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Venezuela

Socialists and the fight for democracy in Venezuela

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The U.S. and its allies are increasing the pressure against the Venezuelan government after National Assembly President Juan Guaidó³ declared himself to be president of the country against the elected President Nicolás Maduro last month. Gonzalo Gómez is a Venezuelan revolutionary, member of the socialist organization Marea Socialista and co-founder of the independent left-wing website aporrea.org. He was interviewed by Eva María, and the interview was translated by Alejandro Q.

Note from the interviewer and editors: This interview was conducted on January 27 with Gómez, a leading voice of Venezuela's Marea Socialista, which has consistently opposed U.S. imperialism, supported the gains made through the Bolivarian process, and criticized both Hugo Chávez's and current President Nicolás Maduro's concessions to national and international business interests, bureaucratic tendencies and anti-democratic maneuvers. On February 5, Gómez participated in a meeting with U.S.-backed opposition leader Juan Guaidó as a representative of the Citizens' Platform in Defense of the Constitution. This platform is organized by leftist figures who oppose U.S. intervention and propose a popular referendum (Consulta Popular) to avoid a violent confrontation. [1]

We understand the Platform's goals and their hope to use publicity from this event to make their own views known. [2] However, we feel compelled to state that we are concerned the meeting with Guaidó, a leader who is receiving direct support from imperialist governments in Europe, from reactionary heads of state in Brazil and Argentina, and from the Trump administration itself, runs the risk of allowing the Venezuelan right to portray itself as talking to all sides in a media war designed to pave the way to intervention.

ON JANUARY 23, Juan Guaidó³, the president of the National Assembly, declared himself acting president of Venezuela and was immediately recognized by the United States, member countries of the Group of Lima and many other states. But for most of the world, this is the first time that we've heard of Guaidó³. Who is he and what has been his role in Venezuelan politics?

Guaidó³ was an assemblyman for the right wing opposition party Popular Will (VP), which is headed by its imprisoned leader Leopoldo López.

Guaidó³ had just been named president of the National Assembly as part of the power-sharing agreement among the largest parties in it. He participated in the opposition's street mobilizations against Maduro in 2017, but aside from that, he had no great prominence, not even as a leading public figure in his party.

The Supreme Tribunal of Justice declared the National Assembly in contempt in 2015 when it refused to unseat Assembly members from the Amazonas state who had been charged with electoral fraud for buying votes.

This was something carried out by the ruling PSUV [United Socialist Party of Venezuela] to stop the new right-wing majority in the Assembly, but then the PSUV abandoned the Assembly itself and pushed for a National Constituent Assembly "on highly questionable conditions, by the standards of both democracy and the Constitution inaugurated under Hugo Chávez in 1999.

It was from this opposition-led National Assembly, declared to be in contempt, that Guaidó³ emerged as a figure. When he declared himself president, he announced that Maduro was a usurper and that the elections Maduro had

won were illegitimate. He stated that he was assuming the presidency in a "provisional" manner to form a "transition government" that would then hold new elections.

However, the Assembly didn't proclaim him the president. It was only after an immense anti-Maduro demonstration held on January 23 that Guaidó³ proclaimed himself president, without having been elected by the Venezuelan people or even chosen by the National Assembly.

SO WHO is the true president of Venezuela? Are the events of January 23 and after a coup "at"?

The president of Venezuela was elected in May 2018: it is Nicolás Maduro.

Even though the election took place under severe restrictions, with some political parties banned and state resources used to favor the PSUV, Marea Socialista called for participating in these elections, despite our criticisms, because we considered that voters should not give up our right to choose.

The conservative opposition called for abstaining from the vote, and the rate of abstention rose to over 70 percent.

Even though we voted, we believe that Maduro's government has lost its legitimacy because of its anti-worker policies, its terrible corruption, its predatory extractivism that gives away our resources to foreign powers, its unconstitutional decisions and the repressive authoritarianism by which it governs.

It was elected under highly questionable conditions and has lost any claim to legitimacy with a whole number of serious violations to the Constitution. The vast majority of the working class has shown that they reject Maduro and his government "there have been many mass manifestations of this rejection.

Guaidó³ took advantage of this discontent to declare a rejection of Maduro's government and put forward the Assembly's proposals and policies.

Afterward, he called for the national mobilization on January 23, and, seeing the strength of the response and the immense anger against Maduro, seized the opportunity to proclaim himself president. He took the oath of office as "president" in front of this demonstration "once again, without any constitutionality to this actions.

Looming behind all this was Trump's government, along with several right-wing governments in Latin America, organized in the so-called Group of Lima. After the declaration of the parallel government, the threats started up of intervention by the U.S. to impose it by force.

Therefore, the true government in Venezuela is Maduro's, even though we consider it illegitimate and an oppressor of our people that has been destroying the Bolivarian Revolution. Maduro is not a self-proclaimed president supported by the U.S. He can only be replaced by the Venezuelan people, exercising its sovereignty and voting under acceptable and constitutional conditions.

So what is taking place does have the characteristics of an ongoing coup "at", even if has not been carried out by the Venezuelan military, but instead through sanctions and threats from U.S. imperialism, in alliance with the most right-wing governments of Latin America and the European Union. These governments have not even gotten support from bodies like the Organization of American States and the United Nations.

U.S. intervention has taken the form of sanctions, confiscation of Venezuelan holdings abroad, blockades of particular goods and the strategic use of humanitarian aid, but also preparations for military escalation in case the political and economic pressures don't yield results.

We know that Trump and the U.S. government are driven by imperialist, colonialist and capitalist interests the geopolitical drive to dominate other peoples. We repeat our slogan: The people no longer want Maduro, but no one chose Guaidó. We are against foreign interventions and seek a solution accomplished democratically by the people.

In this conflict between an elected but illegitimate president and another who is neither elected nor legitimate, we call for dialogue to take place, but dialogue in the interests of popular sovereignty. Let us ask the people what they want.

Speaking for Marea Socialista and the Citizens' Platform in Defense of the Constitution, we have proposed a call for a consultative referendum, under the terms of the Constitution's Article 71, which specifies that matters of national importance can be put to a vote.

That referendum could be invoked in an agreement between the Maduro government and the Opposition National Assembly or by gathering the of 10 percent of voters. We are working in alliances with other political organizations and popular movements to make this happen, as we do not want anything being decided for us behind closed doors.

Let the people decide on their destiny let them be consulted if the desire is for the government to regain legitimacy. Let general elections decide these questions. But we do not accept other governments or imperial forces imposing their will, nor the political elites within Venezuela who pretend to stand for democracy, but ride roughshod over it.

WHAT IS the difference between the large demonstrations of January 23 and previous phases of the opposition against Maduro? Could you elaborate on the different factors involved?

The year 2018 was marked by workers' and community protests and a union resistance emerging in an increasingly notable way. These struggles centered on defending wages that have been destroyed by hyperinflation and the government's anti-worker policies; defending collective bargaining agreements that the government began to undermine by lowering benefits; and opposing the repression of workers' protests.

Also, working-class communities came out into the streets in greater and greater numbers to protest shortages and the scarcity of utilities like water, natural gas and electricity, public transportation; and health services and medications.

The main difference between these protests last year those the year before is that the earlier ones were more connected to and driven by the opposition's political demands, and they were mainly middle-class in character. These 2017 protests began as large mobilizations, but ended with episodes of street violence that were crushed by the government, using drastic repression.

This year's protests started around questions of basic needs erupting in the barrios, which were then channeled towards the Open Assemblies and the January 23 demonstration, where Guaidó declared himself president, to the surprise of many of the demonstrators.

Workers' struggles have begun expressing themselves around new Venezuelan workers'

organization, with activists and union leaders promoting and tying these struggles together from a class perspective, but with a diversity and plurality in their political alignments.

Some are linked to the opposition, others are "neither-nor," and still others come from the current of dissident Chavismo that has developed as the PSUV trade union bureaucrats have become an instrument of the government, which is the main boss in the country.

The Bolivarian Socialist Workers Central Union, the largest trade union, is today an arm of the state apparatus that assists in posing anti-worker policies, either justifying them or dampening protests in order to help manage the rebelliousness of the working class against the destruction of its rights by the PSUV government and the military.

The situation with Guaidó puts this new surge of the union movement at risk. It was born of struggles from below, but a fight will be required to keep the movement independent of the different poles that would like to co-opt and dismember it.

HOW ARE the United States and its allies influencing the development of this political crisis?

Many Venezuelans look with some "vete" and sympathy for "support" against Maduro because they aren't seeing all the implications of this support for the sovereignty and independence of the country, let alone the terrible risks it carries. Another part of the population is incensed about the U.S. interference and is guided by nationalist feeling.

The Bolivarian and revolutionary sectors critical of Maduro that are against the government have held their positions, but they must necessarily place top priority on the struggle against imperialist intervention. The threat of intervention favors the Maduro government and hinders the development of peoples' autonomous struggles against this right-wing government.

HOW WOULD you describe the alliance between Trump, the Latin American right wing represented by Bolsonaro and Duque and the Venezuelan Opposition?

For Trump, this is an opportunity to recolonize parts of Latin America in which the U.S. has lost influence. For Trump's lackey governments, this is the chance to eat the crumbs from a feast for the U.S. that is provided by the pillaging of their own peoples.

Despite the reactionary character of Maduro's bureaucracy, the U.S. won't forgive its origins in the revolution led by Chávez. Nor can they forget how Chávez orchestrated the traditional bourgeoisie's removal from power to directly administer the state in a country as important as Venezuela.

Several regional right-wing governments maintain historical and business links with the U.S. Washington resents the influence of emerging imperialist interests like China and Russia on a neighboring government. So we see the U.S. embarking to impose conditions, dominate its "backyard" and maintain the global balance of power it desires.

What do you think of the proposal advanced by Uruguay, Mexico and the Vatican for a negotiated solution to the crisis?

In the face of the dangers of a possible civil war or invasion, this proposal has positive aspects, as long as it doesn't foster closed-door agreements between the political elites and as long as it respects the people's right to choose their own government a government that aims to restore healthy institutions and re-establish health and the provision of food supplies, along with a democratic political life and human rights.

What do you expect will happen in the next few weeks? What do you think should be the task of socialists in Venezuela at this time?

It's very difficult to foresee because Trump and the US government are wielding a stick to create their own favorable conditions. If they don't get the results they want with the stick, they may resort to directly destroying their opponent, which in this case is not just Maduro, but the entire country. We are hoping to avoid war through negotiations, thus escaping from even greater suffering. We demand a democratic and constitutional solution from which the people can reorient their course.

Nothing will be favorable for the people without intense participation and mobilization from workers and working-class communities in defense of their own interests, in autonomous, self-organized, and conscious ways. The people must aim to conquer their own power and hegemony in the service of the greater good.

A large part of the left in the U.S. is principally opposed to U.S. intervention and rightly so but it adopts an uncritical stance towards Maduro's government. What would you like the international left to say and do to establish solidarity with the Venezuelan people?

International solidarity is necessary in the face of what the U.S. and its allies are carrying out against Venezuela. Solidarity from leftist, progressive, workers and intellectual organizations opposing interventionist policies is especially important. These groups know the high cost of intervention for peoples on the receiving end as well as the high cost born by the North American people themselves.

We ask for strong opposition to Trump's intervention against Venezuelans, and we are convinced that this will also assist the struggle for freedom and against oppression imposed by the pro-war hawks within the United States.

We need an international campaign against U.S. imperialism and the imposition of illegitimate governments, and for the democratic rights of the Venezuelan people to decide the future of their own country through constitutional means and free elections. This solidarity must not tolerate intervention behind excuses like humanitarian concerns.

But this anti-intervention campaign cannot mean any support for Maduro's government as such, since it is an oppressor of its people.

The opposition to intervention must be for the Venezuelan people to make their own decisions, based on sovereignty and freedom not to help further consolidate a government that betrayed and dismantled the Bolivarian revolution in the name of a false socialism.

Under Maduro, a bureaucracy has become a lumpen-bourgeoisie and made itself comfortable in power by exploiting workers, delivering our sovereignty to transnational corporations and foreign powers, destroying our environment, and sacking public resources, all to enrich an elite of bosses.

Opposition to U.S. intervention must not extend to giving support to a despotic government and predatory castes. Let

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there be no confusion. The support we request is for democracy, sovereignty and dignity for the Venezuelan people.

Translation by Alejandro Q

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[1] <https://www.aporrea.org/actualidad/a274428.html>.

[2] <https://www.aporrea.org/ideologia/n338059.html>.