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Venezuela's Maduro is not going anywhere

In the run-up to the upcoming elections, a split opposition and US sanctions have strengthened Maduro's grip on power

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Across the world the coronavirus pandemic has strengthened governments' grip on power and weakened the opposition. That's also true for crisis-stricken Venezuela. In spite of the pandemic and a bleak economic situation, the government of President Nicolas Maduro currently has a firm grip on power. According to official data, up to now somewhat more than 80,000 Venezuelans have been infected with the coronavirus. This figure is low by comparison with other countries in the region. However, the real numbers are probably many times higher.

So how is it that the pandemic is not hurting Maduro's government? The authoritarian regime's repression has not been the only crucial factor. The opposition's mistakes under Juan Guaidó play a considerable role as well. Admittedly, Guaidó was recognised as interim president by 60 countries, including Germany. But he and other opposition groups have underestimated Maduro for years. They hoped that the pressure of international sanctions would lead the Chavista government to collapse due to its internal contradictions. So far that has not happened and currently nothing suggests it will.

The Venezuelan military has not switched sides, as the opposition hoped it would. Alongside the repression within the armed forces, it's the close connection between Guaidó and the US administration and its aggressive policy under Donald Trump that may have made the difference. Through his participation in plans for an extremely amateurish attempt at a military invasion in May 2020, Guaidó has ruined his reputation vis-à-vis the Venezuelan military. The cheering of Guaidó's opposition over the international sanctions has also contributed to him alienating the wider population. The sanctions have further exacerbated the already precarious humanitarian situation in the country. Anyone who rejoices

about them can hardly hope to have the people's support.

A weak opposition

The pandemic has also weakened the opposition. Mobilising many people on the streets – a thoroughly successful method in the past – is currently not possible. The people, who have mostly become impoverished in the meantime, are so busy trying to survive from one day to the next in the face of constant power cuts, shortages of water and fuel as well as the constant health threat that there have only been sporadic protests so far.

The government feels so very much the master of the situation that it has announced elections for the National Assembly on 6 December 2020. This should – according to their calculations – give them a fresh start thanks to a solid government majority. This way, political and economic changes can swing into action. Moreover, Maduro hopes to gain legitimacy from the elections. Time will tell whether this calculation is correct. But Maduro has already succeeded in splitting the opposition with the plan.

Within the opposition parties, there are also fears that the opposition will lose the last opportunity of exerting political influence by boycotting the elections.

The four bigger opposition parties, led by Juan Guaidó, are demanding a boycott of the elections. They believe that there can be no equal opportunity because of the repression and under the conditions of the pandemic. There may also be high costs: in March the election machines were burnt – they would have to buy new ones. But instead, the few financial resources available should be used to fight the coronavirus.

A split opposition

Within the opposition parties, there are also fears that the opposition will lose the last opportunity of exerting political influence by boycotting the elections. Those who support this position are therefore advocating that they take part in the elections. They see the vote as an opportunity to express the populace's broad rejection of the regime. According to polls, 80 per cent of Venezuelans reject the Maduro government. Accordingly, this part of the opposition hopes to bring about democratic change via the elections.

One such advocate is Henrique Capriles, who only just lost the

presidential election to Maduro in 2013. His position is supported by the country's Catholic church. In August 2020, the Bishop's Conference announced that currently the conditions for elections to the National Assembly are not fair. However, it called on the opposition to offer the people alternatives to boycotting the elections. A few prominent representatives from civil society also want to stand as candidates – on the condition, however, that the date of the election is postponed.

A third group of opposition forces is calling for boycotting the elections. But they also want to set up a government in exile and call for a military invasion from outside. Finally, a last group of smaller opposition parties is negotiating with the government about concrete reforms. It overwhelmingly wants to take part in the election on 6 December.

The international response

While this division is further weakening the opposition, the Venezuelan government is confronted with a 433-page report from a UN fact-finding mission. This was presented to the UN Human Rights Council on 16 September 2020. It's of course not the first international report on the threat to human rights in Venezuela. But it's the most detailed report so far, which asserts the individual responsibility of Maduro and other members of government for human rights violations. With that, the preconditions for a trial at the International Criminal Court in The Hague would be met. The report may accordingly make political forces in Latin America, which are still standing in solidarity with the Chavista government, change their mind.

The report will probably not, for the time being, change anything regarding Maduro's support from Russia, China, Iran, Cuba and Turkey. On the other side is the US, which does not see the conditions for a parliamentary election in December as being met. The Trump administration only accepts negotiations with Maduro in order to talk about his replacement. Without consideration for the situation of the Venezuelan people, it wants to bring the government to its knees with ever tougher economic sanctions. However, the US government has rejected demands for military intervention in Venezuela.

In the face of the humanitarian disaster in the country and the threat from the coronavirus, a political de-escalation in

The EU is between these camps, continuing with its position as a facilitator. President Maduro has, alongside the UN, also asked the EU to send an observer mission to the elections in December. Currently Brussels is negotiating a postponement of the date of the election with the government – so far however unsuccessfully.

Venezuela is more urgent than ever.

Admittedly, 110 political prisoners were set free in September – however, the international contact group, which was set up by the EU, has stated that currently the conditions are not in place to hold transparent, inclusive and free parliamentary elections on 6 December. It has therefore refused to send an election observation mission for this specific date.

Negotiations are the only way

In the face of the humanitarian disaster in the country and the threat from the coronavirus, a political de-escalation in Venezuela is more urgent than ever. Truly fair and free parliamentary elections are not to be expected in the foreseeable future. That should also be clear to the opposition parties. They should respect the will of the big majority of Venezuelans, who are striving for peaceful change in power via elections, and take part in the elections.

However, in return the government has to guarantee some minimum standards. That includes postponing the election date. Only then, these elections could mark the beginning of a solution to the crisis. At the same time, humanitarian aid must reach the country to a much greater extent than hitherto. Left to its own devices, the country's dilapidated health system cannot fight the pandemic effectively. However, the government must first concede that there is a humanitarian crisis in the country. Subsequently, with international mediation, further issues could step by step be negotiated between the government and the opposition.

However, currently it does not look as if President Maduro would budge on these points. So far concessions have only served the purpose of winning more time. The US government's hard line is also not helpful. The example of other countries such as Iran or North Korea show that regimes hit with sanctions consolidate their power, while the big majority of the population suffers from their consequences. There is therefore no other way than to have further negotiations with the Maduro government. The EU should continue with its facilitating path and not allow communication channels to break down. In the current situation, the central goal cannot be the early replacement of Maduro – but the improvement of the catastrophic living conditions of people in Venezuela.



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