

Venezuela Shuts Down, On Brink of Civil War

by David Ramonet and Gretchen Small

The options for what happens next in Venezuela are few, and none good. If a strong and decisive intervention by inter-American institutions does not force President Hugo Chávez to negotiate his resignation, or if the military does not intervene to achieve the same end, the polarized political situation is leading the country toward bloody street fighting. The country is so polarized, in fact, that civil war could result, even if either of those interventions do occur.

It is not merely the stubbornness, a product of the President's clinically crazy mental state, which has led to this situation, but the hardcore adherents of violence with which he surrounds himself, who are hell-bent on playing the ultimate card of his fascist "revolution." After four years of a government which collapsed the national economy and destroyed the institutions of state, Chávez has confronted, throughout the past year, an organized opposition centered around the "Democratic Coordinator," which joins various political parties and civil associations, including the business organization Fedecámaras and the Venezuelan Labor Federation. Since Dec. 2, the Democratic Coordinator has carried out a national civic strike, which has led to the total paralysis of the oil industry, the heart of the Venezuelan economy.

One year ago, analysts forecast that Venezuela would be the next country to face an institutional crisis similar to that of Argentina. But they never imagined it would occur like this. So-called "globalization" has cornered every nation in the world, and especially in this hemisphere, and has led to the disintegration of the institutions. In the case of Venezuela, Chávez—brought to power, as *EIR* has documented, by the City of London, Wall Street, and such local toadies as Gustavo Cisneros—has been the instrument. But the tragedy is, that the opposition—made up of the same organizations and personalities which led the country into this situation in the first place—does not offer a solution, either, to the fundamental problem facing the nation: how to deal with the misery in which 80% of the population lives? How to escape from the grip of globalization and the International Monetary Fund?

It is a dramatic failure of leadership which has brought Venezuela to the brink of a civil war which threatens to end in national disintegration. In discussions with regional leaders, U.S. statesman Lyndon LaRouche pointed to the failure of Venezuelan leaders, on either side of the barricades now dividing the country, to break with the oligarchical games which

have typified Caribbean politics for decades. Political decisions are still determined by the deals and agreements reached amongst the families in the Country Club set, who answer to the international financial oligarchy only. No one has stepped forward to build a national patriotic base, which cares about the people and builds for the nation's future. Thus, as opposition leaders play their designated part in a broader scheme they never bothered to consider, Venezuela sinks into partisan violence, trapped in a meaningless right-left confrontation, while international financier interests ready themselves to gain final control over its rich resources.

Shutting Down the Oil

Following months of indecision by the organized opposition—ever since the April crisis, when Chávez abandoned the Presidency in the face of pressure from the Armed Forces, following a massacre inflicted on a peaceful mass demonstration—the crisis became more acute, when a group of 14 high-level officers of the Armed Forces declared themselves in “legitimate disobedience” last Oct. 22 in the Plaza Francia of Altamira, in a main residential zone of Caracas. The previous day, there had been yet another civic strike which had paralyzed the country for 12 hours, but to which the government refused to respond. Since then, some 200 officers and soldiers have joined the act of “legitimate disobedience,” and the plaza in Altamira has become the focal point for millions of Venezuelans who are demanding Chávez's departure from the Presidency.

On Nov. 2, a demonstration starting from the plaza brought more than 2 million signatures to the National Electoral Council, on a petition seeking a referendum on whether Chávez should resign. Violent mobs deployed by the government attacked the marchers, and tried to burn the truck that carried the petitions, but—as does not happen often with these groups—the attackers were dispersed with tear gas by the National Guard. The Council accepted the signatures, and set the date of Feb. 2, 2003 for holding the referendum, the which President Chávez has repeatedly insisted he would ignore, “even if they get 90%” of the votes against him.

The opposition then called a national civic strike beginning on Dec. 2, initially aimed at forcing the government to accept the referendum.

Since Dec. 9, the oil industry has been paralyzed. The oil crisis created by the strike at the refineries and in the oil fields has created an existential crisis for the government. Of the 3 million barrels of crude oil normally exported daily, only 650,000 barrels are now leaving Venezuela—which has driven up the price of crude on the international markets. Shortages of gasoline and natural gas have already developed in the interior of the country, which has forced the enormous state-owned iron and aluminum foundries to cut back production. The government is facing a budget crisis due to the lack of oil revenues, and the Venezuelan Central Bank has now suspended dollar sales.

The U.S. company Citgo, partially owned by the Venezuelan government and the leading distributor of gasoline on the East Coast of the United States, won't be receiving Venezuelan oil shipments, and will have to resort to crude from the Gulf of Mexico. The New England region of the United States will also feel the impact of lack of fuel for heating this Winter.

The government has tried to take over the oil tankers anchored in the Gulf of Maracaibo with heavily armed commando units, putting the security of the fuel-loaded tankers at risk. They have also tried, in vain, to force truckers to supply the country with fuel. The government has found that its military might cannot replace the technical expertise required to operate the oil industry.

Food shortages are occurring across the country, as a panicking population stocks up on food. Runs on the banks have begun, as the strike enters its 11th day, with no sign of a resolution. Despite this, President Chávez and his followers insist that the strike has failed, and are refusing to negotiate. Vice President José Vicente Rangel claimed on Dec. 11 that the strike didn't exist at all; that the country was functioning normally, and the strike was only occurring in the television studios of the opposition.

Even as it blindly denies the existence of the strike, the government has deployed its paramilitary shock troops, euphemistically called “Bolivarian circles,” to confront the strikers. On Dec. 6, the utter brutality of these groups was displayed, when a gunman, armed with an automatic pistol, burst into the plaza in Altamira and fired repeatedly into the crowd, leaving three dead and 30 wounded. The gunman was able to reload his weapon three times with extraordinary skill before he was finally overcome. It is believed that there were at least two other gunmen present, who managed to escape.

The day before, the arrested gunman had been caught on a homemade video, later broadcast on television, accompanying Freddy Bernal, Mayor of the Libertador township in Caracas, leading “Bolivarian circle” thugs in an operation to take over the main offices of the state oil company PDVSA, in anticipation of an opposition march to the site planned for later that day.

Dissident military figures also warn that they have reliable reports that the narco-terrorist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) have sent several units specializing in low-intensity urban operations, into Venezuela since the strike began.

The government's violence against the opposition, has not succeeded any more than its attempt to restore the oil industry's operations by force. Each act of terror by the government's squadristi has energized the opposition further, which now says it will not end the strike until a date for new elections is set. Reality, however, does not bother Chávez. He told reporters on Dec. 11 that he feels “complete, full, like the full moon . . . fully confident in the people . . . fully confident in the Armed Forces.”