

Foreign “meddling” in elections—Yankee imperialist style

By Bill Van Auken
6 March 2018

Amid the unrelenting campaign by the Democrats and the media—backed by powerful sections of the US military and intelligence apparatus—to whip up hysteria over alleged Russian “meddling” in the 2016 US election, scant attention has been paid to the blatant meddling of US imperialism itself in the electoral processes of the countries south of the Rio Grande.

Involved in these operations are not a few tens of thousands of dollars in Facebook advertisements, alleged activities of social media bots and supposed “fake news”, but rather support for bloody repression, the systematic impoverishment of entire populations and preparations for military coups and outright US military intervention.

A principal case in point is Washington’s attempt to sabotage the upcoming presidential election in Venezuela, which had been scheduled for next month, but has now been pushed back until May 20 following negotiations between the government of President Nicolas Maduro and opposition parties.

Of course, none of this is new. US imperialism has rigged elections, funded candidates and parties and overthrown presidents it did not like—including Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954, Goulart in Brazil in 1964 and Allende in Chile in 1973—for over a century.

These methods are no means merely a regrettable legacy from some distant past. In Venezuela, the US is backing right-wing political figures who participated in the abortive 2002 coup against the late President Hugo Chavez, while openly appealing for a new military coup and threatening direct US intervention to topple his successor, Maduro.

Washington has denounced the Venezuelan election as a “sham” and “illegitimate” before it has even taken place. Despite the fact that the terms of the vote originally scheduled for April 22 were negotiated between the government and elements of the opposition—including the presence of UN election monitors—the Trump administration is treating it as a political crime that must be stopped at all costs.

Administration officials have told both Reuters and McClatchy news agencies that the White House, the National Security Council, the State Department and Treasury Department are all involved in active discussions on the imposition of sanctions on Venezuela’s oil industry that could lead the country’s already crisis-ridden economy to completely collapse.

Under consideration are not only a full-scale embargo on all Venezuelan oil shipments to the US—which constitutes a third of the country’s market—but also a ban on the sale of all US oil-related products to Venezuela and blocking insurance coverage for oil tankers moving Venezuelan oil.

The latter two measures could prove as crippling as an outright import ban, as the Venezuelan oil industry depends on the importation

of US lighter crude oil and refined products to mix with its heavy crude to prepare it for export. And, without insurance, the country cannot ship its oil through international waters.

“The message is we will continue to ratchet up the pressure until the Maduro regime is removed and democracy is restored to Venezuela,” a senior administration official told McClatchy.

The strategy is clear. Venezuela’s economy must be brought to such a state of collapse that the military is induced to overthrow the government. Thus, the removal of an elected president, by means of starving the population and employing military force—either Venezuelan or US—constitutes for Washington the restoration of “democracy.”

Why is the Venezuelan election “illegitimate”? Apparently because it was boycotted by the MUD right-wing opposition coalition, which cited the early date selected for the vote, a date that had been agreed upon in negotiations between opposition figures and the government. The pushing back of the date by a month to placate the opposition has made no difference as far as the MUD leadership is concerned.

One prominent MUD official, Henri Falcon, the governor of the state of Lara, has decided to run against Maduro and agreed to the revised date for the election. In retaliation, the MUD leadership expelled him from the opposition coalition last week.

The MUD boycott is backed by Washington. The coalition does not want to participate in the election because it is likely to lose. While Maduro’s popular approval rating stands at roughly 25 percent—on a par with the deeply unpopular presidents Temer and Santos in neighboring Brazil and Colombia—the right-wing opposition is even more despised by masses of Venezuelans.

Both the ruling PSUV (United Socialist Party of Venezuela) and the MUD are bourgeois parties, representing rival factions of Venezuela’s financial and corporate elites. Maduro’s government has its principal pillar in the Venezuelan military and enjoys the backing of the so-called *boliburguesia*, a layer of corrupt officials and capitalists who have fattened off of financial speculation and government contracts.

While the limited social assistance programs associated with the rule of Chavez and Maduro have become increasingly hollowed out, as unemployment and prices rise, the MUD has proven incapable of harnessing popular anger among working people, who see the opposition coalition as the political instrument of the country’s traditional ruling oligarchy.

Washington is backing a boycott not only out of fear that the Venezuelan right cannot be counted on to defeat Maduro at the ballot box, but because it wants a far more sweeping change in the country than can be achieved in an election.

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, the former CEO of ExxonMobil, which once exercised a monopoly over the exploitation of Venezuelan oil, expressed US preferences on the eve of his Latin American trip staged last month to drum up support for Maduro's ouster. "In the history of Venezuela and South American countries, it is often times that the military is the agent of change when things are so bad, and the leadership can no longer serve the people," he told an audience at the University of Texas.

In the same address, Tillerson declared that the Monroe Doctrine "is as relevant today as it was the day it was written."

This nearly 200-year-old canon of US foreign policy supposedly endowed Washington with the right to use force in preventing outside powers from establishing a foothold in the Western Hemisphere.

Initially invoked as a US policy of opposing any attempt by European empires to re-colonize newly independent countries in Latin America, it was turned into a declaration of a US sphere of influence and became the rationale for some 50 direct US military interventions along with a series of CIA-backed coups that imposed fascist-military dictatorships over much of the region in the second half of the 20th century.

The doctrine is once again being invoked—some four and a half years after being publicly repudiated by Tillerson's predecessor John Kerry—to counter the rising influence of both China and Russia in a region long regarded by US imperialism as its own "backyard."

China's recently bid to extend its "One Belt, One Road" initiative to Latin America, with Beijing's promise to the region of \$500 billion in trade credits along with \$250 billion in Chinese direct investment over the next decade. This, together with Russia's increased involvement, particularly in Venezuela, with the funneling of some \$6 billion into the state-owned Petroleos de Venezuela in return for oil and petroleum assets, are seen by the US as a strategic threat.

Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee last month, the head of Southcom, which oversees US military operations in Latin America, described the growing influence of China and Russia as his command's "most significant concern." While stating that the challenge posed in the region was "not yet" a military one, there is no doubt that US imperialism is preparing, just as elsewhere in the world, to counter the decline of its economic dominance by military means.

Venezuela is the foremost target of this military strategy because of its strategic petroleum reserves, estimated to be the largest of any country in the world. Washington is determined to restore its unfettered dominance over these resources—and deny them to China and Russia—something that can be achieved not by means of an election, but only through a military overthrow or intervention, the overturning of constitutional restrictions on foreign exploitation of Venezuelan oil and the savage repression of opposition within the population.

As always, the *New York Times* editorial board is operating in lockstep with the Pentagon and the CIA in the machinations of US imperialism in Latin America.

In its Sunday magazine section, the newspaper published a cover story dedicated to the extreme right-wing Venezuelan politician Leopoldo Lopez under the headline "Can Venezuela Be Saved?"

Casting Lopez as the embattled country's Messiah says more about the real intentions of US imperialism than the man himself. The scion of one of Venezuela's most aristocratic families, tracing its lineage back to the "liberator"-turned-dictator Bolivar, and with ministers in virtually every government since, Lopez is a representative of the most extreme right-wing political forces in the country.

He was arrested and sentenced to house arrest for his role in organizing a violent campaign in 2014 known as "La Salida", or the exit, aimed at overthrowing the Maduro government in which 43 people lost their lives.

As a youth, he was reportedly influenced by the semi-fascist Catholic organization "Tradition Family and Property." The graduate of an exclusive US prep school and Kenyon College in Ohio, Lopez went on to attend Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, an institution known for recruiting and grooming "assets" of the CIA and US imperialism all over the world.

His only elected office was that of mayor of Chacao, the center of the wealthy elite in the city of Caracas.

In 2002, Lopez was a direct participant in the abortive coup against Chavez, participating in the illegal detention of the minister of interior and justice and playing a key role in organizing a violent assault on the Cuban Embassy

In its obscenely hagiographic piece, the *Times* compares this extreme right-wing oligarch to Martin Luther King Jr., claiming that the slain American civil rights leader's "Letter From Birmingham Jail" is one of his principal inspirations.

After weeks of speaking with the right-wing politician, the author of the *Times* article, Will S. Hylton, declared it "jarring" to hear him declare his totally unsurprising support for a military coup as a viable "transition to democracy."

Hylton writes, incredibly: "On the spectrum of American politics, he would probably land in the progressive wing of the Democratic Party."

There is, however, a grain of truth in this political characterization. Lopez and the "progressive wing of the Democratic Party" are in the same trench together with the Trump administration and its principal architect of Latin American policy, Republican Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, when it comes to Venezuela.

Last week, a group of 11 Democratic Senators introduced a resolution in the Senate that "denounces as illegitimate any presidential election in Venezuela that fails to meet the standards" demanded by Washington.

There could be no more naked "foreign meddling" in another country's elections, reducing the unsubstantiated allegations against Russia to insignificance by comparison. Among the signatories is the self-described "socialist" and "independent" Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont.

The working class in the US must reject this kind of interventionism and its accompanying political hypocrisy with contempt. It is up to the working class of Venezuela to sweep away Maduro and the corrupt capitalist elements he represents, not the US military and intelligence apparatus.

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