

Venezuela's Maduro declares “economic emergency” as opposition takes control of legislature

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On the same day that the US-backed right-wing opposition took control of Venezuela's single-house national legislature, President Nicolas Maduro announced his declaration of an economic state of emergency “to tackle major economic issues and address, one by one, the fundamental elements of production, distribution, commercialization, and price regulation.”

In December 6 national elections, voters delivered a massive *voto castigo*, or punishment vote, directed against the Maduro government, which, despite its pretensions of “Bolivarian socialism,” has presided over economic policies that have dramatically reduced the living standards of the working class, while guaranteeing the profits of both international and domestic capital as well as foreign debt payments to the country's Wall Street creditors.

In the absence of any mass party of the working class, the protest vote went to the right-wing opposition coalition, the MUD, or Democratic Round Table. The result was seen in the swearing in Tuesday of a National Assembly in which the MUD enjoys a two-thirds super-majority, the first time the ruling *chavista* party has lost control of the body in 17 years.

Sworn in as president of the assembly was Henry Ramos Allup, an aging political hack of Accion Democratica, the party of former President Carlos Andrés Pérez, whose implementation of drastic IMF austerity measures triggered the so-called *caracazo* of 1989, a mass revolt of workers and poor in the Venezuelan capital in which as many as 2,000 were gunned down by security forces.

Ramos Allup confirmed that the primary aim of the new opposition-controlled assembly will be the early

ousting of Maduro. “In six months, the constitutional, democratic and peaceful exit will be decided for an end to this government,” he said in his first speech as assembly president.

Maduro, elected with a narrow majority in 2013, would end his term in office in 2019. Under the Venezuelan constitution, however, a recall referendum can be called after the president has served half of his term, which in Maduro's case will be next July.

The use of the term “exit” by Ramos Allup has a particular political resonance in Venezuela, echoing the slogan used by Venezuela's political right in the mobilization of violent street protests in 2014 seeking the ouster of Maduro.

The convening of the new assembly was accompanied by sharp controversies. The shrunken pro-government *chavista* minority walked out of the session after the right-wing majority began a debate on its proposed agenda, a violation of constitutional norms that restrict the opening session to the swearing in of the legislators.

A further furor was generated by the order given by Ramos Allup to remove from the assembly chamber large portraits of Maduro's predecessor, the late Hugo Chavez, and Latin American independence leader Simon Bolivar.

Maduro responded to this action Wednesday with a call for the people to “rebel” against the new assembly, describing its actions as “illegal” and “neo-fascist.”

More substantively, also on Wednesday, Ramos Allup swore in three opposition legislators from the state of Amazonas whose taking of office had been suspended by the Venezuelan Supreme Court because of vote fraud allegations. In addition to these three, the

electoral victory of one candidate of the ruling PSUV (United Socialist Party of Venezuela) has also come under the court's scrutiny.

The US State Department spokesman John Kirby on Monday characterized the court's review of the challenges as "efforts to interfere with the newly-elected national assembly exercising its constitutionally mandated duties." US embassy personnel in Caracas attended Tuesday's swearing in, and Washington has poured hundreds of millions of dollars into building up the political right.

Venezuela's Foreign Minister Delcy Rodríguez dismissed the US challenge, declaring that the State Department "can give orders to their lackeys in Venezuela, but not to the sovereign powers nor to the national justice" system.

Supporters of the government denounced the swearing in of the challenged opposition legislators as an "institutional coup" calling into question the authority of the courts and the separation of powers under the Venezuelan constitution.

Charges and countercharges over "coups" by the government and the Venezuelan right led the country's minister of defense, Gen. Vladimir Padrino Lopez, to issue a statement Monday declaring that "political sectors" were trying to draw the Venezuelan military "into areas where it doesn't belong."

The armed forces, he said, "is not an organ for the subversion of the constitutional order, nor for disregarding democratic institutionality, much less for carrying out coups."

In fact, the Venezuelan military has been involved in three successful coups and two coup attempts since the end of World War II. The last two involved an unsuccessful coup led by Chavez, then a dissident army colonel, in 1992, and the abortive attempt backed by Washington to overthrow Chavez's elected government in 2002.

The military has served as an institutional pillar of the *chavista* movement, with many of its senior officers occupying top government positions and enriching themselves off of endemic corruption under both the Chavez and Maduro administrations.

The new assembly president, Ramos Allup, declared at a press conference Monday that he expected the armed forces to guarantee order in the installation of the new legislature, in an apparent reference to the

court's actions.

Earlier, Maduro called upon the military to "prepare to defend the country" and to "not allow the right and the bourgeoisie, from the positions of power that they have reached, to surrender the sovereignty, independence and justice that have been built during these years of sacrifice."

If a coup were to come, it would likely be organized by the senior officers now in and around the government to defend their interests along with those of the sectors of the national bourgeoisie and foreign capitalists with which they are allied.

Despite the furious disputes between the government and the rightist opposition, both are embarking on economic policies that will spell a sharp intensification of the assault on the jobs, living standards and basic rights of the Venezuelan working class.

The government put off the harshest economic adjustment measures in the run-up to the legislative election last month and in the face of the right's victory. With the continuing collapse in oil prices, however, it cannot postpone them much longer. This year, principal and interest payments on bonds issued by the government and the state-owned oil company, PDVSA, are to reach nearly \$10.5 billion. Despite its anti-imperialist rhetoric, the *chavista* governments have faithfully paid off the foreign banks, while guaranteeing the control of international and domestic capital over the commanding heights of the Venezuelan economy.

The IMF has pegged Venezuela's inflation rate in 2015 at 115 percent, the world's highest, while predicting that it will top 200 percent this year. Economists have projected that the country's economy will contract 6 to 8 percent in 2016, meaning a further spike in unemployment.

The drive by both the Maduro government and the rightist-controlled National Assembly to impose increasingly draconian austerity measures must inevitably spell a sharp escalation of the class struggle in Venezuela in the coming year.



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