

Venezuelan Supreme Court strips legislature of lawmaking powers

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31 March 2017

Late Wednesday night, the Venezuelan Supreme Court issued a ruling stripping the country's legislative branch of its lawmaking powers, ostensibly over the opposition-controlled National Assembly's insistence on installing three legislators whose election was overturned over alleged voting irregularities.

The international corporate media has called the move a "coup d'état," claiming that the government of Nicolas Maduro has established a dictatorship. In a leading editorial posted online yesterday, Spain's *El Pais* said the decision is "extremely serious, without parallel since Venezuela's institutional crisis began" and marks a step toward the establishment of dictatorships akin to the US-backed juntas that plagued South and Central America in the 1970s and 1980s. The US State Department issued a strong public condemnation of the court's decision.

There is nothing progressive in Maduro's maneuver, aimed at shoring up institutional support for a government that is deeply unpopular among the Venezuelan working class.

Despite its pretensions of promoting "Bolivarian socialism," Maduro heads a capitalist state whose nationalist program has produced a social crisis leading to the impoverishment of the vast majority of the Venezuelan working class. Under Chavez and Maduro, the government brutally repressed social opposition in the working class, which has thus far taken the form of food riots and isolated strikes.

But the primary danger to the Venezuelan working class comes from those very forces denouncing the move as a "coup." Beneath the surface of the intensifying crisis, US imperialism is gathering the forces of the extreme right in an attempt to open up the country to unfettered exploitation by the American oil companies.

The Venezuelan opposition, a right-wing mix of opportunist plotters and CIA assets, has responded to the maneuver by threatening military dictatorship. Proving their democratic pretenses to be a fraud, the president of the National Assembly, Julio Borges, told *El Nacional*, "We have to call on the National Armed Forces, they cannot remain silent, they cannot remain silent in the face of the violation of the Constitution."

Another opposition lawmaker told the *New York Times*, "The people chose us through a popular vote." But the popular vote did not stop the opposition from attempting to orchestrate a coup against the democratically elected Chavez government in 2002, leading to the deaths of dozens of demonstrators.

In recent weeks, the US has heightened pressure on Venezuela in an indication that the Trump administration is seeking to force Maduro's hand and provoke a crisis that brings about the fall of the government.

Speaking in advance of an extraordinary session of the Organization of American States (OAS) on Tuesday, Senator Marco Rubio said the government would suspend aid to Haiti, El Salvador, and the Dominican Republic unless the countries voted to suspend Venezuela from the OAS.

The Democratic Party-aligned press has led the way in calling for a more aggressive stance toward Venezuela.

As if anticipating heightened tensions, a *New York Times* editorial on March 29 said Venezuela must implement "macroeconomic reforms" aimed at opening up the country to Wall Street's exploitation. "These proposals could become harder to reject if a large international coalition presents them to the Venezuelan people as assistance that should not be interpreted as an affront to their country's sovereignty."

On March 19, the *Washington Post* published an editorial titled, “Trump has an opportunity to correct Obama’s mistake on Venezuela,” which argued that Obama’s strategy of mediation with the Venezuelan government was “a feckless failure and that collective action is imperative to restore Venezuelan society.” The *Post* editorial encouraged the Trump administration to take a harder line against the Maduro government.

In February, the Trump administration launched a new round of sanctions against Venezuelan Vice President Tareck El Aissami, accusing him of drug trafficking and money laundering. Michael Fitzpatrick, deputy assistant secretary of state for the Western Hemisphere, said: “We need to act with urgency and clarity of purpose for indeed, as the saying goes, the whole world is watching. [The sanctions are] important for the OAS, which is fulfilling its responsibility to safeguard democracy.”

The move followed a letter signed by a bipartisan group of 34 US senators and congresspersons addressed to Trump, which read: “We urge you to exercise [your] authorities and send a strong signal to the Maduro regime and other bad actors in the region that human rights abusers will be held accountable for the misery and suffering it has needlessly brought to the people of Venezuela.”

When it comes to inflicting “misery and suffering” on the people of Latin America, nobody comes close to the United States government. Over the course of the 20th century, the United States has invaded the region dozens of times, overseen many coups, supported military dictators and right-wing death squads. Millions of Latin American workers and peasants have been killed to secure the profits of American corporations.

One US corporation, ExxonMobil, has a particular interest in Venezuela. The increased pressure is undoubtedly related to the fact that Trump’s Secretary of State Rex Tillerson was ExxonMobil’s CEO.

In January, the nonprofit publication the *Conversation* wrote an article titled “Rex Tillerson’s long, troubled history in Venezuela.”

The article notes that ExxonMobil and its predecessor Standard Oil have been exploiting Venezuela’s oil since 1921. Access was cut from 1976 until the 1990s and again in 2007 due to government nationalization efforts. In 2007, ExxonMobil refused the government’s

offer to pay fair value for the company’s assets in the country.

The corporation has provocatively begun drilling for oil off the coast of Guyana in territory claimed by Venezuela for over a century. An ExxonMobil subsidiary recently signed a \$200 million, 10-year contract to further develop its extraction methods in the region. The corporation has long set its sights on regaining unrestricted access to the country’s oil.

The intensified imperialist pressure against Venezuela marks a continuation and an escalation of the policies of the Obama administration, which included sanctions and heavy diplomatic and economic pressure. However the crisis plays out in the coming days, it remains within the realm of possibility that the corporate CEOs and military generals who conduct the day-to-day operation of government may eschew “soft power” diplomacy and opt for military invasion.



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