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## Regime Change 2.0: Is Venezuela Next?



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On September 8, The New York Times carried a story with a provocative headline: “Trump Administration Discussed Coup Plans With Rebel Venezuelan Officers”. The journalists Ernesto Londoño and Nicholas Casey spoke to 11 current and former United States officials and Venezuelan commanders. These people told the journalists that they had been involved in conversations with the Donald Trump administration about regime change in Venezuela. In August 2017, Trump had bragged that the U.S. had a “military

option” for Venezuela. This statement, these men told the reporters, “encouraged rebellious Venezuelan military officers to reach out to Washington”.

In February this year, then U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said, “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.” This was an invitation for a military coup in Venezuela.

The language Tillerson used has a long history inside the U.S. State Department. It is the logic used since 1954, when the U.S. government overthrew the democratically elected Guatemalan government of Jacobo Arbenz. The theory was known as “military modernisation”, the idea being that in a former colonial country the only modern and efficient institution is the military. The U.S. government used this theory of military modernisation to defend its support of countries littered with military rulers—Ayub Khan in Pakistan (1958), Castelo Branco in Brazil (1964) and René Barrientos in Bolivia (1964).

The ideas that germinated from the conversations between the U.S. officials and the Venezuelans were for a small group of Venezuelan officers to overthrow the government of Nicolas Maduro. The Venezuelans had no clear plot. They wanted encrypted radios and hoped that “the Americans would offer guidance or ideas”.

On August 4 this year, during the 81st anniversary celebrations of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces, an attack took place against Maduro. Two drones—with C4 explosives on them—were driven over the parade and were being directed to strike Maduro. The clumsy, but dangerous, attempt failed. The Venezuelan government arrested 40 people, including a retired colonel (Oswaldo Garcia) and a parliamentarian (Julio Borges). On September 8, Venezuela’s Foreign Minister, Jorge Arreaza, noted that the coup plotters had met with U.S. officials. That the attack on Maduro failed is cold comfort. That there are plots afoot is what is worrisome.

Everything about Hugo Chávez bothered the U.S. government. That he was a socialist who won an election to govern a country with one of the largest oil reserves irked Washington. It also bothered the administrations of George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump that the policy of Chávez was to demonstrate in practical terms the importance of regional cooperation rather than surrender to the policies of mostly U.S.-based multinational corporations. Chávez had to go. There were no two ways about it.

Means to undermine Chávez were tried from his accession to the presidency in 1999; not one day went by without plots being hatched and tried out. The most spectacular attempt

to unseat Chávez came in 2002, when Venezuelan military officials seized power. Chávez surrendered to them in an act of political courage. But he did not have to wait long in their custody. Mass protests engulfed the country and the military had to back off. Their allies in the U.S. could not have their way.

Not long after this coup attempt, the U.S. State Department set up the Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), linked to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) bureaucracy. Four years later, after the agenda of the OTI had been solidified, U.S. Ambassador William Brownfield wrote to Washington about its five-point plan:

1. Strengthening Democratic Institutions.
2. Penetrating Chávez's Political Base.
3. Dividing Chavismo.
4. Protecting Vital U.S. Business.
5. Isolating Chávez Internationally.

In the decade since Brownfield wrote this note, each of them has been developed by the U.S. government and its Venezuelan allies methodically. To protect U.S. business interests is the key issue here. John Caulfield, the leading U.S. diplomat in Venezuela in 2009, noted that Chávez had used petrodollars to make Venezuela “an active and intractable U.S. competitor in the region”.

This was unforgivable—neither could Venezuela be allowed to lead an independent bloc of oil-producing countries (including to revitalise the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, or OPEC) nor could it be allowed to create a bloc of Latin American states that opposed U.S. interference (by the creation of the Bolivarian Alliance of the Americas, or ALBA). The 2009 coup in Honduras against the government of Manuel Zelaya, an ally of Chávez, was a direct shot across the bow. But it was not enough. Chávez and his revolution had to be taken down at home.

### **Aiding the fractious right wing**

The U.S. government and the Venezuelan oligarchy carefully funded institutions inside Venezuela that gave off the appearance of democracy. These are groups that are controlled fully by the oligarchy, but nonetheless are clothed in the style of democratic institutions. The U.S. government's National Endowment for Democracy and the International Republican Institute have worked closely to train leaders to run both political parties and civil society organisations. One of the key tasks of the U.S. officials involved in this aspect of “strengthening democratic institutions” was to unify the fractious Venezuelan right wing. Conversations with U.S. State Department officials over the past decade reveal

that they have been frustrated by the bickering and petty ambition inside the oligarchy, whose factions are eager to ingratiate themselves to the U.S. rather than to build popular support amongst the Venezuelan people.

Through the Pan-American Development Foundation, the U.S. government has allocated funds to work inside Venezuela to cultivate very specific non-governmental organisations (NGOs). These NGOs concentrate their work on the problems of crime, press freedom, judicial independence, and women's and human rights. Their work has been to document the rise of crime to the harassment of journalists with pointillist focus—exaggerate each individual incident rather than provide the context for their occurrence.

The point of this work is not to appeal to the West, where there is already a disposition to hate the Bolivarian experiment, but to sow dissension amongst the key classes that continue to support Chávez. Brownfield wrote that the U.S. support of these groups was intended to “shine a flashlight into the dark corners of the revolution, to collect and document information and make it public”. But the point was not to merely distribute information. It was to package it in such a way as to erase the legitimacy of the Venezuelan experiment. Nothing was out of bounds. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the OTI would enter the drains of Venezuela, flashlights ablaze, and report every detail of what they found—and then, if there was not enough dirt down there, would exaggerate and manufacture evidence.

### **Regime Change 2.0**

On September 11, *The New York Times* published an editorial with a perplexing title, “Stay Out of Venezuela, Mr. Trump”. Did this mean that the U.S. liberal elite no longer had the appetite for regime change? The subtitle of the article quickly disabuses the reader of any such illusions: “President Maduro has to Go, but an American Backed Coup is not the Answer”. Regime change by a military coup is disdained, but other means are to be encouraged. What are these other means? More sanctions on Venezuela, more pain for the Venezuelan people. This pressure is expected to release emotions against the Maduro government and drive the people to take to the streets.

One avenue to go after Maduro is to draw in the United Nations into the U.S. strategy. The Trump administration has asked the U.N. Security Council to isolate Venezuela's elected leadership by setting in motion money-laundering investigations and by preventing it from accessing international financial networks. It is clear that these investigations are part of an old road map, that is, to bring the U.N. into the conversation about Venezuela, to establish U.N. sanctions against Venezuela, to put more and more pressure on the

government and then to call for some kind of U.N.-sanctioned operations to overthrow the government. This is an old series of developments, already experienced by Iraq, then Iran, North Korea and Syria. Venezuela was always in the queue for such treatment.

### **Long March of the Campesinos (Farmers)**

Conditions inside Venezuela are not easy, with the economy in various stages of crisis. Venezuela has not been able to exit the trap of rent-dependent capitalism—the rents being what it was able to collect for the export of oil. What the Bolivarian revolution has been able to do is to increase social welfare for the public and to generate new kinds of institutions to deliver resources to the hardest hit among the people. But it has not been able to shift the organisation of the economy and of society.

The working class and peasantry inside Venezuela have reacted with maturity to the deepening crisis. Over the past year, there have been strikes by electrical workers and nurses, protests by retired people who live in declining government pensions, and a march of the peasants. Each of these protests against the government has been on the premise that it opposes regime change and it defends the Bolivarian revolution, but it has demands to make on the government and on society that cannot be muffled.

On July 12 this year, a hundred farmers set off from the city of Guanare (Portuguesa State) for Venezuela's capital, Caracas. They marched for over a month across the country and then met Maduro in an emotional meeting (broadcast live on television). "During the past three years, the crisis has become critical because of the lack of food," said Usmary Enrique of the Platform of the Struggling Farmers (Plataforma de Luchas Campesinas). "It is ridiculous that we import food when we could produce it," he said.

Maduro promised to take their complaints seriously. A month later, the farmers went on hunger strike until Maduro focussed attention on their revised agrarian policy. Maduro passed an order against land evictions and warned against the use of violence against farmers. Tensions between small farmers and the Venezuelan government are genuine and serious. But there is no expectation that farmers would join a platform set up by the U.S. government for regime change. They do not see the U.S. government or the Venezuelan oligarchy as allies.