Venezuela set for new protests after Maduro win ratified

AFP- Venezuela braced for fresh protests Saturday, after President Nicolas Maduro's disputed election victory was ratified – and a growing number of nations recognized his opposition rival as the true winner.

Both Maduro and the opposition, led by Maria Corina Machado and her presidential candidate Edmundo Gonzalez Urrutia, have called on their supporters to demonstrate this weekend, in the wake of Sunday's controversial vote.

The South American country's CNE election authority, which is loyal to Maduro, on Friday proclaimed him the winner with 52 percent of the vote and said Gonzalez Urrutia had garnered 43 percent of ballots.

But Argentina, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Panama and Uruguay recognized opposition Gonzalez Urrutia as the true president-elect, joining the United States and Peru in rejecting the official results.

For his part, the 61-year-old Maduro – who has reacted fiercely to criticism of his victory – described allegations of vote fraud as a "trap" orchestrated by Washington to justify "a coup."

He also has threatened Machado and Gonzalez Urrutia, saying they "should be behind bars."

Maduro has led the oil-rich, cash-poor country since 2013, presiding over a GDP drop of 80 percent that pushed more than seven million of once-wealthy Venezuela's 30 million citizens to emigrate.

Experts blame economic mismanagement and US sanctions for the collapse.

Gonzalez Urrutia did not show up to a hearing at the Supreme Court after Maduro requested the tribunal investigate and certify the election result.

However, other opposition candidates summoned to the hearing called for a detailed vote count to be made public after Sunday's vote, which was held amid widespread fear the vote would be rigged.

Voting records "are fundamental for transparency, they are fundamental for peace," said Enrique Marquez, who also ran against Maduro as part of a smaller opposition group.

The opposition this week launched a website with copies of 84 percent of ballots cast, showing an easy win for Gonzalez Urrutia. The government claims these are forged.

– 'Fearing for my life' –

Machado, who was barred from running herself, wrote in The Wall Street Journal that she was in hiding and "fearing for my life," along with other opposition leaders.

She called on supporters to rally Saturday in cities across the country to "assert the truth" about the opposition's victory.

"We have the evidence and the world already recognizes it," Machado wrote on X, formerly Twitter.

Maduro has called for daily mobilization, with "the mother of all marches to celebrate the victory of peace" on Saturday.

He accused the opposition of plotting attacks against security forces during their rallies.

The NGO Foro Penal reported 11 dead in protests Monday and

Tuesday as angry Venezuelans took to the streets, saying their votes had been stolen. Machado said at least 20 people had been killed.

Authorities said more than 1,000 people were arrested in post-election protests.

That crackdown has sparked fear among opposition supporters.

“We have dead, wounded, detainees, missing people… People know it. They are afraid. They know they are going to find themselves facing armed people,” said Katiusca Camargo, an activist in the Petare slum in eastern Caracas.

– ‘Overwhelming evidence’ –

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Thursday there was “overwhelming evidence” that Gonzalez Urrutia had won the election.

Blinken spoke with Machado and Gonzalez Urrutia on Friday, expressing “his concern for their safety and well-being” and congratulating Gonzalez Urrutia “for receiving the most votes,” the State Department said.

In a joint statement, Brazil, Colombia and Mexico urged an “impartial verification” of the result, also calling for Caracas to publish voting data broken down by polling stations.

Maduro’s previous reelection, in 2018, was rejected by dozens of Latin American countries as well as the United States and European Union member states.

He enjoys loyalty from the military leadership, electoral bodies, courts and other state institutions, as well as the backing of Russia, China and Cuba.

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