

US moves towards sanctions as Venezuela charges coup plot

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The US House of Representatives overwhelmingly approved legislation mandating sanctions against Venezuela as officials there presented evidence of US involvement in a plot to bring down the government of President Nicolas Maduro.

The bill, passed in a voice vote by the House with only 14 members in opposition, demands that the Obama administration draw up a list of Venezuelan officials allegedly responsible for repression during violent protests that have been organized across the South American country since last February. They would be sanctioned with the freezing of any assets in the US and the denial or revocation of visas.

Washington's step closer toward another blatant imperialist intervention against Venezuela came on the same day that government officials in Caracas publicly presented what they described as evidence of US involvement in a plot by the far-right in Venezuela to overthrow the government and assassinate President Maduro.

The evidence consisted of emails between ex-deputy Maria Corina Machado, a long-time recipient of US funding, and other figures on the Venezuelan right. One of these messages, sent to another former right-wing legislator at the height of the violent protests, declared that a former top State Department official on Latin America and current US ambassador to Colombia "Kevin Whitaker reconfirms his support and indicated new steps."

Other emails reference financial backing for the protest, implicating a corrupt Venezuelan banker who fled the country for Miami to evade criminal charges.

And an email dated May 23 cited by the officials of the ruling party speaks of the need to "annihilate Maduro." It continues, "We have to clean this rubbish, starting at the top, taking advantage of the global climate provided by Ukraine and now Thailand." The reference to the two countries—in the first the US openly fomented a coup and in the second it gave a military seizure of power its tacit backing—has ominous implications.

Machado denounced the charges against her as an

"infamy," claiming that she had not used the email account from which the messages were sent for a year. Meanwhile, the State Department called the charges "baseless and false," while providing no explanation for the emails or Whitaker's role. It characterized the charges as an attempt by the Venezuelan government to "distract from its own actions by blaming the United States."

The legislation passed by the House, dubbed the "Venezuelan Human Rights and Democracy Protection Act," also creates a new \$15 million fund "to provide assistance to civil society in Venezuela," i.e., to pour additional funding into the right-wing opposition that is seeking to topple the country's elected government. It calls for the money to be appropriated to "assist and train" so-called "democracy activists," to provide "secure mobile and other communications through connective technology among human rights and democracy advocates in Venezuela," and to provide "emergency resources" for such "activists" and "advocates."

Similar legislation has been approved by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and must still be voted upon by the full Senate.

An indication of the growing wave of support for such measures within the US ruling political establishment came on Thursday with the publication in the *Washington Post* of an editorial entitled "Sanctions on Venezuelan officials may bring them to the table" calling for the implementation of sanctions.

The Obama administration has expressed reservations about sanctions. It prefers for the moment to utilize mediation efforts by Latin American foreign ministers and the Vatican in organizing "dialogue" between Maduro and the opposition as a means of weakening the government and pushing it further to the right.

In a statement last week, Secretary of State John Kerry declared that Washington was "losing patience" with Venezuela and that all options "remain on the table at this time." He added, however, that, "our hope is that sanctions won't be necessary."

Similarly, in a Thursday press conference, Roberta Jacobson, the US assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, argued that the administration could impose sanctions unilaterally and needed no congressional legislation to do so. As for sanctions against Venezuela, she added, “We do not feel that now is the right time”

Jacobson continued: “... as you look at the tools you use and you see whether or not they work, you have to keep looking, right, for things that are effective. And I think each of us in the region may have different perceptions of how long our timeline is, how much patience each of us might have for a solution.”

These repeated references to US “patience” running out for Venezuela contain a clearly implied threat of direct US intervention should other means of pressure fail.

Nonetheless, President Maduro responded with praise for Jacobson, declaring in a Thursday television broadcast that he “saluted” her statements, which he said were a “call for reason.” The Venezuelan president went on to announce that he was appointing Maximilian Arvelález as the new chargé d’Affaires at the Venezuelan Embassy in Washington. The post is the highest at the embassy following the mutual expulsion of diplomats by Caracas and Washington. The two countries have not exchanged ambassadors since 2010.

He said he was sending Arvelález “to tell the truth about the country and neutralize the many lies said about Venezuela” and to establish closer ties so that the two countries can “achieve cooperation in important continental and global issues.”

In a futile gesture last February, Maduro appointed Arvelález as Venezuela’s ambassador to Washington, but the Obama administration rebuffed this diplomatic feeler.

“I want better relations of respect and permanent communication with the United States; relations that set a new model for relations between that country and Latin America,” Maduro said in announcing this latest appointment of Arvelález. He appealed directly to President Barack Obama, declaring, “sooner rather than later we have to sow relations of respect.”

Behind all of the Maduro administration’s “anti-imperialist” rhetoric and invocations of “Bolivarian socialism,” it is a bourgeois government committed to the defense of the profit interests of the banks, domestic capitalists and transnational corporations. It is dependent upon revenues from oil exports, about 40 percent of which go to the US.

The close ties between the government and American capitalism found stark expression recently in the signing of a \$2 billion credit agreement between the state-controlled Venezuelan oil company, PDVSA, and a group of energy service firms led by the infamous American contractor

Halliburton. The move is part of Maduro’s bid to open up Venezuela’s oil industry to greater foreign investment.

US imperialism is nonetheless determined to impose its unrestricted hegemony over Venezuela and its oil reserves, the largest in the world. It is to this end that it advances its campaign for regime change under the banners of “human rights” and “democracy.”

This campaign is utterly hypocritical. Who is Obama to preach “human rights” to Maduro while overseeing drone assassinations, wholesale surveillance against the world’s population and growing repression within the US itself?

Washington’s aim is to bring back to power political forces that ruled the country in 1989, when the Venezuelan government responded to the so-called *Caracazo* —mass protests against an IMF-dictated austerity program—by unleashing a bloodbath. As many as 3,000 people were killed after the government sent the army into the streets.

Meanwhile conditions are building up for a similar explosion. Recent figures show that price rises for the first quarter of this year reached their highest point in the last 18 years, with annual inflation topping 59 percent in March.

The inflation, a series of devaluations and signs of deepening recession have had a brutal effect upon the working class, with Venezuela’s National Institute of Statistics reporting that the ranks of those living in extreme poverty rose to 9.8 percent of the population last year. This is compared to 7.1 percent as recently as the second half of 2012.

Meanwhile, negotiations are continuing between the government and the country’s corporate and financial executives on economic measures that will inevitably spell even deeper attacks on the living standards of the country’s working people.



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