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Legitimacy Crisis and Venezuela's Long Road to Democratic Transition

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As Nicolás Maduro spuriously claims to have won the 28 July elections, Venezuela slides into full autocracy. While this underscores the regime's increasing lack of support, internal fractures, and the growing force of the opposition, domestic and international dynamics make a short-term democratic transition unlikely. However, this weakened position could open unexpected opportunities for change.

- The 28 July elections deepened the regime's legitimacy crisis both domestically and internationally. While the opposition has convincingly demonstrated that Edmundo González received a clear majority of the vote, the regime refuses to make public the tallies on the back of which it claims victory for Maduro instead.
- The international community is divided over the electoral results, with Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico no longer supporting Maduro as before. However, doubts persist about their future direction, particularly regarding Brazil and Colombia due to own political interests and their ideological ties to the current Venezuelan regime.
- The opposition, led by María Corina Machado, has adopted a strategy of attrition to gradually weaken the incumbents, relying on coordinated international pressure in seeking to eventually facilitate democratic transition.

Policy Implications

A coordinated response to the regime's entrenchment is essential. The international community should prioritise staunch support for democratic forces, particularly President-elect González and opposition leader Machado. Sustained pressure must be applied on Maduro while remaining open to dialogue, using the legitimacy crisis to facilitate democratic transition and ensure long-term stability.

The Legitimacy Crisis's International Dimensions

The presidential elections held in Venezuela on 28 July 2024 were marked by significant controversy given the Nicolás Maduro regime went to great lengths to prevent competitive candidates from participating in them. María Corina Machado won the opposition primaries but would then subsequently be disqualified from holding public office. After a failed attempt to appoint a representative,

consensus was reached within the opposition to support the candidacy of the little-known diplomat Edmundo González Urrutia. Machado assumed political leadership while González formally took up the candidacy, events indicative of an unprecedented level of cohesion within Venezuela's opposition force compared to previous years.

At midnight on 29 July, Maduro was officially declared the winner without proof being provided, a development anticipated by many Venezuelans and international observers alike. The announcement triggered widespread anger, leading to popular uprisings even in what historically have been pro-Chávez areas. These protests were marked not only by the destruction of Chávez statues but also by brutal repression from state security forces and paramilitary groups loyal to the regime in response. The government also intensified its control over communication channels. It targeted, furthermore, not only the usual opposition suspects but also any citizen, regardless of political affiliation, who dared to question the results proclaimed by President of the National Electoral Council (CNE) Elvis Amoroso.

Later that day, the opposition managed to publish 83 per cent of the electoral records (*actas*), which indicated that González had in fact won. This revelation sparked a series of international reactions that are crucial to understanding the complicated situation one month on from these historic elections. Several governments, including those of Argentina, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Panama, Peru, and Uruguay, immediately backed the results presented by the opposition. Meanwhile, the United States, although not formally recognising González as president-elect, maintained a more cautious stance. The Joe Biden administration, through its spokespersons, indicated that it was not yet prepared to take that step, arguing they wanted to allow room for dialogue between Maduro's government and the democratic opposition in Venezuela, as potentially leading to a negotiated transition. However, the US government also warned the reimposition of sanctions was a possibility, including against CNE officials and the magistrates of the Electoral Chamber of the Supreme Court of Justice (TSJ) for endorsing the regime's claims without independent and verifiable audits.

International responses to the events of 28 July and beyond have been shaped by respective governments' degree of ideological, political, economic, and military proximity to the Maduro regime. States with an affinity to Chavismo, such as China, Cuba, Iran, and Russia, were quick to recognise the CNE's claimed results, extending their support to Maduro to maintain the strategic alliances they have built up over recent years. These Eurasian powers, which have historically resisted interference in the internal affairs of other states and maintained close economic and military relations with Venezuela, also have geopolitical interests that run counter to those of the West. Consequently, they have refrained from questioning the legitimacy of the electoral process, instead emphasising the importance of Venezuela's sovereignty and the current government's right to manage its internal affairs without external intervention.

In contrast, liberal democracies and governments historically at odds with Chavismo – including the European Union, many Latin American states and members of the Organization of American States, as well as the US – took a critical

stance. The OAS, supported by 22 of its 35 country members, demanded the immediate publication of all original voting records and the impartial, independent verification of results. Additionally, Panama's President José Raúl Mulino announced that his country would co-sponsor the inclusion of a point addressing human rights violations in a resolution at the next OAS meeting on 4 September 2024, following a request from the Venezuelan opposition to do so. These critical governments argue that the lack of transparency and potential for electoral manipulation undermine the Venezuelan people's will and represent a further degradation of democracy. Additionally, in response to the ruling issued on 22 August by the Electoral Chamber of the TSJ that endorsed Maduro's victory without evidence, 11 countries in the hemisphere – including Argentina, Chile, and the US – expressed their categorical rejection of the decision and called for an impartial and independent audit.

The cases of Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico are other noteworthy ones here. All led by leftist presidents – Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Gustavo Petro, and Andrés Manuel López Obrador, respectively –, these three countries have attempted to position themselves as mediators in the Venezuelan crisis. Lula and Petro have shown a willingness to engage in dialogue with Maduro while also listening to the opposition, but they have faced criticism for not taking a firmer stance against the intensified repression playing out in Venezuela. Lula has expressed concern about Maduro's rule, acknowledging that it possesses some authoritarian traits he finds troubling. However, the Brazilian leader's approach is also influenced by his country's broader geopolitical ambitions, particularly the aspiration of seeing Venezuela integrated into the BRICS group. A shift towards democracy in Venezuela facilitating or complicating this outcome is equally likely, as ultimately depending on the nature of the transition and the international alignments that follow.

Petro, on the other hand, proposed a power-sharing solution reminiscent of Colombia's own National Front, where the Liberal and Conservative parties alternately held power during the 1960s and 1970s. This proposal, however, was rejected by both Maduro and Machado, leaving it as an outside option in any future negotiations. Additionally, Colombia's relationship with Venezuela is further complicated by the close ties between the latter's regime and the National Liberation Army (ELN), a guerrilla group currently engaged in peace talks with the Colombian government, with Venezuela acting as a guarantor. Maduro could potentially seek to use this relationship as leverage, subtly threatening Colombia's "Total Peace" initiative – already under significant strain even before these recent developments.

Mexico, initially part of these mediation efforts, has since withdrawn, limiting its involvement to observing the outcome of what López Obrador referred to as the "electoral tribunal" – seemingly alluding to the TSJ's Electoral Chamber. The pro-Maduro ruling on 22 August, which improperly claimed the authority to close the case arising from an administrative appeal initiated by the Venezuelan president himself, may suggest Mexico has decided to step back from actively looking for a solution to this controversy. Whether this is actually the case remains to be

seen, however, as on the same day Colombia's foreign minister travelled to Mexico City, apparently to coordinate the two countries' joint position.

Sociopolitical Transformation and the Rise of María Corina Machado

The events surrounding the presidential elections of 28 July are reflective of Venezuela's profound recent sociopolitical transformation, as brought about by a crisis multidimensional in nature. Driven by the economic collapse of the petrostate and pervasive corruption, particularly within the state oil company PDVSA, this deterioration has seen Venezuelans' political and socio-economic preferences shift over time. The endemic corruption existing under Maduro's rule is, unlike in previous periods, not merely perceived as a continuation of past practices but as a deeply destructive force that threatens the very fabric of the state, thus serving to exacerbate current problems rather than stabilise the regime (Cardozo Uzcátegui and Mijares 2020). These changes have created fertile ground for new liberal currents that directly challenge the entrenched Chavista order, marking a critical juncture in Venezuela's historical political trajectory.

With the incumbents tightening their grip on power, one of the most visible consequences of the ongoing crisis has been the mass emigration of approximately 7.8 million Venezuelans, primarily to Latin American countries like Colombia and Peru (R4V 2024). This outpouring has overwhelmed the capacities of host nations and come with acute social and economic impacts, both within Venezuela itself and in the receiving states/regions. In these new environments, the most vulnerable Venezuelan migrants often face significant challenges, including discrimination, xenophobia, and labour-market exploitation. The arrival of large migrant populations has also coincided with the expansion of criminal networks like the infamous Tren de Aragua (Erazo Patiño, Laverde Rodríguez, and Devia Acevedo 2024). This has seen insecurity and violence soar, creating a climate of distrust between locals and migrants (López Romero 2023).

The domestic effects of Venezuela's ongoing descent into chaos, however, have often been overlooked, as international analyses tend to focus only on external consequences such as migration and the humanitarian emergency. Severe economic hardship and the breaking up of families have led to those remaining behind's progressive disaffection with the Maduro regime. The latter's Chavista base, once a decisive pillar of its electoral strength, has begun to fragment under the weight of economic collapse and indiscriminate repression. This disintegration has eroded popular support for Chavismo and – as the 28 July vote tallies reveal – severely undermined its electoral competitiveness.

Against this backdrop, Machado's political platform has continued to gain traction. Once criticised for her uncompromising stance and radical positions, she is now viewed as a key political asset. Machado's focus on the fractured Venezuelan family, combined with her unwavering commitment to the moral and spiritual superiority of her cause, has become a rallying point for those seeking change. These symbolic factors, which are often underestimated in political analysis, have proven crucial in shaping the opposition's contestation strategy, transforming

what was once perceived as a source of weakness into one of formidable strength instead.

Machado's campaign thus consciously tapped into themes deeply ingrained in Venezuelan culture, such as the sanctity of the family and maternal authority, to connect with voters left disillusioned by the failures of the Chavista state. Her emphasis on *Familismo*, a core element of Hispanic Marianismo (Castillo et al. 2010), aligns with traditional values that place the family at the centre of social life. This message enjoys even greater resonance in a society that has endured the huge emotional and social toll of mass emigration, with nearly one-quarter of the population having left the country in recent years. Widespread grief over the separation of families amplifies the appeal of her reunification narrative, making it a powerful social force.

In a society sociologically characterised as matri-centric, where the role of women – especially as mothers and heads of families – is central to the social structure and cultural identity (Moreno 1993), Machado's campaign, centred on themes of maternal care, resilience, and protective leadership, strikes a deep chord. This approach not only taps into profound cultural mores but also stands in stark contrast to the traditionally male-dominated nature of Venezuelan politics. By focusing on values of care, protection, and family unity, Machado has crafted a tenacious and protective leadership identity that resonates strongly with a broad spectrum of the population, particularly in a country whose social and economic fabric has become severely strained over time.

Furthermore, the international community's perception of Maduro has undergone a significant shift of late. While long seen as an authoritarian leader, many international actors previously downplayed the full extent of his autocratic rule, often due to geopolitical considerations or ideological biases. In the wake of the events of 28 July, however, the myth surrounding Chavismo as a competitive electoral force collapsed. This led to broader international recognition of the regime's fully autocratic nature, significantly undermining its legitimacy on the global stage. This shift has important implications for the incumbents' ability to maintain external support.

With the Chavistas facing an unprecedented legitimacy crisis, marked by a lack of moral leadership, ideological coherence, and economic acumen, Machado's vision of a liberal, decentralised economy, coupled with her outlined emphasis on family reunification, has garnered increasing support. This backing is especially strong among Venezuelans who have lost faith in the state's ability to meet their needs and who are seeking new forms of leadership that can offer both economic stability and a renewed sense of community. Machado's rise thus reflects a broader transformation within Venezuelan society, whereby traditional state dependency is now giving way to a more individualistic and market-oriented approach to survival. The informal dollarisation of the economy has empowered citizens to engage in economic activity independent of state control, fostering a sense of autonomy that aligns with Machado's liberal principles.

Consolidation of Full Autocracy

On 22 August, the United Nations Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Venezuela issued a scathing report highlighting that both the TSJ and CNE “lack impartiality and independence and have played a role within the State’s repressive machinery” ([United Nations Human Rights Council 2024](#)). This publicised finding coincided with the timing of the Supreme Court’s decision to ratify the CNE’s announced winner, allegedly without providing any supporting evidence. This ruling starkly exemplifies the ongoing erosion of Venezuela’s democratic institutions.

As mentioned earlier, the TSJ’s endorsement of Maduro’s electoral victory is emblematic of a broader pattern of legal manipulation and state repression. This decision followed a lawsuit filed by the incumbent himself on 1 August, demanding that the TSJ’s Electoral Chamber investigate and certify the election results, amid allegations of the electoral system having been hacked – claims that remain unsubstantiated. Such actions further underscore how the judiciary has been co-opted as a tool for legitimising the regime’s authoritarian control, a process that political analyst Javier Corrales has termed “autocratic legalism” (2015, 2023). According to him, this strategy sees a country’s legal and judicial institutions approached not as checks on power but as mechanisms to justify and enforce repressive and authoritarian measures, transforming the TSJ from a guardian of legality into a collaborator in the Chavistas’ autocratic ambitions.

Institutional decay is a strategy consciously presided over by the Maduro regime to secure its hold on power amid a collapsing society. The TSJ, which should serve as a neutral arbiter helping resolve arising conflicts, has instead aligned itself so thoroughly with the government’s own interests that it has lost all credibility both at home and abroad. Its recent actions, including the refusal to release electoral materials and the endorsement of highly questionable vote tallies, underscore a judiciary that is complicit in autocratic consolidation rather than representing a defender of justice. As Corrales (2015, 2023) suggests, the erosion of trust in these institutions has rendered any hope of resolving Venezuela’s crisis by legal or institutional means increasingly untenable.

The consequences of this consolidation of power extend well beyond Venezuela’s own borders, presenting significant challenges to Latin America’s regional leaders – particularly Lula and Petro. Both have historically shared an ideological affinity with the Chavista movement, yet now find themselves in a highly precarious position. They face mounting domestic pressure to distance themselves from an increasingly indefensible regime while also seeking to successfully navigate the expectations of a hemispheric community not holding back in its criticism of Maduro’s dictator-like rule. For Lula and Petro, the situation in Venezuela has become a key test of their commitment to democratic principles and regional stability.

The challenge for these two leaders is one both diplomatic and ideological in nature, as they must confront the reality that Maduro and his allies, having abandoned any pretence of democratic legitimacy, maintains their grip on power solely by resorting to force, repression, and the manipulation of state institutions.

This situation requires Lula and Petro to reconcile their historical positions with the growing need to advocate for democratic norms and human rights across the hemisphere. That dilemma is further intensified by the fact that Chile's President Gabriel Boric, a fellow leftist, has taken a firm and public stance against the Venezuelan regime. Boric's categorical rejection of Maduro's government as an ideological bastion increases the symbolic pressure on Lula and Petro, highlighting the divide within Latin American leftists regarding Venezuela's autocratisation.

This turn of events is not merely a national issue but a regional challenge that demands a coordinated response. Lula and Petro must carefully balance domestic politics, international diplomacy, and the imperatives of justice and human rights. Their approach to Venezuela will not only shape their own legacies but also signal the future direction of leftist leadership in Latin America more broadly. As they navigate these complexities, the contrasting position of Boric underscores the delicate and multifaceted nature of their predicament, finding themselves under scrutiny from national and international audiences alike.

Transition Strategy and External Pressure

The transition strategy proposed by Machado and González is characterised by a degree of ambiguity that has created uncertainty among their followers and allies. The common tendency to rely on flawed analogies, especially in times of doubt, partly explains the lack of clarity witnessed in the analysis of the Venezuelan situation from outside. Such analogies often suggest that because two situations share superficial similarities, their outcomes must necessarily be comparable. However, this oversimplification overlooks the fundamental differences between contexts, leading to erroneous conclusions and potentially misguided counterstrategies in consequence. In political analysis, such oversights are particularly perilous as they distort the understanding of complex realities and see those working to effectively address them led astray.

Some observers have drawn parallels with past events, particularly in comparing the current situation to the failed interim presidency of Juan Guaidó (2019–2023) or to the aftermath of Henrique Capriles's unsuccessful 2013 electoral challenge. Maduro himself has fuelled these comparisons by branding González a “second Guaidó,” thereby attempting to normalise his regime's continued grip on power. While invoking such analogies may be tempting, the key point is they fail to capture the crucial differences in the current landscape that indicate the past is not merely repeating itself in Venezuela today.

Three key differences, as noted, stand out: the economic collapse of the petrostate and pervasive corruption have created fertile ground for new liberal currents; the emerging opposition leadership under Machado successfully combines an uncompromising political stance with a focus on the fractured Venezuelan family; the international community now takes a much dimmer view of the Maduro regime than previously. When these three factors are taken together, it becomes evident that the pathway to democratic transition in Venezuela is a complex one fraught with many challenges. The conditions that enabled Maduro to maintain power during previous crises, such as the 30 April 2019 uprising, remain intact.

The military continues to be tightly controlled by the party leadership, with much of its high command deeply integrated into the Chavista structure (Mijares and Cardozo Uzcátegui 2020). Moreover, Venezuela's revolutionary narrative, akin to that of Cuba and Nicaragua, continues to justify the chosen course of action under the guise of a historical mission, as an alternative to adopting the bureaucratic-authoritarian model seen in other parts of Latin America. This sense of destiny reinforces the Maduro regime's resilience, complicating efforts to catalyse democratic transition.

However, while the ruling coalition still presents a united front, bolstered by the shared benefits of being a "mafia state" (McCarthy-Jones and Turner 2022; Cardozo Uzcátegui and Mijares 2020) and a climate of mutual distrust and fear, signs of a deeper rupture are emerging. One significant development is the nascent fracture within the ruling coalition's membership base, which has been a key source of support and line of defence for the regime over the past 25 years. The disillusionment taking hold among Chavistas suggests a significant weakening of the social foundations underpinning Maduro's continued rule. While not fully manifest yet, this splintering hints at a potential shift in the balance of power looming.

Furthermore, regime cohesion is heavily reliant on a web of corruption that binds together various factions within the governing coalition. Maduro functions as a *primus inter pares* among these groups, with their unity cemented by mutual involvement in criminal activity. Under such conditions, any transition threatens to have prohibitive costs for the elites surrounding Maduro, making rapid change unlikely.

As a result, the opposition's adopted strategy has evolved into one of attrition – focusing on gradually eroding regime stability rather than seeking an immediate fracture within the ruling elite (Munck and Leff 1999). This approach is designed to limit the government's margin for error, anticipating that any internal disarray or conflict may not receive the same level of popular support that sustained Chavismo during critical moments in the past (such as in 2002 or 2013). Instead, the opposition aims to keep attention both nationally and internationally on the incumbents' illegitimate rule, their widespread unpopularity, and their inability to manage Venezuela's deepening socio-economic challenges. By doing so, it is hoped to create the conditions eventually leading to internal rupture within the regime, providing an opening for democratic change.

In this delicate situation, external support – particularly in the form of acute pressure being leveraged by democratic states – is essential. But it must be carefully managed. A poorly calibrated approach risks backfiring, providing the regime with a pretext to rally its base around narratives of foreign interference or imperialism – rhetoric that, while less credible today, can still be exploited to strengthen its grip on power. If international pressure is not coordinated effectively, it could lead to the emergence of disparate fronts that allow Chavismo's standard-bearers to find further room for manoeuvre internationally, undermining efforts to hold Maduro and his allies accountable. A further danger is fostering "Venezuela fatigue" among international actors, reducing the likelihood that the expected in-

ternal rupture within the regime will occur within a foreseeable time frame and potentially prolonging Maduro's rule indefinitely.

While concerted international pressure is a precondition for Venezuela's democratic transition, it is not sufficient on its own accordingly. The opposition's success will hinge on sustained, long-term efforts to weaken the regime from within while external pressure must simultaneously be calibrated, coordinated, and consistent. Only by maintaining this delicate balance can the opposition create the conditions necessary for democratic transition and be ready to seize the opportunity when the incumbents' internal cohesion finally begins to unravel completely.

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