Death toll rises to 14 in Venezuelan protests

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With Venezuela's right-wing protests now ending their second week, at least 14 people have been reported killed, hundreds wounded and scores arrested. Clashes are continuing in Caracas, where barricades of debris and tires have blocked traffic in the capital's business district and wealthier eastern neighborhoods, the center of the movement demanding *la salida* (the exit) of President Nicolas Maduro, who won a narrow election victory last April.

The Maduro government has denounced the continuing protests as a US-backed coup. There is no disputing that the principal leaders of the protest movement—the Harvard-educated Leopoldo Lopez, the leader of Voluntad Popular (Popular Will), and Maria Corina Machado, a member of the National Assembly—have been amply funded by the US National Endowment for Democracy for years and have coordinated their policies closely with the US Embassy.

However, as of yet, there is no indication that the military is moving against the government, and the numbers that have taken to the streets are far less than those mobilized by the political right in the run-up to the abortive US-backed coup that briefly toppled Maduro's predecessor and mentor, the late Hugo Chavez, in April 2002.

Nonetheless, the political crisis generated by the protests has led to open divisions within the ruling PSUV (United Socialist Party of Venezuela) and to an evident flailing about by the Venezuelan president.

The most open breaking of ranks within the PSUV came from the governor of the state of Tachira, on the Colombian border, where the protests began and have taken the most violent form, with mobs attacking and burning government buildings and setting up roadblocks demanding drivers pay tolls under threat of violence.

Last week, the Maduro government charged that the events in Tachira, and particularly its capital San Cristobal, were the result of a combined conspiracy involving the Colombian right and Washington. The president dispatched much of his military command to the state, where he deployed a battalion of paratroopers and national guard reinforcements. One of the latest fatalities occurred in the state, a man hit by a stray bullet while watching a street protest from his apartment balcony.

Governor Jose Vielma Monday criticized the government's response to the protests as heavy-handed and called for the release of Leopoldo Lopez, who has been detained for the last week and charged with arson and conspiracy. He called the military response in Tachira "excessive" and said he was particularly upset by the overflight of the region by military aircraft. He added, "I am not part of the regime, I was elected by the citizens of Tachira."

Vielma's comments drew sharp rebukes from other PSUV leaders, with charges that he had lost his nerve and gone over to the other side. Later on Monday he tweeted a denunciation of "unhealthy rumors" calling into question his "commitment to peace, to the president and to the revolution."

The Tachira governor is an ex-military officer who participated in the failed coup carried out by Hugo Chavez and other nationalist military officers in 1992 and subsequently held a number of senior posts in the Chavez government.

Maduro himself has alternated between denouncing his right-wing opponents as "fascists" and condemning Washington for imperialist intervention in support of a coup, and calling for dialogue with both. He also called for the formation of a "truth commission" by the National Assembly and the convening on Wednesday of a "National Peace Conference."

These overtures, at least in the first instance, have been rudely rebuffed by both the Venezuelan rightists and their patrons in Washington.

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Miranda governor and twice-defeated rightist presidential candidate Henrique Capriles, who was invited to participate in a "dialogue" during a meeting with governors and mayors at the Miraflores presidential palace Monday, refused to attend the meeting, declaring that he would not "whitewash" the Maduro government, claiming that he had been threatened with the loss of federal funds for his state if he failed to appear. This charge was denied by the government, which pointed out there was no change in funding for Miranda and that Capriles was the only Venezuelan governor not to attend.

Competing with the imprisoned Lopez for leadership of the Venezuelan right, Capriles exploited the opening to deliver a long demagogic statement declaring he could not attend "while they are repressing and attacking Venezuelans."

As for Washington, the White House dismissed Maduro's offer last Friday to renew "dialogue" with the US. Maduro proposed that the US send Secretary of State John Kerry and that he would dispatch Venezuelan Foreign Minister Elias Jaua to engage in talks. The two had initiated such talks in June of last year at Maduro's request, and plans were laid for sustained negotiations aimed at restoring "constructive and positive relations." This initiative was short-lived, however, breaking down over the participation of US embassy personnel in the conspiracies of the right-wing opposition.

White House spokesman Jay Carney brushed off Maduro's proposal Monday, stating: "He should focus instead on a dialogue with the Venezuelan people, because that is what is at issue here. This is not about the United States." The statement amounted to a clear message that Washington will continue with its efforts to destabilize Venezuela in pursuit of regime change.

Until now, the protests have gained little support outside of the more privileged middle class areas of Caracas and other cities. There have been scattered reports of *cacerolazos*— beating of pots and pans—in working class and poorer areas of the capital.

Popular frustrations are building up in these areas and among working people across Venezuela over real wages that have been slashed by inflation and currency devaluations, shortages and the government's attacks on militant workers' strikes and protests. The right-wing parties that have led the anti-Maduro demonstrations, however, hold little appeal for these layers of the population. Advancing reactionary slogans such as "people's capitalism," they seek to destroy whatever gains have been won by Venezuelan working people over the past decades and to restore the iron rule of the country's traditional oligarchy.

The danger posed by the present developments is that the demonstrations will only push the Maduro government further to the right. The call for "dialogue" with the right is not new. The government had entered into talks with Capriles and other right-wing politicians before the protests and had reached common agreement on economic adjustment policies that would have seen the lifting of gasoline subsidies and increased rates on transportation, electricity and other services.

The bitter divide between the right and the Maduro government notwithstanding, the fact remains that, after 15 years of so-called "Bolivarian Socialism," Venezuela remains a capitalist country in which 71 percent of production and the lion's share of oil revenues remain in private hands. Its financial sector is among the most profitable on the planet, with bankers raking in unprecedented returns even as the living standards of the working class fall and the economic growth rate declines.

The defense of social conditions and basic rights of the masses of the population against the threat of a genuine coup is possible only by means of the political mobilization of the Venezuelan working class, independent of the bourgeois nationalist PSUV and the Maduro government, in the struggle for socialism.

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