

The Choices Are Not 'Che' or 'Pinochet'

by Gretchen Small

International friends of Venezuela attempting to foster an electoral route back from the brink of civil war for the country, have come up against the hard reality that putting a political straitjacket on the megalomaniacal President Hugo Chávez is going to require more audacious thinking and action, than what they have attempted so far, if they are to succeed without triggering a continent-wide right-left bloodbath.

Two months and a day after it began on Dec. 2, the national civic strike demanding President Hugo Chávez's "Resignation, Now," was, by and large, over on Feb. 3. Economic breakdown, combined with international pressure, induced the opposition to shift strategies, and give up the strike which had bankrupted the economy. The international campaign was spearheaded by the combined efforts of former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, and a "Friends of Venezuela" group which was formed at the initiative of the Lula government of Brazil, and included the United States, Spain, Portugal, Mexico, Chile, and Brazil. Carter and the Friends group thought, at first, that they had some promise of renewed cooperation, also, from the Venezuelan regime. But President Chávez, a retired army lieutenant colonel, responded to the strike's collapse with a cry for war. He announced that he intends now to decapitate the opposition to his regime, bankrupting and jailing whomever required. Believing himself to be the instrument of a quasi-religious continental project to purge Ibero-America of its "corrupt elite," Chávez had dismissed the Friends of Venezuela in his speech to the 500,000 gathered at a government rally on Jan. 23. "No club of gentlemen will resolve the crisis. The crisis will be solved when what is going to have to die, finishes dying, and what is being born, finishes being born."

Adding to his multiple personalities, Chávez apparently is now convinced that he is not only the reincarnation of South American 19th-Century Liberator Simón Bolívar, but also of Ernesto "Che" Guevara, the Argentine-Cuban guerrilla who sought to ignite "one, two, many Vietnams" across Ibero-America.

Speaking before a special "Solidarity With Venezuela" event during the annual Jacobin confab of the World Social Forum in Pôrto Alegre, Brazil on Jan. 26, Chávez threatened to unleash the "Che Guevara" model throughout South America, should his ouster from office become a real possibil-

ity. In that case, he ranted, "it will show the rest of the peoples of the continent that there is no point in struggling peacefully and democratically for change, and it would be necessary to think of other means. I had a gun in my hands. I put it away. I would not want to use it again. . . . But if the oligarchs of the continent do not understand that the changes are inevitable . . . the telluric force of this continent will erupt, and as Ernesto Guevara once said, 'the cries of battle and the flash of gunfire' will sound."

The worst narco-terrorist lunatics in the continent are now rallying around Chávez, as typified by the prominent presence of Bolivian terrorist-indigenist Felipe Quispe at the official celebrations in Caracas this year of Chávez's Feb. 4, 1992 military uprising. The Castro regime also signalled its support for Chávez's attempt to save his skin by playing the continental card. At a Feb. 2 Havana presentation of a book of Chávez speeches, entitled *The Fascist Coup Against Venezuela*, Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque proclaimed that Chávez is attempting to do in Venezuela what Cuba did 40 years ago, and if Chávez is defeated, "it would be a historic set-back" for all peoples. Present in the front row was Fidel Castro.

What makes the situation even more dangerous, are the equally lunatic calls coming from certain quarters in the opposition movement, for Venezuela's military to rise up and drive Chávez out. A statement signed by a so-called "Democratic Bloc," claiming to represent 40 non-governmental organizations, and the Merchant Marine (a much more serious factor), which argued for such a military solution, began to circulate on Feb. 3. These layers are being egged on by the "chickenhawk" imperialist crowd in Washington, around Vice President Dick Cheney.

LaRouche: Go at the Insanity Factor

On Feb. 7, U.S. Presidential pre-candidate Lyndon H. LaRouche released a new statement on this explosive mix. "The Carter initiative and the efforts of the Brazilian government were the right thing to do. Carter and the Friends tried to cool things out, but now Chávez is destroying the very deal that was being put together to bring Venezuela back from the brink," LaRouche said.

LaRouche referenced his Dec. 21, 2002 statement, in which he emphasized the "substantial evidence that Chávez is actually clinically insane," as a factor to be considered. "A prompt, quiet, non-bloody solution must be found and agreed upon by the relevant parties, under which Chávez would be induced to step down from office," LaRouche wrote then, suggesting the aid of a professional psychiatrist might be employed in the effort.

"Chávez's latest provocations only underscore my earlier assesment and proposed course of action," LaRouche reiterated on Feb. 7. "Further urgent efforts are required of friends of Venezuela, to quietly stop this Chávez insanity, before it triggers a Pinochet-style coup in that country, and a conse-

quent left-right firestorm across the continent. It is obvious to me that some nasty faction from within the United States is orchestrating the situation around Chávez, including Mont Pelerinite elements within the opposition, who have strong ties to the imperialist 'chicken-hawk' crowd in Washington. They are exploiting Chávez's mental problems to the end of producing an added element of strategic chaos into both the Ibero-American theater generally, and also the international petroleum issues posed by the current threat of a Mideast war.

"The essential problem here, is the mental condition of President Chávez himself. His conduct serves no rational interest. As Abba Eban once said to me, during our New York meeting on the subject of Middle East peace, one must never forget that 'some heads of state are clinically insane.' Chávez is such a complication. The greatest danger, is that someone might use his nuisance-like qualities to turn him into a martyr to Benthamite Jacobinism. Thus, I have warned against a 'Pinochet' solution for the Chávez problem," LaRouche declared.

Scorched Earth Strategies

Chávez has been manifesting signs of clinical euphoria even in his voice and body mannerisms in the speeches he has given since the middle of January, speeches where he has repeatedly promised to wipe out his opponents, with no concern for national interests. Those who led the strike "can't remain unpunished. . . They must go to prison," he told the nation in his regular Sunday television harangue, "Hello, President," on Feb. 2. At a political rally a few days before, he had urged prosecutors and judges to impose sentences of "more than 25 years of prison, for treason against the Fatherland," upon strike leaders.

Charges have already been filed against the head of the Fedecámaras business association, Carlos Fernández, who was called in for questioning on Jan. 30. Similar moves are believed imminent against the head of the Venezuelan Labor Federation (CTV), Carlos Ortega. Legal maneuvers are under way against opposition newspapers and television networks, such as the 20 legal actions, seven of them criminal, brought against the opposition-run television network, RCTV.

Chávez has made good use of the fact that opposition ranks include the likes of the hated, dirty billionaire Gustavo Cisneros (whose help in getting elected in the first place, Chávez did not reject). But only a lunatic could dismiss the entire opposition as a mere handful of "oligarchs." When on Jan. 22 the Supreme Court threw out the opposition's petition for a referendum on whether Chávez should leave office or not, the opposition countered by organizing an informal referendum for Feb. 2. There they collected, at thousands of tables around the country manned by 30,000 volunteers, some 4 million signatures on petitions proposing varied electoral and legal maneuvers by which President Chávez could be removed from office—double the number

the opposition collected at the end of 2002, on the petition rejected by the court.

Yet, Chávez told the Colombian daily *El Espectador* on Jan. 31, that there never was a strike, but only "subversion," which he compared to the "subversion" which Colombia has faced for 50 years. The comparison has its ironies, given that Chávez has long insisted that the Colombian state must negotiate with the Colombian FARC and ELN narco-terrorists—which his regime in fact supports—even as he proclaims that he will never negotiate with the "fascists, coup-plotters, and terrorists" who oppose him.

The regime's intransigence has forced the strike to be continued in the most critical sector of the economy, the oil industry, because the government refuses to rehire the more than 5,000 workers and managers whom it fired over the course of the strike, or to roll back the structural changes it imposed upon *Petróleos de Venezuela* (PDVSA), dividing and downsizing the national oil company. Yet, the regime's attempt to bring oil production back up to 3.2 million barrels a day (production is currently just over 1.5 million bpd, it is believed), with a workforce at least one-seventh smaller, and lacking its most experienced managers and labor, is irrational, because it threatens long-term damage to the oil industry.

The political impasse has already destroyed the economy, incalculably. For the first time, the Central Bank simply did not issue an annual report on 2002. Unemployment increased by at least 1 million in 2002, and at least another 300,000 will probably lose their jobs in the first quarter of 2003. This, out of an economically active population of 10 million, in which unemployment has now reached around 20%. But 60% or more of those considered employed have no secure jobs, but work in the so-called "informal" sector.

The final blow to the economy may be delivered by Chávez's imposition of exchange controls. Controls are a required measure for any sovereign national economic development, but in his Feb. 5 television address announcing the new measures, Chávez gloated that the controls are "the ideal way" to defeat his enemies—and, he specified, to ensure that Venezuela can pay its foreign debt. There will be a fixed exchange rate (1.598 bolivars to the dollar), and a new state-run company will import most food and medicine, whose prices will be controlled. But, he added, "not one dollar for coup-mongers. We're going to shut the door on them." Remember, he said, "this is the year of the revolutionary offensive."

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