

Trump imposes sanctions on Maduro after Venezuelan constituent assembly elections

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1 August 2017

The US Treasury Department imposed financial sanctions on the personal assets of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro on Monday in response to Sunday's constituent assembly election.

The move by the Trump administration marks a significant yet careful escalation of US imperialist involvement in the Venezuelan crisis. By limiting its sanctions to Maduro's assets and by avoiding direct sanctions on Venezuela's state-run oil company PDVSA, the Trump administration is sending a message to potential dissidents in the military and in Maduro's own United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) that the US is willing to do business with government insiders to force the fall of the administration.

The coincidence of ongoing demonstrations and the announcement of the sanctions point toward the heavy involvement of the CIA and other US-linked intelligence assets in backing the opposition's efforts to topple the government. The announcement of the sanctions are also aimed at inflaming tensions within the country, and the Trump administration knows Maduro will use the US sanctions to intensify state repression, a step which the US will then use to justify further intervention.

The US announced the sanctions only hours after Trump promoted John Kelly as his new chief of staff. Kelly, who recently led Trump's deportation force at the Department of Homeland Security, previously served as military leader of the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), in charge of overseeing US operations in Latin America. Kelly's elevation and the move against Venezuela are a sign that the US intends to be more actively involved in the region in its efforts to "pivot to Latin America" and challenge China's influence.

Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin's announcement that the sanctions will freeze Maduro's assets in the US and prohibit US citizens from doing business with him is the next step in a deliberate series of escalating measures against the Venezuelan government.

In February, the US took similar measures against the country's Vice President Tareck El Aissami. In May, the US sanctioned eight members of the country's supreme court. Last week, the US extended the sanctions to include 13 other top officials of the PSUV. Now, Mnuchin announced that all who participate in the newly elected constituent assembly are subject to these penalties.

The sanctions were accompanied with increased threats by the US. Mnuchin said "all options" are still being considered, including sanctions on the country's oil resources. Sanctioning Venezuelan oil would limit the government's ability to pay back Wall Street and threaten to cut off its social programs and the payment of state employees, including the military. This would exacerbate social tensions in the country and lead to the death of thousands of workers and youth from an intensification of the violence and the lack of already scarce food and services.

Trump's national security adviser, H.R. McMaster, also spoke at the sanction rollout announcement, proclaiming that the decision by calling the constituent assembly was an "outrageous seizure of absolute power" that turns Maduro into a "dictator."

Maduro joins a select blacklist of active heads-of-state with US sanctions, including Iraq's Saddam Hussein, Libya's Moammar Gaddafi, Syria's Bashar Al-Assad, North Korea's Kim Jong-Un, and Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe. Maduro will doubtless get the message: the US killed Hussein and Gaddafi, while Assad and Kim have been openly threatened with

assassination.

In his post-election “victory” address Sunday, Maduro aggressively pushed forward his calls for the supreme court and new constituent assembly to remove parliamentary immunity from the leaders of the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD). “The right wing already has its prison cell waiting. All criminals will go to prison for the crimes they’ve committed.” Such threats, which will only be strengthened in response to US provocations, are not only aimed against the MUD, but all social opposition.

Following the United States, a number of countries, including the United Kingdom, Spain, Canada, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, have declared the constituent assembly as illegitimate. The Spanish Foreign Ministry is planning to discuss with the EU “additional measures that can promote a return to democracy”.

Prior to the White House announcement, the Russian Foreign Ministry condemned the escalation of US-led pressures, urging the US and other countries “to renounce their destructive plans capable of deepening the divisions in society.”

The freezing of assets and threats from Washington are coming in the context of a deepening economic crisis and escalating efforts by the PSUV government and the MUD-led opposition to sideline each other for control of the state. These have involved the creation of parallel governing bodies like the constituent assembly and the “shadow” Supreme Court sworn in two weeks ago by the MUD-controlled Congress.

On Sunday, the Bolivarian military oversaw the electoral process and violently repressed attempts by the opposition to bring the voting to a halt across the country by setting up barricades and occupying voting centers. The confrontations resulted in 10 deaths, bringing the total of those killed since the current wave of protests began in April to 121 with roughly 2,000 injured.

According to the pro-Maduro Electoral Council (CNE), 8 million people, or 41.5 percent of those registered, voted to elect the 545 members of the constituent assembly, which will convene on Thursday taking over the Federal Legislative Palace, where the unicameral MUD-led Congress met.

The opposition has responded by calling on its supporters to continue protesting; however, MUD’s

view is shifting toward the Trump administration, ready to become a fully subservient regime to the interests of the US corporate and financial oligarchy.



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