VENEZUELA

Dismissal of Senior Scientist for ‘Nonattendance’ Shakes Community

CARACAS—The dismissal of a top Venezuelan scientist from a government research institute and threats to dismantle one of its most successful programs have revived accusations that the government of President Hugo Chávez is engaging in political persecution. Reinaldo Di Polo, a physiologist with more than 40 years’ experience and over 4000 bibliographic citations, learned at the end of July that he was to be removed from his post at the Venezuelan Institute for Scientific Research (IVIC), the country’s premier science agency, on the grounds of “nonattendance” on unspecified dates between January and June of this year.

In statements to the press, IVIC Director Ángel Viloria described the matter as “purely administrative” and accused the press of politicizing it. “It’s not a dismissal,” Viloria said. “The man retired on 1 July 1997. He spent all the budget and didn’t show up for work. We don’t know if all those scientific articles he says he published were done elsewhere.” (Viloria did not return telephone calls from Science seeking further comment.)

Di Polo, along with two dozen other IVIC researchers, belonged to a program known as the PLI (Permanencia en Labores de Investigación), which allows retired scientists to continue working. PLI was introduced because Venezuelan law allows academics to retire after 25 to 30 years’ service, precisely when a research scientist is at his or her most productive. PLI members represent about 20% of IVIC’s research staff, but on average, PLI members are responsible for 50% more articles published in peer-reviewed journals than other IVIC staff, according to PLI member Gioconda San-Blas, head of the mycology laboratory.

Since retiring, Di Polo—who won Venezuela’s national science prize in 2000 for his work in neurophysiology—has produced 38 research papers in international journals. More than half of the research, he says, was done at IVIC. “Nowhere in the world,” Di Polo says, “do research scientists have to punch a card.” Viloria, however, is not impressed with academic credentials. “We can’t give preponderance to indices of citations created by commercial consortia. We’ll have to evaluate how much sense it makes, for the future of the country, to continue counting publications and prizes,” he said to the press.

In May, President Chávez called on science minister Jesse Chacón, a retired army lieutenant, to “turn the screws” on unproductive scientists and demanded that research projects have direct, practical applications (Science, 29 May, p. 1126). Viloria, whose own research specialty is butterfly taxonomy, said, “We can’t keep giving investment priority to issues that are of no interest to the state.” PLI is under review, and “it is likely that this special regime will disappear.”

When Chacón visited IVIC on 25 August, he was handed a letter from its Association of Researchers (AsolnIVIC), pointing out that, far from being an ivory tower, IVIC addresses issues vital to the country’s development. “Just to cite a few examples,” the association says, “in the IVIC, research is carried out into many diseases, including areas such as visualization (figuring out what happens when a piece of paper is folded, for example), mentally rotating an object, and mechanical reasoning (see illustration). Many talent hunts for gifted elementary and high school students rely on the results of the SAT, which assess verbal and math—but not spatial—skills.

Lubinski and Camilla Benbow of Vanderbilt have found from their analyses of data from the Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth, begun in 1971 at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, that there is wide variability in spatial abilities even among the one in 1000 children who score over 700 on the math SAT before age 13. Their latest paper, scheduled for publication in the November issue of the Journal of Educational Psychology, shows that spatial abilities “behave in the same way in an average sample” as they do in the hyper-precocious, says Lubinski. Spatial ability roughly correlates with math and verbal ability, but many spatially gifted people are not in the top tier of math or verbal ability. Using data from Project TALENT, a 1960 survey of 400,000 U.S. high school students, they found that among those who scored in
Scientists’ greatest fear, however, is that the government is intent on eliminating “bourgeois science” altogether. Claudio Bifano, president of the Venezuelan Academy of Physical, Mathematical, and Natural Sciences, says the country’s scientists are “trying to defend internationally accepted principles and values of science and education.” The government, he says, “wants to transform this country into Cuba—and that is the real danger.”

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