

A Rigged Election Could Trigger Turmoil in Venezuela

by Tiziano Breda

Venezuela is approaching one of its most consequential elections. On 28 July, the incumbent President Nicolás Maduro will seek a third consecutive six-year term.¹ Even though he has struck an agreement with the opposition in which both parties commit to creating the conditions for a competitive election, known as the 'Barbados Agreement',² many observers doubt that Maduro would allow for a relatively free and fair contest, given that polls do not give him the slightest chance of winning.³ But what will happen if he actually opts to go down

the path of an evidently rigged vote? If the past is any indication, the answer is probably a lot of demonstrations, both peaceful and violent, alongside renewed international isolation that would undermine recent diplomatic openings in the region.⁴

The 2018 election and its aftermath

In the last presidential election of 2018, opposition groups considered the playing field tilted in Maduro's favour because the Supreme Electoral Tribunal was stacked with government loyalists. Most opposition candidates opted out of the race except for Henri Falcón. When Maduro claimed victory, Falcón brought the case to the Supreme Court.⁵ The election was considered so

¹ Rafael Ramírez, "An Election between Sanctions and Transition: Venezuela at a Crossroads", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 24|30 (June 2024), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/18622>.

² International Crisis Group, *Barbados Deal Sets Venezuela on a Rocky Path to Competitive Polls*, 20 October 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/21681>.

³ Julie Turkewitz and Anatoly Kurmanaev, "How Venezuela's Leader Could Stay in Power, No Matter What Voters Want", in *The New York Times*, 25 June 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/25/world/americas/venezuela-election-maduro-power.html>.

⁴ Chase Harrison, "Map: Which Latin American Countries Have Restored Relations with Venezuela?", in *AS/COA Articles*, 21 June 2023, <https://www.as-coa.org/node/103328>.

⁵ "Venezuela: Maduro Rival Henri Falcon Demands New Election", in *Al Jazeera*, 30 May 2018, <https://aje.io/ds3kr>.

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illegitimate that the then opposition-controlled National Assembly used a constitutional quibble to appoint its head, Juan Guaidó, as interim president in early 2019. This marked a watershed moment, as it gave birth to, *de facto*, two parallel presidencies.⁶

Rallying national and international outcry, most opposition forces mobilised their supporters to back the appointment of Guaidó. Over 500 protests were led or attended by different opposition movements in Venezuela and around the world. These demonstrations set out to repel Maduro's re-election and instead support Guaidó's claim to the interim presidency in 2019. Most of them were peaceful, but 13 per cent were violent or repressed by security forces and government-affiliated mobs known as *colectivos*. Part of the military also joined the rallies and tried to stage an uprising, but were quashed as well.⁷ The government's crackdown on opposition-led and other spontaneous protests led to the death of at least 76 people, a record high in a single year since ACLED started covering the country in January 2018. The crackdown, coupled with growing international isolation and US and European sanctions,⁸ contributed to

further sinking the country's economy and fuelling the greatest mass exodus ever recorded in Latin America, with around one-fourth of the 28 million Venezuelans leaving the country.⁹

Support for Guaidó progressively waned. Corruption accusations related to mishandling resources,¹⁰ the crackdown of security forces faced by Guaidó's supporters and the eventual failure to overthrow the Maduro government left the public disillusioned. Demonstrations in his support fell from 76 in 2020 to 19 in 2021 and just 2 in 2022. The opposition eventually removed Guaidó from the post of interim president in December 2022.¹¹

The Venezuelan opposition 2.0

Since then, opposition forces have progressively rebuilt public trust and scored some electoral advances. After boycotting the 2020 legislative elections, some progress in a Norway-led negotiation between the government and opposition paved the way for a slight improvement in

⁶ Jon Lee Anderson, "Our Man in Caracas", in *The New Yorker*, 3 June 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/06/10/venezuelas-two-presidents-collide>.

⁷ Scott Smith and Christopher Torchia, "Clashes Rock Venezuela as Guaido, Maduro Vie for Power", in *AP News*, 1 May 2019, <https://apnews.com/0153cace08c84c8fbf34f9c6a7bdd4dd>.

⁸ Anna Ayuso et al., "A Critical Juncture: EU's Venezuela Policy Following the War in Ukraine",

in *JOINT Briefs*, No. 27 (May 2023), <https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=1689>.

⁹ Betilde Muñoz-Pogossian and Alexandra Winkler, "The Persistence of the Venezuelan Migrant and Refugee Crisis", in *CSIS Commentaries*, 27 November 2023, <https://www.csis.org/node/108349>.

¹⁰ Angus Berwick and Mariela Nava, "'Missed His Moment': Opposition Corruption Scandal Undermines Venezuela's Guaido", in *Reuters*, 3 December 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN1Y72BB>.

¹¹ Mayela Armas, "Venezuela Opposition Removes Interim President Guaido", in *Reuters*, 31 December 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/venezuela-opposition-removes-interim-president-guaido-2022-12-31>.

the playing field of the 2021 regional elections – including through a more balanced composition of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal and the presence of EU observers. This led opposition parties to participate in the election, despite widespread irregularities and arbitrary candidate disqualifications. As a result, opposition candidates won four of the country's 23 governorships, including Barinas, a historic *Chavista* stronghold.¹²

Through the 2021 process, opposition parties reckoned that the benefits of electoral participation outweighed the boycott. In October 2023, they signed a deal with the government, the abovementioned Barbados Agreement, committing to use the electoral route to solve the country's crisis. In parallel, the emergence of María Corina Machado as a political icon¹³ has rekindled popular enthusiasm and expectation of change, including among *Chavistas*.¹⁴ Her undisputed victory of the opposition primaries in late 2023, with over 93 per cent of the votes, turned her into a pivotal figure around which to rally. Under her leadership, Edmundo González – Machado's placeholder,

since she was not allowed to run – has been recognised as the opposition unity candidate, hence forming a more cohesive front than in previous electoral cycles.¹⁵ González could get 55 per cent of the votes, according to polls.¹⁶

A summer of discontent?

For its part, the government is not doing well, as far as public support is concerned. In 2023, ACLED recorded over 2,700 demonstrations in Venezuela. While these demonstrations related to a range of issues, they mostly revolved around discontent with the faltering provision of services, labour rights and access to justice. This is the highest number since it began covering the country, which hints at both the growing dissatisfaction with the government and the renewed citizen willingness to retake public spaces to express dissent. Despite slight economic improvements after the darkest times of 2018–2019, in fact, Venezuela's economy still faces enormous difficulties.¹⁷

The government's superficial efforts to go after corruption, furthermore,

¹² Deisy Buitrago and Mayela Armas, "Venezuela Opposition Gains Hope from Win in Ruling Party Stronghold", in *Reuters*, 11 January 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/venezuela-opposition-gains-hope-win-ruling-party-stronghold-2022-01-11>.

¹³ Luz Mely Reyes, "María Corina Machado, la elección sentimental de la 'candidata-no candidata'", in *El País*, 13 June 2024, <https://elpais.com/america/2024-06-13/maria-corina-machado-la-eleccion-sentimental-de-la-candidata-no-candidata.html>.

¹⁴ Tony Frangie Mawad, "In Venezuela, Some Chavistas Are Quietly Drifting toward the Opposition", in *Americas Quarterly*, 10 June 2024, <https://americasquarterly.org/?p=44891>.

¹⁵ Andreina Itriago Acosta and Patricia Laya, "Maduro at Crossroads as Venezuela Opposition Joins Together", in *Bloomberg*, 22 April 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-04-22/maduro-is-at-crossroads-as-venezuela-s-opposition-joins-together>.

¹⁶ In Venezuela, there is no run-off. Adriana Núñez Rabascall and Gustavo Ocando Alex, "Encuestas proyectan triunfo de la oposición en Venezuela con 'una brecha muy grande' de votos", in *Voz de América*, 17 June 2024, <https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/7656509.html>.

¹⁷ Amelia Cheatham and Diana Roy, "Venezuela: The Rise and Fall of a Petrostate", in *CFR Backgrounders*, last updated on 22 December 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/node/231759>.

seem to respond more to internal purges within *Chavismo* than an actual commitment to punish misconduct.¹⁸ The evident improvements in the security realm – with gang-related violence events nosediving from 1,149 in 2020 to 476 in 2023 – also seem to owe more to the exodus of Venezuelans, including criminals,¹⁹ than the security forces' recent raids in jails and kingpin hunts in marginalised neighbourhoods, as the government claims.²⁰ Against this backdrop, and regardless of Maduro's attempt to rebrand his public image, from authoritarian to 'friendlier' leader,²¹ his public support remains very low, with around 15 per cent vote intention.²²

Looking beyond 28 July

It is hard to predict the eruption of protests. The high toll of the 2019 repression and the disillusionment with the Guaidó initiative has alienated most Venezuelans from

politics. Furthermore, the increase in demonstrations in 2023 seems to have been independent of the political opposition's efforts to recompose itself. Opposition parties or representatives spearheaded or participated in just a few dozen of the protests. Hence, it is unclear whether such social discontent can coalesce into mobilisation in favour of the opposition. Nonetheless, the renewed sentiment of hope and participation that a more united opposition front is creating under Machado's leadership,²³ coupled with widespread popular grievances and the subsequent quest for change by different societal sectors, are creating a scenario in which an evidently rigged election may trigger another wave of demonstrations, in addition to international outcry and isolation.

Maduro can choose to allow the return of democracy in the country, even if that likely means losing the presidency. By retaining control of all the other government branches, he would still be in the position to negotiate with the current opposition the conditions for a smooth transition that does not translate into a witch hunt against him and his allies. However, he could also use this influence to hamper González's ability to run the presidency, pitting the judiciary and the legislature against it. Alternatively, he could opt to sway electoral authorities into disqualifying the opposition ticket or manipulating the results and, in doing so, reset the little economic and political progress made in the past couple of years and

¹⁸ Alonso Moleiro, "Venezuela Doubles Down on Anti-Corruption Internal Purges", in *El País*, 7 April 2023, <https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-04-07/venezuela-doubles-down-on-anti-corruption-internal-purges.html>.

¹⁹ InSight Crime Venezuela Investigation Unit, *Why Is Venezuela's Crime Rate Falling?*, 28 May 2024, <https://insightcrime.org/?p=276710>.

²⁰ "¿Qué tiene que ver la intervención de cárceles en Venezuela con las elecciones presidenciales de 2024?", in *La Patilla*, 17 November 2023, <https://www.lapatilla.com/?p=5304787>.

²¹ Patricia Laya and Andreina Itriago Acosta, "Why Don't You Give Me Likes?: Maduro Wants to Ditch Despot Image", in *Bloomberg*, 13 June 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2024-venezuela-elections-maduro-rebrand>.

²² Adriana Núñez Rabascall and Gustavo Ocando Alex, "Encuestas proyectan triunfo de la oposición", cit.

²³ Tony Frangie Mawad, "From West to East, Machado and González Re-politicized Caracas", in *Caracas Chronicles*, 8 July 2024, <https://wp.me/p6PDXs-mhJ>.

shepherd the country towards the abyss of authoritarianism, international isolation and socio-political turmoil. In this scenario, he would face the hardships related to having to face widespread mass protests, severed ties with regional governments – including more sympathising ones such as Colombia and Brazil – and the likely full-blown re-imposition of US and EU sanctions. Even though he has already sailed through similarly stormy waters once, the greater cohesiveness of the opposition, some cracks among the *Chavista* ranks, and the diplomatic and economic pressure that this path entails may hinder his ability to hold on to power for another term. Hopefully, these costs will weigh in his final decision.

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