

Washington maneuvers toward Venezuelan coup

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With an employer-organized lockout in its third week, the Bush administration is maneuvering with the Venezuelan right wing in an attempt to topple the country's elected president, Hugo Chavez.

Washington has expressed mounting concern over the political crisis in Venezuela, which supplies approximately 14 percent of US oil imports. The shutdown of the country's state-owned oil corporation, Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA), has reduced production to a trickle and sent world crude oil prices to over \$31 a barrel, a two-year high.

On December 13 the White House issued a statement effectively solidarizing itself with the demands advanced by the alliance of Venezuelan employers, the US-funded trade union bureaucracy and the political parties of the country's oligarchy. "The only peaceful and politically viable path to moving out of the crisis is through the holding of early elections," the statement said.

Under Venezuela's constitution, Chavez is to remain in power until the end of 2006. He could be subject to a recall referendum—in August of 2003 at the earliest—provided those seeking to oust him secured sufficient support for such a vote. For his term to be cut short, the constitution requires that more people vote to remove him in such a referendum than the number who voted to place him in power in the last presidential election.

Washington's undisguised contempt for such constitutional considerations is the clearest signal that it is prepared once again to support a right-wing military coup, as it did last April when Chavez's opponents succeeded in ousting him for two days. He was returned to power in the wake of a popular uprising in the streets of Caracas.

If the shoe were on the other foot, and Venezuela's workers and poor were clamoring for the removal of an unpopular US-backed regime through extraordinary elections, there is no doubt that the Bush administration would be proclaiming the sanctity of constitutional order and denouncing the use of "undemocratic" methods.

There are indications of divisions within the Washington establishment over the reckless policy being pursued in

Venezuela. Some elements fear that by continuing to foment right-wing agitation against the current government, the Bush administration is plunging the country into civil war.

This week, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer backtracked on the administration's previous statement about early elections, saying that the administration had meant to signal its support for an early referendum on Chavez's rule. While such a vote would likewise violate the Venezuelan constitution, the shift suggested that at least some in the US government could accept something short of Chavez's immediate overthrow.

For his part, the Venezuelan president has repeatedly promised Washington that his government would assure normal and even expanded oil deliveries if a US war against Iraq cut off supplies from the Middle East. He has denounced the well-paid managers of PDVSA for organizing the shutdown of the country's oil facilities, charging them with "sabotage" and accusing them of seeking the state corporation's privatization for their own enrichment.

While the Chavez government has sent troops into oil installations and ordered the seizure of idled tankers, it has pointedly stopped short of taking over privately owned food producing and distribution companies that have been shut down by their owners as part of the anti-government action, drying up vital food supplies.

Chavez has made it clear that his populist appeals to Venezuela's impoverished masses need not interfere with trade relations with the US, nor with his government's compliance with the economic prescriptions of the International Monetary Fund. But right-wing elements within the Bush administration will not forgive him for his ties with Cuba's Fidel Castro and his earlier denunciation of the US war in Afghanistan.

These elements—led by Otto Reich in the State Department and Elliott Abrams in the National Security Council—collaborated directly with those who organized the abortive April coup. Veterans of the Reagan administration's terrorist "contra" war against Nicaragua, they are determined to utilize similar methods to install a

more pliant regime in Caracas.

The destabilization efforts against Chavez have won support from US client regimes in Latin America, as well as from the financial markets. The Organization of American States, which is supposed to be mediating the conflict in Venezuela, rejected the Venezuelan ambassador's call for the body to state its support for his country's elected government. Instead, it issued a declaration denouncing attacks on the country's right-wing media, which became the target of mass demonstrations recently because of the vitriolic anti-Chavez propaganda broadcast by the country's privately owned television stations. The OAS also indicated that it might support the call for early elections if the crisis continued.

Adding insult to injury, Colombia's ambassador to Caracas urged Colombians visiting the country to return home immediately because of the "critical political situation" in Venezuela. This warning came from the representative of a government involved in a bloody civil war.

Meanwhile, Standard & Poor's has downgraded credit ratings for both the Venezuelan government and the PDVSA, further deepening the country's economic crisis.

Within Venezuela, the struggle between Chavez and his opponents is being waged with an eye on the military. While the chief of the Venezuelan army voiced support for the government "against the petroleum sabotage," leaders of the opposition issued calls for the generals to overthrow the government.

"The armed forces should step forward in defense of our people and their freedom," declared Enrique Medina, one of the dissident officers who have declared themselves in "disobedience" against the government. "Where are the military commanders, what are they waiting for, for the country to destroy itself?" added opposition leader Antonio Ledezma.

Carlos Ortega, the head of the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers' corrupt union bureaucracy, which is closely allied with the American AFL-CIO, appeared to disassociate himself from direct appeals for a military coup, declaring himself in favor of the "democratic route," while urging the military "not to act against the people."

While maintaining a "democratic" façade, Ortega and his allies in the Venezuelan employers' federation are banking on the continued shutdown of the oil industry and highway blockades to create an atmosphere of chaos, thereby provoking a coup.

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher implicitly endorsed right-wing calls from within Venezuela for quick and decisive action, saying Monday that "the situation in Venezuela is volatile and is deteriorating rapidly." The US

government, he added, "believes that a solution must be found as soon as possible to avoid a greater polarization that could lead to an eruption of violence."

Overshadowing the events in Venezuela is the impending US war against Iraq. Washington has declared its "grave concern" over the chaotic conflict between Chavez and his opponents in large part because it requires a reliable supply of Venezuelan oil in the event that military intervention in the Middle East disrupts petroleum supplies from that region. Petroleum industry specialists familiar with the situation warn that the US may be compelled to postpone its war plans unless it can end the Venezuelan crisis.

"I believe that the US will not take any decision on acting in Iraq until the situation in Venezuela is resolved," former Venezuelan energy minister Calderon Berti told the Brazilian daily *Jornal do Brasil* Wednesday. Berti, who also served as president of PDVSA, said it would be too great a risk to launch a war in the Persian Gulf while Venezuela, the world's fifth largest petroleum exporter, was unable to produce.

A major war, he said, could mean the loss of 5.5 million barrels of petroleum a day on the world market. Venezuela has a daily production capacity of over 3 million barrels. If both supplies were cut off, Berti said, oil prices would soar to over \$40 a barrel, placing severe pressure on the US and world economies.

Thus, in preparation for a war against Iraq promoted on the pretext of removing a dictator, the Bush administration may decide to oversee a military coup in Venezuela. In both countries, the key unspoken issue is oil.



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