

Washington's drive for regime change in Venezuela

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2 May 2014

In the past few days, US officials have resumed a drumbeat of denunciations against the Venezuelan government of President Nicolás Maduro.

In response to an appeal from a right-wing Venezuelan émigré in Miami, President Barack Obama described himself as “deeply troubled by the continued repression of protestors in Venezuela,” and declared that he was “working behind the scenes” to influence events in the South American country.

Speaking Monday via an Internet video connection to a conference in Estonia of the “Freedom Online Coalition,” which includes the governments of 23 countries, Secretary of State John Kerry made unsubstantiated claims that the Venezuelan government had blocked access to some web sites and lumped it together with Russia as a country that suppresses Internet freedom and constitutes a place “where we face some of the greatest security challenges today.”

Needless to say, the US secretary of state—who had earlier condemned the Venezuelan government for waging a “terror campaign” against its own people—made no mention of Washington’s own role in the wholesale spying on Internet activities of hundreds of millions of people around the globe.

And at a separate conference in New York City, Roberta Jacobsen, the undersecretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, told an audience that the Obama administration was not “ruling out anything,” including the imposition of sanctions against Venezuela, but for now advocated “giving a chance” to the ongoing “dialogue” between the Maduro government and its right-wing opposition.

The statements by the US president and the two top State Department officials only go to confirm the warning made last month by Maduro that his government is confronting a “slow-motion” coup, in which US-backed violent demonstrators are “copying badly what happened in Kiev.”

In Venezuela, as in Ukraine, the aim of US imperialism is to remove any obstacle to its exercise of hegemony. Venezuela sits atop the world’s largest proven oil reserves, and Washington is determined to place these strategic

resources firmly under its thumb. The Venezuelan government’s diversion of oil revenues to finance minimal assistance programs for the poor, its provision of subsidized oil exports to Cuba and other nations in what the US has always regarded as its “own backyard,” and the growing trade and financial ties between Caracas and Beijing have all served to provoke the ire of the US government.

As in Kiev, in Venezuela Washington backed “peaceful protesters” who dubbed their campaign *la salida* (the exit), meaning the ouster of the elected president. To that end they employed Molotov cocktail attacks against government buildings and sniper fire against security forces and government supporters. All the while, as in Ukraine, Washington and the Western media grossly exaggerated the repressive actions of the government, while utterly ignoring the violence of the demonstrators.

Unlike Kiev, *la salida* failed to achieve its objective. The violent protests were confined almost exclusively to the more well-heeled neighborhoods. They attracted little to no support within the country’s working class and impoverished masses. Their own growing anger against rising prices and chronic shortages notwithstanding, working people recognize in the protest leaders—who, like their counterparts in Kiev are longtime recipients of US aid through agencies such as USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy—the representatives of imperialism and the old Venezuelan oligarchy that oppressed the country for centuries.

Now, along with Washington, the Venezuelan right and big business are “giving a chance” to the so-called “dialogue” initiated by the Maduro government, even as the violent protests continue, albeit on a far reduced level.

Mediated by the Vatican and foreign ministers of Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador, this dialogue has been aimed at reaching an accommodation between the Maduro government and the right-wing opposition, organized in the electoral coalition known as MUD (Democratic Unity Roundtable). Alongside these dialogue sessions, the government has organized an economic “peace conference”

with leading Venezuelan capitalists, appealing for an increase in production and asking billionaires like Lorenzo Mendoza of the Polar food conglomerate what they need to boost productivity and profits.

What the Venezuelan financial and corporate ruling layers are demanding is more cash from the public treasury—which they are being granted—as well as higher prices on goods along with attacks on basic rights and living standards of the working class. These are also forthcoming, with prices on a number of basic commodities having been quietly allowed to increase—along with a 40 percent hike in public transit fares—and labor laws protecting workers against layoffs increasingly ignored.

Maduro used May Day to announce a 30 percent increase in the minimum wage, upon which large sections of those employed in the formal sector subsist. Given an inflation rate that neared 60 percent last year, the increase leaves workers far behind, with two minimum wage salaries required just to buy basic necessities under even the government's low estimate of these costs.

The president of Venezuela's chamber of commerce, Fedecamaras, Jorge Roig, praised Maduro for consulting with big business before announcing the paltry wage hike, calling the 30 percent rise "responsible."

The emerging strategy of the Venezuelan right and its US sponsors is to utilize the instability it has created to push the government to the right, while in the process further alienating the measure of popular support it enjoyed thanks to its social assistance programs and populist rhetoric.

Waiting in the wings, should neither the Maduro government nor the right prove capable of imposing new conditions of stability for Venezuelan capitalism, is the military. From the coming to power nearly 15 years ago of Hugo Chávez, a former army lieutenant colonel and abortive coup leader, the military has played a decisive role in the "Bolivarian Socialist" government. Today military officers occupy 11 government ministries, including the most important—Defense, Interior and Economy—as well as the majority of the country's governorships. The announcement that three air force generals and some 30 officers have been arrested for alleged participation in a coup plot serves as a deadly warning.

The Venezuelan working class is confronted with sharp dangers, not only from the political right, but from within the Maduro government and its military core as well.

Those pseudo-left elements who have cast "Chavismo" and "Bolivarian Socialism" as some new road to socialism have worked to politically disarm workers in the face of these threats. They have painted in rosy colors a situation in which the grip of private capital over the country's economy is greater than before Chávez took office and in which

finance capital is reaping super profits off of Venezuelan oil revenues, even as a new layer tied to the government, the so-called *boliburguesia*, enriches itself through contracts and corruption.

Venezuelan groups like Marea Socialista (MS-Socialist Tide), whose politics are promoted by both the Pabloites and the International Socialist Organization, pose the task of the working class as pressuring Maduro to the left to counteract the pressure from the right. Other pseudo-left groups abroad have moved even further to the right, distancing themselves from the Venezuelan government after Chávez opposed the imperialist regime change operations in Libya and Syria that these groups have supported.

In the end, all of these groups speak politically for more privileged layers of the petty bourgeoisie. They were attracted to Chavismo precisely because it subordinated the working class to a "comandante" and a military-dominated government, thereby mediating Venezuela's explosive class struggle.

The bitter lessons of the recent violent clashes in Venezuela and the government's response are summed up in the necessity of establishing the political independence of the working class, in opposition to the bourgeois government of Maduro and its pseudo-left supporters. This means building a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International based on the theory of permanent revolution and fighting for the working class to take power in Venezuela and throughout Latin America.



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