Unprecedented Fraud and New Momentum

What is Different This Time in Venezuela

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On July 28, the birth anniversary of Hugo Chávez, Venezuelans cast their votes in a presidential election. Since 1999, the opposition had not been able to unseat the "Bolivarian revolution". This time, however, serious pollsters estimated a large victory for the opposition candidate, Edmundo González Urrutia. Most elections in Venezuela have not been free nor fair for long. Despite being aware of the unfair conditions of this electoral process, Venezuelans' preference for a peaceful transformation of the conflict motivated citizens to vote. This time was different: The government of Nicolás Maduro has engaged in what seems to be an unprecedented massive fraud, tampering with the votes and refusing to make public the tallies disaggregated by state, municipality and polling centre. This doubling down on electoral irregularities brings new challenges to the prospect of a democratic transition that requires an adept national and international response strategy.

A history of repression

This was not the first time that citizens voted under unfair conditions. Abuse of state resources in political campaigns has been common since the late president Hugo Chávez led the Bolivarian Revolution. Chávez' revolution, named after the country's independence hero Simón Bolívar, long aimed to establish a socialist state through wealth redistribution, nationalization of key industries, social programs, and diminished foreign influence. The economic outlook of this movement has changed considerably in recent years as Maduro pushed Venezuela into a neo-patrimonial and authoritarian form of capitalism, but its willingness to stay in power at all costs has only intensified. Opponents have long been framed as US puppets and far-right actors. Gerrymandering and autocratic legalism were also used to demobilize anti-chavista forces. Yet, repression patterns changed under the governments of Nicolás Maduro. Opposition politicians, activists, human rights defenders, and journalists have been forced into exile; parties have been stripped of their legal status and party symbols. Chavista dissidents have likewise been targeted with repression. These are only a few examples of the arsenal of irregularities.

In the past decade, the government doubled down on these tactics, seeking to fragment the opposition and making it very difficult for the opposition to compete. But so long the government had remained reluctant to overtly alter the outcome of the election. In 2013, for example, the opposition claimed fraud but was unable to offer proof of vote tampering. A few years later, in 2015, the opposition participated in the legislative election under the joint coalition MUD, obtaining a landslide victory. While the ruling elite dismantled the National Assembly and unleashed unprecedented repression after the election, they initially acknowledged the results, and Maduro even attended its opening session. Later, in 2016, the government used the courts to reject a recall referendum that the government would have most probably lost if it had taken place. A direct precedent of vote tampering comes from the 2017 regional elections, where the government had committed fraud by changing the tally of votes at polling stations level, as the opposition candidate for governor in Bolívar state, Andrés Velázquez, demonstrated.

Since losing its competitiveness, the government has consistently aimed to push the opposition into a boycott strategy, which would reduce the costs of reversing or not acknowledging results. This scenario occurred in 2018, when traditional opposition actors chose to boycott the presidential election at a time

when Maduro was polling low due to the severe socio-economic crisis. In 2021, the opposition returned to an electoral strategy to challenge the incumbent during the regional elections. Where the opposition won, the government initially recognized the results but subsequently threatened opposition mayors and governors once they were in office.

While the regime has used various means to counter the will of the people, blatant fraud in a nation-wide contest had not occurred until this presidential election.

What is different this time?

Chavismo entered the race with the expectation that the opposition would fragment prior to the elections. Despite all the incentives the government imposed to cause divisions, such as selective repression of traditional opponents and maneuvering room for co-opted groups, previously radical opposition elites turned to elections to defeat the government. Incumbent elites also campaigned knowing they would have trouble mobilizing Chavista bases. For several years, discontented Chavistas have pressured and questioned the ruling elite, demanding their rights and former benefits be respected; they have also critically pointed to corruption and unmeasured wealth among government elites. In this context, the government made new promises and relied on old intimidation and surveillance tactics to mobilize their sympathizers. The government also relied on a worn-out discourse of social resentment, arguing that the opposition was led by the old oligarchy, whose "last names" were used to rule the country. Many Venezuelans pointed out the cynical nature of this campaign led by a handful of individuals who have ruled for over two decades.

But the election was also a result of careful international negotiations, where the US administration provided crucial sanctions relief in exchange for minimal electoral conditions, while encouraging the opposition to return to the electoral route. In part due to the Barbados Accords, the Plataforma Unitaria, an alliance of opposition parties organized a primary election, where María Corina Machado was chosen the unitary candidate. The government frequently violated the terms of the agreement, but the opposition remained focused on defeating Maduro at the ballot box. As Machado remained banned from running for office, the alliance ultimately stuck with what was meant to be a temporary replacement, former diplomat Edmundo González Urrutia, who ran against the incumbent.

Scope of the fraud and depth of the victory

This is a nation-wide election where the office of the presidency was at stake. The government has alleged that foreign electronic hacking in the transmission system delayed the tabulation of the polling station data to the Electoral Council's headquarters. And yet, with an apparent 80% of votes tallied, the Council declared Maduro the winner with just over 51% of the vote. No breakdown of the vote by state, municipality and polling station has been provided, as it is the norm. On the other hand, the opposition claims that their witnesses suffered intimidation, with many being forcibly removed from polling stations. Still, poll watchers managed to gather over 80% of the tallies, showing a nearly 70% to 30% margin in favor of Edmundo González.

While they have not been fully verified, until now, most evidence indicates that the opposition's tallying is the accurate result. If true, this would mark the first time in 25 years that the opposition not only won a presidential election but did so with a decisive landslide victory. According to these results, the government lost all states and all municipalities by a wide margin. The results no longer reveal an urban-rural divide that was common in previous years of Chavismo. Nor does it show a working class and popular sector bias in favor of the government.

We see, instead, a wide rejection of the government, which in part explains the immediate aftermath of the announcement. Massive spontaneous protests and *cacerolazos* (a traditional form of protest where people bang pots and pans together) erupted all across the country erupted all across the country. They began in popular barrios, not the traditional opposition middle and upper class strongholds. By choosing to contest elections under the worst conditions since

1999, opposition actors were able to capitalize on cross-class discontent for the first time. Moreover, because citizens were heavily involved in organizing and mobilizing around the elections, as well as on election day, they felt part of a pro-change movement and therefore personally robbed when the government announced the results. Participating and winning by such a wide margin imposed the well-known dilemma of either recognizing and negotiating or engaging in massive fraud. Given the high costs of exiting, the ruling elite has chosen the latter.

The path forward

Venezuela is entering a new, dangerous phase of its conflict. The government has rapidly increased repression towards protesters and is implementing mechanisms of surveillance and intimidation against the population. It is employing different repressive tactics to fragment and demobilize society. Images and videos from popular communities reveal regime-related armed groups intimidating citizens and imposing curfews. In working and middle class sectors, it will rely on heavy police and military presence. Opposition elites have been framed as fascists, and regime elites have called for the jailing of Machado and González Urrutia. This escalation is increasing the costs of participation and open dissent.

While this is true, by choosing a peaceful and institutional democratic resistance strategy, the opposition has created momentum for a diverse cross-class pro-democracy movement. At the elite level, opposition leaders must remain resilient against the expected fragmentation strategies the government will pursue. Now is time to open the tent even wider, as recent announcements by intellectuals, former ministers and leaders of Chavismo, and other candidates in the presidential elections demonstrate that a wide coalition for democracy can be forged. Some of these leaders, who were previously critical of the traditional opposition but are now calling for the release of results and the reversal of fraud, can serve as bridges between government factions that fear repression but are considering open dissent, and the pro-democracy movement. For Venezuelans' desire for change to materialize, challengers must remain committed to one another and to a domestically grounded strategy. Past experiences with parallel and outside-the-system moves, such as the "interim government" led by former legislator Juan Guaidó, derailed opponents and demobilized society.

Beyond navigating the interests of exiled communities and other foreign actors who might be tempted to rush into maximum pressure without considering the new constraints imposed after the results, opponents must leverage the art of high-level diplomacy. Several governments, including the United States, members of the European Union, and Latin America, have already called for immediate transparency and verification of the election results. Likewise, international organizations and human rights groups have demanded the end of repression against protesters. The role of governments historically tolerant with Chavismo is crucial, such as those of Brazil and Colombia. They must remain vigilant, continue to demand the release of vote tallies and operate in coordination with other Latin American governments as well as the United States to offer a diplomatic pathway for a negotiated solution to this crisis.

Opposition elites must guard the momentum they have helped build with grassroots movements, organized civil society, and ordinary citizens. Both leaders have addressed citizens in person three times: twice after the announcement of the results on July 29 and again on July 30. They have also posted messages on their social media platforms. While it is understandable that, amidst a wave of repression, the leadership is cautious, it is essential to organize and channel discontent consistently. This starts by crafting messages that take into account the needs and realities of the different groups within the pro-change camp, including those who are being most heavily repressed by the government. The common cause of this heterogeneous bloc is the verification and respect of the election results. Society's preference for a peaceful solution to the conflict should be honored by the opposition. Any acts of violence should continue to be rejected, as both Machado and González Urrutia have maintained so far.

The opposition also needs to find ways to support communities targeted by repression. Victims of violence will need both material and non-material resources to face the tragic consequences of their desire for change.

In the July 28th election, the government entered a new level of electoral irregularities, walking away from any pretense of democratic accountability. This rupture in confidence to the Venezuelan people ushers new challenges for a transition in Venezuela. Although the authoritarian incumbent has the upper hand as of now, Venezuelan society and opposition can work with international actors to demand a transparent verification of the election results and democratic opening. Venezuelans already met the expectation of international actors by participating despite all risks and costs. Letting the government get away with fraud would not only increase the risks of dissent and trigger more displacement, but also incentivize other autocrats to follow the same path elsewhere.

This article only reflects the authors' opinions.

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