

Venezuela tensions mount after arrest of coup leader

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Washington has stepped up threats of military intervention in Venezuela following moves by the Maduro government to arrest a group of right-wing politicians in the National Assembly who participated actively in the abortive April 30 coup called by the US puppet and self-proclaimed “interim president” Juan Guaidó.

On Wednesday night, agents of Venezuela’s SEBIN internal security agency arrested the vice president of the National Assembly, Edgar Zambrano. Zambrano is the leader of the right-wing Democratic Action (AD) party, whose last elected president, Carlos Andrés Pérez, directed the repression that led to as many as 3,000 deaths during the 1989 popular uprising known as the *caracazo* and was subsequently impeached for corruption. Zambrano was leaving a meeting at the AD headquarters when he was surrounded by security agents.

After he refused orders to get out of his car, the police brought in a tow truck which towed him and his car to jail. He reportedly had US \$9,000 on his person at the time of his arrest.

He and several other National Assembly deputies have been charged by the country’s Supreme Court with treason, conspiracy, civil rebellion and other crimes in connection with the April 30 events, which were initiated by Guaidó, who posted a video of himself and the leader of his far-right, US-funded Voluntad Popular party, Leopoldo Lopez, who had escaped house arrest, and a few dozen armed men in uniform.

On April 30, Guaidó and Lopez appealed to the Venezuelan military to rise up and overthrow the government of President Nicolas Maduro. In the course of the day, it became clear that the coup had no significant support either within the military or the civilian population. Soldiers who had been brought to the event under false pretenses turned themselves in, and an appeal by Guaidó to the population to storm the La Carlota air base in eastern Caracas failed miserably, while provoking violent clashes in which five people lost their lives.

Zambrano and others were photographed and filmed at the

site where the coup leaders sought to gather support, a highway overpass in the Altamira section of the capital. They are seen trying to persuade soldiers to join in an attack on the base and standing with civilians who mounted heavy machine guns on the overpass, apparently preparing for a massacre.

Others named by the court have sought to flee. Richard Blanco of the Alianza Bravo Pueblo, a minor right-wing party that split from the AD, sought refuge in the residency of the Argentine ambassador in Caracas. Two other deputies charged in relation to the coup, Mariela Magallanes and Americo De Grazia, entered the Italian embassy seeking protection from arrest.

Meanwhile, Maduro has announced the dismissal of dozens of Venezuelan military personnel who had been involved in the coup attempt. The most senior among them was the chief of the SEBIN internal security force, Gen. Manuel Figuera. Five lieutenant colonels, four majors, four captains, six lieutenants and 35 sergeants were also arrested.

Some 25 of these military personnel sought refuge in the embassy of Brazil, whose fascistic president, former army captain Jair Bolsonaro, has provided enthusiastic support for Washington’s regime-change operation.

Leopoldo Lopez, who was convicted for inciting violence in the so-called *La Salida* (Exit) demonstrations which were launched in 2014 in an attempt to force out the government after the right-wing opposition had lost both presidential and municipal elections, has been granted protection by the Spanish embassy, which has allowed him to continue issuing calls for Maduro’s overthrow.

The initial attempts by the Maduro government and its judicial system to hold accountable those responsible for the attempted coup of April 30 have evoked howls of protest from Washington, the European Union and the United Nations.

Washington issued a statement in the name of its “virtual embassy” in Venezuela, denouncing the detention of Zambrano as “illegal and inexcusable” and warning that there would be “consequences,” without specifying what

form they would take.

The European Union called the arrest “another flagrant violation” of Venezuela’s constitution and a “politically motivated action aimed at silencing the National Assembly.”

And the United Nations human rights office demanded the “immediate release” of Zambrano and demanded that the Maduro government “cease the attacks” on the National Assembly and its members.

Venezuelan Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza called attention to the grotesque hypocrisy of these denunciations, declaring that those who were leaping to the defense of the coup organizers were complicit in the coup. He pointed out that in the countries whose governments were condemning Caracas, “sedition and military rebellion also constitute grave crimes.”

Arreaza in particular blasted the UN human rights office for failing to condemn the attempted coup of April 30 and defending the impunity of its organizers. “Is it the case that military coups are organized in defense of human rights?” he asked.

What would be the reaction of the US government if a group of politicians and a handful of soldiers called for an assault on Andrews Air Base outside of Washington and set up machinegun positions on a Highway 495 overpass? One can safely assume that such an incident would produce far more bloodshed than the clashes in Caracas, and that the perpetrators would have been prosecuted on treason, sedition and terrorism charges.

Meanwhile both Washington and Guaidó—whom the Maduro government has yet to charge, no doubt fearing his arrest could provoke a US attack—are continuing to encourage a revolt by the military to topple the Venezuelan president.

US Vice President Mike Pence, in a speech delivered on Tuesday to the annual Conference of the Americas held by the US State Department made a point of announcing that sanctions imposed just three months earlier on the now renegade commander of SEBIN, General Figuera, had been lifted “in recognition of his recent actions in support of democracy and the rule of law” and urged others “follow the example” set by Figuera.

Figuera, a veteran commander of Venezuela’s National Guard, a unit used in the repression of struggles of the working class in Venezuela, is an unlikely champion of “democracy.”

Pence’s speech included preposterous claims that the Maduro government had entered a pact with Iran to bring Hezbollah “terrorists” into Venezuela and from there dispatch them throughout the hemisphere. The claim seemed aimed at joining the two major arenas of US threats of war into one, justifying attacks on both Iran and Venezuela. The

vice president likewise denounced Russia for using its trade and political ties with Venezuela to gain “a foothold in this hemisphere.”

Pence summed up by declaring: “The United States of America will continue to exert all diplomatic and economic pressure to bring about a peaceful transition of democracy in Venezuela. But to those who continue to oppress the good people of Venezuela, know this: All options are on the table.”

The only “military option” that he announced in the speech was the US Navy’s deployment next month of the USNS Comfort, a hospital ship, to countries bordering Venezuela next month, ostensibly to provide aid to Venezuelan migrants.

Discussions are underway within the Trump administration on far more aggressive forms of US military intervention. These reportedly include dispatching US military units, including special forces troops, to neighboring countries, first and foremost Colombia, and the deployment of a naval armada off the Venezuelan coast in a show of force.

US Senator Rick Scott, a Florida Republican, issued a call on Wednesday for the US to mount a naval blockade of Cuba to enforce the sanctions against the export of Venezuelan oil decreed by the Trump administration. Scott called last week for the US to send troops to Colombia to break through barriers on the Venezuelan border to force through “humanitarian aid.”

All of these proposals, which pose the threat of a bloodbath and a potential confrontation between the US and nuclear-armed Russia, express the mounting frustration in Washington over the failure of the regime-change operation centered upon Guaidó to produce the desired results. The Venezuelan military has thus far failed to turn against Maduro, and the broader masses of Venezuelans, however much they are hostile to the Maduro government, see in the right-wing CIA-trained opposition an enemy in service of US imperialism and the country’s traditional ruling oligarchy.

Under these conditions, the threat of a direct US military intervention to assert Washington’s control over Venezuela and its oil reserves, the largest on the planet, only continues to grow.



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