

Venezuelan generals arrested in alleged coup plot

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After nearly two months of violent right-wing-led protests, Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro revealed Tuesday that three air force generals had been arrested on charges of plotting a military coup.

"We captured three generals who attempted to raise the air force against the legitimately constituted government," Maduro announced during a meeting with foreign ministers of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), who arrived in Caracas as part of a bid to broker a settlement between the government and its rightist opponents.

While Maduro failed to name the generals, they were subsequently identified by the Venezuelan media as Carlos Alberto Millán Yaguaracuto, who belonged to the Strategic Operational Command of the Armed Forces, José Daniel Machillanda Díaz, who was assigned to the General Aviation Command in La Carlota and Oswaldo Hernández Sánchez, who was vice minister of education for the Defense department and also a commander at the José Antonio Páez air base. All three were being held at the Division of Military Intelligence.

Maduro stated that the generals had been the subjects of an investigation after junior air force officers asked to join in the conspiracy alerted the government. He charged that the three had forged "direct links with opposition sectors" and had told others that "this next week was going to be decisive."

The news that a significant layer of Venezuela's military command was involved in a coup plot has profoundly unsettling implications for the Maduro government.

For the past 50 days, the government has identified its main enemy as the "fascist" right, which has orchestrated violent street demonstrations under the slogan "*la salida está en la calle*" (the way out is in the street). This opposition is openly demanding the fall of Maduro, who was elected last April by a narrow majority, succeeding

former president Hugo Chavez, who died a month earlier.

While this campaign has led to violent clashes across the country, leaving at least 36 people dead and hundreds more wounded, along with over 1,800 arrests, it has at no point demonstrated the ability to oust the government.

The major demonstrations and street barricades have been confined to the better off and middle class neighborhoods. While Venezuela's poor—who constitute over a third of the population—and the working class are increasingly hostile to rising prices, shortages and government policies that have benefited the financial elite while driving down living standards, they have rejected the leadership of the right, which is identified with the interests of the country's old oligarchy and US imperialism. In recent days, the protests have waned, even as casualties from "opposition" snipers have risen.

Discontent within the military, however, poses a threat of a far greater magnitude to the government, whose so-called "Bolivarian Socialism" has always rested heavily on the Venezuelan armed forces. Hugo Chavez was himself a former army lieutenant colonel who led an abortive military coup in 1992. Active and retired military personnel occupy a quarter of the seats in Maduro's cabinet, while holding 11 of the 20 governorships won by the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). They are also in charge of a number of state-owned industries, including the Venezuelan Guyana Corporation industrial conglomerate.

Both Chavez and Maduro have sought to cement the military's loyalty, with its members consistently awarded pay raises above the rate of inflation—which topped 56 percent last year—even as real wages of the working class have steadily fallen. Its higher-ranking officers are prominent within the so-called *boliburguesia*, the layer of wealthy businessmen who have enriched themselves off state contracts and government influence.

To the extent that this layer sees the Maduro

government as incapable of containing political unrest and social tensions and thereby assuring stability, it could turn against the government and organize a military coup—something which has happened at least five times in the last 70 years of Venezuela's history.

In an evident response to such concerns, the military high command issued a statement Wednesday accepting the arrest and court martial of the three generals, while proclaiming the “cohesion of the Bolivarian National Armada Forces,” the “clarity of their mission and vision” and their commitment to “civilian-military unity.” The document concluded with a description of the military as “the people in uniform.”

The UNASUR mission, composed of the foreign ministers of Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador and Bolivia, concluded its work Thursday after meeting with government officials as well as representatives of the right-wing opposition coalition the MUD (Unified Democratic Roundtable).

The Maduro government declared itself in full agreement with the regional body's recommendations, which included a push for mediated negotiations with the Venezuelan right, and announced on Thursday the formation of a National Council on Human Rights to hear all charges of human rights abuses. It also said it would convene a “Peace Conference” in the western state of Mérida. Previously, the government had created a “Truth Commission” to investigate the source of the recent violence.

In reality, negotiations between the government and the right-wing opposition are nothing new. Talks are already underway involving the government, the church, some leading businessmen and a few opposition politicians. Moreover, the government entered into such talks after last December's municipal elections, which the opposition, having declared them a referendum on Maduro's rule, ended up trailing the PSUV by 9 percent in the total popular vote, while the ruling party won 77 percent of the mayoral races.

Maduro, having denounced the MUD politicians as “fascists” in the campaign, quickly sought negotiations with them once the election was over. The aim was to achieve political unity behind a set of economic austerity measures—including a rise in the heavily subsidized price of gasoline—which would be deeply unpopular. The MUD enthusiastically endorsed these policies and vowed to coordinate with the government in suppressing any popular opposition. The government went ahead with a 79 percent devaluation, which deepened the crisis for

average workers. It postponed the raising of gas prices, however, for fear of social upheaval.

While Henrique Capriles, the former MUD presidential candidate and governor of the state of Miranda, and other prominent MUD officials backed the austerity plan, seeking to push the Maduro government further to the right, a rival, more right-wing faction led by Leopoldo Lopez, Maria Corina Machado and the Voluntad Popular (Popular Will) party opted for the campaign of violent street demonstrations to destabilize and topple the government.

Lopez was arrested on charges of fomenting violence, while Machado, a long-time recipient of US National Endowment for Democracy funding, has been stripped of her National Assembly seat for accepting an appointment as an “alternative delegate” of Panama as part of a failed scheme to deliver an anti-government speech before the Organization of American States last week.

Meanwhile, in a virtual press conference with Latin American media on Thursday, the US undersecretary of state for the Western Hemisphere, Roberta Jacobson, reiterated an earlier threatening statement to Congress by Secretary of State John Kerry that as far as Washington is concerned “all options are on the table” in relation to Venezuela.

She added that “this does not include military action,” but that the Obama administration was not discarding the possibility of imposing economic sanctions against the Latin American nation.

The tensions within the military, the move toward negotiations between the government and the right and the threat of escalating US imperialist intervention all pose a substantial threat to the Venezuelan working class. It is this class alone that can provide a way out of the current crisis by forging its own revolutionary leadership, independent of the government and the PSUV, and fighting for a workers' government and a genuine socialist solution to the capitalist economic and social contradictions that have continued to deepen under the regimes of Chavez and Maduro.



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