

Growing fissures in Maduro government as Venezuelan protests continue

Bill Van Auken
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With violent right-wing-led protests in Venezuela now entering their third month and amid the spread of social unrest and acts of looting in the country's working class areas, growing fissures are emerging within the *chavista* government of President Nicolas Maduro.

Among the more significant defections from among former government loyalists is that of Major General Alexis Lopez Ramirez, a top military adviser to Maduro, who resigned last week as secretary of the country's National Defense Council. Lopez had previously served as the commander of the Venezuelan army and the head of presidential guard of Maduro's late predecessor, Hugo Chávez.

The retired general said he had quit his post "due to my disagreement with the way of proceeding to summon a national constituent assembly." Maduro has called for an election next month of a special assembly to rewrite the Venezuelan constitution.

The move is largely seen as a maneuver aimed at deflecting the rising popular anger and laying the foundations for some kind of accommodation with elements of the right-wing opposition.

Under the existing constitution, however, the power to convene such an assembly rests with the Venezuelan electorate, by means of a popular referendum, not with the president. Moreover, Maduro has stacked the deck by reserving a portion of delegates to be selected not by means of universal suffrage, but rather picked by various social "sectors," including neighborhood councils, unions and other organizations controlled by the ruling PSUV (United Socialist Party of Venezuela).

The resignation of General Lopez poses a serious political threat to the government to the extent that it reflects broader disaffection within the military. From its very origins, the *chavista* movement, behind its

populist and even "socialist" pretensions, has rested heavily on the military. Chávez was himself an army colonel who first gained national exposure by means of an abortive military coup in 1992, six years before he was first elected president.

While Maduro, who assumed the presidency after Chávez's death in 2013, has no such military background, senior active and retired officers continue to dominate his government's most important ministries and make up half of the country's governors. The senior officer corps has also been among the principal beneficiaries of the wholesale corruption that has characterized "Bolivarian socialism," controlling key areas where illicit profits are to be made, including ports, food distribution and the control of foreign exchange.

In the face of the mass protests called by the right-wing opposition coalition, the MUD, the government has rested ever more heavily on the armed forces. Under Plan Zamora, instituted last April, it has assumed the power to declare martial law throughout the country, and protesters, including those accused of looting, have been brought before military courts.

Until now, the indications of military opposition had been restricted to lower-ranking officers. In April, the government announced the arrest of four junior officers—three first lieutenants and a captain—for "conspiracy and planning terrorist actions." And the previous month, three army lieutenants who declared their opposition to Maduro sought asylum in Colombia. The right-wing opposition has claimed that scores of officers have been placed under arrest, but this has not been confirmed.

Henrique Capriles and other MUD leaders, while centering their protests on the demand for Maduro's ouster and the convening of immediate elections, have

repeatedly pitched their appeal to the military command, invoking its duty to protect the constitution and essentially calling for a coup.

Also continuing to express opposition to the government's policies is Venezuela's attorney general, Luisa Ortega Diaz, who publicly called Wednesday for Venezuelans to reject the call for the constituent assembly after the Supreme Court rejected her demand that eight of its justices be impeached for "conspiring against the republican form of government." Among the charges she presented was the court's decision in late March to usurp the power and functions of the opposition-controlled National Assembly. Her opposition to the action at the time led the court to back down.

Ortega, a long-time *chavista*, has also initiated the prosecution of lower-ranking military personnel for acts of repression, which has led to disquiet within the ranks and leadership of the Venezuelan armed forces.

Maduro and his closest allies have responded angrily to Ortega's latest intervention. Vice President Tarek El Aissami attacked her on his Twitter account, demanding that she "stop this fascist opposition, which now has you as its chief, from keeping on murdering people."

The death toll since the beginning of the latest round of mass protests two months ago has risen to at least 80. Among the latest deaths were those of a protester struck down by a truck at a street barricade Wednesday night in Miranda state and a police supervisor shot dead by masked protesters at a road blockade in Merida state.

Washington is attempting to exploit the violence—and no doubt its intelligence agencies are fueling it—to pursue regime change and the installation of a new government that would be even more compliant with the demands of Wall Street and the US-based oil corporations.

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, the former head of ExxonMobil, whose predecessor company Standard Oil controlled Venezuelan oil for decades before its nationalization in 1976, told the House Foreign Affairs Committee Wednesday that the State Department is currently working with the US Treasury Department to compile "a very robust list of individuals" in the Venezuelan government to be targeted with sanctions.

Reuters news agency reported that the Trump

administration is also considering punishing sanctions against Venezuela's state oil company PDVSA. A ban on Venezuelan oil imports to the US would plunge the already shattered Venezuelan economy into an unprecedented crisis. Oil exports are the source of 95 percent of the country's foreign earnings, and the US is Venezuela's largest market, accounting for 40 percent of total sales.

If such measures are taken, it will spell an intensification of the hunger, mass unemployment and impoverishment already facing Venezuelan workers. The Maduro government has responded to the country's economic crisis by shifting the burden onto the working class, slashing imports of vitally needed food and medical supplies to meet debt payments to Wall Street bondholders and defend the wealth of the Venezuelan bourgeoisie.

All sides, from the Maduro government to the right-wing opposition to the US government, confront the threat of the unraveling political situation in Venezuela giving rise to revolutionary social upheavals from below. The concern is that the increasingly frequent bouts of protest and looting in working class and poor neighborhoods can coalesce into a mass upheaval along the lines of the so-called *Caracazo*, the 1989 revolt that shook Caracas in response to a draconian IMF-dictated austerity package imposed in the face of falling oil prices.

The emergence of dissidents in the Maduro government is part of a bid to fashion a new national unity government with the aim of heading off such a revolt from below.

Elements of the Venezuelan pseudo-left such as the group Marea Socialista, which previously subordinated itself to the Chávez and Maduro government, joining the ruling PSUV, are aligning themselves with these efforts, voicing criticisms of Maduro while seeking to divert any independent movement of the working class back behind the political machinations of the bourgeoisie.



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