

Pérez or Peña: Will justice be served in Venezuela?

by Jaime García

On May 18, two days prior to the first anniversary of Carlos Andrés Pérez's (CAP) removal as President of Venezuela, that country's Supreme Court issued an arrest warrant for the former President and two of his former cabinet ministers, accusing them of misuse of public funds. Ten of the court's magistrates voted for the arrest, and four opposed it. Pérez was immediately taken to the headquarters of the Technical Judicial Police, where he was photographed and fingerprinted, and then sent off to the El Junquito Jail in Caracas.

Ironically, it was also to the El Junquito Jail that alternate Judge Guillermo Heredia, of the 42nd Criminal Court, had decided to send Venezuelan Labor Party (PLV) Secretary General Alejandro Peña Esclusa three weeks before, in a fraudulent trial ordered by the Cisneros Group—the leading members of Pérez's corrupt "financial entourage." Publication by the media of the astounding irregularities committed in the case against Peña (see p. 45) forced the 42nd Court's permanent judge to replace Heredia and allow Peña to go free on bail, while the case was appealed to a higher court.

For Venezuelans, former President Carlos Andrés Pérez and the young leader Alejandro Peña have come to symbolize the two alternatives for the nation's future. Pérez represents the power of the international drug-money-laundering mafia, submission to the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) conditionalities, brutal looting of the country's wealth, and ripping up national sovereignty at the behest of supranational powers. Peña Esclusa and the PLV, linked to American statesman Lyndon LaRouche's international movement, have for years proposed economic and political solutions diametrically opposed to CAP's, which are now the order of the day. They have also exposed the origin and international ties of Pérez and his cronies, to the extent that, in the trial against Peña, Cisneros employees accused him of participating in a conspiracy that they claim brought down the CAP government and provoked the recent collapse of Banco Latino, the bank the Cisneros crowd unabashedly looted.

The truth is that Venezuelans, at least beginning with Pérez's second term in 1989, have rebelled against the IMF's policies and those of the corrupt faction which has looted the nation. This internal warfare is reflected by those who wish to continue corrupting the justice system, as in the case of Cisneros versus Peña, and those who seek to wield justice against the corruption employed by Pérez. It is also reflected

in the warfare against the national currency and the threats by foreign banks and the IMF, on the one hand, and the almost daily protests by Venezuela's productive sectors, business and industrial associations, demanding radical policy change rather than just cosmetic touches to the free trade model left by CAP.

As Peña Esclusa indicated in his May 18 press conference in Caracas (see next page), President Rafael Caldera has the moral authority to pull the country out of the danger of dissolution, and must act immediately to halt those who seek Venezuela's destabilization.

International pressures

That destabilization has taken the form of extraordinary pressure from the international banking community, combined with internal rioting and a campaign of rumors that Caldera has suffered a heart attack and is gravely ill or dying. An IMF delegation arrived in the country just prior to the Supreme Court's decision on Pérez. The delegation is supposedly on a "routine" visit, but government sources report that its members are demanding that Caldera sign a standby agreement with the Fund, which he has thus far refused to do.

As Venezuela's justice minister pointed out on May 11, the eruption of rioting and looting in various cities that began on May 10 is highly suspicious. He noted that the riots, which began following the killing of a high school student, coincided with announced government actions against both Carlos Andrés Pérez and former President Jaime Lusinchi. In Los Teques, a city near Caracas, two students were wounded in riots, and there were also violent confrontations between protesters and police agents in Lara, Margarita Island, Bolívar state, and elsewhere. The U.S. State Department announced on May 17 that it was issuing an advisory to American citizens to stay away from the affected areas, as the riots "are expected to continue."

In a clear allusion to CAP and the Cisneros gang, Interior Minister Ramón Escovar Salom announced that the government is investigating possible orchestration of the riots by "those hurt by the fight against corruption and those who don't want certain crimes against the state punished, and who want to create an environment of confusion, which can serve as a smokescreen at a time [when] the country is paying careful attention to developments in the struggle against corruption."