

Venezuela's Maduro sworn in for second term amid rising social unrest and threats of intervention

By Bill Van Auken
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President Nicolas Maduro took the oath of office Thursday morning for a second six-year term under conditions of mounting social unrest within Venezuela and a concerted drive by the US, the European Union and the right-wing governments of Latin America to force him from power.

Maduro was sworn in before the Venezuelan Supreme Court and not, as is customary, before the Congress, which is controlled by his right-wing political opposition and, with foreign backing, is promoting itself as the foundation for an alternative government.

Thursday's ceremony was boycotted by the US and EU as well as most Latin American governments. Present were presidents Miguel Diaz-Canel of Cuba, Evo Morales of Bolivia, Salvador Sanchez Ceren of El Salvador and Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega. Also attending were representatives of Russia, China and Turkey, as well as an embassy-level official from Mexico.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued a tweet denouncing Maduro's inauguration, while making a thinly veiled appeal for a military coup in Venezuela:

"The U.S. condemns #Maduro's illegitimate usurpation of power and urges those who support the Venezuelan regime, including security forces sworn to support the constitution, to stop enabling repression and corruption. The time is NOW for a return to democracy in #Venezuela."

Pompeo issued the tweet from Cairo, where he gave a speech that consisted of a full-throated defense of US imperialist intervention along with praise for the Egyptian dictator Gen. Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, who seized power in a bloody 2013 coup that saw the massacre of some 1,600 supporters of the ousted elected president Mohamed Mursi and the subsequent roundup and imprisonment of at least 60,000 people for political reasons. Washington has no problem with the legitimacy of Sisi's regime, nor with that of the other members of its anti-Iranian axis in the Arab world, a collection of dictatorial monarchies to whom Pompeo is paying call.

Last week, the so-called Lima Group, consisting of the governments of 13 Latin American countries and Canada voted for a resolution demanding that Maduro renounce his second term and surrender power to the opposition-controlled Congress. The sole dissenting vote was cast by Mexico, which warned of "the consequences for Venezuelans of measures that seek to interfere in [their] internal affairs."

While the United States is not a member of the Lima Group, a video link was established to allow the participation of Pompeo, the former director of the US Central Intelligence Agency, which is responsible

for countless military coups and right-wing dictatorships in Latin America.

In the run-up to the Lima Group session, Pompeo staged a three-day trip to Latin America to meet with the newly inaugurated Jair Bolsonaro, the fascistic former army captain who has assumed the presidency of Brazil, and Colombia's right-wing President Ivan Duque for discussions that reportedly involved prospects for regime change in Venezuela.

Shortly after the ceremony at the Supreme Court in Caracas, the Organization of American States (OSA) convened in an extraordinary session and voted for a resolution to not "recognize the legitimacy" of Maduro's second term in office. It called for the convening of new elections under international supervision. The measure passed with 19 votes, just one more than the minimum needed for approval.

Maduro's claim to a second term is based upon a May 2018 election that expressed the widespread popular hostility and disgust of the population toward the entire political setup in Venezuela. It saw the highest abstention rate on record and a boycott by the majority of the right-wing opposition, which knew that it had nowhere near the necessary support within the population to win an election. Maduro won three times the number of votes cast for his closest rival, but this represented just 28 percent of Venezuela's eligible voters.

Of course, the Trump administration, which is denouncing the Venezuelan president's election as illegitimate, came to power with fewer votes than Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, and the support of just 26 percent of US eligible voters.

Maduro won his first term by a narrow margin in 2013 in an election convened one month after the death of his predecessor, Hugo Chavez, who had himself come into office in 1998. Chavez, before dying of cancer, had anointed Maduro as his chosen successor for continuing his so-called "Bolivarian Revolution" and "Twenty-First Century Socialism," which consisted of a series of fairly modest social assistance programs funded by rising oil prices, while guaranteeing unprecedented profits to both domestic and foreign finance capital and overseeing a social order that saw the share of the national income going to the employers actually rise compared to that of labor. It had nothing to do—the claims of its pseudo-left supporters notwithstanding—with socialism.

Instead, the Chavez and Maduro governments succeeded in building up a new ruling-class layer, the so-called *boliburgesia*, which consisted of elements of the military—the principal pillar of the government—state officials, trade union bureaucrats, bankers and corporate executives, who enriched themselves off of financial

speculation and their relations to the state, siphoning off vast amounts of the country's oil income.

With the collapse of oil and commodity prices in 2014, the country's economy, more dependent upon oil exports than ever before, began a downward spiral.

The International Monetary Fund predicts that Venezuela's economy will shrink by five percent next year with inflation reaching an unfathomable 10 million percent. Oil exports last year fell 33 percent compared to 2017, while Venezuelan refineries are reported to be operating at one-third capacity.

The Maduro government has sought to impose the full burden of this deep crisis onto the backs of the Venezuelan working class. It introduced an adjustment program last August that consisted of the slashing of real wages and benefits of workers, while awarding tax breaks to both Venezuelan capitalists and transnational corporations. The previous social assistance programs were largely gutted.

Meanwhile, the Maduro government has sought to open up oil and mineral exploitation to foreign transnationals and has faithfully met payments to the international bankers on Venezuela's huge foreign debt. According to one estimate, debt service payments now consume up to 75 percent of export income, the largest share in the world.

The value of the monthly minimum wage has been reduced to less than US\$ 10, while there have been widespread layoffs and plant shutdowns. Sixty-four percent of the population is living under conditions of extreme poverty. Some 2.6 million Venezuelans have emigrated because of the economic crisis.

Within the country, there have been growing numbers of strikes and protests, led not by the right-wing parties whose activities were given huge prominence by the global capitalist media in 2017, but by workers and the poor. They have been met with repressive force by a government that steadfastly defends private property.

The aim of Washington and its allies is not to alleviate the desperate conditions confronting the masses of working people in Venezuela, but to deepen them through the imposition of ever-tightening economic sanctions aimed at destabilizing and toppling the government.

And, for all of the cries from the imperialist powers and the right-wing capitalist governments in Latin America about "democracy" and "legitimacy," their aim is to transfer power to a right-wing layer that has no broad base of support within the country.

Washington's regime-change objectives are bound up with the drive by US-based energy conglomerates to reassert their previous unchallenged hegemony over Venezuela's oil, the largest proven reserves in the world, as well as the Pentagon's strategy of global confrontation with the so-called "revisionist powers", China and Russia, which have established economic and political ties with Caracas.

The principal means of achieving these aims consist of military force. Trump himself has declared that the military option remains "on the table" in relation to Venezuela and has repeatedly asked his advisers as well as Latin American heads of state about the feasibility of a military intervention to overthrow the Venezuelan government.

Meanwhile, top US officials have repeatedly appealed to the Venezuelan military, which holds the balance of power within the Maduro government—as well as control over its most lucrative agencies—to intervene.

Last year, former US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson declared that "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." Republican Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, who is largely directing US policy toward Latin America under the Trump administration, sounded the same theme on Twitter: "The world would support the Armed Forces in #Venezuela if they decide to protect the people & restore democracy by removing a dictator."

Pompeo's tweet Thursday appealing to the Venezuelan security forces is part of a broader and coordinated campaign.

On December 5, in the run-up to the inauguration of Bolsonaro in Brazil, his vice president, Gen. Hamilton Mourão, told an audience of business executives that he had no doubt that Maduro would be overthrown by the Venezuelan military. "There's going to be a coup in Venezuela," he said, "and the United Nations will have to intervene with a peace force ... and there will be the role of Brazil, to lead this peace force."

Meanwhile, the new president of the Venezuelan National Assembly, Juan Guaido of Voluntad Popular (Popular Will), an extreme right-wing party that has received tens of millions of dollars in funding from the USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy, told the congress that Maduro's "illegitimate" second term had interfered with the armed forces' "chain of command" and appealed directly to the military to "reestablish democracy."

Such a resolution of the crisis in Venezuela will be prosecuted only by means of a massive intensification of bloodshed and repression against the Venezuelan working class.

The task of settling accounts with Maduro and the corrupt military and capitalist elements he represents is that of the Venezuelan workers, not the CIA and the Pentagon. The threats of military intervention and counterrevolutionary violence in Venezuela can be answered only through the mobilization of the working class independently of both the government and the right-wing opposition, as well as their respective trade union affiliates, in a political struggle to put an end to capitalism as part of a socialist revolution throughout the Americas and internationally.

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