

The Coup d'Etat Attempt in Venezuela

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If there were not a coup d'etat underway, someone would have to invent one to rally the masses. That may be the case for the Venezuelan government today, which is beset with so many problems, and it is one of the reasons that some people are incredulous about the latest claim of President Nicolás Maduro to be victim of a planned coup attempt.

Nevertheless, there was real evidence presented two weeks ago of a conspiracy in the ranks of the Venezuelan Air Force. In fact, there are three important elements: real evidence, real informers and, fortunately, real arrests.

One of the arrests is that of Antonio Ledezma, the mayor of Metropolitan Caracas. It must be admitted that this shady right-wing politician's ties to the Air Force conspiracy are not very clear. Moreover, the Air Force's scheme to bomb various sites in Caracas including the Presidential palace could only be distantly linked with plans by Ledezma and other visible opposition leaders to take power through undemocratic means, since this military conspiracy is presumed to consider itself "Bolivarian" (i.e. "Chavist") – at least that is what Maduro hinted in a nationwide television transmission on February 12.

Instead, Ledezma's arrest is based principally on the contents of [a document called the "National Transition Agreement"](#) that he developed with two other anti-government leaders: Leopoldo López and María Corina Machado. This declaration, which was to be published on February 12, refers to the Venezuelan government as in its "terminal phase" and expresses the need to "name new authorities." It also mentions restructuring the economy and giving amnesty to "political prisoners." According to progovernment jurists, the "Transition Agreement" does not make sufficiently clear that it conceives political change within a constitutional, democratic framework.

Most likely the interpretation of this ambiguous text could (and will) be argued both ways. Nevertheless, regardless of how the question is resolved, the Venezuelan masses *are highly satisfied* with Ledezma's arrest, as any reasonable person should be, since the mayor is responsible for huge human rights crimes in the past: most recently as a participant in the 2002 coup attempt that led to considerable bloodshed and earlier as the Federal District Governor who directed state troops which assassinated as many as 4000 civilians during the Caracazo uprising of 1989.

What about the U.S. government's possible hand in this recently discovered plot? It should be remembered that many coups against popular, left-leaning regimes are not conceived in CIA laboratories but are rather supported opportunistically by the U.S. government and its agencies. For example, the military plot to remove Patrice Lumumba from power, conceived by Colonel Joseph Mobutu, fell into the hands of a highly relieved CIA agent Larry Devlin,

who enthusiastically supported it. Devlin was the CIA station chief in Kinshasa and had been charged by Washington to poison Lumumba with doctored toothpaste, a prospect he found unattractive.

In present-day Venezuela, it is unlikely that the U.S. government could directly orchestrate a plot that calls itself “Bolivarian” and comes from the Venezuelan Air Force. Nevertheless, the White House might well be working to delicately promote such a thing and later take advantage of it. One possible scenario would involve an initial military coup by dissident Bolivarian officers, followed by a call for elections in which the legal and recognized opposition – involving such figures as Henrique Capriles, Antonio Ledezma, María Corina Machado and Julio Borges – would emerge to take charge.

The possibility of a military coup followed by hurried elections – a two-stage overthrow – could be what is behind the U.S. driven media campaign against Venezuela that has unfolded in recent weeks and involves extravagant claims about government figures running an international drug trafficking ring. Such a plan was also pointed to in words that recently escaped from Julio Borges of the opposition party Primero Justicia. When asked on Unión Radio how he would respond to a coup, Borges responded that, instead of working to restore the constitutional order, his party would “immediately call for elections.” This brings to mind the Honduras transition of 2009 in which a coup d’etat that installed a brief and unpopular military government was followed by the fraudulent election of Porfirio Lobo.

By moving against Ledezma after many months of disappointing concessions to business sectors, President Maduro has obviously scored a point with the Venezuelan masses, as he likewise scored points with the [“Dakazo” interventions in electrical appliance stores](#) (including one called Daka) that took place more than a year ago. However, this earlier move, though highly popular, proved to be of little substance since the government quickly retreated from further economic intervention following its electoral victory that November.

The present conjuncture is quite similar: if Maduro follows Ledezma’s arrest with other decisive actions that show real commitment to popular desires – increased state control of the economy, fighting corruption and smuggling on all fronts, and widening democracy in the PSUV party and Gran Polo Patriótico – the events of last week could mark an important and favorable turning point in the post-Chavez era. The alternative, which is to simply score a point and continue the government’s almost two-year-long retreat from the socialist project, would prove highly unpopular and risk producing unfavorable results in the parliamentary elections coming later this year.

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