

Venezuela: What Activists Need to Know About the US-led Coup

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Global Research, January 29, 2019

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean, USA](#)
Theme: [Law and Justice, United Nations](#)

Two things stand out about the US coup in Venezuela. First, it is unusually open. Typically, the US tries to hide its coups. Second, the coup is built on a series of obvious falsehoods, yet the bi-partisans in Washington, with a few exceptions, keep repeating them.

First, we will correct the falsehoods so readers are all working from the same facts. Second, we will describe how this coup is being defeated. It will be another major embarrassment for the Trump administration and US foreign policy.

It is important to understand [Venezuela has become a geopolitical conflict](#) as Russia and China are closely allied with Venezuela. China and Russia coming into the backyard of the United States challenges [the antiquated Monroe Doctrine](#).

Venezuela has the largest oil reserves in the world and the second largest gold reserves, as well as diamonds and other minerals such as coltan (needed for electronic devices). And, [Venezuela is taking over as president of OPEC](#) and will be in a position to push for oil payments in non-dollar currencies or in cryptocurrencies, a major threat to the US dollar.



A protest outside the United States Consulate in Sydney on January 23 to demand no US intervention in Venezuela. Photo: Peter Boyle

There are a series of false statements repeated by DC officials and corporate media to justify the coup that are so obvious, it is hard to believe they are not intentional. In his two-paragraph comment on the coup, even Senator [Bernie Sanders repeated them](#).

1. Truth: President Nicolás Maduro is the legitimate president.

President Maduro was re-elected on May 20, 2018, in response to the opposition demanding an early election. The [legitimacy of the election of Maduro is so evident](#) that it must be assumed those who say he is illegitimate are either intentionally false or ignorant. The election was scheduled consistent with the Venezuelan Constitution and in consultation with opposition parties. When it became evident that the opposition could not win the election, they decided, under pressure from the United States, to boycott the election in order to undermine its legitimacy. [The facts are](#) 9,389,056 people voted, 46% of eligible voters. Sixteen parties participated in the election with six candidates competing for the presidency.

The electoral process was observed by more than 150 election observers. This included 14 electoral commissions from eight countries among them the Council of Electoral Experts of Latin America; two technical electoral missions; and 18 journalists from different parts of the world, among others. [According to the international observers](#), “the elections were very transparent and complied with international parameters and national legislation.”

Venezuela has one of the best electoral systems in the world. Voter fraud is not possible as identification and fingerprints are required for each voter. Voting machines are audited before and immediately after the election. Venezuela does something no other country in the world does — [a public, citizen’s audit](#) of a random sample of 53% of voting machines that is televised. All 18 parties signed the audits.

Maduro won by a wide margin, obtaining 6,248,864 votes, 67.84%; followed by Henri Falcón with 1,927,958, 20.93%; Javier Bertucci with 1,015,895, 10.82%; and Reinaldo Quijada, who obtained 36,246 votes, 0.39% of the total.

This same voting system has been used in elections that Maduro’s party has lost in governor’s and legislative elections. Venezuela is a real democracy with transparent elections. The United States could learn a good deal about real democracy from Venezuela.

2. Truth: The economic crisis is caused by outside intervention, internal sabotage and the decline in oil prices.

There is no doubt the economic situation in Venezuela is dire. The cause is the economic war conducted by the United States, the major decline in oil prices and economic sabotage by the opposition. In essence, the United States and opposition created problems in the Venezuelan economy and now say Maduro must be replaced because of problems they created.

Oil was discovered in Venezuela in the early part of the 20th Century and has dominated the economy since then. [The Dutch Disease](#), the negative impact of an economy based on one natural resource, causes a sharp inflow of foreign currency, which raises the value of the country’s currency, making the country’s other products less price competitive. It is cheaper to import products rather than create them. This makes it more difficult for segments of the economy like agriculture and manufacturing to develop.

Chavez/Maduro sought to diversify the economy. They put in place [thousands of communes](#) and hundreds of thousands of people working in cooperatives to build agriculture and manufacturing. When the global price of oil was cut by more than half, it collapsed Venezuela's public finances undermining these efforts. The economic war by the US made it difficult for Venezuela to borrow and trade with some countries.

Economic sanctions against Venezuela began under President Obama, and the [Trump administration escalated](#) them with financial sanctions. United States sanctions cost Venezuela some \$6 billion [since August, according to an October analysis](#). Measures against the nation's oil industry have prohibited the Venezuelan majority-owned company, CITGO, from sending profits back to Venezuela, a \$1 billion loss to the government yearly. Now, the [Bank of England is refusing to return \\$1.2 billion in gold reserves](#) after US officials, including Secretary of State Michael Pompeo and National Security Adviser John Bolton, lobbied them to cut Venezuela off from its overseas assets.

The US economic war and sabotage of the economy by business interests [has been exposed as part of the effort to remove Maduro](#) by creating social unrest and lack of confidence in the government. This has included hoarding of goods, storing essentials in warehouses and selling Venezuelan goods in Colombia.

In September 2018, Venezuela pointed to a false media campaign exaggerating migration from Venezuela. They highlighted [statistics from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees](#) to affirm that Venezuela has the fewest volunteer migrants in the continent. They pointed out 5.6 million Colombians have fled violence in their country and live in Venezuela. Venezuela has programs that have [helped thousands of Venezuelans return home](#).

Socialism strengthens economies, as [demonstrated in Portugal](#). Indeed, one criticism of Venezuela is that the Bolivarian Process is moving too slowly to put in place a socialist economy. There is a need for more sectors to be nationalized and put under democratic control of the people.

3. Truth: The opposition is violent, not the Maduro government.

Opposition protesters have been extremely violent. One tactic of the opposition was to be violent and then film the government's response to make the government look violent. When [Abby Martin was confronted by opposition protesters](#), they told her, "Do not film anything that we do. Just film what the government does to us." She reported on the violence saying, "the vast majority has been caused by either indirect or direct violence by the opposition."

Martin reports the opposition attacked hospitals, burned down the Housing Ministry, assassinated Chavistas and attacked citizen communes such as an art commune that gave free dance and music lessons to local children. Afro-Venezuelans were burned alive. Protesters pulled drivers out of buses and torched the buses. When photos and videos of opposition violence were put on social media, Martin and her colleague, Mike Prysner, became the target of a false media campaign on social media. The opposition did all they could to prevent them from reporting the truth using hundreds of death threats and threats they would be lynched.

In 2017, [Venezuela Analysis](#) reported that violent opposition protests included an attack on a maternity hospital endangering the lives of more than 50 newborn babies. [Another report](#)

[described](#) the opposition using snipers to shoot government officials and civilians. Opposition newspapers urged that blunt objects be used to “neutralize” pro-government protesters, resulting in serious injuries and death.

Steve Ellner also reported that [violence was coming from the opposition](#). He pointed to attacks at grocery stores, banks, buses, and government buildings. [Other commentators](#) described specific incidents of violence by the opposition including killing people. [Maduro ordered the arrest](#) of a retired general who tweeted how to use wire to decapitate people on motorcycles, which happened, and how to attack armored vehicles with Molotov cocktails.

[Documents show that violence](#) was the opposition’s strategy. They sought to “Create situations of crisis in the streets that will facilitate US intervention, as well as NATO forces, with the support of the Colombian government. Whenever possible, the violence should result in deaths or injuries.”

The tales of government violence are [rooted in lies](#). The government’s response was [Maduro calling for a peace conference](#) describing it as “a national peace conference with all the country’s political sectors ... so we Venezuelans can try to neutralize violent groups.”

4. Truth: The National Assembly acted in violation of the law and is in contempt of court.

The National Assembly is not the only democratic body in Venezuela. Indeed, its actions since the opposition won a majority have violated the law and protected the violence of the opposition with an embarrassing amnesty bill.

On December 6, 2015, the opposition won a parliamentary majority in the Assembly. There were allegations of vote buying in Amazonas state that were investigated by the National Electoral Council, another branch of the government. The Supreme Court barred four legislators from Amazonas taking office, two from the opposition, one allied with the opposition and one from the ruling party. The National Assembly allowed three candidates to take office. The Assembly has been [held in contempt of court](#) since July 2016 and their decisions were nullified.

Before the court ruling, the Assembly passed [an amazing amnesty law](#), which granted amnesty for crimes the opposition has committed since 1999 (Chavez’ election). The law is an admission of guilt and provides a well-organized catalog of crimes including felonies, crimes committed at public rallies, terrorist acts involving explosives and firearms and undermining the economy. They essentially admitted exactly what Chavez/Maduro have claimed — crimes to overthrow the government for 17 years. Venezuela’s [Supreme Court ruled](#) the amnesty law was unconstitutional. Inaccurately, the Trump administration calls the Assembly Venezuela’s only remaining democratic institution.

This January, a subsidiary of the state oil company asked the Assembly to intervene claiming the president cannot make reforms to mixed public-private oil businesses without the prior approval of the National Assembly. On January 16, the court ruled that the Assembly was still in contempt of court and could not act. This is also when the Assembly elected Juan Guaidó as their president, who would later appoint himself President of Venezuela, as part of the US-led coup. Guaidó’s election to head the legislature was illegal and nullified by the court.

The Assembly still exists but remains in a state of contempt of the judiciary. It can rectify the situation by removing the lawmakers accused of electoral fraud. The Assembly refuses to do so because their goal is to remove Maduro from office and they need a super-majority to do so.



Medea Benjamin of CODEPINK disrupts Mike Pence at the OAS. Press TV.

A Timeline of the US Coup in Venezuela

In "[Anti-Maduro Coalition Grew from Secret Talks](#)," the Associated Press explains the coup was "only possible because of strong support from the Trump administration, which led a chorus of mostly conservative Latin American governments that immediately recognized Guaidó."

Since August 2017, Donald [Trump has been saying that military intervention](#) against Venezuela was a distinct possibility. AP describes this as a "watershed moment" in the coup planning. They report Trump pressuring aides and Latin American countries to invade Venezuela. In September, the New York Times reported that the [Trump administration had been meeting with coup plotters](#) since mid-2017.

[The Wall Street Journal reports](#) Trump has long viewed Venezuela as [one of his top-three foreign policy priorities](#), with Iran and North Korea. Trump requested a briefing on Venezuela on his second day in office, talking of the immense potential of Venezuela to become a rich nation through its oil reserves. [AP reports](#) that Trump "personally sparked" this as he brought up regime change in Venezuela in every meeting with Latin American leaders.

After Maduro was re-elected, [administration plans began taking shape](#), driven in part by key members in the National Security Council and anti-Maduro advocates in Congress like extreme interventionist Senator Marco Rubio.

On November 1, John Bolton zeroed in on Latin America, calling Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela a "[troika of tyranny](#)." On January 2, Bolton met with his Brazilian and Colombian counterparts to collaborate to "return Venezuela to its democratic heritage."

On January 10, [Maduro was sworn in for his second term](#), Pompeo spoke with opposition

leader Guaidó, pledging support. Canada also played a key role, [AP reports](#) that Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland spoke to Guaidó the night before Maduro's inauguration offering Canada's support. This was 13 days before Guaidó announced he was president of Venezuela.

On January 12, the [State Department backed Guaidó's move](#) to invoke his authority as president of the assembly, saying, "It is time to begin the orderly transition to a new government." On January 15, the National Assembly declared Maduro as illegitimate. The Trump administration worked to get allies lined up to support Guaidó'. By January 18, the Venezuela Foreign Minister was [describing a US coup in progress](#).

The night before Guaidó's announcement on January 23, Vice President Mike Pence [put out a video message](#) encouraging Venezuelans to overthrow their government, saying, "We are with you. We stand with you, and we will stay with you." [Guaidó](#) also received a phone call from Pence the night before he appointed himself president where he pledged that the [U.S. would back Guaidó](#).

Guaidó declared that Maduro's government was illegitimate and he was assuming the presidency. In a well-coordinated charade, almost instantly, Trump recognized Guaidó as the country's rightful leader. To further demonstrate the preconceived, tightly coordinated and efficiently carried out the coup, US allies, among them Canada, Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, Chile, and Peru, quickly recognized the coup president.

The [Trump administration is](#) claiming Guaidó represents the lawful government and is entitled to all Venezuelan revenues. The State Department notified the Federal Reserve that Guaidó is the agent for access to Venezuelan assets in US banks.

Nearly as quickly, Maduro [drew statements of support](#) from Russia, China, Turkey, Mexico, Cuba, Bolivia, and others. The Venezuelan [Supreme Court called for an investigation](#) into the National Assembly and Guaidó, regarding the illegal usurpation of Executive power. The Venezuelan military announced it supported Maduro and Russia warned the US not to intervene militarily.

On January 25, the [Organization of American States, which is traditionally a US tool](#), rejected a resolution to recognize Guaidó. [Medea Benjamin of CODE PINK interrupted Pence at the OAS](#) holding a sign that said: "a coup is not a democratic transition!" Venezuelan Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza thanked Benjamin, saying,

"With her protest, she revealed the macabre coup plan against Venezuela, we will always prevail, thank you!"

Eighteen countries defeated the proposal.

At the [UN Security Council meeting](#) on January 26, Russia's UN Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia accused the United States of attempting "to engineer a coup d'état." He demanded to know whether the Trump administration "is ready to use military force" against Venezuela. European countries gave Venezuela eight days to hold an election, a suggestion Venezuela rejected. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called Venezuela an "illegitimate mafia state." He accused Russia and China of trying "to prop up Maduro."

Both [China and Russia have told the US](#) not to intervene in Venezuela's internal affairs. In

December, [Russia sent two](#) nuclear-capable strategic Tu-160 bombers to Venezuela [along with](#) an An-124 heavy military transport plane and an Il-62 long-haul plane. As of December, Russia has one brigade in Venezuela and was [discussing sending a second military brigade](#) to [Venezuela](#) even before the coup due to the continued threat of intervention from the United States.

China has lent over \$50 billion to Venezuela through oil-for-loan agreements over the past decade and has become a partner in the Venezuelan oil industry. In December, seven months since signing a financial business venture with China, [Venezuela's oil production has doubled](#) to 130,000 barrels per day. The take-over of Venezuela's oil would also be an attack on China. China and Venezuela signed 28 bilateral strategic cooperation agreements on September 14 in the areas of oil, mining, security, technology, finance, and health.

Demonstrating the nature of the coup president, the first acts that Guaidó took were to seek a loan from the International Monetary Fund, which would put Venezuela in debt to western bankers and under their control, and to privatize the Venezuelan oil industry, which would rob Venezuela of the funds being used to lift up the poor and working class.

The appointment by Mike Pompeo of Elliott Abrams as the person in charge of overseeing operations "to restore democracy in Venezuela" is an ominous sign. It is scandalous and demonstrates the most [extreme elements of the US establishment](#) are leading the charge. Abrams was [convicted during the Iran-Contra scandal](#), [supported US-backed death squads](#) in Guatemala and El Salvador in the 1980s, played a [key role in the Reagan administration support for the murderous Contras](#) in Nicaragua and was the person who [gave approval for the US-backed coup in Venezuela in 2002](#).

Analyst [Vijay Prashad writes](#) the coup violated the charters of the United Nations and of the Organisation of American States and describes efforts to call on the military to rise up against the government have failed. The Trump administration is now [threatening](#) a total oil embargo on Venezuela and is leaving the "military option" open.

The concerted campaign by the US and Canada to install Juan Guaidó as the new 'self-declared' interim President of Venezuela [has been met with initial failure](#). Unfortunately, the illegal and undemocratic attempts to destabilize the country and overthrow the democratically-elected President will continue with harmful consequences. The people of Venezuela are rising once again to defend their country against hostile foreign intervention. It is essential that we support them in this fight. Many groups are [holding solidarity rallies](#) and issuing statements of support. Find rallies and protests [here](#) and [here](#).

While Sanders got all the facts wrong about Venezuela, he did reach the right conclusion:

"The United States has a long history of inappropriately intervening in Latin American countries. We must not go down that road again."

People in the United States have an important role to play in supporting Venezuela and defeating the coup.

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