

Clashes in Venezuela Leave Three Dead

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Clashes between anti-government demonstrators and both security forces and supporters of President Nicolas Maduro left at least three people dead following a demonstration of over 10,000 organized by the political right in the Venezuelan capital of Caracas Wednesday.

Those killed in the clashes following the demonstration were Bassil Alejandro Dacosta, 24, a student at the Universidad Añejandro Humboldt de Bellas Artes who was shot in the head, and Juan Montoya, 40, a member of a pro-government group from an impoverished area of Caracas, who was shot in the head and chest. A third victim fell Wednesday night during clashes between security forces and demonstrators burning tires in the streets of Chacao, the wealthy district of the capital that is a center of opposition.

Both the Venezuelan president and his right-wing opponents have raised the specter of the April 2002 abortive US-backed coup against Maduro's late predecessor, Hugo Chavez, in characterizing the violence seen in the capital as well as several other cities.

"There will be no coup d'état in Venezuela, you can be absolutely sure of that, let the whole world know that," Maduro declared in a TV and radio broadcast. The Venezuelan president banned all public demonstrations nationwide for the rest of the week.

The government also ordered the arrest of several right-wing opposition leaders described as the "intellectual authors" of Wednesday's violence. These included Iván Carratú Molina, a former vice-admiral in the Venezuelan navy, and Fernando Gerbasi, a former Colombian foreign minister, who were recorded in a telephone conversation warning that Wednesday's demonstration would be "something like April 11," the day of a bloody 2002 confrontation between government opponents and supporters at the Miraflores presidential palace that set the stage for the coup against Chavez.

Arrest orders were also issued against former mayor Leopoldo Lopez, the leader of the right-wing Popular Will party, which was one of the main organizers of Wednesday's protests. Maduro and his supporters have descried Lopez and his followers as a "Nazi-fascist faction" of the opposition, distinguishing them from the MUD (Democratic Unity Roundtable) politicians, like Miranda governor and twice-failed former presidential candidate Henrique Capriles, with whom the government is collaborating.

Leopoldo and his allies have made it clear that their aim is to bring down the government, describing their campaign as *la salida*, or "the way out," and insisting that the country cannot wait until the next presidential elections in 2019 to force Maduro out of office.

Wednesday marked the 200th anniversary of a battle in the war for independence in which seminary and university students played the decisive role. Celebrated annually as Day of

the Youth, demonstrations were held by students supporting the government as well as those led by the right-wing opposition.

The main clashes erupted after the vast majority of demonstrators had left the street as small bands attacked government buildings, set fire to police cars and clashed with both security forces and government supporters.

The protests are the largest seen since the eruption of clashes following Maduro's election to the presidency last April by the thinnest margin in 45 years. The clashes in Caracas had been preceded by smaller student protests in the western states of Merida and Táchira.

While both sides are comparing these events to the coup of April 2002, there is as yet no indication of any military faction seeking the overthrow of the government, and the right-wing opposition does not appear able to mobilize anywhere near the numbers it brought into the street a dozen years ago.

Nonetheless, there is little doubt that this is the outcome desired by the right as well as within powerful sections of the US ruling establishment. Late last month, the Brookings Institution issued a report entitled "Venezuela Breaks Down in Violence," by one Harold Trinkunas, who is the former chair of the Department of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School in California.

Significantly, at the time it was issued, there was no significant political violence in the country, only what the author referred to as "the risk of a violent popular reaction and regional instability." The report stresses US interest in maintaining Venezuela as "a reliable supplier of oil to international markets" and advises Washington, "should violence erupt, to prepare a concerted regional response that leads to Venezuela's re-democratization." In other words, bring about regime change.

It is noteworthy that the center of the anti-government protests has been in the well-heeled eastern part of Caracas and among more privileged layers of middle class students.

There is evidence, however, that opposition to the government is building up from another direction, the left, within the Venezuelan working class, whose conditions have deteriorated in the face of a 56.1 inflation rate last year—the highest on the continent—and government devaluations that have slashed workers' real wages. Meanwhile, the government's economic policies have led to widespread shortages, with the Venezuelan Central Bank itself estimating that at any one time one out of four basic necessities is unavailable.

Lack of foreign exchange has also led to the collapse of Venezuela's auto industry, previously the continent's third-largest after Brazil and Argentina. Toyota announced that it would shut down operations today due to a lack of parts, putting 1,300 of its own workers and 1,500 in related industries in the street. The country's other two carmakers, General Motors and Ford, never began production this year for the same reason.

While the government routinely employs rhetoric about "Bolivarian socialism," figures released by the central bank last month show that of the nearly \$642 billion coming into the country between 2005 and 2013 as revenue from Venezuela's nationalized oil industry (which accounts for 95 percent of the country's exports) more than \$282 billion, 44 percent of the total, is going into the coffers of private enterprises.

Those within the ruling financial, corporate and government circles with access to scarce

dollars are profiting as never before, while conditions for the working class and the poor deteriorate. Maduro and others in the government try to present this process as a matter of “economic war” and “sabotage” by a “parasitic bourgeoisie,” even as their supporters in the so-called *boliburguesia* enrich themselves.

Among the demonstrations canceled in the wake of Wednesday’s violence was a mass march that had been called for Friday by the electrical workers union FETRAELEC. While rejecting what it termed the “violence provoked by a fascist and anti-democratic sector,” the union insisted that workers would take to the streets again to oppose “the abominable bureaucracy which today has taken control of the revolutionary process at CORPOLEC (the state-run electrical company).”

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