

Venezuela on the edge: between totalitarianism and democracy

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"The closer the fall of an Empire, the crazier its laws are." – Marcus Tullius Cicero

In Venezuela's current political landscape, the fight for change and democracy continues despite strategies deployed by Nicolás Maduro's regime to judicialize dissent through the anti-fascist law and the law for the defense of the Esequibo. The public demand for a way out of the deep crisis the country is facing is overwhelming: 8 out of 10 Venezuelans clamor for free, fair, and competitive elections. A clamor that finds an echo in María Corina Machado as a presidential candidate, with the backing of more than 90% of the population.

Maduro's regime's attempt to reverse this democratic momentum through a consultative referendum on the Esequibo Territory did not achieve its objective. Despite supposed participation that exceeded 10 million voters, the sparse turnout at the polling stations revealed a reality different from what the regime intended to show.

This context frames an even more complex situation at the international level. On Monday, April 8, complying with the deadline granted for Venezuela to present its counter-memorandum on the dispute over the Esequibo, Maduro's regime appeared before the International Court of Justice to reaffirm the country's sovereign right over the territory disputed with Guyana. However, this act does not imply the recognition of the ICJ's jurisdiction over the territorial controversy, highlighting the complexity of the Bolivarian regime's strategy on the international stage.

Observers perceive Maduro's maneuvers regarding the Esequibo as a risky strategy that fosters nationalism. These endanger citizens' rights, including the right to choose freely and raise the risk of armed conflict with Guyana. These actions remind us of other desperate strategies by authoritarian regimes that seek to create external crises to justify internal repressions -Putin's invasion of Ukraine. This tactic is not new, and observers have noted it in other historical contexts, such as when Argentina occupied the Falkland Islands in 1982.

Venezuela's stance on the territorial dispute has generated mixed reactions in the region. On the one hand, the support of the 15 countries of the Caribbean Community (Caricom) for Guyana in December 2023 contrasts with the escalation of the conflict by Maduro, especially with the enactment of the "Organic Law for the Defense of the Guayana Esequiba". This law has been interpreted by some, including the president of Brazil, Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva, as a

maneuver to “divert attention from electoral rights violations in Venezuela” as well as to decree a State of exception that allows postponing the presidential election for a year.

On the other hand, important founding members of the Puebla Group -José “Pepe” Mujica, Lula da Silva, and José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero—hope for a presidential election in Venezuela with the “greatest legitimacy” to avoid repeating the situation of 2018, when the leading opposition candidate, Henri Falcón, denounced fraud and did not accept the results of those elections. This event led to the disapproval of Maduro’s legitimacy of origin by more than 60 countries.

Currently, Maduro does not have the support of the Caribbean Community (Caricom) because it condemns unilateral actions to resolve problems with Guyana. Nor are key members of the Puebla Group who consider the conditions of the presidential election a violation of political rights in the region by not allowing the participation of various candidates, which they have described as an anti-democratic coup.

In the Americas, Maduro has only received political support from the questioned leaders of Nicaragua and Cuba, Daniel Ortega and Miguel Díaz-Canel. Of course, outside the region, he has the support of Vladimir Putin, the Iranian ayatollahs, and Xi Jinping -allies who see Venezuela as a territory to confront the United States on a war geopolitically.

It is the politically weakest moment for Hugo Chávez’s successor, including the interim government period. To survive the isolation from the American continent and the European Union, the candidate for re-election could entrench himself like his partners in the region. However, the upcoming presentation of cases at the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity creates risky conditions for Nicolás Maduro’s environment -chain of command- that could cause a fracture within the regime with unprecedented consequences for its power stability.

The recent sentencing of Major General Cliver Alcalá Cordones to 21 years in prison by a federal court in the United States is a sign that justice arrives and that in front of the judge, the responsibility of the accused is individual, despite having obeyed superior orders.

On the other hand, María Corina has maintained an unwavering struggle locally and abroad to establish the rules and negotiations necessary to transform an anti-democratic election into transitional elections, with all that this implies from a political, legal, constitutional, and international point of view.

The sequence of mistakes (laws) committed by Maduro warns of the proximity of his fall, so Venezuela’s future is at a turning point where the entrenchment of the regime would evolve towards totalitarianism. Or there could be a change. The demands of the people led by María

Corina seek a solution through a complex negotiation with the mafia state for the restoration of democracy and the reunion of citizens.

Consequently, Venezuela's political horizon is on the verge of a significant transformation that will outline the contour of a shift toward democratic public policies. Driven by an unbreakable popular will and the international recognition of the need to restore the democratic state, María Corina Machado symbolizes not only the aspiration for transparent and fair leadership but also the desire to fix a governance framework that prioritizes the fundamental rights and freedoms of all Venezuelans. This transition, marked by the overwhelming clamor for free and fair elections, has the potential to lead to the implementation of deep political, social, and economic reforms, which, with the independence of the Judiciary and the revitalization of democratic institutions, would lay the foundations for an era of active civic participation and responsible government.

As Venezuela approaches this turning point, the role of the international community and internal political forces will be decisive in supporting and consolidating the advance towards democracy. Creating an environment conducive to dialogue and negotiation, complemented by measures that ensure the rule of law, could catalyze the reconstruction of the country's social and political fabric. Ultimately, this change would redefine the relationship between the state and its citizens, promoting broader and more meaningful participation in national affairs and reaffirming Venezuela's commitment to democratic principles on the international stage, opening new avenues for investment and prosperity.