

Venezuelan rebels overthrow Bush agenda for new world order

by Valerie Rush

The death knell of the "new world order" sounded across Ibero-America on Feb. 4, when rebel Venezuelan troops led by elite commando units attempted to overthrow the government of President Carlos Andrés Pérez, the International Monetary Fund's model "democracy." When the bloody but short-lived insurrection ended 12 hours later, it was clear not only that the rebels had held the widespread sympathies of Venezuelans, but that Pérez's "democratic" colleagues throughout the hemisphere had just been put on notice. Pérez's government may have won an extended lease on life, but George Bush's agenda for the continent is overthrown.

Indeed, Ibero-America's free market adherents, and their international banking sponsors, cannot fail to see the handwriting on the wall. The brutal austerity policies dictated by the creditor banks and slavishly adhered to by Pérez are publicly claimed by the rebels as the root cause of their insurrection (see *Documentation*). That fact, reports Reuters, has "set alarm bells ringing in many countries." One western diplomat is quoted: Brazilian President Collor "must be worried about the dislike shown in Venezuela for the same policies he is following, especially since Caracas has a better record of democracy than Brazil." *El Tiempo* of Colombia editorialized, "The same could occur here, today."

The *Baltimore Sun's* coverage of the coup is explicit: "Behind Latin America's democratic facades are millions of dispossessed, impoverished citizens who have received no benefit from the economic programs touted by the Bush administration, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. The Venezuelan situation could be duplicated at any moment from Argentina and Peru, to Guatemala and Nicaragua." A *Jornal do Brasil* commentary of Jan. 6 calls Venezuela "a warning for the banks and International Monetary Fund. . . . The same warning holds for Latin America and Eastern Europe [and] for the rich countries: Adjustment programs which only take into account macroeconomic statistics, ignoring the reality . . . of desperation, create fertile soil for popular revolts and nationalist *caudillo* adventures."

'We will be back'

"Unfortunately, for now, we did not achieve our objectives. We did not capture power in Caracas. . . . But it is time to avoid more bloodshed, and to reflect. There will be other occasions," promised Army Lt. Col. Hugo Chávez, the

most visible leader of the Bolivarian Military Movement which led the coup attempt, in a televised appeal to his supporters to lay down their arms.

That there will indeed be other occasions is suggested by commentaries from many Venezuelans, who insist that the coup "was not against democracy, but against Pérez." The *Washington Post*, in a Feb. 6 article reviewing the "wide backing" for the coup attempt, quotes a Venezuelan worker "summing up what appeared to be the general mood: 'Every day we have less to eat, worse schools, worse hospitals. Of course we want a change. We do not want Pérez.' " Venezuelan students are reportedly defying the government's suspension of constitutional reports to distribute the rebels' program on the streets of Caracas. Even Defense Minister Fernando Ochoa Antich, who has fully backed President Pérez against the rebels, described the fallen soldiers *on both sides* of the coup attempt as "heroes."

One striking acknowledgement of the depth of popular support for the attempted coup came from former Venezuelan President Rafael Caldera, who in a speech to Congress immediately following the coup attempt, warned Bush and his new order cohorts that what has just happened in Venezuela could happen tomorrow in any other country. "Democracy cannot exist if the people don't eat," warned Caldera, who went on to attack the debt-collection policies which have created conditions "which even frighten the International Monetary Fund and multilateral credit institutions." Caldera urged President Pérez to "immediately make the profound changes the country is demanding [since] . . . it would be ingenuous to treat this as merely the adventure of a few rebels."

Yet Pérez says his policies will stand. Asked the day after the coup attempt if he would modify them, he responded, "The government is always reviewing its policies, but we have to be proud that we have been successful with these policies in all areas." Pérez has even sent a finance ministry official to meet with the New York banks and demand that Venezuela's credit rating be protected, *and even raised*, because of his proven commitment to free market policies.

Among Pérez's stoutest endorsers immediately following the coup threat were Bush and Fidel Castro, the same combination which has been fighting to reinstate Haiti's bloody dictator Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who has, ironically, been enjoying a golden exile in Caracas, under Pérez's protection.

Documentation

Summary of the rebels' program

- *Recover sovereignty:* The insurgent officers reject negotiations with Colombia to delimit the territorial waters of the Gulf of Venezuela, which they consider totally Venezuelan. They demand greater firmness against the invasions of their country's southern border by Brazilian gold miners. They neither agree with nor accept the giveaway of important state companies, like the telephone company, to private international consortiums.

- *Revise economic policy:* The neo-liberal policies of the Pérez government will be changed, especially the provision of resources to pay the foreign debt to foreign banks, and those measures judged prejudicial to agriculture and to small and medium-size industries.

- *Emergency program against hunger and misery:* The rebels would enact a series of decrees to "expedite the creation of thousands of jobs and to massively increase food production," given that statistics indicate that 80% of Venezuelans live in poverty, and more than half in a critical situation.

- *Corruption trials:* The rebels intend to carry out spectacular trials of suspects denounced for their involvement in corruption scandals over the past decade.

- *Convoke a Constituent Assembly:* The rebels would convoke a constituent assembly to mobilize the common citizen to discuss the great national problems which require new answers.

Democracy cannot exist if people don't eat

Excerpts of a speech given by Venezuelan Senator and former President Rafael Caldera, to the National Congress of Venezuela on Feb. 5.

I want to tell the President of the Republic that the responsibility for immediately making the deep changes the country is demanding rest upon him. It is difficult to ask the people to sacrifice in democracy's defense when they are daily suffering exorbitant increases in the cost of living, [and] when the government has proved incapable of putting an end to the terrible scourge of corruption that is consuming Venezuelan institutionality.

This situation cannot be hidden. The military coup is to be repudiated and punished. But it would be ingenuous to think that we are dealing solely with an adventure of a few rebels who jumped into this thing on their own, without taking into account what they were getting involved in. There's more to this than meets the eye; there is a serious situation in the country, and if that situation is not faced, the

future holds many more serious concerns for us. . . .

I do not agree with saying that the purpose of the military insurrection was to assassinate the President of the Republic. What we are facing is a serious situation threatening Venezuela. And I would like the heads of state of the rich countries which called President Pérez to express their solidarity in defense of democracy to understand that democracy cannot exist if the people don't eat. As Pope John Paul II said, one is not obliged to pay the debt at the expense of the people's hunger.

I want these gentlemen to understand that these Latin American democracies require a change in their handling of the foreign debt burden, so rashly contracted and, in many cases, improperly administered, and which is putting us in a situation which has even come to frighten the International Monetary Fund and the multilateral credit organizations.

That is why I would like to send this message from the Congress, to President George Bush, to President François Mitterrand, to [Spanish] Prime Minister Felipe González, to the heads of state of the rich and developed world, so that they realize that what happened in Venezuela can happen to any of our countries. Because what happened in Venezuela has a reason, has a cause without which the worst adventurers would not even dare to try to rupture the constitutional order.

That situation we must examine with purpose. When the events of Feb. 27 and 28 [Caracas riots in 1989] occurred, I warned in this hall that what was going to occur could be even more serious. I did not make a prediction, but it was clear that that packet of [austerity] measures which produced those serious events as the first explosion, was not going to stop there. . . .

I said then . . . that Venezuela was something like a showcase of Latin American democracy. That showcase shattered in February 1989. . . . Now it has been shattered by the rifles and other instruments of aggression wielded by the military rebels.

It is necessary for us to say this and to undertake an examination of our consciences. We talk much of reflection, of analysis. But the real truth is that we are making very little progress, that we cannot say in good conscience that corruption has been halted, but that, on the contrary, we feel that it is spreading; we see with alarm that the cost of living is becoming increasingly difficult to meet for vast sectors of the population. That public services don't work and that the solution being sought, which we have criticized, is privatizing them, handing them over to foreign hands, because we feel we are incapable of administering them. . . .

I am not saying that the insurrection today was over this. But it served as a foundation, or at least as a pretext, for their actions. I conclude by calling again upon the President to fully confront this situation, which is serving as a motive, or at least as a pretext, for those who wish to rupture, dismantle, and destroy the constitutional, democratic system of which we are proud.