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Venezuelan Presidential Elections 2018

KEY POINTS

- Venezuela is set to go to the polls on 20 May 2018.
- Elections were initially scheduled for December 2018 but were then moved to 22 April before being pushed back to the 20 May.
- The transparency of the vote has been called into question.



SITUATIONAL SUMMARY

Political: On 20 May 2018, Venezuela will go to the polls to elect a new president. Elections were initially scheduled to take place in December 2018 but were then moved to 22 April before being pushed back to the 20 May. Concerns about election manipulation have been issued by regional powers including Brazil, Mexico, and the United States, as well as the United Nations Human Rights Council, the European Union, and the Organization of American States. Indeed, the influential 'Lima Group', set up by regional powers in 2017 to address the ongoing crisis in Venezuela, issued a joint statement urging the Venezuelan government to suspend



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the planned elections, claiming it lacked credibility.

President Maduro, Hugo Chavez's chosen successor, is running for a second six-year term on the ticket of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela; Maduro has been in power since 2013. Venezuela is a nation beset by scarcities of food and medicine, hyperinflation, rampant corruption, an authoritarian government, and a mass exodus of its population, and a crime rate which makes it the deadliest country in the world.

The candidate that gains the most votes in the first round will win. Unlike in other presidential elections, the winner will not be required to gain 50 per cent of the vote.

SOLACE GLOBAL COMMENT

Who Will Win the Election?

There is little doubt that the winner of the 20 May vote will be Nicolas Maduro. Though it remains to be seen if he will win by legitimate means; voter abstention may lead to Maduro gaining enough votes to win or he may simply act fraudulently. Maduro maintains power through the violation of human rights and the Venezuelan constitution. He has taken Hugo Chavez's authoritarian tendencies further, becoming a dictator. Indeed, after losing control of the National Assembly to the opposition Democratic Unity coalition in 2015, Maduro filled the Supreme Court with his allies and created the Constituent Assembly. Legislative power now resides in the new Assembly which has been filled with Maduro supporters after the opposition refused to contest the vote. Even if Maduro technically loses the election, commentators have suggested that he will not leave the country without a struggle and may use military assistance to maintain his control.

The Opposition

One of the primary reasons that Maduro and his supporters have managed to maintain control is the fractured nature of the opposition movement in Venezuela. This has partly been attributed to the policies and decisions made by Maduro and the establishment; many notable opposition leaders have been jailed, exiled, or barred from running, notably Henrique Capriles who twice came close to winning the presidential election. The formal opposition coalition is boycotting the May 2018 vote, calling it a sham to legitimise Maduro's rule. The president is facing three opposition candidates which commentators have suggested could split the vote, the turnout for which is already expected to be low.

The primary opponent, and most likely to cause an upset win, is Henri Falcon on the ticket of the Progressive Advance party. Falcon is a former Chavista (a follower of the former President of Venezuela, Hugo Chavez) and former governor of Lara State. Falcon has been accused of not representing a significant change from the policies of Maduro which have led to Venezuela's significant problems. Conversely, Chavistas accuse him of being a traitor. Henri Falcon has been criticised by the opposition roundtable for helping to legitimise Maduro's eventual victory. Another candidate gaining ground is an evangelical pastor and businessman Javier Bertucci. Bertucci was linked to the Panama Papers scandal in 2016 and has been accused of being a religious reactionary.

What Will Happen after the Vote?

The reaction of the population after the vote is unclear at this time. Maduro and his regime have violently cracked down on pro-democracy demonstrations. More than 200 demonstrators have died under his rule, with thousands more wounded. Many do not foresee the nationwide, popular protests which Venezuela saw in 2014 and 2017. This has been attributed to public apathy over the election. With many opposition figures unable to provide leadership to the regime's opponents.



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Despite the United Nations reportedly being invited to observe the vote, few commentators expect this to be a transparent contest. This may encourage the United States and its regional allies to further increase the pressure on Maduro by implementing more sanctions. Indeed, on 14 May, the Lima Group vowed to consider steps if the vote went ahead and claimed that they had analysed possible scenarios and worked out a series of “actions” they could take, without going into detail on what such actions may consist of. Should further sanctions be implemented, this may lead to an increase in the societal and economic issues already outlined above and the further suffering of the populous; any sanctions would need to be highly targeted to hurt the elites rather than the general populous. While this may increase the pressure on Maduro, it will also likely heighten his resolve and enable him to use the United States as a scapegoat.

Neighbouring countries will also fear an additional influx of refugees and migrants. The best estimates suggest that 5,000 people are leaving Venezuela every day. Thousands have fled to Colombia, Brazil, Panama, Spain, the US, and even to the Caribbean, with deadly consequences at times. Moreover, many of these countries have issues of their own and are unable to adequately provide for these refugees.

How Can Stability be Restored to Venezuela?

The election of Maduro is only likely to hasten the demise of Venezuela as it continues to spiral out of control. The situation in Venezuela is likely to get worse before it gets better – the International Monetary Fund (IMF) expects the Venezuelan economy to shrink by 15 per cent this year. The recent rise in the oil price (linked to Middle East insecurity) may assist in drawing out this process but is unlikely to save Venezuela or provide an economic boom enjoyed by the country under Chavez. For stability to be restored, Venezuela’s international backers, notably China and Russia, would need to decide that they no longer had the patience for payment delays and conclude that their propping up of the regime was no longer viable or in their interest.

Alternatively, should the US and its allies engage and bargain with Maduro, they may be able to stem the tide of Venezuela’s demise. Engagement, perhaps with the Vatican as mediators, also ensures that the regime cannot use the United States to legitimise his own policies. Washington could also go further in supporting and recognising the opposition and National Assembly to help dissipate Maduro’s power.

SECURITY ADVICE

HIGH POLITICAL RISK



Travellers are advised to expect elevated security measures throughout Venezuela during and immediately following the elections, particularly in the vicinity of polling stations and political party headquarters. Travellers should reassess if their travel to Venezuela is business-critical, especially so during the election period. If not, it is recommended to delay journey plans. If in-country, travellers should avoid all crowds as they are highly likely to become violent and foreigners caught in demonstrations of this kind may be subjected to harsher punishments by local security forces. Those in country should review their security arrangements and evacuation plans in case the violence escalates further. Travellers are also advised to make preparations for further shortages of fuel, food, and medications. Should such shortages become a life-threatening concern, travellers should consider leaving the country.

For most travel to Venezuela, including the capital Caracas, Solace Global would advised clients to employ the minimum of an airport meet and greet, a security-trained driver for all travel, and an armed a close protection officer. It may also be advisable that this level of security is increased for other areas of the country or for specific client profiles. Travellers are also advised to use travel-tracking technology with an intelligence feed for all travel in Nicaragua. This should enable a traveller to be alerted of any security updates within their vicinity, and to update others of their movements in case of an emergency.



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