

Venezuelan Protests: The Two Faces of a Country

Forty-four years ago, most historians accept, the unified efforts of workers, students, entrepreneurs, politicians and civil society forces succeeded in driving General Marcos Pérez Jiménez from power in Venezuela. This January 23, on the anniversary of the general's ouster, two marches-one organized by the government, and the other by the opposition-celebrated the return to democracy in Venezuela. History was overtaken by contemporary concerns, however, as reflected in the banners carried by the marchers: "Freedom Yes, Censorship No," "A United Venezuela," "Chávez, It's Time to Go," on the part of the anti-government demonstrators; and "Yes to Revolution," "We Support the New Land Laws," and "Let Chávez Get to Work," by the president's supporters.

Observers interpreted the event as an opportunity for the governments and its opponents to take the measure of each other's strength. But an editorial in Venezuela's leading newspaper, *El Nacional*, was quick to rule out the parallel marches as emblematic of the "two Venezuelas," as Chávez has insisted. There is only one Venezuela, the newspaper argued, and its problems will never be resolved with "one-sided dialogues, autocratic impositions, and punitive or retaliatory policies."

The church, which has been the target of attacks by the Chávez regime, took a more direct approach to the standoff. "In those two marches the people went up against each other, and he [President Chávez] may not want to admit it, but he had a lot to do with that clash between brothers," said Archbishop Roberto Lückert. Political analyst Ascencio Reyes agreed that "the demonstrations of Wednesday the 23rd, besides revealing the split in the country, showed that both sides have reached their limit and are prepared for anything. What we are witnessing is the radicalization of their positions."

But how significant were the marches, really? On the one hand, they merely marked the continuation of a series of civil society protests that began with a general strike on December 10. These have succeeded in bringing together large sectors of society-university students, teachers, community associations, professional organizations, homemakers, workers and businesspeople-in a rejection of the aggressive and arbitrary policies of the Chávez administration. On the other hand, the marches revealed the growing polarization of the government's backers and its opponents. Protests seem likely to continue in a society marked by deep class differences and a president who seems bent on dividing the country instead of uniting it. In the first weeks of February, government critics plan to take to the streets banging pots and pans, while a government-sponsored caravan goes out in support of the Chávez administration.

Some analysts view this as the beginning of a "battle for the street." Chávez is out to prove that the December 10 strike and the 20-point decline in his popularity are

not part of a general trend, they argue, while the opposition seeks to frame the same developments as proof of the success of the campaign to make the government change its course.

According to Luis Vicente León, director of the consulting firm Datanálisis, the number of demonstrators is not as important as their power to do more damage to the president "if he doesn't change his style or reverse his policies." Likewise, Teodoro Petkoff, publisher of the newspaper *Tal Cual*, argues that "Chávez's only achievement has been to rebuild the opposition." The government's critics now include three main political parties, 59 civil organizations, business interests and some unions. "A year ago, all of this would have been impossible to imagine," Petkoff adds.

Indeed, in less than 12 months, support for the president has declined by 70%, and the ranks of his opponents have swelled by 75%. "With every day that passes Chávez is using up his oxygen, and the clanging of pots and pans is threatening to make the bulk of population go deaf," the newsmagazine *Cambio* writes.

Some people interpret these events as the beginning of the end of Chávez's "revolution." But others worry that the president's belligerent attitude and head-on challenges to all those who oppose him (last week, he called Catholic Church and the country's business leaders "tumors" on the body politic) are indications of his transition from authoritarianism to dictatorship. Chávez's minister of defense, José Vicente Rangel, has declared, "the battle will be bloody, and we won't let them take the government away from us." Given words like this, it's hard to have much faith in the future of democracy in Venezuela.