

Venezuela's right appeals to military amid mounting tensions

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Leading right-wing politician and former presidential candidate Henrique Capriles made an open appeal to the Venezuelan military Wednesday to defy a state of emergency put into effect at the beginning of the week by President Nicolas Maduro.

The provocative appeal came as Capriles and other leaders of the Venezuelan right organized protest marches in Caracas and elsewhere in the country to demand that the government hold a popular referendum on revoking Maduro's presidency. Petitions carrying some 1.85 million signatures were turned in on May 2 demanding the initiation of the process. If accepted, 4 million signatures, representing 20 percent of the electorate, would be required to secure the referendum.

Demonstrators in Caracas were met with tear gas when they attempted to march on the National Electoral Council. Elsewhere in the capital, backers of Maduro gathered to support the embattled president.

Both the pro- and anti-government demonstrations were relatively small, reflecting the anger and alienation of broad sections of the population that have turned against the government, but see the political elements organized in the MUD (Democratic Unity Roundtable) as representatives of a Venezuelan oligarchy that has continuously oppressed working people.

Political tensions are rising as Venezuela's economy plummets. Driven by the sharp decline in oil prices, the crisis has seen the economy shrink at the rate of 8 percent during what is the third straight year of recession. The inflation rate is projected to hit almost 2,000 percent by next year.

Soaring prices have been accompanied by shortages of basic foods and other necessities. Imports have been reduced by as much as 40 percent as the Maduro government directs dwindling foreign currency to

meeting debt payments to the international banks.

The result has been a growing wave of protests and road blockades in working class districts, and increasing incidents of looting of supermarkets and government food dispensaries. According to the Venezuelan Observatory for Social Conflict, spontaneous demonstrations have been taking place at the rate of 17 per day across the country, while 107 separate incidents of looting were registered during the first quarter of the year, with the rate increasing over the past month and a half.

Tuesday saw disturbances in Guarenas, a working class town east of Caracas. The unrest broke out after a long line of people waiting outside a government-subsidized supermarket saw a truck carrying food approach, only to be taken away by soldiers. The crowd blocked roads in the center of the town and chanted, "We want food" and "We are hungry."

Stores and businesses shut down, school children were sent home early and public transportation was suspended as members of the Bolivarian National Guard and local police moved in to break up the protest. At least 18 people were arrested.

The unrest in Guarenas was an especially sensitive issue for the government as it was in this town in 1989 that the *Caracazo*, the mass uprising against an IMF-dictated austerity package, broke out, leading to clashes in which as many as 2,000 Venezuelans lost their lives in the violent repression used to repress the rebellion.

Maduro has publicly justified the new state of emergency on the grounds that a foreign invasion is imminent. His principal evidence consists of a statement made by Alvaro Uribe, the ultra-right ex-president of Colombia, at a conference organized at a college in Miami calling for a "democratic military" force to act in defense of Venezuela's right-wing

opposition. Uribe has also made statements denouncing the current president of Colombia, Juan Manuel Santos, for introducing a “dictatorship backed by guns and terrorist explosives” through the negotiations to end the war with the FARC guerrilla group.

The real reasons behind the state of emergency lie elsewhere. In the first instance, it is aimed at suppressing popular unrest. In the second, it can be used to suspend constitutional rights, including the right to a referendum on revoking the mandate of the sitting president.

Maduro declared Tuesday that the calling of a referendum was “an option not an obligation,” and that the government “is not required to hold any referendum in this country of any kind.” His predecessor, the late Hugo Chavez, accepted such a recall referendum in 2004, just two years after an abortive US-backed military coup. He defeated the attempt to oust him with support from 59 percent of the voters. Polls indicate that Maduro would lose badly if he submitted to a similar referendum.

In addition to the state of emergency, Maduro has called for nationwide military maneuvers this coming weekend. There has been speculation in Venezuela that such exercises may be aimed at disrupting possible military plots against him.

The military has been a central pillar of so-called “Bolivarian socialism” since its origins, along with the banks and the *boliburguesia*, the layer of government officials and politically-connected businessmen who have enriched themselves off of speculation and corruption schemes. At least 10 of Maduro’s ministers are drawn from the military, while ex-officers are governors of a number of states. The founder of the Bolivarian state, Hugo Chavez, was himself an ex-lieutenant colonel who came to political prominence as the result of a failed coup in 1992.

Maduro, a former union official, does not have the close political ties to the Venezuelan military that Chavez enjoyed, and there are persistent reports of disquiet within the officer corps.

One manifestation of such divisions came this week with public statements by the retired major general Clíver Alcalá Cordones, a former top commander who participated with Chavez in the 1992 coup. Declaring himself a “convinced chavista,” he charged that Maduro had “administered the legacy of Chavez very

badly” and said he supported a recall referendum. Alcalá Cordones added that the present conditions in Venezuela struck him as very similar to those that prevailed when Chavez sought to overthrow the government of President Carlos Andrés Pérez.

While claiming that he was not proposing a military coup, the rightist politician Capriles certainly sounded like it: “And I tell the armed forces: The hour of truth is coming, to decide whether you are with the constitution or with Maduro.”

In an apparent response to the unrest, the army Wednesday organized a mass meeting of officers in Caracas which was addressed by Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino Lopez, who stressed the need to maintain “peace” and counter a “campaign against Venezuela to generate chaos and violence to permit an intervention by the government of the United States.”

Padrino Lopez told the officers that they should familiarize themselves with the constitution in order to understand “the task which the National Armed Forces have today.”



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