

Andean Report by Alfonso Rodríguez

CAP spurns confidence vote

The Anglo-Americans' champion of "democracy" rejected a Senate ruling and defied a constitutional order.

On Nov. 5, Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez (or CAP, as he is known) rejected a Senate ruling that requires him to include on the ballot for the Dec. 6 election of mayors and governors, a "yes/no" referendum on whether the population wants him to remain in the presidency. CAP's response was given within hours of the Senate vote; in announcing it on national television, the President took the unusual step of requiring the presence of the entire military command at his side.

The Senate ruling, authored by Social Christian party (COPEI) Sen. Pedro Pablo Aguilar, responded less to the demands of the population for an end to CAP's rule than to the desperation of the Venezuelan political establishment to forestall a coup. If the referendum is not included in the Dec. 6 election, estimates are that abstentionism will be in the range of 80% or greater. By including the referendum, some hoped to channel this disenchantment to the polls. The population would be given their opportunity to boot CAP out of office, but the political system which spawned him would be saved.

CAP's rejection of the Senate's "vote of confidence" ruling has thus created an institutional crisis only comparable to the failed military coup of Feb. 4. In Aguilar's view, CAP's refusal to abide by the vote is made even more serious by the fact that he denounced the vote as "unconstitutional." According to the Venezuelan Constitution, only the judiciary can determine whether or not a measure is constitutional. Thus, says Aguilar,

CAP not only repudiated a decision of the Senate, but also "usurped" the functions of the Supreme Court.

Further, by insisting on the military command's presence during his rejection of the Senate ruling, CAP, in Aguilar's view, was also "abusing" his position as supreme commander of the Armed Forces.

It is ironic that the greater the effort the United States government makes to keep CAP in power, the more there are demonstrations against him in his own country. On Oct. 21, U.S. Ambassador to the Organization of American States Luigi Einaudi told a select audience of the Washington-based Woodrow Wilson Center that "Venezuela has a President with personal charisma, history, a potential of external reality . . . [who] still projects vigor, courage, modernity, adaptability."

Einaudi concluded with a warning that "if there is any interruption [of his mandate], let me assure you all that there will be . . . a whole range of reactions, which will make business as usual impossible."

And yet on the very night of the Senate vote, Venezuelans in several parts of the capital city jubilantly celebrated the decision with pot-banging and fireworks.

What nervous elements of the political establishment apparently hoped to accomplish with Aguilar's proposal is that, by bringing about CAP's resignation "democratically," there can be a peaceful way out of the current crisis in Venezuela. Declared Aguilar, "The worst tragedy that could happen would be a combination of violence,

anarchy, and the inability of the state to guarantee public order. It would be something like a civil war, of an unprecedented sort that could better be called 'bloody anarchy.' "

Aguilar's proposal implicitly requires that CAP resign following a vote of no confidence. According to Aguilar, CAP would be immediately replaced by the president of the Congress, who would then call on Congress to name an independent to fill out the remainder of the term and initiate reforms, including election of a Constituent Assembly.

Should the referendum take place, of course, the political dynamic in the country would be dramatically altered. This reality has triggered factional brawls within the political parties.

For example, Andrés Velázquez, leader of the leftist Causa R party, had rejected Aguilar's proposal two days before the Senate vote, during a visit to U.S. Ambassador Michael Skol's home in Caracas where he went to watch the U.S. election returns.

Velázquez, who is hopeful of improved relations with the United States under a Clinton presidency, has presidential aspirations for 1993. Causa R Secretary General Pablo Medina has already advanced the idea of requesting the presence of international observers, including former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, French President François Mitterrand, the head of Brazil's Workers Party "Lula," and Mexico's Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas. The last two, like Causa R, are affiliated with the Cuba-spawned São Paulo Forum, a continental collection of leftist parties.

But Causa R's representative to Venezuela's Supreme Electoral Council has backed the Senate ruling, and has already convoked an urgent meeting of the council to plan how to implement the referendum.