

Andean Report by Jaime Ramírez

Venezuela's AD party disintegrating

CAP's efforts to dissolve the traditionalist underpinnings of the AD party could lead to a cross-party insurrection.

The elections for governor and mayor, held for the first time in Venezuelan history last Dec. 3, proved to be a total disaster for the ruling Democratic Action (AD) party. But not so for President Carlos Andrés Pérez. The President, known as CAP, is seizing the opportunity to launch an all-out offensive against the traditionalist political machines which control the AD party and which, ironically, carried him to power. For CAP to impose viscious austerity, he must seriously weaken or eliminate these political machines.

A few weeks after the AD's electoral defeat, CAP organized a diabolical alliance with a number of his old enemies, such as the Mussolini-styled populist Luis Piñerua Ordaz, who tried to put CAP in jail for corruption toward the end of his first term in 1979. Also included in this alliance are such young "renovators" of the party as Deputy General Secretary Héctor Alonzo López and the official spokesman of the AD's executive committee, Antonio Ledezma. Both are part of the "ideological reform" school, which advocates turning the AD into a neo-liberal party. The third component of this "Pérez-troika" is made up of a gaggle of social democratic labor leaders trained by the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD) and by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). This last group is headed by the current president of the Venezuelan Workers Federation (CTV), Antonio Ríos, although its most intelligent spokesman is former CTV head Juan José Delpino.

This group's strategy is to eliminate the party's regional political machinery, transforming the AD into a promoter of the economic reforms dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the creditor banks, and their national partners—that is, the investor groups identified with Cisneros, Vollmer, Febres Cordero, and Mendoza.

The AD is currently wracked by a scandal over party purges decreed by an AD ethics tribunal, made up of Piñerua's followers. The purged elements were subsequently exonerated, but the scandal is serving as a mechanism to dissolve the party itself, which is broadly based on labor, farmer, and professional organizations. The operation began just weeks after phase two of CAP's IMF-dictated austerity package was launched.

The meeting of AD's National Directorate Committee (CDN) held last Jan. 25, clarified what the real issues are. At that meeting, AD General Secretary Humberto Celli emphasized the need to change the government's economic policy, which has been universally identified as the primary reason for last December's electoral defeat. Celli urged the CDN to propose strict exchange controls, a drastic reduction of interest rates, price controls—in sum, "a Venezuelan economic program," as distinct from the IMF's plan.

CAP responded with an unequivocal defense of his economic program, and pledged the dissolution of the party if it did not support him. But the success of his assaults on the traditional party apparatus is not assured. The

"anti-corruption" circus run by government spokesmen inside the party has proven insufficient, by itself, to do the job. And so, on May 14-25, the Venezuelan Armed Forces were deployed to conduct "training maneuvers" in various cities around the country. Those maneuvers were seen as a de facto state of alert to head off a feared popular insurrection, like that which occurred in February 1989. Given expectations of protests against a wave of early-June price hikes, "they want to turn the National Armed Forces into an IMF police force," said Christian Social leader Abdón Vivas Terán on May 24.

There remain many doubts as to how effective the government's political strategy will prove. There is generalized anger over the appointment of Henry Kissinger as the President's "foreign investment adviser." To many, the nomination is a transparent effort to benefit the partners of the Rockefeller interests in Venezuela, a point suggested by the daily *El Nuevo País* May 29.

Discontent also exists among the Armed Forces, which have been unable to disguise their disgust at being dubbed "IMF police." And some directors of the state enterprises, such as Leopoldo Sucre Figarella, the president of the Venezuelan Corporation of Guayana, violently oppose the privatization of such key industries as the steel manufacturer Siderúrgica de Orinoco.

And, finally, there are the regional labor leaders who maintain a firm stance against CAP's economic package, to the point of allying with the political opposition. Such, for example, was the case with the successful civic strike held in the state of Sucre to protest the imminent gasoline hike.

Added together, these elements make a potentially powerful opposition.