One dead in Venezuela as protesters teargassed in wake of disputed vote

AFP- At least one person died Monday in Venezuela as security forces tried to break up protests triggered by a hotly disputed election result that gave Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro a third term in power, an NGO said.

Venezuelan security forces fired tear gas and rubber bullets Monday at irate protesters challenging the reelection victory claimed by Maduro but disputed by the opposition and questioned by many other countries.

Thousands of people flooded the streets of several neighborhoods of the capital, chanting “Freedom, freedom!” and “This government is going to fall!”

Some ripped Maduro campaign posters from street posts and burned them.

Around the country at least two statues of Hugo Chavez, the late socialist icon who led the country for more than a decade and handpicked Maduro as his successor, were knocked down by protesters.

At least one person died in northwest Yaracuy state and 46 more were arrested in post-election demonstrations, Alfredo Romero, head of a rights group called Foro Penal, which specializes in political prisoner issues, said on the platform X.

In Caracas AFP observed members of the national guard firing tear gas and rubber bullets at protesters, some wearing motorbike helmets and bandannas tied over their faces for protection. Some responded by throwing rocks back.

Protests were reported even in very poor areas of Caracas that had been bastions of support for Maduro and his socialist government. Shots were heard in some areas. Protests broke out elsewhere in Venezuela, too.

“We want freedom. We want Maduro to go. Maduro, leave!,” Marina Sugey, a 42 year-old resident of a poor area of Caracas called Petare, told AFP.

Maduro, 61, attended a meeting Monday at which the National Electoral Council (CNE) certified his reelection to a third six-year term until 2031.

He dismissed international criticism and doubts about the result of Sunday’s voting, claiming Venezuela was the target of an attempted “coup d’etat” of a “fascist and counter-revolutionary” nature.

But opposition leader Maria Corina Machado later told reporters that a review of voting records available so far clearly showed that the next president “will be Edmundo Gonzalez Urrutia,” who took her place on the ballot after she was barred by Maduro-aligned courts.

The records showed a “mathematically irreversible” lead for Gonzalez Urrutia, she said, with 6.27 million votes to only 2.75 million for Maduro.

The elections were held amid widespread fears of fraud by the government and a campaign tainted by accusations of political intimidation.

Pollsters had predicted a resounding victory for the opposition.

In the early hours of Monday, the CNE said Maduro had won 51.2 percent of votes cast compared to 44.2 percent for Gonzalez Urrutia.

The opposition cried foul, prompting Attorney General Tarek

William Saab to link Machado to an alleged cyber “attack” seeking to “adulterate” the results.

— ‘Another fraud’ —

The outcome sparked concern and calls for a “transparent” process from the United Nations, United States, European Union and several countries in Latin America.

The CNE has not provided a detailed breakdown of the result.

Allies including China, Russia and Cuba congratulated Maduro.

Gonzalez Urrutia, a 74-year-old former diplomat, on Monday acknowledged the deep discontent in society with the CNE results and vowed that “we will fight for our liberty.”

Machado assured Venezuelans that “the leaders of the world” are validating the results, and called families to turn out Tuesday for “popular assemblies” nationwide to show support for a peaceful transition of power.

Nine Latin American countries called in a joint statement Monday for a “complete review of the results with the presence of independent electoral observers.”

The US-based Carter Center, one of a few organizations allowed to bring observers into Venezuela, urged the CNE to immediately publish detailed polling station-level results.

Brazil and Colombia also urged a review of the numbers while Chile’s president said the outcome was “hard to believe.”

Peru recalled its ambassador and Panama said it was suspending relations with Venezuela.

The Organization of American States, based in Washington, called an emergency meeting for Wednesday at the request of Argentina and other countries that challenged the official election tally.

Caracas hit back Monday, saying it was withdrawing diplomatic staff from Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Panama, Peru, the Dominican Republic and Uruguay for “interventionist actions and statements.” It also suspended flights to and from Panama and the Dominican Republic.

– ‘Bloodbath’ warning –

Independent polls had predicted Sunday’s vote would end 25 years of “Chavismo,” the populist movement founded by Chavez.

Maduro has been at the helm of the once-wealthy oil-rich country since 2013. The last decade has seen GDP drop by 80 percent, pushing more than seven million of its 30 million citizens to emigrate.

He is accused of locking up critics and harassing the opposition in a climate of rising authoritarianism.

In the run-up to the election, he had warned of a “bloodbath” if he lost.

Ballots were cast on machines that sent electronic votes directly to a centralized CNE database.

The machines printed out paper receipts that were placed in a container and counted by hand as a backup measure meant to be open to public scrutiny.

The opposition had deployed about 90,000 volunteer election monitors nationwide.

– Economic misery –

Sunday’s election was the product of a deal reached last year between the government and opposition.

That agreement led the United States to temporarily ease sanctions imposed after Maduro’s 2018 reelection, rejected as a sham by dozens of Latin American and other countries.

Sanctions were snapped back after Maduro reneged on agreed conditions.

Venezuela boasts the world’s largest oil reserves but has seen severely diminished production capacity in recent years.

Most Venezuelans live on just a few dollars a month, and endure biting shortages of electricity and fuel.

Economic misery in the South American nation has been a major source of migration pressure on the southern border of the United States, where immigration is a major presidential election issue.

AFP