

Maduro's Pyrrhic Victory

by Allison Fedirka - July 30, 2024

Venezuela's National Electoral Council declared Nicholas Maduro the victor in the country's July 28 presidential elections. Official results showed he received 51 percent of the vote, while the opposition candidate, Edmundo Gonzalez Urrutia, won 44 percent. The results come as little surprise given that Maduro, now entering his third term, has regularly manipulated elections in his favor. But continuity for Maduro doesn't necessarily mean continuity for the government or Venezuela. Instead, it will amplify the government's vulnerabilities and put the country on a path to a much more uncertain future.

If anything, the election made it clear to Maduro that he no longer enjoys popular support. His political base relied heavily on people whose livelihoods depended on the government – be it through employment, public aid or other patronage avenues. As the country's financial and economic situation declined, so too did the government's ability to meet its people's needs. Public opinion polls suggested this trend was well underway even before the election. But since the surveys were conducted by nongovernmental organizations or opposition-linked entities, the government could easily dismiss the findings. Still, Caracas fully backed the elections and allowed for the opposition's participation. Opposition figures, local analysts and some foreign media believe the opposition won 70 percent of the popular vote. Venezuelan civil society, which is surprisingly strong, disseminated these estimates, as well as updates on impromptu anti-government protests.

Maduro may have won, but he must now face the opposition's systematic approach to delegitimizing the official results. Its claim over fraudulent results rests on the verification of votes. Prior to verification, the ballots at each voting center are counted. Voting in Venezuela is performed electronically, so each time someone votes, a receipt is printed and deposited into the ballot box. Counting the votes involves printing a tally of the votes cast on each machine. Authorities at each voting center send their results to the National Electoral Council. From there, the votes are verified by comparing individual receipts in the ballot box with the vote-counting tally. Roughly half of all voting centers go through this verification process. There have been many reports about failures to properly transmit machine tallies, opening space for the government to claim victory based on unverifiable totals. The opposition is very well versed in this process – its strategy has always been to work within the country's institutions. Its challenge to election results, based as it is on technical grounds, means to undermine the Maduro regime. While the opposition knows it will not reverse the National Electoral

Council's results, it hopes to instill doubt within other Venezuelan institutions.

Maduro will also face challenges from within the government's complicated web of power. Though considered an autocrat, Maduro does not wield absolute power. He controls large swaths of the government – such as the election council – but not the entire country. Acting independently – in, say, making guarantees to the U.S. – is both difficult and risky. Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino Lopez, for example, works closely with Maduro. He controls the armed forces, who answer to him, as well as some of the country's critical foreign relationships, particularly the one with Russia. Maduro must keep Padrino on his side or face a possible putsch by the military. There are also informal power brokers in the mix, most notably Diosdado Cabello, who oversees much of the country's illicit business and drug trafficking activities. He occupies little room within the government but benefits from the latitude Caracas gives him so long as he doesn't threaten the regime. Maduro, Padrino and Cabello are all subject to talks and influenced by third parties – be it the U.S., Russia or drug cartels.

Then there is the backlash the government will face from the international community. For most of Maduro's tenure – and Hugo Chavez's before his – the government practiced a political ideology derived from the Bolivarian revolution that criticized capitalism and demonized the U.S. as antithetical to Venezuelan ideals. Naturally, it has tended to side with countries opposed to U.S. policy, such as Iran, Russia and China. But over the past two years, as Caracas' search for relief from economic pressures dispelled the notion that regime change was impossible, ties between the U.S. and Venezuela began to improve, however marginally. Many of the improvements were predicated on whether Sunday's elections followed democratic procedures. This is now strongly in doubt. The United Kingdom, Panama, Chile, Spain, Peru and Argentina have all raised questions over the outcome. Brazil has called for greater transparency with the results and verifications for the sake of the government's legitimacy. Even Mexico's outgoing president, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, said he would wait for the final vote count before weighing in on the elections. For its part, the U.S. said that it would not prejudge the outcome but questions the veracity of the results. In other words, the countries that were slowly warming up to Venezuela may once again start to pull back.

This is tough news for a government that must still address its yearslong economic downturn. Given the doubts over the adherence to democratic processes, Washington will very likely revisit its sanctions regime on Venezuela, possibly increasing primary and secondary sanctions against the country. That Venezuela is on unsteady footing will also likely make companies otherwise interested in renewing or signing new business contracts with the country reconsider their plans. Both circumstances are problematic given that the Venezuelan economy needs outside funding to truly recover. Maduro said he plans to use an anti-blockade law to help attract funding from other actors,

but he won't find many takers, especially since doing business with Caracas could run afoul of U.S. sanctions.

Despite his "victory," Maduro now finds himself in an even more precarious situation. Anti-government protests have already started to ramp up and show no sign of drawing down in size, scope or aggression. Another wave of Venezuelan emigration is also expected, which will put even more pressure on Venezuela's ties with other nations in the region. It'll be a rocky month as the government prepares for the next round of local elections.

Author: Allison Fedirka

[Read more from this author on geopoliticalfutures.com](#)