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Washington Seeks Regime Change in Venezuela *Agents of Destabilization*

by GARRY LEECH

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Both the ongoing protests in Venezuela and the economic problems that the demonstrators are protesting against appear to have been orchestrated by the opposition in order to destabilize the country and bring down the government. Unable to gain power through the ballot box, the Venezuelan opposition has turned to unconstitutional means to oust President Nicolas Maduro. With only limited support among Venezuelans, the opposition has been dependent on outside aid from the United States and Colombia, Washington's closest ally in Latin America. The current protests appear to represent the latest tactic in a destabilization campaign that Washington has been waging against Venezuela for more than a decade, initially to overthrow former president Hugo Chávez, and now to oust his successor Maduro.

For the past month, demonstrators in several Venezuelan cities have been protesting against electricity blackouts and shortages of basic food products. More than a dozen people have died during the unrest. While the protests are being portrayed in the mainstream media as spontaneous outbursts resulting from growing frustration at government mismanagement of the economy, a

strategy document that recently came to light suggests the unrest is the latest tactic in a long-running destabilization effort orchestrated by the opposition and outside forces.

The strategy document, which was obtained and published by lawyer Eva Gollinger, illustrates how the current unrest in Venezuela has been orchestrated by the country's opposition and foreign actors. The document was drawn up by US-based FTI Consulting and two Colombian organizations (The Centre for Thought Foundation of Colombia First and The Democratic Internationalism Foundation) in a June 2013 meeting. Mark Feierstein, head of the Latin American operations of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and leaders of the Venezuelan opposition including Maria Corina Machado, Julio Borges and Ramon Guillermo Avelado participated in the meeting.

The document calls for the re-establishment of democracy in Latin America by targeting Venezuela's "pseudo-progressive" political leaders. According to the text, "The plan, agreed by consensus with worthy representatives of the opposition to the government of Nicolas Maduro, focuses on these objectives with the continued strong support of several global personalities, with the function of returning to Venezuela true democracy and independence, which have been kidnapped over 14 years." It then proposes fifteen actions, including one that states, "Maintain and increase the sabotage that affect the population's services, particularly the electricity system, which puts blame on the government for assumed inefficiencies and negligence." Another action seeks to "increase the problems with scarcity of basic products of the food basket."

The document goes on to specify violent actions of destabilization, suggesting, "Whenever possible, the violence should cause deaths and injuries. Encourage hunger strikes of numerous days, massive mobilizations, problems in the universities and other sectors of society now identified with government institutions." The plan also calls for the recruitment of "Venezuelan and international journalists and reporters such as: CNN, The New York Times, The New York Post, Reuters, AP, EFE, The Miami Herald, Time, BBC, El Pais, Clarin, ABC among others."

Ultimately, the plan calls on members of the opposition to "Create situations of crisis in the streets that facilitate the intervention of North America and the forces of NATO, with support of the government of Colombia." The strategy document proposed a six-month timeline for carrying out the proposed actions. Interestingly, the current protests began seven months after the plan was drawn up.

Venezuela's President Maduro, like his predecessor Chávez, has repeatedly claimed that economic elites in the opposition who control private sector food production have deliberately created shortages in basics by cutting back production, stockpiling inventory and exporting goods to neighboring Colombia to create the impression that the government is mismanaging the economy in order to generate civil unrest. The strategy plan clearly suggests that the opposition has indeed played a role in creating food shortages and electricity blackouts, both of which it has publicly blamed on government mismanagement.

The three entities that appear on the header of the document have close ties to Washington. FTI Consulting is a global risk management firm based in the Washington, DC area, while the Bogotá-based Centre for Thought Foundation of Colombia First and the Democratic Internationalism Foundation are both organizations that prominently feature former Colombian president Alvaro Uribe, a hardliner who was Washington's closest Latin American ally during his eight years in office (2002-2010).

While the strategy document doesn't refer to the US government directly, it raises questions about the possibility of a US consulting firm and Colombian organizations operating as covert operatives for the US government. Such a strategy would be in accordance with Washington's long-running campaign to destabilize Venezuela in order to achieve regime change. This campaign involved US support for the April 2002 military coup that overthrew President Chavez. The plan failed when massive popular support for Chávez forced the Venezuelan military to re-instate the democratically-elected leader three days later.

Following the coup debacle, Washington intensified its efforts to destabilize Venezuela by expanding its support for opposition forces under the guise of "democracy promotion." Shortly after the failed coup, Maria Corina Machado, a leading Venezuelan opposition member involved in the coup, formed the non-governmental organization Súmate to organize and promote a recall referendum to oust Chávez from office. The US government funded Súmate through both the USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

Súmate was a natural fit for the NED, which was established in 1983 in order to promote "democracy" and "civil society" organizations overseas. In actuality, the NED's objectives have been to provide funding and support to pro-US political forces in Latin America, Africa and Asia in an effort to undermine governments that challenge US interests. To this end, the NED assumed the destabilization role previously played by the CIA in such places as Chile during the

1970s. Alan Weinstein, one of the founders of the NED, stated in 1991: “A lot of what we [NED] do was done 25 years ago covertly by the CIA.”

After the recall referendum also failed to remove Chávez from power in 2004, the United States further expanded both its support for the opposition and efforts to undermine the Venezuelan government. A classified cable sent from the US Embassy in Venezuela to Washington that was published by Wikileaks refers to the role of the USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI). According to the cable, “Ambassador outlined the country team’s 5 point strategy to guide embassy activities in Venezuela for the period 2004-2006 ... The strategy’s focus is: 1) Strengthening Democratic Institutions, 2) Penetrating Chavez’ Political Base, 3) Dividing Chavismo, 4) Protecting Vital US business, and 5) Isolating Chavez internationally.” The cable goes on to note, “This strategic objective represents the majority of USAID/OTI work in Venezuela. ... OTI partners are training NGOs to be activists and become more involved in advocacy ... 39 organizations focused on advocacy have been formed since the arrival of OTI; many of these organizations as a direct result of OTI programs and funding.”

The cable highlights how US strategy intended to infiltrate then-president Chávez’s primary support base among the poor: “One effective Chavista mechanism of control applies democratic vocabulary to support revolutionary Bolivarian ideology. OTI has been working to counter this through a civic education program called ‘Democracy Among Us.’ This interactive education program works through NGOs in low income communities. ... OTI supports local NGOs who work in Chavista strongholds and with Chavista leaders ... with the desired effect of pulling them slowly away from Chavismo.”

Between 2006 and 2010, USAID spent some \$15 million in Venezuela with a significant portion of the money used to fund university programs and workshops for youth, no doubt with the objective of “pulling them slowly away from Chavismo.” The prominent role of university students in the current protests suggests that the US strategy has paid off. Viewing US aid to opposition members as a violation of Venezuelan sovereignty, the country’s National Assembly passed a law in December 2010 prohibiting foreign funding of political activities—activities that, ironically, are also illegal in the United States. Following the passing of the new Venezuelan law, USAID/OTI shifted its Venezuela operations to Miami.

The USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) division was created in 1994 and its objectives are clear: to achieve regime change. According to USAID, “OTI’s programs serve as catalysts for positive political change. ... Seizing critical windows of opportunity, OTI works in

select conflict-prone countries to provide fast, flexible, short-term assistance targeted at key political transition and stabilization needs. ... OTI's programs are individually designed to address a country's most pressing transition needs, focusing attention on the 'make-or-break' issues that will decide the country's future. ... OTI looks for partners and projects that will provide the spark for social transformation."

The US government has not relied solely on USAID and the NED to undermine the Venezuelan government. A 2007 National Security Agency (NSA) document made public last year by whistleblower Edward Snowden described the "agency's priorities in 2007 for the next 12 to 18 months in terms of signals intelligence (SIGINT) or electronic eavesdropping." The document lists six "enduring targets," consisting of six countries that the NSA believes it needs to "target holistically because of their strategic importance." Venezuela is mentioned as one of the six "enduring targets," along with China, North Korea, Iran, Iraq, and Russia. The NSA's objective with Venezuela was to aid US "policymakers in preventing Venezuela from achieving its regional leadership objective and pursuing policies that negatively impact US global interests."

From its offices in Miami, the USAID has continued to support the activities of the Venezuelan opposition and its foreign allies. The Solidarity Centre office in Bogotá received an unusually large two-year grant of \$3 million in 2012 for unspecified operations in the Andean Region, including Venezuela. The Solidarity Centre receives 90 percent of its funding from the US State Department, USAID and the NED. The Solidarity Centre shifted its Venezuelan operations from Caracas to its Bogotá office following the failed coup against Chávez in 2002. The Centre's activities inside Venezuela had become untenable after it was revealed that it had funded the anti-Chávez Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV), which played an instrumental role in the failed coup. According to sociologist Kim Scipes, the Solidarity Centre's office in Bogotá is managed by Rhett Doumitt, who headed the organization's Venezuela office during the coup. Meanwhile, the NED also continues to fund Venezuelan "civil society," providing local organizations more than \$1.5 million in 2012.

Not surprisingly, US Secretary of State John Kerry has criticized the Venezuelan government for the violence related to the protests and has suggested that the United States is considering imposing sanctions. He also recently announced an initiative to convince other leaders in the region to join the United States in mediating the crisis. Clearly, the objective is to force the Venezuelan government to negotiate with an opposition that cannot win at the ballot box in free and fair elections.

In all likelihood, any US-led mediation process will result in a call for President Maduro to resign and an interim government to be installed. It is a textbook strategy that the United States has used elsewhere: provide support to opposition movements that will destabilize a country to the degree that regime change can be justified. Among Washington's previous successful destabilization campaigns that brought down democratically-elected governments were the ouster of President Jean Bertrand Aristide in Haiti in 2004 and the removal of Viktor Yanukovich in the Ukraine two weeks ago.

The opposition figure at the forefront of the current protests in Venezuela is Harvard-educated Leopoldo López, who was also instrumental in organizing the street protests in April 2002 that were part of the failed coup. He is also the former mayor of the richest municipality in Venezuela and a scion of one of the country's wealthiest families. López has received funding from the NED despite the fact that a 2009 diplomatic cable dispatched from the US Embassy in Venezuela and published by Wikileaks called him "a divisive figure in the opposition" who is "often described as arrogant, vindictive, and power-hungry." López dropped out of the 2012 presidential race when it became clear that he would not garner enough votes in the primary to become the opposition coalition's candidate. The opposition leader recently turned himself in to the authorities to face charges of instigating arson and violence while the Maduro government expelled three US diplomats it claims met with protesters in the two months leading up to the outbreak of unrest.

As the aforementioned documents make clear, US policy has long sought to destabilize the Venezuelan government in order to achieve regime change. It has backed a military coup, funded the opposition's electoral efforts and supported opposition groups that are intent on destabilizing the country. The current protests constitute the culmination of more than a decade of policies intended to undermine the Venezuelan government. And while much of the US strategy has been implemented under the rubric of "democracy promotion," in actuality its objective has been the unconstitutional overthrow of a democratically-elected government and the installation in power of an opposition that has repeatedly failed to win at the ballot box in free and fair elections.