in 1976 and surrounded himself—then as now—with a personal phalanx of DISIP agents, many of whom were Cuban exiles who had undergone anti-Castro terrorist training with the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

According to González, who was the lawyer for two such Cuban exile terrorists involved in the 1976 bombing of a Cuban passenger plane, "Carlos Andrés Pérez has always been the U.S. State Department's spearhead in Latin America. The Letelier case and the Cuban airplane disaster cannot be seen as isolated incidents. They form part of a constant, systematic trajectory of Mr. Pérez in favor of State Department interests."

When and how?

The only questions still to be answered concerning CAP's unceremonious departure, are when and how will he go? If left up to the power elites in Washington, D.C.—who appear to be the Venezuelan President's last bulwark of defense—Pérez will be replaced through carefully orchestrated presidential elections next December, and will hopefully go quietly off into retirement with Miss Matos and with the millions he stole from the Venezuelan people. The newly adopted "favorite sons" of the U.S. State Department, Venezuela's Causa R party, are doing their best to persuade Venezuela's furious citizenry to accept that option, to "put their faith in the ballot box" and, presumably, in Causa R's presidential candidate.

But the electorate is well aware that Venezuela's notoriously corrupt political elite has a stranglehold on the institutions of power, to the point that what passes for "Venezuelan democracy" in Washingtonian rhetoric is better known among Venezuelans as the *cogollo*, or political mafia.

At the same time, the recent example of Brazilian President Fernando Collor's impeachment for corruption is still fresh in the minds of all Ibero-Americans. Thus, the demands for Pérez's immediate resignation are now coming from spokesmen across the political spectrum, as the fear grows

that the country could explode in violence long before the December elections roll around. Indeed, if the Venezuelan people have their way, Pérez won't make it through April.

Embezzlement charges

The most immediate challenge stems from the March 12 announcement by Venezuela's independent Attorney General Ramón Escovar Salom that he has formally charged President Pérez with embezzlement and misuse of public funds. With a 73-page document detailing the charges against the President, Escovar has petitioned the Supreme Court to rule on whether there is sufficient merit in the evidence to order CAP's presidential immunity lifted, preparatory to both civil and criminal trial proceedings against him. In the event that such a ruling is made in Escovar's favor, Pérez will be forced by law to abandon office.

The embezzlement charges stem from Pérez's first months in office in 1989, when he reportedly conspired with his former interior minister, Alejandro Izaguirre, and former presidential secretary Reinaldo Figueredo Planchart, to divert some 250 million bolivars from an Interior Ministry secret fund, converting them into \$17 million on the last day of a preferential currency conversion plan, and then converting them back into bolivars. The conspirators reportedly made at least \$20 million in profit. CAP insists that the money was used for legitimate defense and security purposes, and was only "mistakenly" wired to the office of the presidency.

There is currently much speculation over whether the Supreme Court—largely made up of CAP appointees—would ever rule in favor of the President's prosecution. However, it is widely acknowledged that any dismissal or coverup of the charges could be the immediate trigger for a new coup attempt. CAP's efforts to pressure the Supreme Court by demanding that it issue an immediate ruling on Escovar's petition have thus far proven unsuccessful.

Kissinger to the rescue?

Even as Venezuela is in the throes of economic, social, and political crises, the international financial elite which has sustained CAP in power past Judgment Day refuses to give up. On March 17, a delegation of international advisers to CAP arrived in Caracas, headed by former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and including Mitsubishi President Shinroku Morohashi, former American Express executive James Robinson, and Italian clothier Luciano Benetton. Undaunted by polls showing that their man in Caracas has a single-digit popularity rating, the group discussed with Pérez how to make Venezuela "more competitive" for the shrinking pie of foreign investment.

Pérez assured the gathering of financial superstars that the Venezuelan economy was "making progress." Perhaps what he had in mind was the billions of drug dollars that, according to both U.S. and U.N. narcotics investigators, are legally laundered through Venezuela each year.