

Venezuela: Divisions within the Chavez Government?

Two Students Killed in Clashes

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Two students, one a supporter of President Hugo Chavez and the other an opponent, were killed Monday as demonstrations and counter-demonstrations took place across Venezuela following a government order to suspend broadcasts by an opposition television channel.

The most violent clashes took place in the city of Mérida, where students from the Universidad de los Andes took part in an anti-government demonstration that was broken up by riot police using tear gas, truncheons and shotguns. Supporters of the Chávez government also staged demonstrations.

Similar protests were staged throughout the country in response to an order by the Chávez government to suspend the broadcasts of several cable channels, including that of Radio Caracas Television International (RCTV), which previously was the country's second largest and an open supporter of the right-wing opposition.

RCTV's license to broadcast over the public airwaves was rescinded in 2007, also touching off a wave of opposition protests and triggering denunciations from Washington. In 2002, RCTV openly backed the CIA-orchestrated coup that briefly deposed Chávez before mass demonstrations and support from a section of the military returned him to the presidential palace.

RCTV was one of six cable/satellite channels taken off the air Sunday for failing to comply with a new media law that requires national stations to broadcast government announcements and presidential speeches, places restrictions on the content of programming shown at certain hours, and imposes other requirements. Three of the stations were allowed to resume broadcasting Wednesday.

The owners of RCTV have charged that the sole reason that they were closed was their refusal to broadcast Chávez's speeches.

Government officials, however, suggest that the broadcaster is concerned that the new restrictions will cut into its advertising revenue. They have stressed that the channel has not been closed down, but rather that its broadcasts have been suspended and can resume whenever it complies with the media law.

The Obama administration, which recently presided over the overthrow of an elected president in Honduras, expressed extreme concern over RCTV's fate, calling its shutdown "an attack on democracy itself."

Mérida, a city of approximately a quarter of a million some 400 miles southwest of Caracas, was heavily patrolled by troops and police Tuesday in the wake of the violent clashes the night before, when the two students were killed.

Yosinio Carrillo Torres, 16, a high school student and a supporter of the government, was shot in the chest and killed while rallying with other youth. Some hours later, Marcos Rosales, 28, a medical student at Los Andes University and member of a student opposition group, was mortally wounded in a drive-by shooting. At least 15 people were wounded in the gunfire.

The protests continued Tuesday, with demonstrators in Caracas burning cars and clashing with police.

The clashes take place in the context of rising social unrest generated by rising prices, chronic disruptions of electrical power and water supplies, and revelations of high-level corruption within the Chávez government.

Caracas and much of the rest of the country has faced rolling blackouts as the country's main hydro-electrical facility has been unable to generate sufficient power due to a prolonged drought. Critics of the government have charged that the crisis, together with the imposition of water rationing, is indicative of the government's failure to invest in infrastructure.

Faced with a weakening economy, the government found itself forced earlier this month to devalue the Venezuelan currency, the bolivar, a measure that it repeatedly vowed that it would not take. While the devaluation sets a two-tier exchange rate that will supposedly hold down prices on essential goods such as food, independent economists have estimated that it will raise costs for businesses by as much as 60 percent, which will then be passed on to the population, resulting in a sharp decline in the buying power of Venezuelan workers.

Venezuela already has the highest inflation rate in Latin America. The government's increase of the minimum wage by 25 percent earlier this month falls short of covering the 27 percent inflation rate last year.

Meanwhile, a wave of banking scandals has exposed the vast enrichment of a layer of businessmen close to the government, the so-called bolibuguesía, referring to the new layer of capitalists created by Chávez's so-called Bolivarian Revolution. It has also called attention to the accumulation of wealth by a number of prominent political figures, who have become millionaires while promoting "21st century socialism."

The demonstrations are also being fomented by the right-wing opposition in advance of parliamentary elections scheduled for September. The Venezuelan right hopes to exploit popular discontent to seize back control of the legislature. During the last elections in 2005, it boycotted the vote.

The pressures on the Chávez government are becoming evident with a series of high-level resignations. This week, Ramón Carrizález, who held two top posts—vice-president and minister of defense—announced his resignation along with his wife, Yubirí Ortega, who was minister of environment. The two claimed that the move was due to "strictly personal reasons."

Their resignation was followed Tuesday, however, by that of Eugenio Vazquez Orellana, who headed the state-owned Banco de Venezuela and also served as bank minister. Orellana, who was reportedly close to Carrizález, insisted that his departure was because of health issues. According to some Venezuelan media reports Wednesday, Chávez had asked Orellana to withdraw his resignation.

The resignations follow Chavez's firing of Angel Rodriguez, the electricity minister, after the botched implementation of rolling blackouts in Caracas created widespread disruption and anger.

And last month, Science and Technology Minister Jesse Chacon, a former army officer and close confidante of Chávez, was forced to resign after his millionaire brother Arne Chacon was arrested in connection with a banking scandal.

Chávez named Agriculture Minister Elías Jaua, 40, as his new vice president. And he tapped General-in-Chief Carlos Mata Figueroa, who will remain the chief of the military's Operational Strategic Command, as the new defense minister.

In accepting the post, General Mata Figueroa declared that the armed forces of Venezuela were "committed to the revolution" and warned the population not to give credence to "rumors"—presumably referring to mounting speculation that the series of resignations reflects deepening divisions within the government and within the military, upon which it rests.

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