

Third time's the charm

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"Before a nation can be rebuilt, its citizens need to understand how it was destroyed in the first place: how its institutions were undermined, how its language was distorted, how its people were manipulated." - Anne Applebaum

In the 2024 presidential election, Nicolás Maduro seeks to gain legitimacy to maintain his grip on power. However, achieving this goal would require him to confront the democratic forces' candidate, María Corina Machado, who was selected on October 22nd in the primary election, and to adhere to the Barbados Agreement signed five days earlier. Failing to do so, he will continue to be regarded as an usurper in Miraflores by the international community, which has already labeled him as such following the fraudulent re-election in 2018.

At that time, an economic and political crisis battered Venezuela, leading it to a state of critical unsustainability. The country's economy shrunk by an unprecedented 70% between 2013 and 2019, with hyperinflation peaking at 130,060% in 2018, plunging over half of the population into extreme poverty. Amid this disaster, exacerbated by Maduro's mismanagement and the fall in oil prices, the response was to call for early presidential elections in May 2018.

Henri Falcón, the leading opposition candidate, denounced fraud in the election results, which he rejected minutes before the regime's National Electoral Council announced the official figures. He called for holding new elections in October or December, following Venezuelan tradition and practice.

Falcón accused the Maduro regime of violating the agreement signed in March 2018 to rectify electoral process flaws. He reported receiving 142,589 complaints about irregularities during the voting day and stated that officials prevented 91,700 witnesses from participating in the polling stations. Most of the irregularities involved so-called "red points" near electoral centers where officials bought votes with government bonuses through the scanning of the "carnet de la patria" and controlled "assisted votes". "We have counted 12,709 red points in the 14,000 voting centers", Falcón stated.

The results displayed the lowest electoral participation in the country's history, reinforcing opposition claims that the electoral process was illegitimate, a sham, due to the ban on numerous relevant opposition parties from competing.

A prominent leader, Julio Borges, appealed on his Twitter account: "I implore Venezuelans not to fall into demoralization. Today, Maduro is weaker than ever before. We are in the final phase of a tragic cycle for our country. He has been exposed, and the world will disavow the fraud today".

The European Union, the United States, and the democracies of Latin America (Lima Group) refused to recognize the electoral result. They chose to acknowledge an interim government led by the president of the Legislative Assembly in 2019. Additionally, the US applied secondary sanctions against the Maduro regime.

Since 2018, Chávez's successor has managed to stay in power - a period marked by an unprecedented exodus of millions of Venezuelans - through the social control of the population: food bags and bonuses from the Patria system, as well as the support of the military elite managing the country's major businesses and the intelligence apparatus (Sebin and DGCIM) that neutralizes opponents and members of the Armed Forces, committing crimes against humanity.

Six years later, Maduro faces again a presidential election with the lowest voting intention since 2013, 7.9%, according to Meganálisis. It is the first time the gap between the two leading candidates is overwhelmingly in favor of the democratic forces' candidate. Moreover, the latest Datincorp study shows that the popularity of the PSUV leader is at rock bottom: 23% of Venezuelans feel anger, 17% feel shame, 15% feel contempt, and 21% feel no emotion when someone mentions him. To this, we must add the Damocles sword of the International Criminal Court hanging over his and his intelligence and counterintelligence bodies' heads for alleged crimes against humanity committed since 2014. This situation has led the regime to intensify the use of fear and repression to quash widespread rejection, which they failed to reverse despite resorting to nationalism with the Esequibo territory dispute, images and videos of Hugo Chávez in the commemoration of 20 years of the anti-imperialist declaration, and more recently Jesus Christ.

Meanwhile, the democratic forces with María Corina Machado are preparing with overwhelming popular support for the presidential election. This time, the founder of the Vente Venezuela party is not just a political figure; she is a symbol of the battle for the recovery of democracy, integrity, and a prosperous future for Venezuela. This fight is not just for a change of leadership but for the re-institutionalization of the country and respect for human rights.

This time, the strategy of the primary winner, who negotiated the necessary steps for an orderly and democratic transition, reflects a deep understanding of the Venezuelan crisis. It's not just about winning an election but about rebuilding a country shattered by years of mismanagement, looting, and repression. Consolidating a united front, including all sectors of

Venezuelan society and supported by the international community, is crucial for restoring democracy and dignity in the country.

Faced with low voter intention and growing unpopularity, Maduro is looking for a substitute to be competitive. This time, it won't be a Falcón. He needs someone who recognizes the results and does not represent the people's voice. However, this strategy has little chance of success against the popular demand for authentic and representative change.

In summary, Venezuela is at a critical turning point. As Maduro desperately seeks to choose the opposition candidate that allows him to compete in the 2024 elections without directly facing the Venezuelan people, Machado emerges as a catalyzing figure for democratic change. This electoral contest is not just a fight for power but a battle to redefine Venezuela's future, potentially marking the end of an authoritarian cycle and the beginning of a new era of governance based on freedom, respect, and prosperity.

In this context, the 2024 election represents much more than an electoral decision; it's a collective assessment of how far Venezuela has come and where it is willing to go. Venezuelan society is re-evaluating what it considers politically acceptable, increasingly embracing democratic principles and rejecting the dictatorial tactics that have characterized the Maduro regime. The potential victory of María Corina would symbolize a change of leadership and a profound transformation in Venezuela's political and social identity.

The third time's the charm.