

Venezuelan government moves against dissenting chavistas

Alexander Fangmann
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On June 27, hours before the Venezuelan Supreme Court stripped the dissenting attorney general, Luisa Ortega Diaz, of her powers to investigate human rights violations, a helicopter piloted by a police officer mounted a suspicious attack on the court, dropping four grenades and firing shots before flying away.

The government of President Nicolás Maduro released a statement branding the helicopter incident as a terrorist attack and “part of the escalation of the coup,” exploiting the incident to distract from the anti-democratic measures it is carrying out.

The government’s statement identifies the attacker as Óscar Pérez, and says he is under investigation for his links to the CIA. Numerous reports have described him as a 36-year-old former police investigator and part-time actor. A captain in the Scientific, Penal and Criminal Investigation Service Corps (CICPC), Venezuela’s largest national police agency, Pérez also co-produced and acted in the 2015 film titled *Suspended Death* (*Muerte Suspendida*), in which he plays a role based on his real life. The film even contains scenes of Pérez firing shots from a helicopter.

A video released on YouTube the day of the attack features Pérez, appearing to be flanked by two masked men with an assault rifles, and what looks to be two mannequins. In the video, he claims to be part of a “a coalition of members of the military, policemen, and civilians” that is “nationalist, patriotic and institutionalist,” and which is looking to reestablish “stability in opposition to this temporary and criminal government.”

There has been widespread dissent within the Venezuelan military, especially among the lower officer ranks. Reports indicate that at least 65 army officers have been arrested, with 14 charged with rebellion and treason. The *chavista* government relies

heavily on the military, with military officers heading up around a third of the country’s ministries and comprising half the country’s governors.

Many high-ranking officers and generals, a key component of the *boliburguesia*, have enriched themselves enormously through *chavismo* by their control of military-owned companies. There are no doubt layers of the officer corps who feel blocked from advancement and feel they can do better at managing Venezuela.

Nevertheless, despite the accusations of the Maduro government, it does not appear that the Pérez incident is connected with a wider conspiracy in the armed forces. There appears to have been one other person with him in the helicopter, holding a sign reading “Art. 350, Libertad,” referring to the Venezuelan constitution’s article 350, which encourages people to “disown any regime, legislation or authority that runs counter to democratic principles and guarantees, or that undermines human rights.”

Venezuelan security forces said they found the helicopter used in the attack near the northern coast of Venezuela in Vargas State, but with no sign of Pérez.

Although members of the right-wing opposition parties were initially supportive of what they took to be part of a wider rebellion among the armed forces, enthusiasm died down as it became clear that coverage of the incident was drowning out the attention being paid to government moves against Luisa Ortega Diaz, the chief prosecutor who has come out against the Maduro government. The incident also bolsters government claims that the right-wing opposition, heavily supported by US imperialism, is trying to foment a coup.

One of the figures charged in the government’s statement with alleged links to Pérez, Miguel

Rodríguez, the former minister of the interior and intelligence chief for Maduro, as well as a high-ranking former general, told Reuters he was “not at all convinced by the helicopter incident,” and asked rhetorically, “Who gains from this? Only Nicolas for two reasons: to give credibility to his coup d'etat talk, and to blame Rodriguez.”

The action taken by the Supreme Court later on the same day of the attack broadened the power of the government ombudsman, allowing the holder of that office, Tarek William Saab, to carry out investigations of crimes connected to human rights, normally the prerogative of the chief prosecutor, Ortega Diaz. This was an escalation against Ortega Diaz, and indeed, two days later the government banned her from leaving the country and froze her assets. She faces a further hearing on July 4.

In recent months, Ortega Diaz has broken from the government, particularly over its attempt to convene a Constituent Assembly that would rewrite the constitution in order to sideline the opposition-controlled National Assembly. In claiming that the calling of the Constituent Assembly is unconstitutional, Ortega Diaz has cut through government claims to be operating on firm legal principles, a key pillar of its rhetoric against the right-wing opposition.

She has also put forward numerous accusations of government human rights violations, and has prosecuted soldiers and policemen for their roles in the killing of protesters. Ortega Diaz has blamed the government for 23 protest deaths and 853 injuries, which would amount to around a fourth of the total protest deaths.

Just two days after the helicopter incident, she charged Antonio Benavides, former head of the national guard, with systematically violating the human rights of protesters. Ortega Diaz's concentration on this question of “human rights” has made her the darling of US-based and opposition media, which sees it as providing a justification for the intervention of US imperialism. Maduro had reassigned Benavides last week from the national guard to government head of the capital district.

Regardless of the actual origin of the helicopter attack, it illustrates the depth of the crisis gripping ruling layers. The working class of Venezuela can place no trust in any section of the bourgeoisie. A change of

government achieved either through a CIA-backed coup or an independent power grab by sections of the military would mean a redoubling of the ongoing attacks on basic rights and social conditions. Venezuelan workers must prepare themselves to put forward their own socialist and internationalist program, independent of all factions of the bourgeoisie.



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