

Election of constituent assembly in Venezuela takes place amid intensified violence and US threats

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President Nicolás Maduro and the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) carried through the election of a 545-member constituent assembly yesterday by deploying 230,000 Bolivarian soldiers and militia reservists across the country amid widespread violence, the assassination of both pro- and anti-government supporters, and increased threats from the US.

Initial press reports show a low turnout, even in poorer neighborhoods less affected by protests that once were the PSUV government's main base of support. A poll published by Datanálisis Friday showed that 75 percent of Venezuelans do not believe a new constitution is necessary, while over 80 percent oppose the Maduro administration.

The chief goal of the elections is to isolate and potentially dissolve the opposition-controlled congress. According to the pro-Maduro National Electoral Commission, the constituent assembly will have "total power to change any existing constitution and create a new legal order." Once the results are made public, the new legislative body will assemble in the first week of August.

The prelude to Sunday's vote involved four months of escalating efforts by the PSUV government and the US-backed, right-wing Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) to sideline each other and gain greater control over the state. The fight between the two sections of the Venezuelan bourgeoisie takes place in the face of immense social opposition among the working class and poor. Hunger, hyperinflation, and unemployment are widespread and most workers lack basic services. Both the PSUV and MUD fear a mass uprising that they will not be able to control.

The broad opposition against the government notwithstanding, the MUD has not gained any consistent

support outside of upper middle class and student sectors due to its nakedly pro-imperialist and pro-corporate program. Since it gained a majority in Congress in 2015, it has appealed to sectors of the armed forces as well as Washington to undermine the Maduro government.

The MUD issued a call to boycott the elections, did not present any candidates, and called on its supporters to block streets and disrupt the vote. The Trump administration and other governments including Mexico, Colombia, and Panama have also announced that they will not recognize the assembly.

Hoping to install a government that will allow US corporations an unrestrained exploitation of Venezuela's oil resources, which already account for 10 percent of US oil imports, Vice President Mike Pence called the far-right MUD leader Leopoldo Lopez Friday to promise "strong and swift economic actions" if Sunday's vote went ahead. Sections of the US foreign policy establishment are demanding the Trump administration impose sanctions on Venezuelan oil exports.

European Union top diplomat Federica Mogherini called for "urgent measures" to restart dialogue with the opposition, warning that a Constituent Assembly could "polarize the conflict more and increase the danger of confrontation."

On Sunday morning, the Venezuelan military launched a violent crackdown, mostly in the MUD-controlled areas of the country. The day started with 20 percent of electoral centers "inaccessible" due to opposition blockades, but ended with less than 5 percent, as the armed forces violently cleared roadblocks and occupied buildings.

The Maduro government gave the Bolivarian Armed Forces (FANB) operating control of the federal and municipal police starting on Thursday to oversee the

electoral process and enforce a ban of “all meetings, public demonstrations, gatherings, and any act that can disrupt the elections.” Such measures and militarized deployments are aimed at intimidating *all* social opposition, including that of the working class, and disproves Maduro’s pledge that the constituent assembly will bring “peace and democracy.”

PSUV Vice President Diosdado Cabello, who traveled across the country to campaign, is expected to be elected as the president of the Constituent Assembly. An ex-captain of the Army, Cabello is a loyal member of the military leadership that brought Chávez into power and became part of the *boliburguesía* (Bolivarian bourgeoisie) that enriched itself tremendously through outright corruption and the administration of oil and infrastructure contracts. Cabello has insisted on a hardline program of “liquidating the enemy” and strengthening the power of the military.

The conflict between the two factions is reaching a breaking point. The opposition has sought to establish parallel governing structures, using the Congress to swear in a “shadow” 33-member Supreme Court in opposition to the Maduro government, which responded by arresting three of the magistrates. Moreover, the MUD mayor of the Iribarren municipality, Alfredo Ramos, was arrested Friday night by the Bolivarian Intelligence Agency SEBIN and sentenced by the Supreme Court to 15 months in jail after he allowed barricades to be set up in his jurisdiction.

On Sunday morning, PSUV leaders announced a “victory” against the attempts to undermine the elections. However, given the continued tensions and censorship by the mass Venezuelan media, Vice President Tareck El Aissami insisted that “we need to continue isolating these sectors of the opposition who have precluded any public debate.”

On Tuesday and Wednesday, a total of eight people died in clashes during a “48-hour general strike” supported by the MUD-aligned business chambers and trade unions. This was followed by “Takeover Venezuela” protests Friday and Saturday, limited to scattered roadblocks and described by the Spanish *Público* as there being “more photographers than those throwing rocks.”

Saturday night, PSUV constituent assembly candidate José Félix Pineda was shot and killed in his home, while the MUD claimed at least three of its supporters died during Sunday’s protests, including the youth secretary of the opposition Democratic Action (AD) party, Ricardo Campos. If confirmed, this would bring the number of

dead in the wave of protests since April to over 115.

The reactionary character of the opposition was on display Monday in an interview on Venevisión where MUD leader Freddy Guevara was asked whether the current situation resembled the 1958 Puntofijo pact in which the conflicting political parties representing the land oligarchy and the liberal bourgeoisie agreed to hold democratic elections. He replied: “There are some themes here that imply more the Chilean arrangement with what happened to Allende and Chile’s reconstruction afterwards.”

Guevara was referring to the September 11, 1973 coup organized by the CIA and military intelligence agencies in connivance with sectors of the military led by Allende’s commander of the armed forces, Augusto Pinochet. The fascist dictatorship which arose in the aftermath of the coup tortured and murdered tens of thousands of workers and carried out sweeping social attacks to impose privatizations and other free-market policies.

It is such a perspective that is in the mind of the ruling class sectors behind the MUD who are seeking to impose pro-imperialist policies under a US-backed, fascist dictatorship that quells all social opposition. On Saturday, Guevara announced: “Starting on Monday we will have new actions, tactics, and strategies to fit the new reality we will be living in.”

“We must re-affirm that we are in the last moments of this dictatorship,” he continued. However, reflecting the cynical psychology that dominates the MUD, he added, “We are going to get them out without turning into what they are.”



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