



Drone Attack on Maduro - Assassination Attempt or Concoction?/Image: Sputnik

Where the press operates under severe restrictions and where pro-government propaganda is dominant, the truth of the attacks of the 4th August is unlikely to be forthcoming anytime soon - **Dr Sanjay Badri-Maharaj***

On Saturday 4th August 2018, Venezuela's President Nicholas Maduro survived what appeared to be an assassination attempt. This attack was blamed initially on Colombia and thereafter on the Venezuelan Opposition and their supporters abroad. With six people having been arrested, the Maduro regime has been using this purported attack to consolidate its already tight grip on power and to implicate its opponents.

The Purported Attack

Venezuelan authorities claim that two DJI M600 drones, of a type often used by photographers, were loaded with four pounds of plastic explosive and flown with a view to assassinating President Maduro as he addressed a military parade commemorating the 81st anniversary of the country's National Guard. The authorities further claim that one of the drones had its guidance signals successfully jammed by security forces, causing it to go off-course, while the other missed its target and collided with an apartment building leaving scorch marks and broken windows. Seven people were injured in the attack - all civilians.

Proximate security for President Maduro reacted by deploying collapsible shields to protect the President who appeared to be shocked by the attack. In addition, armed units of the police, the intelligence services and other agencies moved swiftly to secure the surrounding areas while fire-fighting teams were deployed to contain the damage. One discordant note

was struck, apparently by firefighters responding to the incident. They were not apprised of the cause of the fires and described them as “routine fires”.

However, eye-witnesses, including occupants of the apartment building, describe a “small plane” which hit the building causing “smoke to come out”. This seems to corroborate the official Venezuelan position that drones attacked the President and his associates.

Who is Responsible?

A shadowy and heretofore little-known group called the “National Movement of Soldiers in T-shirts” claimed responsibility for the attack and while expressing a wish for the speedy recovery of those injured in the attack, the group stated: “We will not cease our struggle until we achieve the restoration of the constitution and of democracy”. This group has previously stated that it has links to the anti-government street protesters collectively known as “The Resistance”.

President Maduro and his allies have been quick to link the attacks to his opponents. He stated that the “far right” working in coordination with detractors in Bogota and Miami, including Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos, was responsible for the attacks. Colombia was quick to deny any involvement in the attacks and Venezuela has provided no evidence against them.

A Crackdown on Dissent in the Offing?

The Maduro regime has wasted little time in trying to use this attack to tarnish the opposition with the regime routinely accusing opposition activists of plotting to attack and overthrow Maduro. As Maduro’s popularity wanes, he has sought to concentrate power – executive, legislative and judicial – into the hands of those loyal to him. His recent election to a new term in office was widely decried as an electoral farce with irregularities and an apparently rigged registration system depriving the opposition of a fair chance to either field candidates or participate effectively in the process.

It should be noted, however, that in 2017, when anti-government protests were at their

peak, a rogue police officer, Oscar Perez, flew a stolen helicopter over the capital and lobbed grenades at several government buildings. Six months later, Perez was killed in a gun-battle with security forces.

The crackdown has already led to the arrest of Juan Requesens who is a lawmaker from the Primero Justicia party in the opposition-controlled National Assembly. The Maduro government alleges that Requesens and another opposition leader Julio Borges are behind the attack. Borges currently resides in Colombia and Maduro claims that Borges has the protection of the Colombia government, though offering no proof. No evidence has been forthcoming against Mr Requesenseither but this did not stop Maduro from describing him as “One of the craziest and psychopathic ones, someone called Requesens... who a year ago called for the US army to invade and occupy Venezuela.”

Will the Truth ever be known?

In a country, such as Venezuela, where the press operates under severe restrictions and where pro-government propaganda is dominant, the truth of the attacks of the 4th August is unlikely to be forthcoming anytime soon. While it is undoubtedly true that the Maduro regime will use these attacks to crack down on the opposition, it is equally true that there is a violent fringe to the opposition which may not be averse to attempting to assassinate Maduro.

Truth and credibility have become casualties of the Venezuelan political crisis. This leaves external observers no clearer as to either the identities or the motives of the attackers. With its credibility so low, after rigged elections, economic mismanagement and repressive policies, the Maduro government seems to be continuing on a path that pushes Venezuela further to the brink of economic and political collapse. This recent episode is but the latest in the country's spiral into chaos.



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