

Maduro government imposes state of emergency in Venezuela

Bill Van Auken**17 May 2016**

Venezuela was placed under a nationwide “State of Exception and Economic Emergency” Monday as its government continued to face both social unrest created by the country’s economic meltdown and a drive by the political right to oust President Nicolas Maduro.

While the Venezuelan president said that the decree was necessary to confront “international and national threats against our fatherland,” including both military intervention from abroad and a coup at home, the most pressing challenge to his government is coming from Venezuelan workers and poor who are unable to live under conditions of massive poverty, soaring prices and growing unemployment.

The country’s economy has plummeted in tandem with the price of oil, which is now selling for roughly one third of what it cost in 2014 and accounts for 95 percent of export earnings.

Recent weeks have seen a growing wave of looting by people frustrated with their inability to either find or afford basic foods and other necessities of life. Crowds have stormed supermarkets, shopping centers and government food dispensaries across the country.

With the value of the country’s minimum wage now reaching only \$40 a month, large sections of the population are reduced to eating two or fewer meals a day, with meat, chicken, fish and other sources of protein well beyond their reach.

“We are officially declaring May as the month that [widespread] hunger began in Venezuela,” said Oscar Meza, Director of the Documentation Center for Social Analysis of the Venezuelan Federation of Teachers.

Meanwhile the state-run health care system is in a state of collapse. Venezuelan government figures cited by the *New York Times* show that the mortality rate among infants under a month old has increased by more than a hundredfold since 2012, while there are five times as many deaths of mothers giving birth in hospitals. These death rates reflect a lack of basic medicines and supplies as well as the effects of continuous daily blackouts that shut down incubators and other equipment.

Workers throughout the country have suffered devastating cuts in real wages, with inflation pegged at 700 percent this year and projected to rise as high as 1,642 percent next year.

While the only sector to have received wage increases commensurate with the soaring inflation rate is the military, the government has sought to freeze existing contracts and resisted negotiating new ones.

There are increasing signs of working class militancy amid these catastrophic conditions. Workers at the Central University of Venezuela have continued job actions, blocking all of the main entrances to the facility on Monday with picket lines and burning tires. Meanwhile, the country’s electrical workers announced plans to launch a nationwide general strike by next week after five years in which the government has refused to negotiate a new contract.

The conditions are developing for a social explosion on the scale of the *Caracazo* of 1989, the mass uprising against IMF-dictated austerity measures—imposed during a previous fall in oil prices—that the government attempted to drown in blood.

In announcing the state of emergency last Friday, President Maduro warned that “Washington is activating measures at the request of Venezuela’s fascist right, who are emboldened by the coup in Brazil.”

The right-wing opposition, organized in the MUD (Democratic Unity Roundtable) electoral coalition is attempting to organize a recall vote that would force new elections. The MUD, which won a super-majority in the federal legislature last December, has reportedly collected nearly two million signatures supporting a recall, but leading government officials have accused it of fraud and warned that the vote will not take place.

The collaboration between the MUD and US government agencies is undeniable, with the American embassy openly supporting its activities and outfits like the National Endowment for Democracy funneling money to the political right.

Support for ousting the Maduro government, however, has

spread far beyond the MUD's well-heeled upper middle class constituency, with polls showing the president's popularity rate plummeting to anywhere between 15 and 25 percent.

Justifications given for the state of emergency were less than convincing. Maduro and his supporters cited statements made by Alvaro Uribe, the former right-wing president of Colombia, at a conference in Miami last week rhetorically calling for foreign military intervention in Venezuela to aid the opposition. It also pointed to a background briefing given by two US intelligence agents who speculated that Maduro could be brought down, including by a coup from within his own party or the military.

It is entirely possible that the Maduro government will use the state of emergency to suspend the constitutional right to seek a recall vote and thereby derail the right's campaign. This, however, will do nothing to dampen the anger of millions of Venezuelans over their inability to secure food and health care for their families.

In addition to the state of emergency, Maduro has announced plans to hold military exercises next weekend "to prepare ourselves for any scenario."

The scenario of mass social upheavals is far more likely than that of a foreign invasion, and there are growing signs that the government is resorting to repression against the working class to sustain itself in power.

The turn to the military comes on the heels of "Operation Liberation of the People" launched last year, which has seen police and military collaborating in mass arbitrary arrests and extra-judicial executions in the name of a war on crime waged in poor and working class neighborhoods. Last Tuesday, a crackdown resulted in the arrest of 1,130 people and killing of at least nine.

Under the severe impact of the global capitalist crisis on Venezuela's economy, the economic and political setup introduced in Venezuela 17 years ago with the coming to power of the former army officer Hugo Chavez has reached an impasse.

The right-wing corporate media internationally has gloated over the deepening crisis of the Maduro government and the growing hunger and misery of the Venezuelan masses, proclaiming both a manifestation of the "failure of socialism."

This is a lie. While the late Chavez and his successor Maduro proclaimed their policy to be that of "Bolivarian socialism" or "Twenty-first century socialism," they have led a capitalist government that has defended private property in an economy in which a greater share of production was in the hands of the private sector than before Chavez became president.

The limited social assistance programs initiated under

Chavez served, as he himself boasted, to protect the rich by reducing the immense class tensions in what historically has been one of the continent's most unequal nations.

Meanwhile, on the strength of rising oil prices, the financial sector reaped record profits, while a layer known as the *boliburguesia*, composed of government officials and businessmen with ties to the government, enriched themselves off of corruption, smuggling and currency manipulation schemes that siphoned hundreds of billions of dollars out of the economy.

As the present crisis demonstrates, the government failed to either develop vital infrastructure or diversify the national economy to reduce its dependence upon oil exports, 40 percent of which went to the US market.

With the collapse in oil prices, the ability to maintain social programs and subsidized imports has evaporated, and the full weight of the crisis is being imposed upon the backs of the working class.

Reduced revenues that could go to buy desperately needed food and medicine are instead being directed by the Maduro government to meet interest and service charges on Venezuela's debt to the international banks. It has rigorously denied reports that it will default on some \$10.5 billion in debt servicing costs that come due this year.

The White House Monday declared itself to be "quite concerned about the wellbeing of the people of Venezuela" and called for all "interested parties" to "work together peacefully to try to find solutions."

This is so much eye wash. Washington views the intense crisis in Venezuela, Brazil and elsewhere on the continent as an opportunity to reassert US hegemony in Latin America, counter the growing influence of China and inflict blows against the working class.



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