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Venezuela after the failed coup

Venezuela will have presidential elections in 2024. If the opposition wants to be successful, they must unite and finally develop a political profile

Now that Russia is being replaced as an energy supplier because of the war in Ukraine, the German government has rediscovered Latin America. But then why didn't Chancellor Olaf Scholz actually stop by Venezuela during his trip to the region in January, given that it is the country with the world's largest oil reserves and the eighth-largest gas reserves? Venezuela has largely disappeared from the headlines in recent years after opposition leader Juan Guaidó tried to overthrow Nicolás Maduro's government. That didn't succeed – and then came the pandemic. But what has happened in Venezuela since then?

As a reminder: the 2015 parliamentary elections resulted in a victory for the opposition parties. After irregularities and because of the poor human rights situation, the international community – or at any rate the US, the member states of the EU and most of the Latin American countries – did not recognise the election of Nicolás Maduro as President of Venezuela in 2018. Guaidó, of the opposition party *Voluntad Popular*, who was then President of the National Assembly, declared himself interim president in January 2019 with the approval of the above-mentioned countries. In December 2020, parliamentary elections were held in Venezuela again, but were boycotted by the parties supporting the interim government. Instead, the National Assembly elected in 2015 declared itself to be Venezuela's only legitimate representative body and confirmed Guaidó's presidency.

An article in the Venezuelan constitution was used as the legal basis for this self-authorisation, according to which, in the event of the absence of an elected president, the President of the National Assembly takes office – but only for 30 days; during this period new elections must be called. At the time, it was assumed that in view of Venezuela's massive economic difficulties, the tough international economic and financial sanctions against the country and the mass protests in the streets, especially in Caracas, Maduro's presidency would very soon be over. This expectation was also shared by large parts of the international community.

A failed coup

They were wrong. Maduro is still president today and is even sitting more firmly in the saddle than before. This is thanks to his supporters and the limited effectiveness of the sanctions. In addition, mistakes were made by the opposition under Guaidó, such as mismanagement and a lack of transparency in dealing with financial resources, as well as the initial support for a failed and amateurish attempt at a military invasion and the forcful removal of Maduro from office in May 2020. The defection of the armed forces to the side of the opposition – a decisive factor in the struggle for power, and one which Guaidó himself had predicted – failed to take place.

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The dominant position of the *Voluntad Popular* party in relation to the other opposition parties supporting the interim government has led to increasing tensions between them over the past four years and popular support has continued to decline. One reason is that the interim government and its parties have never developed a political profile. They have essentially focussed on engineering the overthrow of the Maduro government. The discussions took place mainly in the virtual world of social media, with little relevance to the lives of the population. Maduro's government, on the other hand, despite the sanctions, has been able to improve living conditions in the country through the de facto recognition of the US dollar as a means of payment and the partial deregulation of the Venezuelan economy. It has also made a name for itself in the fight against Covid-19.

On 30 December 2022, a majority of the deputies of the Venezuelan National Assembly, elected in 2015, decided not to extend the mandate of the interim government under Juan Guaidó. This decision was long past due. Furthermore, it stands as a belated admission that the strategy of the opposition – and the countries supporting them – to put pressure on the Maduro government through sanctions, hoping that it will collapse due to internal conflicts, has failed. Guaidó, who resisted this decision until the very end, is now once again just one of several leaders of the opposition in Venezuela and only recognised as such internationally.

After all, the 2015 National Assembly committees for the management

of Venezuela's assets in the countries that are supporting the opposition continue to exist, so that these financial resources do not automatically revert to the Maduro government's control. These assets mainly include the company CITGO – one of the most important producers of petroleum products in the US – as well as 30 tons of gold in Great Britain and money in bank accounts in the US and Europe. The interim government has so far used this money to support its representations abroad and the opposition parties that support it, which otherwise have hardly any financial resources. This sizeable foreign wealth in the hands of the opposition has led the Maduro government to agree to negotiate with the opposition in Mexico through the mediation of Norway.

Distrust in Maduro's government continues

However, these negotiations have just stalled again. The 30 December 2022 decision deepened divisions in the Venezuelan opposition, further weakening it. In addition, over the past months, governments sympathetic to the opposition in Latin America have been voted out in Chile, Colombia and Brazil. The Biden administration in the US and some European countries such as Spain and France are increasingly counting on changes in Venezuela through dialogue with the Maduro government. However, there are currently no signs that these states will go so far as to recognise the legitimacy of the Maduro government in the near future. This would require significant concessions on the issues of human rights and democracy. It has also not yet been decided whether Maduro will be allowed to travel to the EU-Latin America summit in Brussels scheduled for June 2023 or whether he will be disinvited.

It is questionable whether the positive economic growth in recent years which has come to Maduro's aid will continue. For further improvements, international sanctions would have to be lifted and fundamental economic reforms would need to be carried out alongside the political ones. It is not evident that the government would be willing or able to do this. Social inequalities between the rich and poor have risen sharply. Hyperinflation, that in the meantime had been successfully combatted, is back. Prices – even those in US dollars – have multiplied. The minimum wage set by the government is therefore in no way enough for people to survive. For this reason, the year 2023 has begun with social protests across the country and on the streets in numbers that had not been seen since 2019.

The opportunity for countries like Germany to

In this situation, it would now be extremely helpful for Maduro if he could, like his

search for new sources of energy supply is passing right by.

predecessor Chavez and several Venezuelan governments before him, use the huge oil and gas reserves – as well as Venezuela's enormous potential in non-fossil energy production – to obtain the urgently needed foreign exchange for the state budget. Unfortunately, however, due to a lack of maintenance, the oil production facilities have been in such poor condition in recent decades that production is a fraction of what it used to be. Hardly any gas is ever extracted but is mostly burned off as an annoying by-product of oil production – with the corresponding negative consequences for the environment. The idea of using non-fossil energy sources has not yet gained acceptance in Venezuela – and if it did, there would be a lack of money for the necessary investments due to the sanctions.

Thus, the opportunity for countries like Germany to search for new sources of energy is passing right by. At present, it is not foreseeable what will happen next in Venezuela. Will more people take to the streets again? Will the government react with more repression, as in 2019? This cannot be ruled out.

In any event, the interim government under Juan Guaidó is history. The new phase in the relationship between government and opposition will be determined by the presidential election announced for 2024, in which Nicolás Maduro will stand again, and from which he hopes that his rule will be legitimised and recognised by the international community. Regular parliamentary and regional elections are then scheduled to take place in 2025. If the opposition wants to be successful here, they must be united and, above all, develop a political profile. Surveys show that the majority of Venezuelans trust neither the government nor the opposition, but still desire change through elections. The prerequisite for this, however, is that these be carried out under a minimum of fair conditions.



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