

Breaking Venezuela's stalemate: strategic coordination to overcome Maduro's regime

Antonio De La Cruz
Executive Director
17/Sep/2024

"In a non-violent struggle, the only weapon you will have is the number of people (...) The power of resistance lies in unity and coordination." – Srdja Popovic

For years, Venezuela has been at the stage of a political conflict in which the opposition, Nicolás Maduro's regime, and the international community play critical roles in a crusade that defines the country's destiny. At first glance, it may seem like a power struggle where brute force determines the outcomes, but a deeper look reveals that it is about strategies. From the perspective of game theory, this analysis allows us to understand why efforts for democratic change in Venezuela have been ineffective thus far and what needs to be done to break the stalemate.

The regime: the dominant strategy

Nicolás Maduro and his regime employ a dominant strategy. The only viable option for them is to remain in power at all costs. Repression, institutional control, and electoral manipulation are not merely tools of coercion but central elements of their strategy. From the regime's perspective, any concession signals the beginning of their collapse, no matter how small. In terms of strategic interaction theory, they have established a "coercive equilibrium", where the use of force and intimidation is the only means of ensuring their survival.

The stolen of the electoral victory on July 28, 2024, when the opposition, led by María Corina Machado and Edmundo González Urrutia, managed to win at the polls — confirmed by 86% of the voting records, which the regime never disclosed, it must be noted — was a calculated move. Those in Miraflores were aware of the risks involved in acknowledging this victory. Thus, they resorted to their dominant strategy: disregarding the results and swiftly proclaiming the regime's candidate as the re-elected president for the 2025-2031 term. For Maduro, conceding to the opposition is unacceptable, and this stance has left little room for negotiation.

The opposition: internal coordination

The Venezuelan opposition faces a far more complex challenge: internal coordination. While they all share a common goal—removing Maduro's regime and restoring democracy—divisions among parties and leaderships hinder the development of a cohesive strategy. The opposition is engaged in a popular resistance that seeks to avoid risking the lives of demonstrators, with

success hinged on maintaining unity in diversity, both in purpose and action, and sustaining mobilization despite repression.

However, past attempts at cohesion have been difficult. One cause of their imbalance is the lack of consensus on the main strategy—whether to focus on internal mobilization, international pressure, or a balance of both. Each faction against the regime follows its path, weakening the overall movement. This dilemma poses the most significant risk for democratic forces: without a coordinated strategy, Maduro’s government continues to impose its own without significant counterweights.

Civil Society: the prisoner’s dilemma

Venezuelan civil society, the people, now form the backbone of the opposition movement, but they face a prisoner’s dilemma. Each person fears that their participation in protests or demonstrations will be in vain due to repression. The outcome of this collective inaction is devastating: the dictatorship is strengthened by not facing robust widespread opposition.

Civil society thus has two options: remain steadfast in the fight, mobilizing for change, or betray its ideals, succumbing to exhaustion and resignation. If enough people choose inaction, the regime will remain intact. However, if a significant number of citizens decide to mobilize in peaceful resistance, the pressure on Maduro could reach a tipping point. The key to breaking this cycle is ensuring that Venezuelans, worn down by years of crisis, hold onto the hope that mass mobilization remains an effective tool for regime change.

The International Community: pressure

Despite limited options, the international community also plays a crucial role in this power struggle. Economic and diplomatic sanctions have put pressure on the dictatorship to accept a democratic transition. However, the results have been mixed. While sanctions have weakened the regime’s economic power, they have not eroded Maduro’s control over the National Assembly, the Supreme Court, the Attorney General’s office, or the military leadership.

The international community is engaged in a pressure strategy: intensifying sanctions to push the regime toward collapse. However, this could exacerbate the humanitarian crisis in the country. On the other hand, a more moderate approach might be interpreted as a lack of commitment to defending democracy and human rights, potentially encouraging Maduro to continue without fearing significant reprisals. For this strategy to be effective, the international community needs to coordinate its efforts with Venezuela’s democratic forces and civil society, something that, until now, has been nominal at best, as demonstrated by the regime’s continued revenues from oil exports.

The stalemate: failed coordination

An analysis of these actors suggests that there is currently a sense of deadlock. While the opposition, civil society, and the international community share aligned goals, the lack of effective coordination has allowed Maduro's regime to remain in power. Conflict modeling teaches us that when actors fail to coordinate correctly, the results are suboptimal for everyone except the dominant actor — in this case, Maduro.

To break this stalemate, democratic forces and civil society must achieve a balance of coordination that maximizes internal mobilization and external support. This requires that the various sectors opposing the regime remain united around a common strategy—removing Maduro's government and restoring democracy—while avoiding divisions that allow the regime to survive. At the same time, the international community must maximize its pressure in a coordinated manner, ensuring that Maduro has no room to maneuver.

Conclusion: coordination or collapse

The future of Venezuela depends on the ability of democratic actors to coordinate their efforts. If the opposition, civil society, and the international community cooperate, Maduro's regime could finally face an unsustainable crisis. However, if coordination fails, the stalemate will deepen, and with it, the suffering of millions of Venezuelans.

Ultimately, history offers a crucial lesson: significant changes do not occur simply because diverse actors share the same goal but because they succeed in coordinating their efforts toward that goal. The key to Venezuela's future lies in the strength of ideas or mobilization and in the ability of all members of the anti-regime alliance to work together strategically and effectively.