

Weekly Report - 22 February 2005

VENEZUELA: Opposition left takes separate path

Pompeyo Márquez, the former guerrilla fighter and member of the Communist party's central committee who appeared to have been left as surviving spokesman for the shell of the opposition Coordinadora Democrática (CD), has joined in the relaunch of Izquierda Democrática (ID), as the vehicle for 'a left different to the one that is now ruling us'. Also taking explicit distance from the rightwing members of the CD is the nominally social-democratic Acción Democrática (AD).

Márquez appeared next to Luis Manuel Esculpi, secretary-general of ID, for the party's 'relaunch' in Caracas on 19 February. They claimed that their 'new' ID shared the outlooks of Brazil's Lula da Silva, Chile's Ricardo Lagos and Uruguay's Tabaré Vázquez. ID's new manifesto says that it rejects the 'unipolar world' which the US under Bush 'is trying to impose'. On the international scene it advocates 'peace and solidarity, disarmament, democracy, and Latin American and Caribbean integration'. In Venezuela, it is against the 'de-nationalisation of oil' and in favour of 'restoring the prestige of PDVSA [the state oil company]'.

Much of this appeal is close to that of the chavistas; what distinguishes them, in the eyes of ID, is that the chavistas are essentially 'undemocratic'. The relaunched ID has not yet said if it intends to contest the municipal elections due in July.

AD ponders participation

Acción Democrática leader Henry Ramos announced on 17 February that the party grassroots would be consulted on whether to contest the municipal elections - but added that he was personally in favour of taking part, so as not to 'concede an inch of ground' to the government. Coming just after other former opposition allies had announced that they would be boycotting the elections, Ramos seems to be repeating what he did just before last year's gubernatorial contests. Then also, most of the rightwing members of the CD started out by proclaiming that they would not be in the running, only to end up taking part.

Ramos took advantage of the occasion to goad his rightist former allies, like Copei and Proyecto Venezuela, for 'not acknowledging their chromosomes and class nature'. He said, 'AD is the only democratic and popular opposition party in the country. Only AD, because of its organisation and popular penetration, is capable of competing with chavismo.'

That can be read as a message to those who might find the revamped ID appealing. What Ramos is saying is that, however attractive their proposals, they lack the organisational wherewithal to challenge the primacy of the pro-Chávez camp.

The big mistake

Ramos acknowledged, though, that AD shared with the rest of the opposition the 'tremendous error' of having supported the abortive 2002 coup against Chávez - for which, he said, 'we are all still paying'. 'One way or another,' said Ramos, 'Chávez manages to appear before international opinion as a great defender of the needy classes who is opposed by the Venezuelan oligarchy because at last someone has appeared taking the side of the poor.' The big challenge, he added, is 'to persuade the people that this is not like that; that the Chávez government is clientelistic; that it abuses its power; that it uses it to persecute'. And for that, he concluded, 'we must depart from that sort of Noah's Ark which is the Venezuelan opposition'.

Weekly Report - 15 March 2005

VENEZUELA: US spells out its policy towards Chávez

President Hugo Chávez keeps repeating that the US wants him assassinated. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice says this is 'ludicrous'. Perhaps Chávez is being a bit paranoid, but it is not hard to discern that the US wants him out. While working to build up the opposition to Chávez within Venezuela, it is marshalling its diplomatic efforts towards persuading the rest of the region that it should take action against him.

None of this is secret: it was spelt out to the US House of Representatives' subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere on 9 March by Roger Noriega, Assistant Secretary of State for the region. In an address remarkable for extending a warm embrace even to 'populist' leaders in the hemisphere, Noriega said of Chávez, 'His efforts to concentrate power at home, his suspect relationship with destabilising forces in the region, and his plans for arms purchases are causes of major concern.'

In response to this, he told the legislators, 'We will support democratic elements in Venezuela so they can fill the political space to which they are entitled [...] We also want Venezuela's neighbours and others in the region to understand the stakes involved and the implications of President Chávez's professed desire to spread his "Bolivarian" revolution [...] Should the United States and Venezuela's neighbours ignore President Chávez's questionable affinity for democratic principles we could soon wind up with a poorer, less free, and hopeless Venezuela that seeks to export its failed model to other countries in the region.'

That same day the same subcommittee was told by Adolfo Franco, assistant administrator of USAID's Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean, that the agency's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) 'is performing critical work in support of democratic development and civil society in Venezuela [...] For example, in Venezuela, USAID is implementing the "Venezuela Confidence-Building Initiative" to promote a solution to the current political crisis which began over three years ago'.

Secretary Rice provided the rationale for US action in a statement to the television network Univisión: 'Given that he was elected, he should govern democratically, and secondly, he should not interfere in the affairs of his neighbours. Those are the issues and these are issues for the region. This is very much the Charter of the Organisation of American States and all we ask is that Venezuela live up to it.' She appeared to be alluding to the OAS Democratic Charter, which provides for the exclusion of member states that act in breach of democratic principles.

The State Department is not the only US government agency with an attitude towards Chávez. Over the past few days two leading defence figures have been spelling out their positions to Andy Webb-Vidal of the Financial Times. Roger Pardo-Maurer, deputy assistant secretary for western hemisphere affairs, said, 'Chávez is a problem because he is clearly using his oil money and influence to introduce his conflictive style into the politics of other countries. He's picking on the countries whose social fabric is the weakest. In some cases it's downright subversion.' He added that Washington had run out of patience with Chávez.

General Bantz Craddock, head of the US Southern Command, raised questions about Venezuela's arms purchases, saying that its motives were unclear and hinting that the weapons may be used to 'export instability'.

Weekly Report - 22 March 2005

VENEZUELA: Chávez's allies in open dissent with his party

Last week brought the Venezuelan opposition the best news it has had in a long time: bitter dissent has broken out within the pro-Chávez camp, with six parties challenging the bid by the president's Movimiento Quinta República (MVR) to claim for itself most of the candidacies for the forthcoming municipal elections. The crucial detail: without its allies, the MVR does not have a majority in the national assembly.

Municipal and parish elections are due on 7 August. The MVR wants to base the shareout of candidacies according to the past electoral performance of the coalition's member parties - which would give it 70% of the candidacies. There are six allied parties, of which the biggest are Patria para Todos (PPT) and Unidad Popular Venezolana (UPV), each of which has a seat in the assembly. The MVR says that giving the other parties a greater share would be tantamount to 'fraud'. Some MVR leaders have tried to settle the dispute by claiming that their formula has been approved by none other than Chávez.

The president, who has not yet come out with a firm stance one way or the other, has sought to play down the importance of the rift. 'There will always be differences,' he told reporters on 17 March. Some of his officials appear to see things differently. For example, education minister Aristóbulo Istúriz has been accused by the pro-Chávez weekly *Las verdades de Miguel* of having engineered a cut-off of government advertising in response to some critical articles. Istúriz, it is worth noting, belongs to the PPT, one of the parties now battling the MVR.

Miguel Salazar, publisher of the weekly, did not mince words in his reaction to the minister's purported action. 'I'm not surprised,' he wrote, 'that you should seek to put out on the street the 30 compañeros of our small firm [...] which with scant resources has managed to create a successful vehicle for information, while you, with all the power and money, have not managed to produce a single work you can claim as yours, in a ministry that has proven too big for you.'

Lina Ron, president of UPV and a well-known grassroots leader in Caracas, says the MVR is using the wrong *chavímetro* [gauge to measure allegiance to Chávez]. 'Who has been running Caracas and dominating it electorally, continuously and with popular support? I have to say it is my people, not the MVR's. This is because the grassroots MVR members are also those who follow Lina Ron.'

For now at least, all parties to the dispute are professing undying allegiance to Chávez. The anti-Chávez camp is hoping that, as with prior cases of dissent, the rift will deepen and turn into defection. The MVR now has 68 seats in the assembly; 15 short of a majority. Its allies raise the pro-government total to 86, a majority vulnerable to only a few defections.

This year's electoral calendar begins on 3 April, with recall referendums against nine opposition legislators - a move by the pro-Chávez camp to widen its advantage in the legislature. Next, as noted above, come the local elections on 7 August. Finally, on 4 December, come the legislative elections. This is when the MVR wants to obtain a majority of its own (hence its moves, starting now, to elbow out smaller allies). It is also the first opportunity for the opposition to show if it can recover from last year's major defeats (first in the presidential recall referendum, later in the gubernatorial contests). No opposition strategist realistically expects a turnaround that will give the MVR a majority, but many would like to see it end up in a weaker position.

Weekly Report - 19 April 2005

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VENEZUELA: Mixed debut for new supreme court

A moment of reckoning has come for the supreme court recently enlarged and filled with new appointees by the slender pro-government majority in congress. Its actions will show whether fears voiced by the opposition at home and abroad about creeping authoritarianism enforced by a compliant judiciary are justified. The first important cases to come before the new supreme court have been inconclusive in this respect, but other controversial cases are on their way.

On 15 April the supreme court's constitutional panel threw out an appeal filed by opposition lawyer Tulio Alvarez against a lower-court conviction for aggravated and continuous defamation against the former president of the national assembly, William Lara; this conviction earned him a prison sentence of two years and three months. Alvarez had repeatedly accused Lara of irregularly using assembly funds, with which Lara successfully argued he had nothing to do.

That same day the penal panel of the supreme court overturned an appellate court's acquittal of retired General Carlos Alfonzo, who had been convicted by a lower court of breaching a security zone when, in 2002, he joined an opposition demonstration in front of the national guard's headquarters. The general was on active duty at the time. The supreme court, however, did not confirm the lower court's five-year sentence: it ordered a retrial, releasing the general on his own recognizance until this takes place. This may not be all that good for Alfonzo: a new trial could reconsider charges of rebellion and abandonment of a command post, which the lower court had thrown out.

Likely to reach the supreme court soon is an appeal by the award-winning journalist Patricia Poleo against a conviction for defamation that carried a six-month suspended sentence. The charge had been made by communications minister Jesse Chacón, wrongly identified in a photo published by Poleo as the person who appeared crouching next to a body during the November 1992 coup led by Hugo Chávez against then-president Carlos Andrés Pérez. Chacón had alleged that the misidentification and a biased caption had damaged his reputation.

Further down the line are the proceedings initiated against the prominent lawyer Carlos Ayala Corao, on charges of participation in the abortive April 2002 coup against Chávez. The US-based NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW), which has taken up Ayala's case, says the charges are 'outrageous and would be rejected out of hand in any independent court of law'. Ayala is currently president of the non-governmental Comisión Andina de Juristas (CAJ) and is a former president of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

HRW has noted that during the coup attempt against Chávez, Ayala intervened to protect the rights of a pro-Chávez congressman who had been detained illegally and was being held incommunicado by the security services. The congressman, Tarek William Saab, subsequently thanked Ayala on television for his timely action. A special committee of the national assembly that investigated the events of April 2002 also noted that Ayala waited for five hours outside police headquarters while he was seeking Saab's release. Over the past year, says HRW, the pro-Chávez majority in the Venezuelan legislature has 'severely weakened judicial independence in Venezuela'. It adds that numerous recent newspaper articles indicate that the chief prosecutor general is considering criminal proceedings against more than 200 people for 'politically motivated offences', including involvement in the coup attempt against Chávez.