Washington harnesses coronavirus pandemic to promote Venezuela coup

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US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo launched on Tuesday a grotesquely cynical initiative, dubbed a "Democratic Transition Initiative," aimed at furthering Washington's longstanding campaign to provoke a proimperialist coup in Venezuela.

This so-called initiative is a blatant attempt to utilize the coronavirus pandemic as a weapon. It is seen by US officials as a means of intensifying the suffering of the Venezuelan people that has been inflicted by a succession of ever-tightening "maximum pressure" sanctions that have cut off the country's oil exports, together with its access to food, medicine and other basic supplies on the world market. The result thus far, according to at least one estimate, has been the deaths of over 100,000 Venezuelans. With the spread of COVID-19, that toll can rise by hundreds of thousands more.

Last month, the State Department announced that it had initiated a policy of "Maximum-pressure March," designed to utilize the pandemic along with the plummeting price of oil on the world market to force Venezuela into submission.

This policy found its most rabid expression in the US Justice Department's announcement last month of indictments of President Nicolas Maduro and other top Venezuelan officials on trumped-up charges of drug trafficking and money laundering. While Washington has produced no credible evidence to support these charges, there is ample proof of its closest partners in the hemisphere, including the right-wing governments in Colombia, Honduras and Guatemala engaging in precisely such activities.

The rolling out of the "transition" plan in the wake of the indictments may be intended as some kind of carrot-and-stick strategy. US officials have suggested that it is telling Maduro to accept the scheme "or else."

A top US official, speaking to reporters on condition of anonymity—in all likelihood the convicted war criminal Elliott Abrams, who is the Trump administration's special envoy for Venezuela—called attention to the fate of Manuel Noriega. The late president of Panama and former CIA "asset" was indicted on drug-trafficking charges and then overthrown and seized through a 1989 US invasion that claimed the lives of thousands of Panamanians.

"History shows that those who do not cooperate with US law enforcement agencies do not fare well," the official said. "Maduro probably regrets not taking the offer six months ago. We urge Maduro not to regret not taking it now."

This is the Mafia-style operation that underlies the so-called "democratic transition."

Its aim is to provoke a split within the Maduro government and, in particular, to convince Venezuela's military to side with Washington in ousting the Venezuelan president.

This was also the central objective in the failed attempt to impose "transitional president" Juan Guaidó, a right-wing politician unknown to the vast majority of the population, who swore himself in at the beginning of 2019 and was immediately recognized by Washington and its allies. Guaidó's repeated attempts to foment a coup, including a direct appeal for a military uprising a year ago, came to nothing, and his attempts to organize opposition rallies have manifestly failed to draw any significant participation in recent months.

The "democratic transition" is on one level a tacit admission that Washington's strategy centered on bringing the US puppet Guaidó to power has proven an abject failure.

The mechanics of the "transition" are based upon Washington's manipulation of various institutions in the Venezuelan state to produce the desired outcome of a regime subordinate to US imperialist interests.

It calls for the National Assembly, which the Maduro government has stripped of its legislative powers, to

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create a five-member “Council of State,” which, together with a “military advisor,” would assume all executive powers, thereby overthrowing the Maduro administration. This body is then supposed to organize elections within six to 12 months, with Washington and its regional allies ensuring the desired results.

The proposal makes an open appeal to the Venezuelan military, declaring, “The military high command (Defense Minister, Vice Defense Minister, CEOFANB Commander, and Service Chiefs) remains in place for the duration of the transitional government.”

It also makes clear that the “transition” will entail the reorientation of Venezuela back into the orbit of Washington’s regional military and financial domination. It demands the removal of all “foreign security forces,” an apparent reference to Cuban and Russian advisors in the country. It also states that in the course of the transition, “Negotiations begin with World Bank, IMF, and Inter-American Development Bank for major programs of support.” In other words, the plan is to shift Venezuela from its financial reliance on China and place it back under the thumb of Washington and Wall Street.

Trump held a telephone conversation Monday with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin which, according to Moscow, touched on the crisis in Venezuela. The Russian-based oil conglomerate Rosneft announced last week that it had sold all its interests in Venezuela to an entity wholly owned by the Russian government. It said it had done so to protect the interests of its shareholders. Rosneft’s subsidiaries had come under US sanctions because of the company’s providing the main vehicle for trading in Venezuelan oil as well as its providing gasoline for the Venezuelan market. Among its principal shareholders are British Petroleum and a Qatari oil company.

It is unclear what the significance of the trade-off will be. Russian officials insisted that it signaled no diminishing of Moscow’s support for the Maduro government, but rather an attempt to protect Rosneft from the US sanctions regime.

In presenting the “transition” plan to a State Department press conference Tuesday, Pompeo declared, “The United States has long been committed to finding a solution to the manmade crisis in Venezuela. The urgency for this has become all the more serious in light of the Maduro regime’s failure to adequately prepare for and address the global COVID-19 pandemic.”

Who does the US Secretary of State think he is kidding? When it comes to “failure to adequately prepare for and address the global COVID-19 pandemic,” there is no government in the world that can compete with that of the United States.

The Maduro government issued a swift rejection of Pompeo’s “transition.” Foreign Secretary Jorge Arreaza declared in an interview, “They can say what they want, when they want and how they want, but the decisions on Venezuela will be made in Venezuela, with its institutions and its constitution. We aren’t the puppets of the US.” He described the US plan as the product of Washington’s “obsession with taking control of Venezuela and its petroleum.”

In part, the “transition” scheme was no doubt floated in an attempt to deflect calls by the United Nations, the European Union, Russia, China and other countries and multilateral agencies for the US to lift a US sanctions regime that is tantamount to a state of war in order to facilitate the struggle against the coronavirus.

The Trump administration, it is clear, intends to do nothing of the kind. It is banking on the conditions that sanctions have created in Venezuela, shortages of medical supplies along with an increasing lack of access to clean water and electricity, to inflict a horrific death toll that can bring Venezuela to its knees. While the country’s threadbare public health system has thus far kept down the number of COVID-19 deaths, the United Nations has warned that Venezuela could be one the hardest-hit countries in the world.

Commenting on the “democratic transition” scheme advanced by Pompeo Tuesday, Juan Guaidó’s security aide Ivan Simonovis made the frank comment, “These are things that need to be done, so they can’t say they weren’t offered an alternative.”

The implication is clear. A fraudulent proposal for a “peaceful transition” is being floated in Washington as part of the preparation for the use of military violence to achieve the predatory aims of US imperialism. The danger of war is amplified by the interest of the Trump administration and the US ruling class in diverting outward the overwhelming popular anger over the failure of the existing capitalist order to protect masses of people from the ravages of the pandemic or to organize any adequate response to it.

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