

Venezuela's turning point: breaking the cycle of repression

Antonio De La Cruz
Executive Director
10/Sep/2024

As Venezuela faces yet another cycle of fraudulent elections, the country's reality seems trapped in a complex game of strategies between Nicolás Maduro's regime and the democratic opposition. In this political chessboard, repression, exile, and electoral manipulation are the key pieces determining the nation's future. While the regime's tactics are predictable, game theory provides a clear perspective on why each actor follows their respective course and, more importantly, what might shift the balance of power.

The recent forced exile of president-elect Edmundo González, who, according to 83% of the ballots, was the actual election winner, is just another move in a long game dominated by Maduro since 2013. By forcing opposition leaders into exile, imprisoning others, and manipulating electoral institutions, the PSUV leader seeks to remain in power at Miraflores Palace and avoid any significant challenges. For many, this is a foreseen tragedy; for others, it's a tragic game where the rules are rigged from the start. However, by analyzing the political dynamics, we can better understand each player's motivations and how this conflict might eventually change.

The Regime: Repression as a Dominant Strategy

In this game, Nicolás Maduro acts rationally according to his interests. He has controlled the security forces, the National Electoral Council, the Supreme Court, and the Prosecutor's Office, all key institutions that should guarantee the legitimacy of any democratic process. Instead of respecting the results of a pseudo-election, his dominant strategy is repression: imprisoning, silencing, disappearing, or exiling those who represent a threat.

Why opt for repression, knowing it carries the risk of international sanctions and political isolation? The answer lies in the payoffs that each choice offers the regime. In the short term, violently silencing the opposition allows Maduro to avoid any direct challenge to his power, securing his political survival. In the long term, though it increases his isolation and further erodes the country's economy, the repressor, a criminal against humanity, continues to bet that the international community will prioritize "stability" over democracy. It isn't irrational. Some global actors have tacitly accepted repression as the cost of maintaining a minimal semblance of order in Venezuela.

The Opposition: Exile as a Survival Strategy

The Venezuelan opposition, represented at this juncture by Edmundo González Urrutia, faces limited options within a rigged electoral system. One must remember that directly challenging the regime from within the country is to risk imprisonment, torture, or worse. Therefore, opting for exile becomes a survival strategy. While it might superficially seem like a surrender, González Urrutia's forced exile allows him to continue fighting from abroad, where international pressure, arrest warrants for Maduro and his chain of command, and sanctions on family members and front-men may work in his favor.

From a Nash equilibrium perspective, this move makes sense. Maduro represses because he knows he can control the system from within, while opposition leaders go into exile because, in Venezuela, they would only face violence. Both players are trapped in an equilibrium where neither can change their strategy without incurring significant costs.

However, this equilibrium isn't static. It is a repeated game. With every new cycle of repression, violence, and electoral fraud, both the international community and Venezuelan public opinion have evolved. What was once unthinkable—a totalitarian regime in Venezuela—has now become an accepted reality. However, increasing international pressure, economic sanctions, and reports of human rights violations suggest that this equilibrium may start to crumble. Maduro, while seeming to win each round, is accumulating costs that could become unsustainable, such as an international arrest warrant for crimes against humanity.

Breaking the Equilibrium: What Can Change?

The political situation in Venezuela shifts when one of the leading players alters the rules. The opposition benefits from greater coordination with the international community. Sanctions have already impacted the regime's funding and social control over the population. At the same time, the International Criminal Court's report on crimes against humanity further weakens Maduro's legitimacy, creating internal tensions to replace him.

The strategy for the opposition is clear:

- Increase international pressure.
- Mobilize the diaspora to push for swift sanctions and arrest warrants.
- Keep global attention focused on the regime's atrocities.

Exile, though painful, allows continued participation in the struggle far from the regime's reach. Meanwhile, the international community must redouble its efforts in sanctions and

condemnations, demonstrating that there is no reward for a regime that systematically violates human rights.

On the other hand, if Maduro wishes to keep winning this game, he must reduce his international costs or risk losing the support of key actors like Brazil and Colombia, who seek to rehabilitate him. His repression remains effective in the short term, but the economic costs and mounting pressure could change the game in the long run. It is where the possibility of negotiating an orderly transition or even his eventual exit from power comes into play.