

Venezuela's Maduro charges US with fomenting Ukraine-style coup

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Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro has charged that Washington is fomenting a Ukrainian-Style “slow-motion” coup against his government in a bid to “get their hands on Venezuelan oil.”

The accusation against the Obama administration was made in an interview with the British daily *Guardian* published Monday. It came as the Maduro government headed into talks brokered by the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) with the right-wing opposition aimed at ending the political violence that has swept the country since mid-February.

At least 39 people have been killed in the violence, including eight members of the police and security forces and several supporters of the Maduro government. Hundreds of people have been wounded and over 2,200 arrested, of which roughly 190 remain in custody.

Maduro said the protests, organized by a hardline faction of the opposition coalition known as the MUD (Democratic Unity Roundtable), were in line with the kind of “unconventional war that the US has perfected over the last decades,” from the coups it backed in Latin America to the more recent events in Ukraine.

This faction of the Venezuelan right, led by figures like Leopoldo López, the head of the Voluntad Popular (Popular Will) political party, and former opposition deputy María Corina Machado, called the demonstrations under the slogan *la salida* (the exit or the way out) with the express aim of forcing Maduro, who won a narrow majority in presidential elections one year ago, from office.

The protests, the Venezuelan president said, had “the aim of paralyzing the main cities of the country, copying badly what happened in Kiev, where the main roads in the cities were blocked off, until they made governability impossible, which led to the overthrow of the elected government of Ukraine.”

Those behind the unrest in Venezuela, which has been

confined largely to the wealthy and better off sections of the middle class, were trying “to increase economic problems through an economic war to cut the supplies of basic goods and boost an artificial inflation,” Maduro further charged. “To create social discontent and violence, to portray a country in flames which could lead them to justify international isolation and even foreign intervention.”

There are unquestionably parallels between the US-orchestrated coup in Ukraine and the political unrest in Venezuela. In both cases, those in the leadership have enjoyed close collaboration with and direct funding from Washington. In Venezuela's case, some \$5 million in overt funding (and no doubt considerably more in covert cash) has been funneled annually to opposition groups through agencies such as USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy. These same agencies provided direct assistance to the right-wing parties that overthrew the government in Ukraine.

Also, as in the Ukraine, the US government has denounced the government's repression—US Secretary of State John Kerry recently accused Maduro of waging a “terror campaign” against his own people--while portraying opposition demonstrators, who have torched public buildings and shot down policemen, as “peaceful protesters.”

Even while denouncing Washington's role, Maduro has searched for renewed accommodation with US imperialism, recently announcing the unilateral appointment of a new ambassador to the US, as well as a special commission to work on improving relations. Maduro last week also had a column published in the *New York Times* appealing for “dialogue and diplomacy.” He wrote: “My government has also reached out to President Obama, expressing our desire to again exchange ambassadors. We hope his administration will respond in kind.”

The Venezuelan government has likewise moved ahead rapidly with plans for talks with the MUD opposition aimed at reaching an accommodation with the Venezuelan right. Maduro announced Wednesday that the first round of public “dialogue” would be held the following day, April 10, with mediation to be provided by the foreign ministers of Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador, as well as Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican’s representative in Venezuela.

In a public statement, Maduro appealed for “civilian and military support” for laying the “foundations for peace in new stage of republican life of our Bolivarian revolution of the 21st century.”

He added, “The road forward has to be one of dialogue to build the country; we won’t convert them to socialism, nor will they convert us into capitalists.”

Maduro said that he would propose two main items for discussion: a National Pacification Plan aimed at combating crime, and an Investment and Economic Development Plan, designed to confront inflation and shortages.

In reality, the Maduro government has been seeking such “dialogue” and a pact with the Venezuelan right for some time. It entered into such talks in the wake of last December’s municipal elections, after the ruling party defeated the opposition—which had proclaimed the vote a referendum on Maduro’s presidency—by a margin of 10 percent.

These talks were aimed at reaching a consensus on a set of economic adjustment measures designed to confront the country’s deepening crisis, characterized by a 57 percent inflation rate last year, shortages of basic commodities and a declining growth rate (with the economy predicted to shrink by 0.5 percent over the course of this year). Among the proposals discussed were devaluation of the currency, ending subsidies on gasoline prices and other price hikes, all measures that spelled a further attack on the living standards of Venezuelan workers.

Right-wing political figures, like Henrique Capriles, governor of Miranda and a two-time loser as a presidential opponent of first Hugo Chávez and then Maduro, voiced support for these IMF-style measures and indicated that they would coordinate security efforts in the face of anticipated popular opposition.

While the violence unleashed by the hardline faction of the MUD upended these efforts, the government has nonetheless sought to revive “dialogue” with elements of the Venezuelan right, as well as with representatives of

major capitalist interests in the country.

In the midst of the protests, Maduro announced the convening of “a national conference for peace,” in which the government sat down with figures such as Lorenzo Mendoza, the billionaire owner of the Grupo Polar food conglomerate, the president of the big business federation Fedecámaras, Jorge Roig, and Miguel Pérez Abad, president of the Fedeindustria (small and medium-sized business groups). Also present were representatives of the political right and leading clerics of the Catholic Church.

Capriles, who had earlier rejected talks with the government, indicated Wednesday that he now would participate. This is in part a reflection of the diminishing support for and participation in the anti-government protests.

Having failed in their objective of toppling the government, the MUD opposition will now use the “peace” talks as a vehicle for pushing it further to the right, seeking further guarantees for the fat profits of Venezuela’s financial and commercial sectors and for the wealth and privileges of those in the top income brackets. All such concessions will be paid for by Venezuelan workers, who have seen their real income decline sharply, even as the government has unleashed repression against those who have sought to mobilize independently to press their demands.

In the end, the Venezuelan military will play a major role in determining the course of the Maduro government. Its active and retired officers are in control of 11 government ministries, including Defense, Interior and Economy, as well as the majority of the country’s governorships. The announcement last month that three Air Force generals had been arrested on charges of plotting a coup in conjunction with the right-wing opposition is symptomatic of disquiet within top brass over the protracted violence in Venezuela.

There is no way forward for the masses of workers and oppressed in Venezuela outside of organizing their own political power independently of the Maduro government and its ruling party in the struggle for a workers’ government and a genuine socialist transformation of the country’s economy.



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