

Game over? Venezuelan opposition looks cornered as Maduro digs in

AFP – Venezuela's battered opposition is running out of options for challenging President Nicolas Maduro's claim to have won reelection.

Opposition presidential candidate Edmundo Gonzalez Urrutia fled in exile to Spain over the weekend. The popular leader he stood in for at the polls, Maria Corina Machado, is in hiding. Other opposition figures have been arrested and Maduro is firmly in charge of the oil-rich nation – showing no sign of yielding.

Maduro's disputed win in the July 28 election is challenged not just by the opposition or historic geopolitical rivals such as the United States, but also by leftist allies of Venezuela such as Brazil and Colombia.

The latter have come up empty-handed in their efforts to help find a peaceful solution to the crisis.

Inside the country, chatter abounds about what the opposition calls a stolen election – but people make their criticisms in whispers: no one wants to join the more than 2,400 people who have been arrested since the vote, including children, with some even accused of "terrorism."

Maduro would be sworn in for a third term on January 10, and in the next four months, anything can happen.

But for now, Venezuela looks like this: Maduro and other heirs of the late iconic socialist leader Hugo Chaves are closing ranks, the opposition is trying to somehow reorganize itself and the outside world is assessing how to confront a Maduro

whom international sanctions and pressure have long failed to shake.

– ‘Sweeping away everything’ –

The National Electoral Council, loyal to Maduro, proclaimed him the winner of the election with 52 percent of the votes. That means another six-year term in power for the former bus driver handpicked by Chavez to succeed him.

The opposition published copies of voting records from polling stations, saying the data proves the claim of a Maduro win is bogus and that Gonzalez Urrutia won by a landslide.

That act of publishing the results online has triggered a probe by the government and charges that the opposition engaged in conspiracy, usurping functions and sabotage.

The government has meanwhile not released detailed voting records to back up its claim of victory – it says it cannot, because the election tally system was hacked.

Maduro insists he won and at least in public rules out any kind of negotiation with the opposition.

“It is clear that the government is not seeking to yield, and to the contrary it is digging in,” said Antulio Rosales, a political scientist and professor at York University in Canada.

“It is a strategy of domination, of sweeping away everything,” said Giulio Cellini, head of the LOG political consultancy.

The goal, he said, is “to keep Maduro in place no matter what the cost is, because the cost of giving up power is even greater.”

After Venezuela’s last election, in 2018, Maduro also claimed victory amid widespread accusations of fraud. With the support of the military and other institutions, he managed to cling to

power despite international sanctions.

Maduro has led the oil-rich but cash-poor country since 2013.

His tenure, amid sanctions and domestic economic mismanagement, has seen GDP drop 80 percent in a decade, prompting more than seven million of the country's 30 million citizens to flee.

Gonzalez Urrutia, a 75-year-old, little-known former diplomat – until now – said last week that he was not considering going into exile, as he has now done.

But for many Venezuelans, his flight came as no surprise. He was under tremendous pressure, not just from a legal standpoint – he defied three summonses to appear in court – but also due to a rain of daily insults from Maduro, who called him “filthy,” a coward and even a Nazi.

Machado, the very popular leader of the opposition who was barred by Maduro-loyal courts from running for president, is now living in hiding.

Many Venezuelans are now wondering if she too will flee into exile.

Protests erupted right after the Maduro win was announced and in clashes with security forces 27 people died and nearly 200 were hurt.

Experts say it is unlikely that the United States will react as firmly as Donald Trump did after Maduro's disputed win in 2018. Then, the US administration said it no longer considered Maduro to be president and recognized opposition leader Juan Guaido instead.

The most recent US punishment came earlier this month, when it seized one of Maduro's planes, in the Dominican Republic. The United States is now expected to impose sanctions on individual members of the Maduro government.

Pablo Quintero, also of the LOG consultancy, said that over the short and medium term, the Maduro government expects to govern in isolation.

“They have trained for these kinds of situations and are willing to endure them in order to stay in power,” he said.

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