

Three dead as millions demonstrate across Venezuela

By Eric London
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Millions of supporters and detractors of the Venezuelan government led by President Nicolas Maduro are demonstrating across Venezuela, bringing tensions to their highest point since 2015. On Wednesday, clashes between the two groups left three dead, including two opposition protesters and one soldier.

The opposition demonstration Wednesday, billed as the “mother of all marches,” was a right-wing show of force aimed at appealing to the Venezuelan military, factions of the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela, and US imperialism to secure more favorable bargaining terms with the government. The PSUV, which also held a sizable rally of its own on Wednesday, has been in power since the election of ex-president Hugo Chavez in 1998. Maduro became president in 2013 after Chavez’s death.

In a move intended to provoke a government crackdown, opposition leaders directed Wednesday’s massive crowd over an elevated highway situated above a river and led them toward government buildings in the city center. Opposition leader Henrique Capriles then used the resulting clashes as a pretext to call for continued demonstrations Thursday.

The demonstrations took place with Caracas under martial law. On Tuesday, Maduro enacted “Plan Zamora,” a domestic military operation that involved placing Caracas’s highways, public buildings, and key television antennas under military control. General Jose Ornelas, military commander of the capital region, explained: “We must defend Caracas.” In addition, local police across the country have been placed under the authority of the National Guard.

The extent of the military presence reflects the nervousness within government circles that increasing divisions are emerging in the government. Three weeks

ago, the Venezuelan Supreme Court stripped the legislature of its lawmaking powers in a move that was later reversed after being opposed by Maduro’s own attorney general, Luisa Ortega Diaz. In a statement released Wednesday, Ortega abstained from repeating Maduro’s claim that demonstrators are “terrorists” and instead appealed to both opposition leaders and the military to refrain from violence.

On Tuesday, the government announced the arrest of four junior army officers—three first lieutenants and a captain—for “conspiracy and planning terrorist actions.” Speaking Tuesday, Maduro said the officers “are playing with the most sacred thing the Republic has, which is national unity, civil-military unity, and peace.”

The arrests were a shot across the bow to silence opposition in the armed forces, which have provided the PSUV with a key base of support over the last two decades. Elements within the army’s senior command have greatly enriched themselves since Chavez—a former military officer—took power in 1998. On Monday, Maduro appeared at a rally of thousands of soldiers and officers, praising them for “repudiating sedition against the country and traitors of the country.” Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino Lopez pledged the armed forces’ “unconditional” loyalty to Maduro.

Aware of growing divisions and hoping to work out a deal on behalf of American oil companies, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said Wednesday that the Venezuelan government is “not allowing the opposition to have their voices heard” and is “violating its own constitution.”

The Trump administration has signaled a policy of more-active involvement in Venezuela. In February, Trump launched a new round of sanctions against

Venezuelan Vice President Tareck El Aissami and met personally with the wife of ultra-right-wing opposition leader Leopold Lopez. These moves come despite the Maduro government's US\$500,000 gift, funneled through Citgo, the US subsidiary of the Venezuelan state oil company, to fund Trump's inauguration festivities, according to U.S. Federal Elections Commission filings released Wednesday.

Washington's record of military interventions and support for Latin American dictators and death squads shows that Tillerson's statements about defending "free speech" in Venezuela are beyond hypocritical. Before joining the White House, Tillerson was CEO of ExxonMobil, which has been exploiting Venezuela's oil since 1921. Chavez nationalized ExxonMobil's extraction facilities in 2007, and the company is searching for ways to "tap" Venezuelan oil once again.

The working class largely abstained from this week's demonstrations, and there was no uptick in strikes or walkouts.

The unpopularity of Maduro's government among the working class is outpaced only by popular hatred for the opposition, which is concentrated among upper-middle-class layers, including students, operating under the direction of groups with close ties to the Central Intelligence Agency and US State Department.

Groups associated with the US government and US corporations give tens of millions of dollars to the Venezuelan opposition, much in the form of "youth outreach" to recruit members of the right-wing opposition. In 2008, the Cato Institute gave its Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty and a cash prize of US\$500,000 to an opposition student leader. The opposition's attempts to denounce Maduro's crackdown on free speech are a fraud. In March, opposition leader Julio Borges called for the military to establish a dictatorship.

But support for the *chavista* government has evaporated in the midst of an unprecedented collapse in living standards for the Venezuelan working class.

The pro-capitalist, nationalist policies of the Chavez-Maduro governments, based almost entirely on oil exports, left the economy vulnerable to the drop in the international price of oil. The government responded by orchestrating a massive transfer of wealth from the working class to the pockets of international

finance capital, slashing social programs to make interest payments to its creditors.

As a result of these policies, 75 percent of the population—some 22 million people—lost an average of 19 pounds of body weight in 2016 alone due to lack of food. A recent university study shows that 93 percent of the country has insufficient income to purchase basic food, while a third of the population eats fewer than three meals per day, nearly triple the figure from 2015.

Mass hunger and malnutrition gave rise to a series of spontaneous demonstrations in working class neighborhoods in the first half of 2016, in which residents attacked government food storage warehouses and sacked shops where owners were hoarding food. Conditions have only continued to deteriorate.

Under these conditions, the *chavista* and opposition factions of the ruling class fear a social explosion. Former Interior Minister Miguel Rodriguez Torres hinted at this in February when he said the government must "open space for participation to dissipate the violence" in order to "pay homage to those who died in '89."

This was a reference to the mass protests of February-March 1989, in which demonstrations in the town of Guarenas near Caracas over a rise in bus fares spread rapidly across the country, igniting a social powder keg. The government of Carlos Andres Perez responded by suspending the constitution, declaring martial law, and massacring more than 1,000 people.

This event looms large in the memory of both factions of the Venezuelan bourgeoisie. Both the *chavistas* and the opposition are planning their strategies with the overarching goal of preventing an outbreak of the class struggle.

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