

Venezuela's Maduro runs right-wing campaign in preparation for austerity

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With a presidential election scheduled for April 14, after the death of President Hugo Chávez on March 5, former vice president and now acting president Nicolás Maduro, Chávez's handpicked successor, appears to be far in the lead over the main opposition candidate Henrique Capriles, the governor of Miranda state who ran against Chávez in October.

Maduro has primarily campaigned as Chávez's handpicked successor who will carry on his policies, to the point that his campaign team has taken to describing him as Chávez's "son." Increasingly, Maduro's campaign has made moves to the right, using Chávez's death to make reactionary appeals to both the military and Catholic Church, to shore up support for the Chavista movement among those right-wing layers.

A former activist in the Maoist *Liga Socialista*, Maduro later became a bus driver in Caracas in the 1990s. During that time, he became head of the bus driver's union, and entered the National Assembly in 1998 as a founding member of Chávez's electoral vehicle, the Movement for a Fifth Republic, which later initiated Chávez' United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV).

In 2005, he was appointed foreign minister, a post he held until October 2012, when we has named vice president. Maduro's wife is Cilia Flores, the Venezuelan attorney general, who in served as Chávez's lead defense attorney in the wake of the former paratrooper officer's abortive 1992 coup.

Although never a member of the military, Maduro has carefully worked to associate himself with it, dressing in quasi-military attire in official photos, and appearing at campaign functions driving military vehicles. Maintaining ties to the military is crucial for Maduro. Chávez, a former lieutenant colonel, relied heavily on the military, placing officers in his cabinet,

throughout the government, and at the head of some of the largest state-owned enterprises, such as the Venezuelan Guayana Corporation, a large mining conglomerate.

Military officers hold 11 of Venezuela's 23 state governorships and roughly a quarter of ministerial portfolios. The head of the National Assembly, Diosdado Cabello, a former officer who participated in Chávez's 1992 coup, is seen as one of Maduro's major rivals inside the Chavista movement. Although Defense Minister Diego Mollero came out in favor of Maduro, in contravention of the Venezuelan constitution, there are no doubt significant sections of the military which would like to shed even the current minimal level of oversight over their control of state-owned corporations.

An important theme of Maduro's campaign has been the attempt to build up a cult of Chávez mixed with appeals to religion. At a rally in Caracas, Maduro said, "president Chávez is in heaven," adding: "I don't have any doubt that if any man who walked this earth did what was needed so that Christ the redeemer would give him a seat at his side, it was our redeemer liberator of the 21st century, the *comandante* Hugo Chávez."

Maduro's appeals to religious sentiment are an overture to the Catholic Church, which plays a reactionary role in Latin America. After Argentine cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was selected as pope, Maduro said: "We know that our commander ascended to those heights and is face to face with Christ. Something must have influenced [Jesus] to call for a South American pope."

In fact, Bergoglio had been described in Argentina as the leader of the political right and is implicated in crimes committed by the Argentine military junta—in which an estimated 30,000 workers, students, and

intellectuals were “disappeared” or murdered.

Maduro’s courting of the military and church indicates the reactionary character of the policies he is preparing to pursue against the working class as the Venezuelan bourgeoisie moves to shore up its wealth. While presenting himself as Chávez’s successor, Maduro is widely seen as a pragmatist who will cut spending on social programs and foreign aid drawn from Venezuela’s oil revenues.

Maduro faces calls to increase Venezuela’s oil production capacity, which has fallen on average 2 percent per year over the last four years, according to Fitch, the ratings agency. It is widely expected that Maduro will make overtures to international oil companies to invest in production.

On February 8, the government announced it was devaluing the national currency, the bolivar, by 32 percent. As Venezuela earns dollars through international oil sales, in devaluing the bolivar, Venezuela’s government effectively gave itself more bolivars per dollar. At the same time, the devaluation will certainly affect the buying power of the vast majority of the population, who already experience high levels of inflation, mitigated only by price controls on some basic necessities.

The devaluation was aimed at both alleviating budget pressures and at jump-starting the country’s non-oil exports, which have dropped to 5 percent of total exports, from a previous level of 19 percent eight years ago.

By weakening the value of the bolivar, the government hopes to stimulate national industry and undercut cheap imports entering from other countries, particularly Brazil. It also served as a barrier to capital flight, making it more expensive to convert national earnings to dollars.

Right before the government announced the devaluation of the currency, Maduro signaled that cutbacks and preparations for austerity were being planned, saying, “we have to learn to do a lot with a little, more with less,” and “we need to overturn the culture in which historically, because of oil, we’ve done little with a lot.”

Maduro himself is a prime example of the social layer some have called the *boliburguesia* —a new section of the ruling class in Venezuela which owes its existence to Chávez’ so-called Bolivarian Revolution.

They have profited from government contracts, corruption, and financial speculation made possible through participation in Chávez’ regime. Having enriched itself at the public trough, this layer has no interest in giving up the wealth it has amassed over the past decades and is working to shore up its own interests. This layer will prove violently hostile to any challenge from the working class.



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