

Rightist mayor faces coup charges as Venezuela's crisis deepens

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25 February 2015

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro has faced widespread international condemnation, but only scattered and minor right-wing protests in the country itself, over the arrest last week of Antonio Ledezma, the mayor of metropolitan Caracas, on charges of conspiracy to overthrow the government.

Joining the usual denunciations from the State Department in Washington and the right-wing governments of President Juan Manuel Santos in neighboring Colombia and President Mariano Rajoy in Spain, was, for example, the leader of the Spanish petty-bourgeois pseudo-left Podemos party, Pablo Iglesias.

The Obama administration has signaled its intentions to ratchet up pressure on the Maduro government. Last Friday, White House spokesman Josh Earnest, asked whether Washington was contemplating new sanctions against Venezuela, responded: "The Treasury Department and the State Department are closely monitoring the situation and are considering tools that may be available that can better steer the Venezuelan government in the direction that they believe they should be headed."

On Tuesday, the *New York Times* published an editorial that largely echoed the assertions the day before by the State Department spokesperson that the charges that Ledezma was involved in a US-backed coup conspiracy were "ludicrous."

The *Times* called the accusations a "fabricated pretext" and "outlandish," dismissing talk of a coup as "Mr. Maduro's conspiracy theories."

One would hardly guess that the US backed an abortive coup by sections of Venezuela's capitalist ruling establishment and the military against Maduro's predecessor, the late Hugo Chavez, as recently as 2002, or that the *Times* itself enthusiastically supported the overthrow of the country's elected president. It noted approvingly at the time that "the military intervened and handed power to a respected business leader." Within less

than 48 hours, massive popular demonstrations sent the business leader, Pedro Carmona, packing and put Chavez back into the presidential palace.

Ledezma, one of the "dinosaurs" of the Venezuelan right, was an active supporter of the coup 13 years ago. He was also one of the principal figures of the country's "hard right," which organized the so-called "*salida*" (exit) campaign last year aimed at bringing down Maduro, who won the election as president in April 2013, by means of street violence. These clashes claimed the lives of 43 people.

The corporate media is portraying Ledezma's arrest on conspiracy charges as merely a response to his decision to sign an open letter calling for a "national agreement for a transition," which advocates a renewed campaign for the extra-constitutional ouster of Maduro.

In fact, the Venezuelan government claims to have evidence identifying Ledezma as a key backer of fascist youth leader Lorent Saleh, who was extradited to Venezuela from Colombia to face charges of working with ultra-rightist Colombian mercenaries to organize terrorist attacks and assassinations in Venezuela. Saleh's group, Operation Liberty, is funded through an NGO that, in turn, receives funding from the US Agency for International Development.

Also linked to plots to overthrow the government are several Venezuelan military officers, including three senior members of the air force who were arrested last year.

Maduro and his supporters in the ruling PSUV (United Socialist Party of Venezuela) have made defiant statements countering international criticism and vowing to employ an "iron hand" against coup plotters.

This rhetoric, however, is belied by other actions and gestures that make clear the Maduro government is attempting to accommodate itself to the main forces that pose the threat of a coup—the Venezuelan financial elite,

US imperialism and the military—while attempting to shift the burden of the country’s deepening economic crisis onto the backs of the working class.

One of the more extraordinary examples of this duplicity came in a speech delivered by Maduro Monday, in which he called upon Barack Obama to “rectify” his administration’s policy toward Venezuela. Maduro said the problem was that the US president had been misled “by evil and deceitful advisors.”

Meanwhile, the government has strengthened the powers of the military, which constitutes a central pillar of the so-called Bolivarian Revolution. Fully 11 out of 32 governorships and eight federal ministries are headed by active or retired military officers. Reports of defections and dissension within the top ranks of the armed forces pose the greatest threat of a coup, but these forces already control much of the state apparatus. To the extent that Maduro is seen as no longer effective in defending their interests and containing popular unrest, the military command could move against him.

Then there is the commanding strata of the Venezuelan bourgeoisie. Recently released figures indicate that these layers are continuing to enrich themselves under conditions in which the vast majority of the population confronts declining living standards and mounting layoffs.

Venezuela’s national financial system recorded profits amounting to \$1.3 billion in January of this year, a 55.23 percent increase over the same period a year ago, maintaining the country’s status as one of the most profitable for the global banks.

Venezuela’s real economy, however, is in sharp decline, driven by the halving of the price of oil, which accounts for 96 percent of the country’s exports. The country’s reserves for imports have been slashed to \$29 billion this year, one third of what they were two years ago.

Financial analysts estimate that the government is confronting a \$14 billion budget gap that could nearly double if oil prices remain at their current levels for the rest of this year. There is growing speculation that the government could be forced into a default on its debt obligations if these conditions persist.

With inflation approaching 70 percent, the government has eased currency controls and allowed price increases on basic necessities, including beef and chicken. Shortages and lines of people seeking basic commodities remain ubiquitous. A rise in gasoline prices, which are heavily subsidized, is expected imminently. It was such an increase in fuel costs that triggered the eruption of the

Caraczo, the 1989 mass rebellion that led to the deaths of as many as 3,000 people.

The Venezuelan right, representing sections of the ruling capitalists who see their interests better served through a closer semi-colonial relation with US capital and a brutal crackdown on the working class, is seeking to exploit the economic crisis to further its drive to oust the Maduro government. For its part, the Maduro government, which represents a layer of wealthy state officials, the military command and the so-called *boliburguesia*, which has enriched itself off of oil revenues and financial speculation, is exploiting these reactionary maneuvers to divert attention from its own turn toward austerity policies aimed against the working class and to seek to rally support on the basis of nationalism.

This has gone hand-in-hand with the suppression of independent struggles of the Venezuelan workers, including the jailing of workers who have organized strikes, protests and worker assemblies independent of the unions affiliated to the ruling party.

Venezuelan workers cannot advance their interests or defend themselves against the very real threat of a militarized crackdown by lining up behind either of these feuding factions of the ruling establishment. The working class can find a progressive way out of the present crisis only by establishing its political independence from the government and the ruling PSUV and fighting for a workers’ government and a genuine socialist transformation of Venezuelan society as part of a unified struggle of the working class throughout the Americas.



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