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afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

By Andrea Lobo
22.01.2020

Venezuela's Maduro offers Trump a “win-win” bargain

The *Washington Post* spoke for more than an hour with Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro on Friday at the Miraflores presidential palace in Caracas. In the first interview with a major US media outlet since last February, Maduro made an appeal to the US ruling elite to agree to a rapprochement.

The newspaper states that Maduro “suggested that a bonanza could be waiting for U.S. oil companies in this OPEC-member state should President Trump lift sanctions and press the reset button on U.S.-Venezuelan relations.”

According to Maduro, previous approaches to Donald Trump, including a call in 2018 with Republican politician Peter Sessions, in which Trump’s personal lawyer Rudolph Giuliani listened in, were limited. Both, Trump and Maduro confirmed last August that their top officials were holding talks, while US special envoy for Venezuela, Elliott Abrams offered amnesty to Maduro if he left power.

“If there’s respect between governments, no matter how big the United States is, and if there’s a dialogue, an exchange of truthful information, then be sure we can create a new type of relationship,” Maduro told the *Post*. He framed the talks as an opportunity for a “win-win situation,” considering “relations in 5, 10 years and the rest of the 21st century.”

This marks the most direct appeal made by Maduro to the White House and American corporate interests since his 2018 re-election was not recognized by Washington, which soon after launched a regime change operation led by legislator Juan Guaidó.

Maduro's appeals demonstrate the bourgeois character of his government, which defends the property and interests of Venezuelan capitalists, whose businesses ultimately depend on access to US and European markets and credit.

In a lame attempt to proclaim his independence, Maduro then played down the importance of the sanctions and told the *Post*, "Do you want me to tell you the truth? I don't care even a little about what Europe does, or about what the U.S. does." However, this didn't prevent him from protesting that "Trump has had terrible advisers on Venezuela."

Building on August 2017 sanctions on trading Venezuelan bonds affecting the oil industry, the US imposed draconian sanctions on the Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA in January 2019 and a virtual economic embargo on any deals with the Venezuelan government in August. The Center for Economic and Policy Research attributed tens of thousands of deaths to the sanctions. The UN reports also show an accelerated pace of migration during this period, with over 4.8 million Venezuelans leaving the country since 2015.

At one point in the interview, Maduro referred to 15 foreign partners in oil production and transportation that have saved the economy from total collapse. Not only is one of these partners the US-based Chevron, which has received sanctions waivers to continue its partnership with PDVSA, but the US Treasury has avoided sanctioning the Russian firm Rosneft, the Chinese state-owned CNPC and several Indian firms, inasmuch as proceeds are used to repay debts.

As a result, the six-year free fall of the Venezuelan economy has begun to slow. Oil exports jumped in November-December 2019 to levels not seen since last February.

On the other hand, hyperinflation has also begun to slow down, largely due to an informal dollarization of the economy openly promoted by Maduro, who called it an "escape valve." According to the firm Ecoanalítica, 53 percent of transactions at the end of 2019 occurred in US dollars.

This dollarization, which is aimed at generating confidence to attract foreign investments, is greatly increasing class tensions. Working families have opted to hold dollars, but most wages and social spending is issued in worthless bolivares. Last week, public school teachers carried out strikes and demonstrations in Caracas demanding dollar wages. These actions were reportedly repressed by pro-Maduro paramilitary groups.

The opposition-led Trade Union National Coalition has sought to channel growing social opposition behind Guaidó, leading Maduro to intensify the repression. The Coalition has

denounced the disappearance, since Wednesday, of the general secretary of the Venezuelan Teachers' Federation and member of the right-wing Popular Will party, René Zapata, and his wife.

Moreover, Quinn Markwith, an economist with Capital Economics, commented: "If dollarization is done as in Ecuador, inflation in Venezuela would slow down. But while the current government is in power, this is unlikely to be an option as it requires discipline and a balanced budget."

No one should doubt Maduro's "political will" to keep the Venezuelan deficit down through austerity. His administration has already imposed the greatest drop in living standards in the country's history, in what amounts to capitalist "shock therapy," and suppressed popular opposition through severe repression. Caracas has already used the economic crisis as a pretext to allow foreign corporations to directly exploit and sell Venezuelan oil.

Any "win-win situation" between US imperialism and Venezuela's ruling circles represented by Maduro would be based on continued attacks upon and the super-exploitation of the extremely impoverished Venezuelan workers and a greater sacking of the country's energy and mineral resources.

However, Washington has so far continued to escalate pressure against the Maduro government. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo met with Guaidó at an "Anti-terrorism Conference" in Bogotá, Colombia on Monday and vowed "further action" to oust Maduro. The US State Department also recently filed a report accusing Russian bots and the Venezuelan government of sparking the recent wave of mass protests in South America.

Ultimately, US imperialism is moving with increasing lawlessness and desperation, as demonstrated by the killing of Iranian general Qassem Suleimani, to defend its geopolitical hegemony against its main rivals, Russia and China, as well as their allies like Tehran and Caracas.

Maduro noted to the *Washington Post* that several military officials, including Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino, acted as turncoats to keep him informed of the failed coup launched on April 30. At the time, Guaidó unsuccessfully called for a military rebellion against Maduro.

On January 5, Maduro's United Socialist Party (PSUV) installed Luis Parra to replace Guaidó as president of the National Assembly, while using the National Guard to prevent the pro-Guaidó camp from entering the building.

The following day, Elliott Abrams promised “more American help to the forces of freedom,” adding, “We have some funds that we can use for the National Assembly.” The USAID indicates on its website that it has spent \$467 million in helping the opposition since 2017, including a \$128 million deal reached last October for aiding the “transition to democracy.”

The opposition lawmakers held a parallel session on January 5 to re-elect Guaidó, effectively splitting the legislature and maintaining the US-sponsored “shadow government” waiting to be installed by a coup. Last Wednesday, the pro-Guaidó legislators held another parallel session at an amphitheater, when armed thugs reportedly attacked their convoy as it entered the National Assembly.

The opposition has since called for anti-Maduro demonstrations and appealed to the Venezuelan military without eliciting any significant response.

Defying a travel ban, Guaidó sneaked out of Venezuela and was received with full presidential honors by Colombian far-right president Iván Duque. Guaidó plans to travel to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, to appeal to the world’s oligarchs, and then to meet European Union authorities in Brussels. Seeing his popular support plummet, Guaidó is undoubtedly planning new provocations.

However, doubts are growing in imperialist circles about Guaidó. Responding to recent developments, *Forbes* wrote, in a piece titled “With Guaido Out, Who Will Be Washington’s ‘President’ of Venezuela Now?”: “Washington will either have to recognize Maduro as Venezuela’s leader, recognize Parra or painstakingly stick with Guaido who has failed to convince the rank and file of the Venezuelan military to jump the PSUV ship.”

A January 10 article in the London-based *Financial Times* comments that Guaidó “has little real clout” and that recent maneuvers by Guaidó and Maduro “seem to have only a limited impact on the lives of ordinary Venezuelans.”

As Maduro’s overtures to imperialism and right-wing policies make clear, workers and youth in Venezuela must oppose all factions of the bourgeoisie and mobilize against austerity and the threat of war by orienting to the global upsurge of the class struggle on the basis of an internationalist and socialist program.

World Socialist 21 January 2020