

Venezuelan 'democracy' decays as Kissinger descends

by Valerie Rush

The Anglo-American banking elite has sent two of its top guns to Venezuela to attempt to shore up its dying "model democracy" on the continent. U.S. Ambassador to the Organization of American States (OAS) Luigi Einaudi flew to Caracas on March 14, where he issued a warning that any "sudden interruption" of President Carlos Andrés Pérez's corrupt reign would face an "immediate intervention" on the part of the OAS. Einaudi's mentor Henry Kissinger appeared on the scene a few days later, in his capacity as a member of Pérez's highly paid Foreign Advisory Board, to assure Pérez that his continued enforcement of the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) free trade and austerity dictates would be backed by the international financial community. U.S. Ambassador to Venezuela Michael Skol reportedly told an array of Venezuelan politicians he met with on March 15 that preventing the overthrow of Pérez's government was, for the United States, "a matter of life and death."

On March 19, the same day Kissinger met and gave a press conference with President Pérez, whole sections of Caracas were occupied by heavily armed police units, and a planned mass student/labor march in opposition to the Pérez government was crushed. Sixty leaders of the march—including students, journalists, and trade unionists—were savagely beaten and dragged off to jail, and scores more were beaten and tear-gassed. Venezuelans poured out into the streets, banging pots and pans and shouting protests at the government's brutality.

The 'handwriting on the wall'

Kissingerian "diplomacy" and police-state repression notwithstanding, the days of the Pérez government are widely acknowledged to be numbered. Since the Feb. 4 coup attempt, President Pérez has shuffled his cabinet three times,

and the last has no more credibility than the first. Indeed, bringing in members of the opposition Copei party—designed to present a semblance of "consensus rule"—has only intensified the population's disgust with *all* political institutions. At the same time, Pérez's efforts to create a paramilitary force to contain the revolutionary ferment in the country have dangerously provoked the Armed Forces, which by law have the monopoly on use of force to protect the state.

Pérez's so-called economic concessions in the aftermath of the Feb. 4 coup attempt by nationalist military forces have been rejected by the Venezuelan population as a farce. "Nothing New," "More Illusions," and "Little Applause, and Many Guards," were some of the newspaper headlines describing Pérez's state of the nation address which outlined his "reforms." The executive committee of the ruling Democratic Action (AD) party only abandoned its efforts to force early presidential elections when Pérez threatened to resign. And, of course, Pérez's pledge to convoke a constituent assembly to "let the people speak," has become a cruel joke in the aftermath of the March 19 police repression.

Even Einaudi's attempt to strong-arm Venezuelans with the threat of a Panama-style invasion appears to have backfired. Einaudi's threat, delivered to an audience of Venezuelan military officers, met with stony silence. One officer, reflecting the hostility of the audience, confronted Einaudi on U.S. policy to dismantle Ibero-America's armed forces. At least three retired generals issued statements blasting Einaudi's threats to national sovereignty, and Defense Minister Fernando Ochoa Antich, a consistent supporter of Pérez, was obliged to declare his "categorical rejection of the intervention of any foreign country in a situation in which some group, whether military or civilian, comes to power by force."

The backlash against Einaudi's "Big Stick" diplomacy

was such that U.S. Undersecretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Bernard Aronson, when publicly questioned about Einaudi's threat, was forced to declare the idea of a U.S. invasion of Venezuela "ridiculous."

The rebellion spreads

The Feb. 4 coup attempt in Venezuela did more than pull the plug on Pérez's rotting government. A rebellion against "International Monetary Fund democracy" now appears to be breaking to the surface in Bolivia as well. Communiqués signed by a "Bolivarian Military Movement" and modeled explicitly on the Venezuelan rebels have been sent to the Army high command, the Bolivian Congress, and Bolivian Labor Confederation (COB) denouncing "corrupt democracy" and U.S. efforts to "eliminate the armed forces of Latin America," among other things. On March 19, EFE news service quoted military sources on the imminence of a coup attempt in that country. Mass protest demonstrations and labor strikes against IMF austerity are simultaneously exploding across the country, and have already forced President Jaime Paz Zamora to replace more than half of his cabinet.

In Colombia, a tax reform which will drive that country's economy irrevocably into the hands of the drug cartels and impoverish what remains of the country's middle and working classes is now at the center of a huge political brawl. Like his Venezuelan counterpart, Colombian President César Gaviria insists that strict adherence to a brutal austerity regimen and to the free trade "opening" of the economy must take priority over any desire for "popularity" with his countrymen.

In Argentina, President Carlos Menem's assertions that nationalist military men, whom he called "Nazis and fundamentalists," were involved in the March 17 bombing of the Israeli Embassy, reflects his fear that a Venezuelan-style revolt could be on the agenda for his country as well.

The arrogance of the international banking elites regarding the crisis in Venezuela has blinded them to both the causes of the revolution now sweeping that country, and its implications elsewhere. One prominent international banking consultant insisted that the problem in Venezuela is that its population "is spoiled. . . . People elsewhere in Latin America have a lot more patience" with IMF austerity dictates. He was confident that the revolutionary forces in Venezuela were not part of a continent-wide movement, even while admitting that a military coup in Venezuela might have a "domino effect."

A fellow consultant found it incomprehensible that Venezuelans weren't pouring into the streets in defense of their "democracy" and their "economic boom." She warned that in the event of any "backtracking" on IMF austerity dictates, "you could forget Venezuela," and insisted that in the event of a coup, "the hemisphere, led by the United States, would establish very, very tight economic sanctions . . . no exports, no imports, zero. . . . Venezuelans should not believe that the hemisphere will stand by and simply debate as they did in Haiti."

Inter-American Dialogue officials Peter Hakim and Richard Feinberg wrote on March 18 in the *Christian Science Monitor* that free market economics and the IMF could not be blamed for the crisis threatening Venezuelan "democracy," but rather a failure of political leadership. Improved "political management" of free-market reforms, they conclude, is the answer.

Superman or has-been?

President Pérez apparently shares the oligarchic illusions of his mentors. In an interview with the March 14 *Miami Herald*, he insisted, "I continue to be a leader with a great deal of popular support. Resigning would be the error of my life, sending the country into chaos." He also argued, "I will never believe that this is a crisis provoked by an economic program. We are convinced that the economic program that we are carrying out is the one that Venezuela needs. . . . All the indicators show that this economic transformation is now permeating all sectors." Apparently, the 60% of Venezuela's population now categorized as "critically poor" do not agree with their President.

The *Miami Herald* also interviewed the secretary general of the Venezuelan Labor Federation (CTV), César Olarte, who observed, "One has the impression that President Pérez came out of the coup attempt as if he were a kind of Superman. He seems to be hearing the complaints, but not really listening to them."

His claims of "a great deal of popular support" notwithstanding, Pérez is apparently taking no chances. According to *El Diario de Caracas* of March 13, the Venezuelan secret police (DISIP) turned a number of remote-control missiles confiscated from the rebels involved in the Feb. 4 action over to thug elements within Pérez's ruling AD party, instead of back to the Armed Forces. The daily *El Nacional* on March 11 reported that the DISIP itself has been "totally rearmed, with weapons of sufficient fire-power to confront any contingency."

Persistent rumors of weapons disappearing from military caches coincide with confidential reports that a paramilitary force is being readied under Pérez's personal direction, involving elements of the DISIP and National Guard, mercenaries, Israeli advisers, and sophisticated weaponry. The daily *El Nuevo País* reported March 15 that the organizers of this Praetorian Guard are the same clique of CIA-linked Cuban exiles who were forced out of Pérez's government a few months ago in one of a string of corruption and drug scandals.

Pérez has also created what one prominent Caracas daily has dubbed "Terror Brigades." In a March 17 editorial, *El Diario de Caracas* charged that the police and the DISIP are working with Caracas Gov. Antonio Ledezma to set up a city-wide thug apparatus "very similar to the 'neighborhood committees'—made up of [Communist] Party stalwarts—which defended the Fidel Castro regime block by block in Havana. . . . And this is called terrorism, anywhere in the world."