

Venezuelan death toll continues to rise as Maduro government pushes for constituent assembly

By Alexander Fangmann
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At least 60 people have died so far in Venezuela over the past two months following a wave of protests called by right-wing opposition parties in response to the Venezuelan Supreme Court's announcement that it had abrogated the powers of the National Assembly. The majority of deaths are the result of increasingly violent and provocative protests carried out by opposition protesters, and an increased crackdown on such protests by security forces and supporters of the government of Nicolás Maduro.

Violence has also resulted from outbreaks of looting that have occurred during and outside of protests, as sections of the population have been driven to desperation by food shortages and declining real income, only to be met by police and National Guard troops charged with defending the economy from sabotage.

Some of the latest deaths include Cesar Pereira, a 20-year-old student and activist from the opposition Popular Will party. Pereira was shot in the abdomen by a marble during a protest on May 27 in Anzoátegui state and died the following morning. It is not clear who fired the marble, as marbles have been used as improvised ammunition by pro- and anti-government protesters.

A student at the Universidad de Oriente in Ciudad Bolívar, Pugas Velasquez, was shot in the head last week during opposition protests at the university. Public prosecutors have announced they will be pursuing charges against three police officers involved in the shooting.

There have also been reports of increasing violence being committed by the opposition. Danny Jose Subero, a former National Guard lieutenant, was

apparently beaten to death and shot in Lara state, while his motorcycle and belongings were set on fire. According to a report in Telesur, Subero had been accused of being an infiltrator while taking selfies at the funeral of a student, Manuel Sosa, who was shot during anti-government protests in Valle Hondo.

In another dramatic case, Orlando Figuera, a 21-year-old vendor, was beaten, stabbed and set on fire during an opposition protest in the middle-class Caracas neighborhood of Altamira. The incident, which was caught on video, apparently occurred after protesters called out Figuera as a *chavista* and thief. Figuera survived the incident, though with burns over much of his body.

According to Penal Forum, an NGO, in addition to the deaths there have been more than 2,700 arrests and 1,000 reported injuries across the country. At least 335 people have been tried by military tribunals, with the government defending their use against civilians, claiming that those who attack members of the military or military facilities can be tried according to military law.

The military tribunals and deployment of troops around the country to quell protests, looting and riots are part of what the government calls "Plan Zamora," under a decree giving the government the power to essentially declare martial law. On May 18, Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino Lopez said he would be transferring 2,600 National Guard and Special Forces troops to Tachira state as part of Plan Zamora in response to looting and riots in San Cristobal in which three people died.

The increasing clashes between security forces and groups of protesters have begun to cause rifts in the

ruling *chavista* United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). The country's attorney general, Luisa Ortega Diaz, who has become a focal point for opposition parties and imperialist media following her criticism of the Supreme Court's move to curtail the power of the National Assembly, has come out against the violence.

Announcing that all the deaths would be investigated, Ortega has claimed that about half the deaths can be attributed to security forces. So far, over 20 members of Venezuelan security forces have been arrested for actions taken against protesters.

Ortega has also been a focal point for opposition within the ruling PSUV to Maduro's call for a constituent assembly, which the Maduro government hopes to use as a way of reaching out and splitting the opposition to negotiate an end to the crisis. Such a resolution would be aimed at preserving the power and privileges of the *boliburguesia*, the layer of capitalist investors, contractors and speculators who have enriched themselves under the rule of Hugo Chávez and his successor Maduro, through a gutting of the limited social programs enacted during the previous two decades.

Elías José Jaua Milano, who was named president of the Commission for the National Constituent Assembly, said in an interview with RT that the opposition is "rejecting taking part in a dialogue and in the elections because they actually don't want to resolve this conflict through elections" and that "they are trying to depose President Nicolás Maduro."

Jaua Milano also said that "Venezuela's top opposition officials are acting on the instruction of most radical parts of the US government...and are carrying out the White House's request to start a kin-on-kin war in Venezuela."

Details released about the constituent assembly reveal that it would comprise 540 members, with 364 elected on a regional basis, and 176 selected by various "sectors" of the population including workers, students, rural inhabitants, pensioners, indigenous peoples, disabled people, neighborhood communal councils and national business confederations.

In a leaked letter to Jaua Milano, Ortega wrote, "To resolve the undeniable crisis without precedent the country is undergoing, it is not necessary, pertinent, or advisable to carry out a transformation of the state in terms of a new constitution." She further stated the

constituent assembly would in fact "accelerate the crisis" rather than solve it, and criticized the "sectorial" representation scheme as being a form of "indirect representation."

Ortega's opposition has also emboldened other government figures. Supreme Court Magistrate Danilo Antonio Mojica criticized the convening of a constituent assembly without a referendum vote, calling such a process "spurious." Another magistrate, Marisela Godoy, said that she supported the attorney general and claimed that the constituent assembly "put the structure of the state and social peace at risk, given the current political upheaval."

According to a Reuters report, the National Electoral Council said voting for the constituent assembly would be held in late July, while regional gubernatorial elections that had been postponed from last year would be held on December 10.

In a sign of the government's increasing desperation in the face of Venezuela's intractable crisis and its utter lack of any progressive policy to confront it, it was revealed that the country's Central Bank closed a deal with the Wall Street investment house Goldman Sachs, selling US\$2.8 billion worth of bonds backed by the state-run oil company PDVSA for just US\$865 million, or just 31 cents on the dollar.

Financial analysts have reported that Goldman Sachs is banking on US-backed regime change in Venezuela doubling the value of the bonds.

The right-wing opposition hypocritically denounced the Wall Street firm for throwing a "lifeline" to the Maduro government, with some of its leaders threatening to repudiate the debt if they come to power. These same politicians would happily participate in a wholesale transfer of Venezuela's oil assets to the energy transnationals if they succeed in toppling the Maduro government.

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