

Venezuela Turns Out Against Hugo Chávez

by David Ramonet and Gretchen Small

Two marches were held on Jan. 23 in Caracas, Venezuela: one organized by the opposition to the government of President Hugo Chávez; the other by Chávez, as a show of force against the opposition. The opposition chose to stage its protest on the anniversary of the 1958 overthrow of Gen. Marcos Pérez Jiménez. The demonstration, called by diverse opposition parties and social organizations, stunned even its own organizers, and marked an important change in the general character of the opposition movement itself. Estimates of the anti-Chávez turnout ranged from 80,000 to 200,000 people; but whatever the figure, their numbers vastly overwhelmed what Chávez could pull, as can be seen in the two pictures published here.

Opposition has grown as the Chávez regime has failed to better the lives of Venezuelans, while building up an overt political-military infrastructure for fascist mob rule. The leadership of the opposition movement, however, tended to portray the issue before the country as a fight of free-trade economic liberals against the “Cuban communists” of the Chávez regime, thus limiting their numbers, and playing into Chávez’s preparations for a civil war of “poor against rich.”

An earlier national strike, on Dec. 10, did shut down much of the country, but most people joined the strike by staying home, intimidated by the regime’s thug tactics against opponents (including organized mob attacks against private schools, newspapers, and political, business, and trade union opponents alike). Jan. 23 broke that fear.

People came from every part of the country; labor and

business leaders, housewives, merchants, workers, students, and children, all marched with a unity of purpose to a meeting in the center of the capital city. The stratification which usually dominates Venezuelan social relations disappeared; rich and poor, black, white, and brown mingled without distinction, producing that special quality of happiness generated when great numbers of people act on the basis of their common humanity.

Slogans ranged from “Chávez Out Now!” to “Democracy, Freedom, and Tolerance; No to Dictatorship.” Another—“We Don’t Want Dictatorship, Nor a Return to the Past”—countered Chávez’s charge that the only ones who oppose him are those committed to the political and economic regime whose wretched failure to defend the General Welfare led to Chávez’s once-enormous popularity. The march concluded with the singing of the national anthem by the ocean of people who overflowed Caracas’ main plaza and spilled into surrounding streets.

In contrast, the march in support of the President who once commanded 80% popularity, was delayed for two hours, waiting for expected delegations who never arrived. Chávez prohibited press helicopters from flying over the capital to verify the size of the two demonstrations. But, although the President lied that his followers were “three times the size of the opposition’s march,” his red bereted-shock troops—and the leadership of the Armed Forces—could see they were outnumbered.

Chávez responded to the mass protest in character: sharply radicalizing his Jacobin regime. Speaking before the diplomatic corps on Jan. 24, he denounced the Roman Catholic Church as “a tumor” on Venezuelan society. He then fired his Interior Minister, Luis Miquilena, an old-line radical who Chávez decided had become “too soft” when he argued for dialogue with the opposition. His replacement, Navy Capt. Ramón Rodríguez Chacín (ret.), signals the direction the Chávez regime intends to take: an intelligence “spook” with a career in military special operations, Rodríguez Chacín has been Chávez’s personal envoy to various Andean narco-terrorist groups, and especially to the largest, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).



The government-sponsored rally in Caracas (left), on Jan. 23, and the opposition march in the main plaza, on the same day.