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Venezuela's Elections: Hoping for the Best, Preparing for the Worst

 IndraStra Global  Thursday, July 25, 2024

By R. Evan Ellis

As Venezuela moves toward promised national elections on July 28, my heart is with the hopes of Venezuelans for a miracle that will translate their courageous act of voting, into a restoration of democracy. Everything I have seen unfold in the country over the past 25 years of my career in government and the private sector following Venezuela leads me to expect the worst. Chavismo

has proven time and time again both its willingness and ability to exploit control of the institutions of the state, repression, corruption, and subterfuge, to consolidate and maintain power, despite the opposition's hopes that the Constitution, laws, and institutions that the country has on paper, will give them a dependable arena in which to fight. To use a science fiction analogy, fighting against a Chavismo which controls all of the institutions and manipulates the rules to its advantage, is like trying to fight [the Matrix](#) without Neo (Keanu Reeves).

I watched Venezuela's tragedy play out as Hugo Chavez proved unyielding when the opposition shut down the country in the 2002-2003 general strike, when he rigged the rules of the game against the ultimately unsuccessful 2004 recall referendum, when the student movement of 2007 and massive protests in 2014 and 2017 all proved fruitless in bringing democratic change against an entrenched regime. I watched questionable national elections allowed a dying (some say possibly already dead) Hugo Chavez to win re-election in 2012, and his anointed bus driver successor Nicholas Maduro to prevail over a partially divided opposition in elections following Chavez' formal death in 2013. Opposition abstention from rigged elections in 2005 handed Chavismo the Congress, and again in 2021, yet when the opposition did fully participate in 2015 elections and won more than 2/3 of the National Assembly, Chavismo used control of judicial and administrative institutions to strip it of key seats, and the power of the democratically elected legislature itself. I watched in 2018 as a body fabricated by Chavismo called and conducted rigged elections outside of the process established by the constitution. I served on Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's Policy Planning Staff (S/P) in 2019 and 2020, as the democratically elected head of the National Assembly Juan Guaido, who became de jure President according to Venezuela's constitution, in the absence of elections following the constitutionally established process to choose Maduro's successor, worked courageously, but ultimately unsuccessfully, with the United States and more than 50 other governments of the international community, to wrestle reins of the state from Maduro. With that failure, in the year that followed, I watched as Chavismo gradually corrupted and divided the demoralized remnants of the opposition in the National Assembly, ultimately retaking control of that body as well.

As Chavismo looks to July 28th, the entirety of its 25-year track record has been to subvert the democratic process, manipulating to its advantage the conditions under which elections occur and the conduct of those elections, as well as managing the consequences of those elections to prevail, whether or not they win at the polls. There is no reason to believe that this time will be different.

From Nicholas Maduro's perspective, every time Chavismo has used subterfuge to hijack elections, then held firm against the resulting domestic mobilizations and international sanctions, it has prevailed. At the height of international pressure against Chavismo from 2019-2020, the regime's security apparatus remained largely intact, owing to the longstanding corruption of its leaders, creating a strong incentive to stick with Maduro to avoid a return to democratic accountability, however bad his governance. Its survival was also bolstered by the thorough penetration of the regime by Cuban agents, leading to the detection and crushing of even the smallest coup attempts and defections in their infancy.

In the recent private talks with Maduro [sought by U.S. officials](#), it is possible to imagine the Biden Administration sought to convince Chavismo to accept a democratic transition, ending in a comfortable retirement in China, Russia, Nicaragua, or some other authoritarian paradise. Unfortunately, U.S. attempts to date to use incentives such as sanctions relief, or threats, to secure a commitment by the Maduro regime to democratic behavior, [have not produced positive results](#). While Maduro is probably concerned about the expanded pressure he may face if Donald Trump is re-elected in November, it is unlikely that the Biden team is explicitly using that argument in its talking points.

Since it would go against the entirety of Chavismo's 25-year track record in power to allow reasonably free and fair elections, accept defeat and peacefully cede power, the key question in the week remaining before the election is "what is the Chavista plan to avoid losing power" and how to effectively respond to it.

[In prior articles](#), I have argued that the magnitude of the Chavista disadvantage in the polls suggested that Maduro may try to cancel the election, possibly escalating the conflict over Guyana's Essequibo region, which it itself fabricated, trying to tie it to a supposed plot by the opposition, [as it has done before](#). Chavismo may now, however, believe that this is the riskier option. First, it would demand action from the Venezuelan military beyond remaining in their barracks and [collecting rents from criminal organizations](#) operating on the national territory. Just as Vladimir Putin's invasion of the Ukraine exposed the corruption and accumulated incompetence in the Russian Army, leading to spectacular failures against the much smaller Ukrainian force, a Venezuelan invasion of the Essequibo could embarrass its military, leading to defections of units in the field that would be more difficult for Cuban and Venezuelan intelligence to control, by contrast to controlling a military kept largely in the barracks after a stolen election. Moreover, invading the Essequibo (versus just stealing the election) would be more likely to involve a response by the U.S. British, and other militaries to defend Guyana. The absence of public signs of a new manufactured crisis over the Essequibo in the week before the election is a hopeful sign, although a

manufactured military crisis remains an eventuality that the U.S. and the region should be prepared for.

The second, now more probably option for Maduro is simply stealing the election and weathering the resulting domestic and international response. He may logically assume that such response will include massive, sustained domestic (and international) protests and expanded international sanctions, but not likely provoke foreign military action to forcibly remove his illegitimate government from power.

Maduro is [already well along the “steal the election” course](#) through the disqualification of the key opposition candidates including Maria Corina Machado and her original designated [successor Corina Yoris](#), as well as continuous [arrests of opposition figures](#), and [acts of violence and intimidation](#) against campaign workers and those who support and attend their events, [excluding all international observers](#) except the Carter Center, and shutting down media coverage and other communication mechanisms that could help the opposition to mobilize for, and after, the election.

As in the past, the Maduro regime will likely continue to use the full array of tools at its disposal through the remainder of the election process to chip away at the opposition advantage, including administratively removing the principal opposition party label, “MUD” from the ballot, using violence and administrative maneuvers to make it hard to access and vote at sites in opposition strongholds, continue to use Chavista dominance of the media and control of other state resources, including distribution of money and “CLAP box” rations to mobilize supporters, then to stuff, destroy, or otherwise alter ballot boxes, or electronically manipulate results on the day of the election itself. If those measures still prove insufficient to manufacture a Maduro win, Chavismo can always invent irregularities as an excuse to annul the election, disqualify Edmundo Gonzalez, or even arrest or assassinate him and other key opposition figures.

In its decisions about how to stop or steal the election, despite the opposition’s determination, unity and remarkable courage, Maduro may assume that, like so many times before, repression from an array of his agents, from the military and police units, SEBIN and the FAES, radicalized and compensated “collectivos,” narco gangs, and even Colombian guerilla groups, to crush and terrorize the opposition into submission.

Chavismo may also calculate that the Biden Administration in the U.S. will merely respond with more, and more internationally coordinated, sanctions and condemnations, hoping Venezuela will not continue to be a major foreign policy issue as U.S. elections approach.

Maduro may further look at the current leadership of the European Council by [Hungary's Viktor Orban](#), as well as friends in the region such as Gustavo Petro in Colombia and Luis Ignacio Luiz da Silva (Lula) in Brazil, who have sought expanded commercial engagement with the Maduro regime, and welcomed his reincorporation into regional institutions, even as they have superficially expressed concern over the regime's behavior, plus "unconditional" Chavismo partners like the PRC, Russia, and Iran, and calculate that the international consequences for his actions may not be so bad.

Short of military action, even more undesirable for other reasons, realistically there is probably little the U.S. and other governments can do to prevent Nicolas Maduro from stealing the July 28th Venezuelan election. The result will likely be not only deepening repression and tragedy for Venezuelans, but also a new wave of migrants out of Venezuela, having delayed their stay/leave decision in the hopes of an electoral miracle. That enormous new exodus of Venezuelans, on top of the [eight million who have already left](#), will include more violent criminals from groups like [Tren de Aragua](#). They will pass through an unstable Colombia, awash in cocaine, political violence and weakening governance, down the Andes through increasingly violent Ecuador as it approaches strategically defining May 2025 elections that could bring Rafael Correa's leftist Citizen Revolution party back to power. More will flow into Peru, where [Tren de Aragua is already well established](#), complicating President Dina Boluarte's governance challenges. They will flow from there into Chile, adding to Gabriel Boric's political and public security challenges. That wave of Venezuelans, perhaps an additional million or more, will also seek to pass through the Darien Gap, which Panama's new President [Jose Raul Mulino is working with the U.S. to secure](#), then pass through a range of politically challenged Central American countries, arriving in yet unseen quantities at the U.S. border, and cities such as Chicago and New York, just in time for the U.S. Presidential election. The Biden Administration, strategists in both the Republican and Democratic

administrations that may succeed him, and other leaders in the region, need to be preparing now, for what to do then.

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Global Identifiers



ISSN [2381-3652](#)

OCLC Number: [923297365](#)

Library of Congress LCCN: [2015203560](#)

Dewey Class No: 327 (International Relations)

ISNI: [0000 0004 5898 6976](#)

VIAF ID: [875148947846054950004](#)

ROR ID: [01jvhre18](#)

NAAN ID: [84818](#)

Publons Publisher ID: [7294](#)

Publons Institution ID: [688925](#)

Standard Address Number (SAN): 992-9274



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