# Venezuelan military claims suppression of attempted coup

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**7 August 2017**

Venezuela's top military commanders claimed Sunday that the country's armed forces had crushed an abortive coup staged by "terrorists" and "mercenaries" linked to the country's right-wing opposition and foreign governments.

The reported coup attempt apparently involved little more than two dozen armed men who attempted to take over the strategic Paramacay military base of the 41st Armored Brigade in the central Venezuelan city of Valencia.

The alleged coup came a day after the newly convened constituent assembly voted to fire the country's attorney general, Luisa Ortega, a long-time supporter of the ruling party who had publicly challenged the legitimacy of the election for the assembly held last Sunday.

Ortega had earlier prosecuted members of the security forces for acts of repression carried out during anti-government demonstrations organized by the right-wing opposition. Four months of protests have left over 100 dead, nearly 2,000 wounded and more than 500 detained. A significant number of those killed have been members of the security forces, as elements of the extreme right have employed increasingly violent methods.

After the constituent assembly voted for Ortega's removal, armed members of the national guard surrounded her offices in downtown Caracas, blocking her when she tried to enter the building.

Ortega has charged that the real reason for her firing was that she was pursuing cases against members of President Nicolas Maduro's ruling PSUV (United Socialist Party of Venezuela) for illicit links to the Brazilian construction giant Odebrecht. The company has admitted to paying $98 million worth of bribes to secure contracts in Venezuela, and Ortega had indicted the wife and mother of a former government minister last month in connection with these schemes.

In the same session in which the assembly voted for Ortega's ouster, Diosdado Cabello, a powerful member of the PSUV's leadership and former military officer, announced that the body would remain in session for two years. A constituent assembly called into session through a referendum convened by Maduro's late predecessor, Hugo Chavez, had a life span of only four months.

The leader of the alleged coup attempt in Valencia was identified as Juan Carlos Caguaripano, a former captain in the national guard who was cashiered in 2014 after making public declarations against the government. He subsequently appeared on CNN's Spanish language network denouncing Maduro and reportedly went into exile in the US.

Appearing Sunday in a YouTube video with about a dozen men in camouflage uniforms, some armed with automatic weapons, Caguaripano declared: "This is not a coup d'etat. This is a civic and military action to re-establish constitutional order. But more than that, it is to save the country from total destruction."

Conflicting accounts of the military action included claims that elements within the armored brigade supported the action before it was put down by forces loyal to the government. The government claimed that the armed group was immediately suppressed by the troops.

According to a communique released by the defense minister, Vladimir Padrino López, the captured gunmen admitted to having been recruited by elements of the "Venezuelan extreme right" acting in conjunction with foreign governments.

There were also reports of a small number of civilian demonstrators coming out into the streets near the

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military base to support the uprising before they were driven off by security forces using tear gas and rubber bullets.

Others in Valencia, however, were quoted by the local media as expressing the opinion that the entire affair had been “staged” by the government to divert growing popular anger.

Similar reactions were expressed in late June when a former police captain and part-time movie actor seized a helicopter and dropped grenades on the Venezuela supreme court building.

Whatever the case, the Maduro government is extremely sensitive to the threat of unrest within the military, which has served as its principal pillar since Chavez, a former paratrooper colonel who led an unsuccessful coup, was first elected to power in 1999. Current and former officers fill roughly a third of the government’s cabinet posts and comprise nearly half of the country’s governors.

The latest developments unfolded as the White House is reportedly considering the imposition of more sweeping sanctions against the government of Maduro, whom members of the Trump cabinet have branded as a dictator. The US government has imposed sanctions against Maduro personally, making him only the fifth sitting head of state to receive such treatment. The other four include Iraq’s Saddam Hussein and Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi—both assassinated—and Syria’s Bashar al-Assad and North Korea’s Kim Jong Un—both targeted for war and regime change.

While more sweeping economic sanctions had been proposed, the crisis and shake-up in the Trump White House have delayed the measures. White House chief of staff John Kelly, a recently retired Marine general and former head of the US Southern Command, which oversees US military operations in Latin America, reportedly wants to personally direct the escalation of US aggression against Venezuela.

The other issue is that the imposition of sanctions against Venezuelan oil, the main economic lever at hand for US imperialism, would be a two-edged sword. Last year, the US imported some $10 billion worth of Venezuela crude oil to feed American refineries. While a cutoff of these imports would likely force Venezuela’s state-owned oil company PDVSA into default and further sink the country’s already plummeting economy, it would also spell higher gasoline prices in the US itself.

The imposition of US economic sanctions would mean a further deterioration in the living standards of the Venezuelan working class. Lack of oil revenues would mean even less ability to import basic necessities like food and medicine. Seventy-five percent of Venezuelans reported losing an average of 19 pounds in 2016 due to widespread food scarcity, and the country’s infant and maternal mortality rates soared during the same year, by 30 and 65 percent respectively.

In the last year, the country’s currency, the bolivar, has lost 94 percent of its value on the exchange market, drastically reducing the real wages of Venezuelan workers, even as the so-called *boliburguesia*, the capitalist layer that, together with the military, forms the principal base of support for the Maduro government, has enriched itself off of currency speculation and manipulation.

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