Swirl of sexual assault and misconduct allegations trigger unprecedented clash between Canadian military top brass and government

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Just days before Prime Minister Justin Trudeau triggered Canada's pandemic federal election, a series of extraordinary events unfolded in Ottawa that exemplify mounting tensions between the top brass of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and their civilian political overseers.

On August 11, lawyers for Admiral Art McDonald issued a statement that asserted it was his right, "indeed obligation," to immediately resume his duties as the Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS), that is, as head of Canada's military. Canada's military police had announced the previous week that a six-month investigation had determined there was no basis to lay charges against McDonald under either the Criminal Code or the military's own Code of Service Discipline. The admiral had voluntarily stepped aside as CAF head last February, just five weeks into his CDS appointment, after an allegation of sexual misconduct was made against him by a CAF member.

McDonald's very public attempt to reclaim his command clearly broadsided the Liberal government. In response, it hastily issued two orders-in-council, legislative instruments requiring the Governor General's signature. On August 12, it placed McDonald on indefinite "administrative leave." The next day it promoted the acting CDS, Wayne Eyre, to the rank of general. This strongly suggests the government intends to sideline McDonald, since the CAF commonly only has one active full general at a time.

This clash is the latest episode in a crisis that has roiled the CAF top brass for the past seven months. There have been longstanding complaints that the officer corps have ignored or downplayed sexual violence within the military, an institution that for more than two decades has been at the forefront of wars of aggression and the brutalization and devastation of entire societies on behalf of Canadian imperialism.

However, with allegations of sexual assault and misconduct now being levelled against some of the CAF's senior-most officers, the crisis over this issue has reached a qualitatively new stage. McDonald's predecessor as Chief of the Defence Staff, Jonathan Vance, was accused of two counts of sexual misconduct in February for relationships he allegedly had with female subordinates, including while serving as the military's top commander. In July, he was charged in civilian court with one count of obstruction of justice. Several other top officers are also under investigation, including Vice-Admiral Haydn Edmundson, the military's head of human resources, who is accused of raping a 19-year-old navy recruit in 1991.

Evidence of widespread sexual assault, including rape and other forms of violence, in Canada's military is well documented. According to a recent report, there were 581 officially filed reports of sexual assault within the CAF in the five years since 2016. This at a time when the military was supposed to be prioritizing stamping out sexual violence and harassment under its Operation Honour. Given the nature of this institution as a volunteer army of trained killers tasked with providing the "hard power" to ruthlessly uphold Canadian imperialist interests around the world, these exposures are just one element—and not a particularly surprising one—of the criminality, brutality, and thuggery that pervades the armed forces.

That being said, the unprecedented conflict between Admiral McDonald and the government underlines that the sexual assault-misconduct crisis has intersected with other disputes within and between the military and the government and is being weaponized.

Vance has received demonstrative support from a faction of the military, who deem the government insufficiently supportive and appreciative of the armed forces. Vice-Admiral Craig Baines, the commander of the Royal Canadian Navy, and Lt. Gen. Mike Rouleau, the vice chief of the defence staff, joined him for a round of golf at the military's private golf course last spring. Rouleau, who quickly gave up his vice chief post under pressure from the media and political establishment, was at the time directly overseeing the military police responsible for investigating Vance.

One element in the backing given to Vance is no doubt concern among senior officers that the military's independent justice system, which sees military officers adjudicate alleged crimes committed within the organization, is under threat. Strengthening the authority of the civil justice system over the military was in fact a recommendation of a 2015 government commissioned report that found rampant sexual abuse within the armed forces, but this and its other chief recommendations were never implemented.

The bitterness of the dispute between the government and a section of the CAF top brass was highlighted in the comments made by Major-General Dany Fortin last Wednesday, when he was charged with one count of sexual assault. Speaking to the press outside an Ottawa area police station, he denounced the move as driven by "political calculus." Fortin, who only a few months ago was lauded by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau for his role in heading Canada's COVID-19 vaccine rollout, added, "For the past three months, my family and I have been living this nightmare of not knowing. Not knowing the nature of the allegation, the status of the investigation and not knowing if I would be charged."

Tensions have long been simmering between the government and military leadership over delays to and alleged mismanagement of major procurement programs, including warships, submarines, drones, and fighter jets. Despite the Trudeau government's commitment to vastly increase military spending by over 70 percent from 2017 levels by 2026, the military top brass, Conservative and New Democrat opposition, and

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sections of the media have complained that the process of equipping the armed forces for the wars of the 21st Century is not moving fast enough.

In 2017, Vice-Admiral Mark Norman's house was raided and he was suspended from his position as second-in-command of the Canadian Armed Forces after being accused of leaking a confidential cabinet document relating to a contract to convert a civilian ship into a military vessel. The criminal case against him, which was dropped in 2019, triggered competing claims of political interference in military procurement programs from Norman's defenders and opponents alike.

A related point of contention is the drive to "modernize" the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) for "strategic conflict" with China and Russia, including control over Arctic Ocean energy and mineral resources. Military-aligned think-tanks and other strategists for Canadian imperialism see this as a golden opportunity to secure Canada's participation in the US ballistic missile defence shield—something that they strongly support because it would strengthen the Canada-US military-strategic alliance and give the CAF greater access to the Pentagon's most advanced weaponry.

Its name notwithstanding, the defence shield's ultimate purpose is to enable US imperialism to wage a "winnable" nuclear war. In 2005, the minority Paul Martin-led Liberal government decided against joining the defence shield, due to fears of riling anti-war sentiment in the population. The Trudeau government has indicated it might at some point be ready to integrate Canada into the missile shield. However, much of the military and foreign policy establishment are frustrated by the reluctance of the government and the opposition parties to openly debate this issue, and others, such as a greater Canadian role against China in the Indo-Pacific, and press forward in implementing a more belligerent policy in defiance of public opposition.

Whilst the scandal roiling the military top brass has cut across the longstanding establishment efforts to promote the CAF as the incarnation of "Canadian values" and an instrument of the Liberal government's "feminist foreign policy," the allegations against Vance and others have been used by the media and political establishment to divert public attention away from the widespread support within the military for far-right and outright fascist organizations.

In July 2020, right-wing extremist military reservist Corey Hurren attempted to assassinate Trudeau at his Rideau Hall residence. Over subsequent months, much evidence emerged pointing to support among CAF personnel for far-right groups like the Proud Boys and Three Percenters. But any examination of this has been dropped and the public's attention instead focussed on the high profile sexual assault and misconduct allegations, which inevitably have been given a #MeToo narrative twist. The issue of how to deal with far-right sympathizers within the military remains in dispute, with a faction of the officers corps at the least prepared to downplay and tolerate their presence in the CAF.

As important as these issues are, they are merely expressions of the much deeper crisis of Canadian imperialism. The very same week the dispute between the military leadership and Liberal government erupted into the public eye, the US-backed puppet regime in Afghanistan, which Canadian imperialism played no small part in fashioning, was collapsing to the Taliban. The debacle in Afghanistan, with the puppet regime built up by the imperialist powers over two decades with hundreds of billions of dollars proving to be a political zero, represents a devastating defeat for Washington and its allies, and their three decades of virtually uninterrupted wars in pursuit of their global predatory ambitions.

From Yugoslavia to Afghanistan, Haiti, Libya, and Iraq, Canadian military personnel have been bombarding countries, massacring civilians, and propping up corrupt, pro-Western regimes in alliance with its US imperialist partner on a more or less continuous basis since the late 1990s. In the course of these criminal operations, the military has been implicated in a series of war crimes, from complicity in torture and child-rape in Afghanistan, to the abuse and massacring of prisoners in Iraq. In Haiti in removing the country's elected president in 2004 and in the Ukraine following the 2014 Kiev coup, the CAF closely collaborated with fascist forces. Its role in NATO's 2011 regime-change war Libya war amounted, to use the words of one senior Canadian commander, to serving as "al-Qaida's air force."

The wars Canadian imperialism has waged as Washington's junior partner over the past two decades have not only killed hundreds of thousands and devastated entire societies. They have had a disastrous impact on every aspect of social and political life at home. Canada's perpetual wars have made social relations more violent, exacerbated social inequality by further enriching the wealthy elite, facilitated the corruption and co-option of the media, and legitimized the gutting of democratic rights.

They have also emboldened the armed forces and intelligence agencies to essentially operate as laws unto themselves, as underscored by their systematic lying to the courts about Canada's involvement in torture, construction of a comprehensive network of spying and surveillance since 9/11, and refusal to acknowledge their involvement in war crimes in Afghanistan. The military responded to the pandemic by activating plans modelled on its neocolonial occupation of Afghanistan to monitor political discussion, promote government propaganda and, in a "worst-case scenario," to suppress popular opposition. (See: **Bringing Afghanistan home: Canada's military launched operation to "shape" opinion amid pandemic**)

All the lies employed by various factions of the political establishment to justify the wars—that Canada is a "warrior nation," that "force works," that the military is fighting for "human rights" and "democracy"—have been thoroughly undermined by their ruinous results and the war crimes with which they are inextricably associated. The Trudeau government's desperate effort to intervene and manage the fallout from the series of sexual assault scandals only goes to show that the political establishment is painfully aware of this fact, and determined to do whatever it can to preserve the ideological as well as practical and political authority of the military so it can continue to ruthlessly assert Canadian imperialist interests.

But that will prove a much harder task than they think. The last two decades have not only witnessed an upsurge of military aggression and war, but also a radicalization of the working class. Workers in Canada, the United States and internationally, who have witnessed the squandering of vast resources on wars of aggression and the propping up of the super-rich during the pandemic, are entering into mass struggles to overturn decades-long attacks on their social rights, fight for wage increases and secure jobs, and oppose the destruction of public services. These militant struggles can and must find political expression in the growth of a conscious anti-war and anti-imperialist movement among the Canadian and international working class.

Whatever the personal fates of the individuals involved in the latest controversy, the conflicts emerging between the military leadership and civilian authorities testify to the putrefaction of Canada's bourgeois-democratic institutions and norms. In the final analysis, the dramatic growth of social inequality, which has been accelerated by the pandemic, and the expansion of military operations in conjunction with the United States can no longer be concealed by the ruling elite's portrayal of Canadian capitalism as a bastion of "democracy" and "human rights." While the response of ruling circles will be to turn ever more openly to the right and to authoritarian forms of rule, working people must oppose Canadian imperialism on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.

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