

Venezuela's Failed Coup, the U.S.' Role, and the Future of Hugo Chávez

by Steve Ellner and Fred Rosen

On Monday, April 15, the day after his dramatic return to power, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez called for a “national dialogue.” He acknowledged the “large number of Venezuelans who were in disagreement with the government, and who would continue to demonstrate peacefully,” and he called for a lowering of the levels of confrontation in Venezuela. The current polarization, he said “is not positive. There has to be communication among the different sectors” of Venezuelan society.¹

The day before, by contrast, in the full flush of victory over the insurgents who had tried to drive him from office on April 11, he went to the city of Maracay to deliver a fiery speech to a battalion of paratroopers—his most militant and consistent supporters throughout the previous days’ events—rallying the troops with a stirring attack on the “oligarchs” who had attempted to bring down his revolutionary government.² The two speeches, the conciliatory reaching out to all Venezuelans and the “us-against-them” defense of the revolution to his stalwarts in the military, reflect a continuing tension within Chávez himself and within the Chavista movement.

Chávez assumed the presidency of Venezuela in 1998 at the head of what he called a “Bolivarian Revolution.” The Revolution linked itself to the legacy of the 19th century South American liberator Simón Bolívar and promised to raise both material living standards and the dignity of the Venezuelan people. It was a nationalist response to the process of neoliberal globalization that was widening the gap between rich and poor within the country and North and South globally. It was, also, a “dignified”

response to the corruption and inefficiency that had come to characterize Venezuela’s political class. The Bolivarian vision, however, was wide-reaching and left room for an array of positions and strategies. In the months leading up to the April 11 coup attempt, as Chávez’s presidency came under attack from several fronts, these differences produced tensions and confrontation within the governing party.

The Bolivarian project evoked the memory of Bolívar the patriot, liberator, and soldier. It rode on a wave of such popularity that it allowed Chávez, an ex-military officer, to win the presidency in a landslide vote in 1998. Ironically, Chávez had once himself attempted to oust a sitting president by force, in 1992, for which he was jailed until 1994, when he was pardoned. By 1997, he had formed his own political party, the Fifth Republic Movement (MVR), which brought him to power in 1998. In 1999, the Chavistas called a Constituent Assembly to rewrite Venezuela’s Constitution, which was approved by popular referendum in December 1999. Under the new Constitution, which changed the length of presidential terms from five to six years, Chávez was reelected to a six-year term in December 2000.

The Bolivarian project, however, also drew the wrath of all those savagely castigated by Chávez for being members of the old politics. Chávez has challenged the privilege, corruption, and inefficiency of the old regime—a regime that could no longer “deliver the goods” to the Venezuelan people. From the beginning, it was a polarizing affair, displaying, in the words of Margarita López Maya and Luis Lander, two political analysts sympathetic to the process, “a

Steve Ellner is the co-editor of Venezuela in the Chavez Era: Polarization and Social Conflict, forthcoming from Lynne Rienner Publishers. Fred Rosen <frosen@nacla.org> is director of the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), which publishes the bimonthly journal, NACLA Report on the Americas. This article is adapted from a longer article, “Chavismo at the Crossroads,” NACLA Report on the Americas, May/June 2002.

Foreign Policy In Focus Policy Report June 2002

Foreign Policy in Focus is a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS). The project depends on sales and subscription income, individual donors, and grants from foundations and churches. *In Focus* internships are available, and we invite article queries and comments.

Issue Editor

Jo-Marie Burt

Project Directors

Tom Barry (IRC)

Martha Honey (IPS)

Communications & Outreach

Kathy Spillman (IPS)

kathy@ips-dc.org

Erik Leaver (IPS)

erik@fpif.org

Siri Khalsa (IRC)

communications@irc-online.org

Project Administrative Assistants

Nancy Stockdale (IRC)

Juliette Niehuss (IPS)

Design/Production

Tonya Cannariato (IRC)

Orders and subscription information:

Mail: PO Box 4506

Albuquerque, NM 87196-4506

Voice & Fax: (505) 842-8288

Email: infocus@irc-online.org

Editorial inquiries and information:

IPS Editor

Voice: (202) 234-9382/3 ext. 232

Fax: (202) 387-7915

Email: martha@ips-dc.org

IRC Editor

Voice: (505) 388-0208

Fax: (505) 388-0619

Email: tom@irc-online.org

Foreign Policy In Focus (FPF) aims to help forge a new global affairs agenda for the U.S. government and the U.S. public—an agenda that makes the U.S. a more responsible global leader and partner. The project responds to current foreign policy issues and crises with FPF policy briefs, the *Progressive Response* ezine, and news briefings. In addition, FPF publishes a series of special reports, a media guide of foreign policy analysts, and a biennial book on U.S. foreign policy.

FPF's network of advocates, organizations, activists, and scholars functions as a "think tank without walls," reaching out to constituencies and foreign policy actors to ensure that U.S. foreign policy represents a more broadly conceived understanding of U.S. national interests.

<http://www.fpfif.org/>

level of belligerence unprecedented in recent Venezuelan life."³

Significantly, since taking office, the Chavistas have never had a unified ideology or well-defined political program. Chávez rose to power as free trade globalization, privatization of state-owned enterprises, and structural adjustment policies were rendering governments throughout Latin America relatively ineffective—except, perhaps, as vehicles to help greedy officials line their own pockets. In that context, while Chávez always considered himself a man of the left, he came to office on a region-wide tide of "anti-politics." The bearer of his anti-politics was the institution least sullied by the compromises of day-to-day politics—the Venezuelan military.

There has long been a tension between military officers and civilians within the MVR. Indeed, many of the group's civilian activists had once belonged to leftist organizations that had faced the military in the guerrilla struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. In addition, the civilians themselves have been split between leftist and moderate wings, producing a three-way tension among moderates, hard-line leftists, and military officers. Holding the three factions together has been a deep distrust of Venezuela's "old politics" and a fierce sense of the country's sovereignty and independence, particularly in the face of U.S. power.

In 2001, oil prices—the staple of Venezuela's export earnings—precipitously fell; living standards stagnated; and with no credible plan for economic recovery in sight, Chávez's once imposing popularity plummeted. Then, as the Bush administration became vocal about its dissatisfaction with Chavez' global independence, Venezuela's domestic opposition became increasingly emboldened and aggressive.

Indeed, Washington, unhappy with Chávez's foreign policy, seemed encouraged by his domestic difficulties. Hugo

Chávez's friendship with (and discounted oil sales to) Fidel Castro, his criticism of the U.S. war on terror, his cordial relations with his Middle East OPEC partners, his apparent sympathy for Colombia's FARC guerrillas, and his denial of Venezuelan airspace for U.S. drug war missions have all been sore points with Bush administration officials. While the degree to which U.S. agencies were involved in the attempted coup of April 11 is still unclear, it is evident that official Washington dearly wanted it to succeed and, at a minimum, sent signals to that effect to the Venezuelan opposition.

In the wake of September 11, Washington began aggressively calling Chávez's "democratic" commitment into question. In late October 2001, during the heaviest U.S. bombing operations in Afghanistan, Chávez incensed Washington with his comment that "terror should not be fought with terror." U.S. Ambassador to Venezuela Donna Hrinak was temporarily recalled to Washington "for consultation." On her return to Caracas she voiced strong displeasure with Chávez's remarks, called in the foreign minister for an "explanation," and showed notable sympathy for Venezuela's opposition. When Hrinak later commented that "the changes in Venezuela should be democratic," Venezuelan publisher Teodoro Petkoff quipped that when the U.S. embassy calls for democratic changes, "the accent is not on democracy but on the changes."⁴

That "accent" was well understood by the Venezuelan opposition. The parties Chávez defeated in 1998, Democratic Action (AD) and the Social Christian Copei, along with the Catholic Church, the national business chamber Fedecámaras, most of the media, and the AD-affiliated Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV) all went on the anti-Chávez offensive. (The CTV has become an arena of intense conflict

between AD, which has long controlled the union, and the Chavistas, who accuse the CTV leadership of selling out the working poor.) On December 10, 2001 Fedecámaras, joined by the CTV, called a one-day general strike, and, after that, demonstrations demanding Chávez's removal became virtually a daily occurrence. To heighten the tension, several military officers also began publicly calling for Chávez to step down.

In early February, Washington seemed to up the ante. In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on February 5, Secretary of State Colin Powell expressed concern “with some of the actions of Venezuelan President Chávez and his understanding of what a democratic system is all about.” And, he continued, “we have not been happy with some of the comments he has made with respect to the campaign against terrorism. He hasn't been as supportive as he might have been. And he drops in some of the strangest countries to visit”—an apparent reference to Chavez's trips to Iraq, Libya, and Cuba. Powell's comments made front-page news in Venezuela on February 6, sharing the headlines and the talk-show news with similar remarks made that same day by CIA director George Tenet.⁵

The critical comments of Tenet, Powell, and Hrinak were not perceived in Venezuela as personal opinions; they were perceived as coordinated signals. The opposition felt it had the green light to remove Chávez from power, and the eventual coup leaders were, in fact, reading the signals well. A few days after the coup attempt, a Department of Defense official told the *New York Times* that the Pentagon had neither encouraged nor discouraged the opposition to overthrow President Chávez. Rather, he said, “we were sending informal, subtle signals that we didn't like this guy.”⁶

The evidence indicates, however, that Washington may well have gone beyond the simple sending of signals to the

emboldened opposition. On several occasions, under the apparent coordination of Assistant Secretary of State Otto Reich—an anti-Castro Cuban American and right-wing ideologue who served as Ambassador to Venezuela during the Reagan administration—U.S. officials in Washington as well as embassy staff in Caracas actively met with the opposition figures who were to become coup leaders.⁷ And a former U.S. Navy intelligence officer named Wayne Madsen told London's *Guardian* that Navy vessels engaged in exercises off Venezuela's Caribbean coast provided strategic “communications jamming” to the opposition during the days of the coup.⁸ It is worth noting that Reich is no stranger to conspiracy; he was a key player in the infamous Iran-Contra affair.

Even though Chávez defied his opponents and returned to office, he remains under enormous pressure. The Chavista movement has made little effort up until now to define long-term objectives. The military faction, which stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Chavista civilians during the days and nights of April 11-14, may at some point confront the leftist hardliners over the party's stance on social and economic issues. At the same time, members of the military wing of the MVR have pushed legislation dealing with public security that runs counter to the spirit of open democracy and liberty embodied in the new constitution. Indeed, a hard line has been differently drawn by different people. For the leftist hardliners, it has meant unswerving defense of Venezuela's working poor—especially informal-sector workers—in the trade union movement, and a commitment to safeguard state-run social security. For the military hardliners it has meant, and may continue to mean, avoidance of negotiation with the politicians of the old political class—over anything.

Prior to mid-April, both the officers and the hard-line “leftists” had claimed

for many months that a “conspiracy” was afoot to topple the government. They cited “secret documents” attesting to an underground network that received millions of dollars in funds from abroad and was linked to the Cuban community in Miami as well as Colombian drug traffickers. (Such documents have never surfaced publicly.) They claimed that ex-President Carlos Andrés Pérez, whom Chavez tried to overthrow in 1992 and now a resident of Miami, was playing a key role in the anti-Chavez plots. In January, Chavista labor leader Nicolás Maduro revealed what he said were the contents of a taped conversation between Pérez and Carlos Ortega, president of the Venezuelan Workers Federation, in which Ortega reportedly tells Pérez: “We need your help here. We are trying by any means possible to gain control of the National Assembly.” Pérez allegedly responds by advising Ortega to work closely with Fedecámaras.⁹ Notwithstanding the reality of the threat, the moderates have called for “comprehension” and “understanding” on the part of both sides. Before the coup attempt, they argued that even if a conspiracy existed, it could best be confronted by open discussion and compromise. Now, in the wake of the failed coup, Chavista moderates continue to call for dialogue.

Hardliners, however, may have the upper hand. The “Bolivarian Revolution” has been a polarizing process and Chávez has been a polarizing figure. At first he successfully positioned himself against the discredited traditional political class, but now he is positioned against a much broader spectrum of forces, and the polarization has seeped into his own political movement. In the aftermath of the failed coup, dialogue as promoted by the moderates within his MVR party may lessen the polarization and permit the emergence of a middle ground of critical supporters and a “loyal opposition.” Reducing the polarization might

also give the Chavistas some breathing space to consolidate the Bolivarian movement and effectively govern Venezuela. The Bush administration's hard line against Chávez, however, may be strengthening the most intransigent hardliners within his government.

NOTES

1. "Hoy comienza diálogo nacional," *El Universal* (Caracas), April 16, 2002, sección nacional y política, online.
2. "Paz o guerra," *TalCual* (Caracas), April 15, 2002, portada, online.
3. Margarita López-Maya and Luis Lander, "Refounding the Republic:

The Political Project of Chavismo," *NACLA Report on the Americas*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 6, May/June 2000. See this entire report for political and historical background to the Chávez presidency.

4. "Guerra!," *TalCual*, February 21, 2002
5. See for example "EEUU expresó desacuerdo con políticas de Chávez," *El Universal*, February 6, 2002, front page, online; and "Color de hormiga," a front page February 7 editorial in *TalCual* which states: "The point is clear. The hawks in the North American government are washing

their hands regarding what might happen in our country. That is the signal they have sent."

6. "Bush Officials Met With Venezuelans Who Ousted Leader," *New York Times*, April 16, 2002.
7. See, for example, "U.S. Cautioned Leader of Plot Against Chávez," *New York Times*, April 17, 2002.
8. "American Navy 'helped Venezuelan coup,'" *The Guardian* (London), April 30, 2002.
9. See "Carlos A. Pérez implicado en conspiración," *El Nuevo Herald* (Miami), January 18, 2002.

Subscribe:

Subscribe for \$15 (10 issues) or \$30 (20 issues). Individual copies of *In Focus* are \$2.50, postpaid; bulk orders of *In Focus* are \$12.00 for 10 copies of the same issue, postpaid; orders for delivery outside the U.S. are double the listed prices. (Subscriptions do not include back issues. Contact the IRC for a list of available back issues.) Make checks payable to the Interhemispheric Resource Center. We also accept VISA and MasterCard.

To subscribe to *Foreign Policy In Focus*, or to order back issues, contact the IRC:
 PO Box 4506 ♦ Albuquerque, NM 87196-4506 ♦ Phone / Fax: (505) 842-8288

Name

Email Address

Street Address

City, State, Zip Code

VISA/MasterCard Number

Expiration Date

Signature