

The venezuelan paradox

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"Only free men can negotiate; prisoners cannot enter into contracts. Your freedom and mine cannot be separated." – Nelson Mandela

Venezuela's political crisis has unfolded a new chapter in the saga of its turbulent democracy. Nicolás Maduro's registration as a candidate for the upcoming presidential election on March 25, to convey widespread popular support, highlights the paradox of Maduro & Co. (The Gang of Five: Diosdado Cabello, Cilia Flores, Vladimir Padrino López, Nicolás Maduro, and Jorge Rodríguez) clinging to power through fear, repression, and electoral manipulation, despite their growing unpopularity and the economic collapse afflicting the country.

The systematic exclusion of dissenting voices from the political sphere, especially the ban on María Corina Machado –the undisputed candidate of the democratic forces after winning the primary with more than 80% of the votes– from participating in the elections by the regime's Supreme Court of Justice, underscores the dictatorship's goal: to silence any legitimate challenge to its rule. The nomination of Corina Yoris as an alternative candidate, though ultimately blocked by Maduro's National Electoral Council, shows the determination of The Gang of Five not to relinquish power.

The list of candidates allowed for this election, dominated by puppets known as "alacranes" – politicians who pretend to oppose the regime but agree with Maduro to conspire against the real opposition–, along with the last-minute inclusion of Manuel Rosales, questions the legitimacy of the electoral process since these supposed opponents are designed to legitimize Maduro's continuity, especially the candidacy of the governor of Zulia state.

Nevertheless, the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) party succeeded in registering Edmundo González Urrutia with the MUD's card, marking a milestone in its steadfast effort to secure electoral participation for the democratic change demanded by 80% of Venezuelans. The CNE's admission of this candidacy allows progress on the electoral roadmap agreed upon in Barbados in October 2023.

To continue usurping power, he attacked the close circle of María Corina Machado. He arrested 5 leaders of Vente Venezuela, and 2 have not yet been presented before the courts; additionally, he issued an arrest warrant against another 7 people, 6 of whom sought asylum in the Argentine Embassy. The instruction was then to cut off the power supply to the diplomatic mission. Ultimately, a series of actions that highlight the harsh reality of human rights violations faced by the forces of the true opposition in this electoral contest. Meanwhile, the PSUV's re-

election candidate continues to promote rhetoric contrary to basic democratic principles, praising the recent elections in Russia as a model.

Last Sunday, the leftist reference and former president of Uruguay, José "Pepe" Mujica, stated: "What is clear is that in Venezuela there is no basic respect for the opposition, and this disturbs and creates a situation that cannot be called democracy (...) it seems they play at democracy, but they do not play democracy".

On the other hand, the international response to the situation in Venezuela has included the left-wing governments of Colombia and Brazil, which expressed their concern about Maduro's authoritarian actions.

This Monday, Gustavo Petro questioned the entire Venezuelan electoral process. The President of Colombia described the disqualification of María Corina Machado from participating in the elections as an "anti-democratic coup". Additionally, five days ago, the President of Brazil said that "there is no legal or political explanation to prohibit an opponent from being a candidate", and described as serious the fact that MUD candidate Corina Yoris could not register. He also called for respect for the pact reached in Barbados.

This scenario indicates a growing regional consensus on the urgency of restoring democracy in Venezuela.

The Barbados agreement, intended to establish the basis for fair and competitive elections, is not respected by Maduro's regime due to its decision to cling to power at any cost. This situation jeopardizes the continuity of General License 44, which allows European oil companies to produce and export Venezuelan oil and gas - in January, the exported volume of oil represented 30 million dollars for Maduro's coffers.

Despite the little progress in complying with the Barbados pact by Maduro, the White House prefers to renew the license due to the narrative imposed by Chevron about the risk of removing Venezuelan crude from the energy market, which would affect the price of a gallon of gasoline and inflation in an electoral context in the United States.

Furthermore, the sanction could be reinstated at any time as it is an executive order.

What happens is that this signal from the Biden administration would be interpreted by The Gang of Five as another non-credible threat -the Alex Saab case, he could not be released because he had not been judged and due to the separation of powers-, which weakens U.S. leadership in changing the behavior of the regime governing Venezuela. On the other hand, this

would only reinforce the authoritarian conduct of Maduro & Co., besides demoralizing the struggle of democratic forces to achieve free and competitive elections.

Maduro & Co. have used the strategy of making believe they are willing to hand over power. But yes, to someone who gives them confidence that they will be free of any "sin" committed over 25 years. With that story, they now seek the U.S. justice to remove the price on their heads. In the end, their goal is to remain in power and betray all agreements, because there are no real consequences for continuing to hijack a nation.

Despite the obstacles imposed by the regime, the determination of the opposition and international scrutiny must play a crucial role in the transformation of Venezuelan politics, from one dominated by The Gang of Five to one that truly reflects the will of the people.

The situation in Venezuela illustrates the power of collective action in the fight for justice and democracy. Despite the obstacles imposed by the regime, the determination of the opposition and international scrutiny can play a crucial role in transforming Venezuelan politics, from one dominated by authoritarianism to one that truly reflects the will of the people.

The call to action is clear: it is time to reject the illegitimate and authoritarian practices that have plunged the country into the current crisis and work together in rebuilding a future where the popular will is not only heard but also the main guide in the search for a fairer and more prosperous common destiny.

At this critical moment, it is essential that the international community maintains pressure on the regime and support for the democratic forces in Venezuela, reaffirming the principle that the legitimacy of power resides in the free and fair consent of the governed. The Venezuelan paradox is not only a challenge for its people but a reminder of the fragility of democracy and the importance of defending it with commitment and solidarity".