

Washington escalates regime change conspiracies against Venezuela

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As Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro prepares an inauguration for his third term on January 10, the US government and its partners in the region are escalating reckless and anti-democratic conspiracies to oust him, potentially even by means of a military incursion.

The coalition of US-sponsored parties called Unitary Platform has similarly vowed to inaugurate their own presidential candidate Edmundo González, claiming evidence that he won the July 28 presidential elections.

The country's electoral body, controlled by the ruling United Socialist Party (PSUV), declared Maduro the winner.

The election was held neither in response to popular demand, nor even according to a constitutional schedule, but rather based on closed-door discussions with Washington, which offered limited sanctions relief in return. From the outset and regardless of the results, the Biden administration saw the elections as a pretext to intensify the drive to install a far-right, puppet regime to better control Venezuela's oil reserves, the largest on the planet.

Having spent four months in exile in Europe, González has reiterated that he does not plan to establish a government in exile and instead will be smuggled into Venezuela to be inaugurated on January 10, with a cabinet ready and opposition leader and long-time CIA "asset," María Corina Machado, to be installed as "executive vice president." Details on this counter-inauguration are being kept secret.

González and Machado both face arrest warrants on charges of conspiracy and sabotage against the electoral system, among others. While Machado claims to be hiding in Venezuela, González signed a document recognizing his election defeat last September in exchange for safe passage to Spain—a deal he claims to have accepted "under duress."

The election of Donald Trump has put wind in the sails of the likes of Machado, who shares his fascistic agenda of extreme free-market policies and dictatorship. During his first term, Trump oversaw the tightening of devastating economic sanctions, along with a failed attempt to capture the Venezuelan leadership led by Green Berets and reportedly said it would be "cool" to invade Venezuela.

The precipitous fall of the Syrian government to US-backed Islamist forces, which was only possible due to an effective stand-down by the Assad regime's Russian, Iranian and Chinese allies, has also emboldened the coup plotters in Venezuela. They have argued that the support of these same governments for Maduro is

likewise unreliable. An opposition leader speaking on condition of anonymity to *El País* said that the events in Syria "send a message to the rank-and-file in the Armed Forces, whose support for the regime is fragile."

Opposition leaders have focused on appealing to the military, with Machado posting several messages on social media in recent weeks claiming that the government is cracking. On December 28, she called on "the great military and police family of our beloved Venezuela" to direct their "duty, honor and privilege of being the bearers of the weapons and insignia of the nation" toward defending the "popular and sovereign mandate expressed in the voting booth."

"The time has come for defining matters, and we all know in our inner principles that the correct decision has been taken and merely awaits the collective resolve to act," she added.

President Maduro and his inner circle have responded by combining militarist bluster and threats against González and Machado with appeals to work out an arrangement with the incoming Trump administration.

Interior and Justice Minister Diosdado Cabello last Sunday called on the military to consolidate a "great block to defend peace" against "threats." He added without naming anyone: "Whoever attempts to enter Venezuela, will pay a steep price. They might be able to enter if they try; their problem will be leaving this land."

While transparently nervous about imperialist coup plots and even outright military aggression, the Maduro administration is entirely dependent upon support from the security forces and sections of the ruling class. As it offers no real alternative to the policies of the far right, it is in no position to mobilize the working class and poor in Venezuela and abroad against such neo-colonial conspiracies. Instead, it has imposed the full burden of the sanctions and the economic crisis on the working class and moved to implement corporate tax cuts, privatizations, dollarization and other incentives for Wall Street.

Having already recognized González as "president elect," the Biden administration will likely deepen sanctions even before Trump takes office on January 20.

There is widespread debate in foreign policy and financial publications on what Trump will do next: will he prioritize big oil interests and migration, maintaining licenses for companies to avoid US sanctions on Venezuelan oil while asking Caracas to accept deportees, or will he press immediately for regime change?

The answer is unclear in the short term, but the character of the incoming administration sends an unmistakable signal. Trump's Latin American policy nominees are people picked not for diplomacy, but rather for counterrevolutionary and military purposes. The Secretary of State nominee Senator Marco Rubio (R-Florida) tweeted images in 2019 of the assassination of Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi, which were clearly aimed at Maduro. Deputy Secretary of State nominee Chris Landau and White House National Security Advisor nominee Michael Waltz have also advocated a hardline approach to oust Maduro.

Moreover, the Trump administration will be the most nakedly oligarchic in history, composed of and surrounded by billionaires, who see Maduro and the "Boli-bourgeoisie" of corrupt business and military elites that he represents as an obstacle to fully controlling Venezuelan oil.

A report this week by credit rating agency S&P Global also salivates over the potential for a removal of Maduro paving the way for restructuring Venezuela's debt through multilateral entities like the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank. This means the plundering of what remains of government-run social programs.

Trump has surrounded himself with the likes of billionaires Elon Musk, who said "we will coup whoever we want" after the 2019 Bolivian coup, and Erik Prince, who is raising money to hire mercenaries to detain Maduro and has called for "putting the imperial hat back on, to say, we're going to govern those countries."

Trump is also preparing a major escalation of efforts to undermine growing Chinese economic and political influence in Latin America more broadly. In the past quarter century, US imperialism has lost its economic hegemony even in what it sees as its own backyard, particularly since China became the top trade partner of Latin America, outside of Mexico, and a key source of credit and investment.

But the days when the American ruling class offered development aid and major investments, such as under John F. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress in the early 1960s, are long gone, as made clear by the long series of US-backed coups and fascist dictatorships in the following decades.

Today, US imperialism relies to an even greater extent on its military superiority to challenge Chinese influence, while the Pentagon and US think tanks constantly portray Chinese-owned economic infrastructure as military targets. This includes, in particular, the new Chancay Port in Peru and three dozen ports operated or being upgraded by Chinese firms. Trump has openly threatened to take back the Panama Canal, citing the management of ports on both ends by a Hong Kong-based firm.

In this context, the ousting of Maduro is seen by US imperialism as a necessary step in the overall push to recolonize Latin America and undermine Chinese influence, working closely with regional forces.

Argentine fascist President Javier Milei, a pro-Trump enthusiast, has been at the forefront of provocations against the Maduro administration. Buenos Aires claimed without any evidence that Venezuelan police have been harassing the Argentine embassy, where six Venezuelan opposition figures have sought asylum. It is

highly significant that the nominally "left" Brazilian President Lula da Silva, who has been subjected to constant verbal abuse by Milei, agreed to provide security and oversight for the Argentine embassy in Caracas after Milei pulled all diplomats from Venezuela in August.

On December 8, Nahuel Gallo, a corporal in the Argentine Gendarmerie, was arrested by the Venezuelan government, which claims that he "arrived to fulfill a mission." Gallo was reportedly working in an official mission in Colombia and decided to visit a relative of his partner in Caracas, where he was arrested.

During a graduation at the Buenos Aires Military College and then in a meeting with Gallo's family in Tucumán, Milei denounced the arrest as "a kidnapping" and vowed to use all diplomatic means to free him. Meanwhile his Minister of Security Patricia Bullrich adopted a more aggressive tone, calling the arrest "almost an act of war."

The Pentagon has also sought to expand its military presence in the region, ramping up military exercises and deals for bases. Most recently, it was granted extended access to a military base in the ecologically unique and sensitive Galapagos islands—declared a UNESCO Natural Heritage Site for Humanity in 1978—following the ratification of a military cooperation agreement signed by the oligarch-President of Ecuador, Daniel Noboa.

The deal allows the Pentagon almost unrestricted deployment of warships, submarines, aircraft and troops. While it sits on the Pacific, the military base in the Galapagos offers strategic access to the Panama Canal, the new Chinese-owned Chancay Port in Peru, and serves as a launching pad for military operations across Latin America.

Last month, the government of Trinidad and Tobago, an island nation that sits off Venezuela's Caribbean coast, signed five agreements with the Pentagon, according to Washington. Media reports indicate that one agreement allows US troops to be stationed on the island in the event of a "conflict" with Venezuela. This was later denied unconvincingly by Prime Minister Keith Rowley, who refused to disclose any details.

The US Southern Command has also extended its presence and training of forces in Guyana, which is rapidly expanding its oil production in disputed offshore fields that Caracas has threatened to take by force.

The current US strategy of sanctions and provocations to encourage a military coup could lead to civil or regional war, and worsen the humanitarian disaster, even after 7 million Venezuelans have left in the past decade. No political support can be given to the capitalist Maduro administration, however. Only the political mobilization of the Venezuelan working class united with workers across Latin America, the United States and internationally to end capitalism can halt all planned aggression and the drive by imperialism to recolonize and redivide the world.



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