

President Maduro still in charge in Venezuela despite Canadian coup-making efforts

[By Thomas Walkom, columnist, Toronto Star, May 2, 2019](#)

The Canadian government's call for peaceful regime change in Venezuela hasn't quite worked out as planned. The country is in chaos after Tuesday's failed coup attempt by opposition leader Juan Guaido. Guaido himself remains free. But fellow coup plotter Leopoldo Lopez has sought sanctuary in the Spanish embassy in Caracas.

As I write this, embattled President Nicolas Maduro remains in charge. He still commands the loyalty of those among the country's poor who support the so-called Chavista revolution begun under his predecessor, Hugo Chavez. More to the point, the bulk of Venezuela's armed forces continue to back him.

For Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland, it wasn't supposed to be this way. When Freeland joined her counterparts from the U.S. and ten Central and South American governments last January to demand Maduro's ouster, it seemed the task would be relatively easy.

Venezuela's economy was a mess. The Maduro government was unpopular. Food and medicines were in short supply. Thousands were fleeing the country. All that was needed, regime-change proponents figured, was a political leader able to unite Venezuela's fractious opposition.

Talent spotters zeroed in on Guaido, a member of the country's national assembly. He was young and personable. Most important, he was an unknown who lacked the political baggage carried by existing opposition leaders.

After secretly travelling to Washington to be vetted, Guaido was elected head of Venezuela's national assembly. Then, with the support of the U.S., Canada and other anti-Maduro countries, he declared himself president of the country.

The U.S. followed up by imposing economic sanctions designed to make the already tough lives of Venezuelans near impossible. At about the same time (coincidence?) the country's electric power grid broke down.

The operating theory of Canada and other coup backers was that Venezuela's military would see the writing on the wall and quickly depose Maduro. The plotters even came up with a complicated legal rationale to justify a putsch. They argued that since in their view the Maduro government was illegitimate in the first place, any coup to depose it would not be a coup but a restoration of the rightful order.

Some soldiers did defect. But the majority — including the high command — held fast. Even when faced with provocations — such as an attempt by Guaido supporters to defy Maduro by

trucking in much-needed medical and food aid from neighbouring Colombia — Venezuela's soldiers continued to support the regime.

Meanwhile, Maduro relaxed his ill-advised refusal to accept aid and agreed to let the Red Cross fly in supplies.

Overall, it was a standoff. The regime didn't have the nerve to arrest Guaido. But Guaido didn't have enough support to mount a successful coup.

Tuesday, April 30 was supposed to change all of that. With the backing of rebel soldiers, Guaido was to take over a Caracas air force base. That would be the signal for a general uprising.

U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton said later that the Americans had been in contact with three senior figures in the Maduro regime, including the defence minister, who were preparing to defect. According to U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Maduro himself was expected to flee to Cuba.

But none of this happened. Maduro didn't flee. His top officials didn't defect. The regime that Canada, the U.S. and others are conspiring to remove is still in place. On Wednesday, each side held massive street demonstrations in Caracas.

And now two nuclear powers are confronting each other over the crisis. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned the U.S. against taking further "aggressive steps" against Venezuela. Pompeo said Washington will take military action "if that's what's required".

Is this the result Trudeau's government had in mind when it recklessly decided to break with past Canadian practice and openly support U.S. sponsored regime change in the Americas?