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# The Madness of Maduro

## The Venezuelan strongman is hugely unpopular, but he's determined to cling to power

*Venezuela is in an escalating state of crisis. After the Supreme Court in late March announced it would strip the elected National Assembly of most of its powers (a decision later reversed), citizens took to the streets. So far, around 90 have been killed in violent anti-government protests. And there's a lot to protest about: job losses, soaring inflation, supermarkets running on empty, extreme levels of criminality and a heavily-controlled media. A highly manipulated election process to elect a new citizens' council with powers to change Venezuela's constitution is for many the last straw. Francine Jácome, director of the Venezuelan Institute for Social and Political Studies, tells <link about writers-and-contributors writer ellie-mears-1>Ellie Mears about the latest developments.*

**In the 1970s Venezuela was the richest country in South America. Now it has the highest inflation rate in the world and it's plagued by violent crime. How have things come to this?**

> I think it has a lot to do with the changes in the economic and political model which was introduced in 1999 when Hugo Chávez came to the presidency. Although oil prices had gone down in the past, they had never before fallen to today's levels. Venezuela has a very state-centric economy which we know has not worked in many, many places in the world in the past.

**Hugo Chávez oversaw a significant reduction in the poverty rates and he increased living standards for whole swathes of the population, but many economists blame the current state of Venezuela's economy on Chávez' own mismanagement. And they say he plundered oil revenues to fund social programmes without really investing in longer term money-making solutions. Was the current president, Nicolás Maduro, just unlucky that oil prices dropped or is he also a poor manager?**

> When it comes to political management, there is a huge difference between the two men. Chávez was much more able to manage the country. At the same time, he did enjoy a period of very high oil prices

and was able to put in place lots of different social programmes. These were, as you say, very short-term. Chávez didn't plan much for the future.

*Would a progressive, leftist government torture people? Would they kill people because they're protesting?*

And it's definitely fair to say Nicolás Maduro was unlucky. But he also didn't have the political will or the political foresight to begin introducing reforms. I think things would be different now if he had. Now, of course, we're in a terrible economic crisis. I think Hugo Chávez would have been much more capable of managing the crisis. And I think he would have put in reforms.

**But Chávez said from the beginning that Venezuela was too reliant on its oil.**

Well yes, that's what he said but his actions were different: over the last 18 years we've been more oil-dependent than ever before. Chávez also nationalised many industries and they've been totally mismanaged. That's why we now depend so much on importing food: before we produced our own. But if you don't have the revenues, you can't import.

**Do you think Maduro will survive the next election?**

I think Maduro is going to do his very, very best to avoid the next election. That's why we haven't had elections; we were supposed to have governors' elections in December of last year and we haven't had them. Right now Maduro's approval rating is between 15 and 20 percent. 80 percent of people want change of government. So if an election were held tomorrow, Maduro would definitely lose.

**Maduro has announced he'll be convening a 'constituent assembly' to help draw up a new constitution. What is the purpose of this project?**

The assembly will enable him to change the constitution and do away with elections, especially universal elections with a secret ballot. They'll probably close down the national assembly and any other institutions that are bothersome to the government. A new constitution will allow the elite who are currently in power to stay there. That, I think, is the main objective.

And they've come up with a very particular way of electing the assembly. Of the 540 constituents, two-thirds will be elected at municipal level. But they've gerrymandered the constituencies, meaning a small town of, say, 20,000 people could elect the same

number of representatives as a city of one million people. This means that small, rural groups that tend to vote for the government will have an undue say.

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The remaining third of assembly members are chosen by various sectors of society – businessmen, farmers, fishermen, etc. But you can only vote if you are a member of one of these groups. Experts reckon this clever system will enable Maduro to stuff the assembly with his own supporters, even if they receive only a 20 share of the overall vote.

**That's some clever electioneering.**

Exactly, and the organised opposition has already said they're not going to participate. So this is really going to be an assembly of the ruling party.

**Do you agree with the decision of the opposition parties to abstain?**

Yes I do, because with this system there's no chance the opposition would be elected anyway. And if they did participate, they would be validating something which is completely illegal. Because our current constitution states that to build a constituent assembly, you first need to hold a referendum. This is not being done.

**So if you look at Venezuela in two years' time, what do you see?**

That's a very difficult question. It's difficult to say what will happen in the next month. I think the protests will increase. Unfortunately violence is also increasing. Already around 90 people have been killed in the protests. And the saddest thing is that most of them are young. They're students between the ages of 17 and 30. Others have landed in jail. It shows the government isn't afraid of using repression and violence for its own ends.

**Does the media in Venezuela still enjoy any freedom?**

No – and they haven't for a long time. The Government has taken the majority of TV and radio stations. They also control the private media. If you turn on the TV right now in Venezuela, nothing seems to be happening. There are no protests, nothing.

Interestingly, government control has led to several independent news websites emerging, though the government is also trying to block these. For example, VIVO, an internet TV station that plays across South America, has been very active in covering the various protests,

but Venezuelans don't have access.

A couple of weeks ago the government started blocking access to some You Tube and Twitter channels. They even blocked a Twitter page giving traffic announcements, because it tells you when roads are blocked off because of protests.

**How has the international community responded to the Venezuelan crisis so far?**

I think the international community has been very slow in responding to the crisis in Venezuela. At the regional level, the Organisation of American States has held various meetings about Venezuela, and the OAS secretary general is very vocal about what is happening there. He's presented a number of well-documented but highly critical reports on the country.

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But members of OAS are politically polarised, and can't reach an agreement. This is because Venezuela sells oil to Caribbean states at a discount, basically buying their loyalty. These countries have either voted against a resolution or abstained. Nicaragua and Bolivia also support Venezuela, but that is more for ideological reasons.

**Are we seeing the end of the left's hegemony in Latin America?**

I have a problem with that statement, because I question whether these governments have ever really been left wing. They have a very leftist discourse but their practice does not bear this out. I mean, would a progressive, leftist government torture people? Would they kill people because they're protesting? So I think what we actually have is authoritarian governments spouting socialist rhetoric, especially in Venezuela.



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Francine Jácome is executive director of the Venezuelan Institute for Social and Political Studies. She has a degree in anthropology from the Central University of Venezuela, and studied political science there at postgraduate level. She has coordinated research projects with organisations such as UNITAR, UNESCO, the Ford Foundation and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, among others.