

Clash between Venezuelan government and opposition raises threat of civil war

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In preparation for Sunday's constituent assembly vote, the two main factions of the Venezuelan ruling class are fighting to establish parallel government infrastructures. Balloting to elect 545 constituent assembly members is part of President Nicolás Maduro and his United Socialist Party of Venezuela's (PSUV's) attempts to sideline the opposition-controlled Parliament. These moves, alongside the opposition's provocative campaign following last Thursday's "national strike," threaten to drag the country to the brink of civil war.

The death toll of the wave of protests that have been called by the opposition Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) since April has climbed to 100 after two protesters, including a 15-year-old, died Thursday. Reports indicate that 367 demonstrators were arrested that day. Several of them will likely be tried in military tribunals as part of the government's "Plan Zamora" decreed in April to rule with martial law amid widespread opposition and a worsening social crisis.

The ongoing offensive by the opposition continued on Friday at an outdoor session of the MUD-led Parliament. Meeting at a park in eastern Caracas, the legislators named and swore in a "shadow" 33-member Supreme Court to oppose the existing one controlled by the ruling PSUV.

The MUD spokesman and leader, Andrés Velazquez, announced afterward that they will hold a march on Saturday to the Supreme Court in support of the "new magistrates," and appealed to the military to "obey" the Parliament and the new judicial body and call for new elections.

On his part, the parliamentary vice-president Freddy Guevara, a central public figure of the right-wing MUD, threatened the government with an ultimatum, warning: "Next week will be the final stretch to achieve

change in Venezuela and force back the false constituent assembly."

In response, the chairman of the pro-Maduro Constitutional Chamber of the official Supreme Court, Juan José Mendoza, denounced the "parallel" court as a "crime of usurpation" and summoned "the respective civilian and military authorities to execute the pertinent actions." The next morning, President Maduro announced that the 33 opposition magistrates and those who named them would be "arrested one by one."

The federal police then arrested one of the magistrates, Ángel Zerpa, later that day. A law professor at the National School for Prosecutors of the Attorney General's Office, Zerpa had been representing the former attorney general, Luisa Ortega Díaz, in a judicial process against her organized by the Supreme Court. This move was initiated after Ortega began attacking the constitutionality of the Maduro government's efforts to sideline the legislature in April.

On Tuesday, the Parliament announced that two more of the opposition "judges" had been arrested: Jesús Rojas Torres and Zuleima González.

The MUD leaders responded by escalating further, calling on Monday for its followers to oppose the imposition of "Communism" through the constituent assembly and occupy the electoral centers next Sunday.

Maduro's defense minister, Gen. Vladimir Padrino, warned that the armed forces will defend the voting proceedings and told MUD that they were "apologizing for crime."

The opposition has made clear that these right-wing provocations are shows of force to push the *chavistas* to negotiate and concede greater powers. In a press conference ahead of the strike Thursday, leading MUD legislator Henry Ramos Allup called for "compromise" to form a "national unity government."

The form that this takes—whether with or without Maduro, through a coup or negotiated transition—is being discussed behind the backs of Venezuelans between the two main factions of the Venezuelan ruling class, along with major powers who have important investments in the country, including Washington, Beijing, and Moscow.

Whether it's through the referendum last week convoked by the opposition or the constituent assembly, the opposing sections of the ruling class are seeking to defend the interests of different factions of international and native capital, all of whom will continue to attack the social conditions of the Venezuelan workers and youth.

The growing aggressiveness of the opposition is largely a response to its support by the US government. On Monday, the Venezuelan foreign minister condemned statements made by CIA Director Michael Pompeo at the Aspen Institute think-tank last week, which amounted to indications that there is a plot to overthrow the Maduro government.

“We are very hopeful that there can be a transition in Venezuela and we, the CIA is doing its best to understand the dynamic there,” said Pompeo, adding that he had just returned from Mexico and Colombia, where he had told them “how to get a better outcome.”

Ahead of what is becoming an increasingly tumultuous week in Venezuela, MUD is calling for another strike, this time for 48 hours. These stunts are not only being encouraged but enforced as lockouts by employers and some trade unions. According to Freddy Guevara, 85 percent of the country stopped working on Thursday, while Maduro claimed it was an “utter failure.”

This next “general strike” is scheduled to begin Wednesday. The top business chamber, Fedecámaras, issued a statement on Tuesday in support “of our workers and employers that decide to join.” Moreover, a number of anti-Maduro union centrals—up to 300 unions by some reports—have announced that they will participate in MUD’s show of force.

Given the enormous opposition among workers against both sectors of the bourgeoisie, these forces are perceivably nervous about the prospect of not being able to contain a potential mass response by workers. Norma Torres, a leader of the Workers’ Front in Defense of the Constitution and Democracy, called for

workers not to leave their homes in respect of the strike. “Initially, we called for two days of strike, but it will depend on how the situation goes,” she added.

The staunchly anti-Chavista Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV) is also participating. One of its leaders, Andrea Parra, made clear that what the unions are enforcing is not a strike but a lockout to try to discipline workers into aligning themselves with the MUD offensive. She warned: “If you stay passive, we’ll have a dictatorship and that is not what Venezuela or the working class wants.”

The CTV is affiliated with the US-based trade union central AFL-CIO, which has a long history of backing US imperialism in Latin America and worldwide. In April 2002, the CTV participated in a US-backed conspiracy with the right-wing opposition and sectors of the military that ended in the brief ouster of ex-President Hugo Chávez.

The pseudo-left parties in Venezuela have moved to seek to contain growing opposition behind either the efforts by MUD or to underpin the Maduro government. The Venezuelan section of the Morenoite International Workers’ Unity (UIT-CI), PSL, is one of a number of organizations that has moved from defending Maduro to calling for his ouster. “Protest until the government falls,” it insists, while calling to vote in the MUD-sponsored referendum and participate in MUD’s “strikes.”



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