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Two against Maduro

Surprisingly united, the opposition in Venezuela is entering the presidential election. Will it be enough to defeat the all-powerful head of state?

Venezuelans are to head to the polls on 28 July to choose their next president. Unlike in previous years, the opposition actually wants to stand this time. While things have been relatively calm in the run-up to the vote, there has been a lot of disconcertment in recent months, and it is clear that the regime has repeatedly put obstacles in the way of the opposition.

But in the meantime, we know who is going to go head-to-head with incumbent Nicolás Maduro. The opposing Democratic Union Platform (PUD) has nominated its presidential contender and leader of the opposition: classical liberal politician María Corina Machado, who received over 90 per cent of the votes with a high turnout in the party's October 2023 primaries. As the most promising candidate, however, she had already been deprived of the right to vote herself. After July's election date was set very quickly in March 2024, candidates had a short window to register. Ultimately, the PUD managed to get former diplomat Edmundo González Urrutia registered as a joint opposition candidate at the last minute.

Better conditions for the few

Following years of hyperinflation, Venezuela's currency has only lost little value against the US dollar since August last year. In May 2024, inflation was down to just 2.9 per cent thanks to increased oil revenues after US sanctions were temporarily eased, allowing the central bank to support the bolívar massively. The days of shortages are over, since the Venezuelan economy started to unofficially accept the US dollar for transactions a few years ago. Multinationals are back, with fashion label Zara reportedly taking $360 000 on its opening day just a few weeks ago. Global stars have returned to perform on the stages of Caracas, the number of international flights has gone up and the country's tax authority SENIAT has recorded increased revenue. Liberated from the

ideologically justified shackles of Chavism, parts of the private sector are flourishing, expressly supported by the Venezuelan government.

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But that is just a limited view of Venezuela. Looking at the bigger picture, only a small part of the population is benefiting from the boom. The poverty rate in 2023 was over 50 per cent. The cost of living and other prices have tripled in recent years. The minimum wage is still equivalent to just $3 per month. Although the government has now created a system of various bonuses that top up monthly income, these do not count toward pensions and social benefits. As well as public-sector workers such as teachers and medical staff, pensioners are the ones most affected by poverty. Public education and healthcare are in a deplorable state.

In recent years, though, it has been rare to see protesters against the government take to the streets *en masse* — a stark contrast to the huge demonstrations from Maduro's early days. This is not just due to fear of repression in an authoritarian state with about 300 political prisoners and no freedom of the press. The population is also exhausted; protests have not brought change, and many people are still facing a fight to survive every day.

Chavism prides itself on pacifying society. In fact, security has improved in recent years. This is also Maduro's ideal, something which he has based his campaign on: Venezuela is a nation of happy people who live humbly but peacefully, placing their trust in their father, Maduro. On the other hand, the opposition is portrayed as a corrupt fascist elite of lesser-known names. Yet, the government is investigating corruption within its own ranks. The former oil minister was arrested recently after he disappeared for over a year, alleged to have plotted with the opposition to embezzle billions in oil revenues.

The end for Maduro?

But Maduro is unlikely to triumph with this narrative. He can no longer rely on previous Chavist strongholds, as demonstrated in a government referendum on Venezuela's claim to a part of neighbouring Guyana last December. Despite a major propaganda campaign, voter turnout was low, especially compared with the opposition's primaries.

The people, on the other hand, are putting their hope in opposition

leader Machado, who has been fighting Chavism constantly and without compromise for decades. She is currently touring the whole country, drawing massive crowds. In a free and fair election, a victory for her would be certain, various polls say. She is also hopeful for support internationally, not only from the US, but also from left-leaning governments in Colombia and Brazil. Under pressure from within and from the outside, the internal conflicts in the government camp suggest Venezuela is preparing to part ways with Maduro.

The authorities have barred prominent opposition politicians as well as Machado from standing in the presidential election. The official list of candidates published by the national electoral commission includes a total of 10 men. Only two of them represent opposition parties other than those sanctioned by the government.

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One of them is the PUD's presidential candidate, Edmundo González Urrutia — former Venezuelan ambassador to Algeria and Argentina, who has previously been an opposition leader. Machado publicly backed him, as did parties such as the social-democratic *Un Nuevo Tiempo* after previously standing against him by fielding its own candidate. In his initial interviews, González Urrutia touched on issues such as education, equal opportunities and social mobility, but overall, he remains meek and in Machado's shadow. Perhaps that was precisely the condition for their support. If he won the election, he would supposedly serve as interim president for Machado. A poll carried out after he was nominated showed 62 per cent in favour of him, 20 per cent for Maduro and a turnout of 75 per cent. González Urrutia's lead is lower according to other polls, but in a free and fair election, he would win as it currently stands.

Both the government and the opposition are confident of victory, especially the latter on social media. However, the opposition has been underestimating Chavism for more than 25 years. Moreover, recent experience has shown it is unlikely the government will accept any influence from foreign powers, with the exception of its close ally, China. Maduro wants to hold on to power, and the will to power has always brought unity to Chavism, despite all the internal conflicts. The poll results show there is a real threat to Maduro, leaving him with several

options: González Urrutia could also be blocked from standing for election, the election results could be falsified or the election could be postponed. So, we shouldn't expect any mass demonstrations on the streets forcing the regime to allow a fair election.

Yet, the opposition has come a long way. Unlike in recent years, it is now standing in the election and, contrary to the expectations of many, it has actually agreed on a candidate. With one and a half months to go before the election date, a lot can still happen. The fact that Venezuela rescinded an invitation to European Union election observers could be an early sign of the direction the journey will take.



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