

## Hopes of fair elections in Venezuela are fading away

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In October 2023, the Venezuelan Government and a sector of the political opposition (represented by the Democratic Unitary Platform) signed an agreement in Barbados, celebrated by the US, in which President Nicolás Maduro committed to guarantee free and fair elections for 2024 (Asamblea Nacional de Venezuela, 2023; US Department of State, 2023). The agreement stated that every political actor could “freely” choose its candidates to run for the electoral competition; it established 12 electoral guarantees, including but not only, holding elections in the second half of 2024, depurating the electoral registry, and inviting electoral missions to observe elections, among others. Just the day after, the US temporarily lifted the sanctions on Venezuela’s oil and gas sector, which Maduro took great advantage of by signing multiple agreements with western companies (El País, 2023; The Economist, 2023). However, remarks and actions made by the Government, before and after the agreement, seem to indicate that President Maduro and his allies are not willing to concede or guarantee the conditions for fair democratic elections. Detentions, disqualifications, and alliances with autocracies, like Russia and Iran, are fading away hopes for democratic elections in Venezuela (Gutiérrez Rojas, 2023; BBC, 2024).

### The first indications

In June 2023, before signing the agreement, the Venezuelan ambassador to Russia held a meeting with delegates from the Central Electoral Commission of that country to witness the “technological advances” of the “transparent” Russian electoral system. The press release from the Venezuelan Ministry of Foreign Affairs argued that both sides had agreed to send electoral observation missions from

Russia to Venezuela (Venezuelan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). The second signal came in July 2023, when the comptroller decided to disqualify María Corina Machado from holding public offices for fifteen years, accusing her of “kidnapping 4 billion USD”, within the framework of the United States’ economic sanctions on Venezuela. This institution is led by the Chavista Elvis Amoroso, a former deputy and advisor to Nicolás Maduro, who has also previously used lawfare as a mean of taking competitors off the road (Alex, 2023). However, Machado reacted well and called the disqualification a sham and intensified her stance against the Venezuelan government. The decision was, however, ratified by the Venezuelan Supreme Court in January 2024 [Ruling 00005, Case 2023-0461] and as of today, it is unclear what her future will be (BBC Mundo, 2023). The third signal came in the same month, when the President of the National Assembly, Jorge Rodríguez, Vice President Delcy Rodríguez’s brother, in a speech before the legislative body, ruled out any possibility that Europe could send electoral missions to observe the 2024 elections. In his intervention, he said that every time the “ancient Europe or any empire tries to attack our sovereignty”, it must receive the strongest response from the Venezuelan people. And, appealing to a distant past, he assured that Europe was resentful because the American colonies had achieved their independence from Spain.

### Venezuela’s relationship with democracy

Venezuela’s democratic backsliding started in the early 2000s, when the then President, Hugo Chávez, turned the military into a political actor by granting

them economic control over state-owned firms, giving them political power, and starting to dismantle liberal institutions (Corrales, 2023). After 2015, with the defeat in the legislative election, Maduro deepened the autocratisation period by co-opting and capturing political institutions like the Electoral Court, the Supreme Court, and summoning a Constitutional Assembly to tackle the opposition-controlled legislature (Reuters, 2015). The democratic decline in Venezuela was a mixture of executive aggrandisement with electoral strategic manipulation. This occurs when the executive weakens other branches, either by co-optation or coercion, hampers political opposition, and manipulates electoral results. As highlighted by the 'Liberal Democracy Index' published by V-Dem, despite of ups and downs, regional democracy has experienced an overall improvement in the last 40 years, except for Venezuela (Bermeo, 2016).

Despite this democratic decline, Venezuela's Government has maintained its efforts in wielding a democratic discourse, albeit, democratic liberties are limited, elections are considered fraudulent by most western international observers, and freedom of expression is strictly controlled. The Barbados agreement is an additional assessed attempt to maintain this impression by offering "guarantees" for the upcoming electoral process of 2024, which at the time of writing, did not have a definitive date. The agreement, more than a real effort to strengthen Venezuelan democracy, is just a strategy of Maduro to pursuit benefits from the US, like the lifting of sanctions, which have been particularly harsh on Venezuela's oil and gas industry, country's main revenue source. Open data from the Organisation

of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, OPEC, shows that overall oil production plummeted after 2019 when Donald Trump recognised the interim Government of Juan Guaidó and imposed the sanctions (OPEC, 2023).

### Conclusions

Although appealing to a democratic discourse, and having signed an agreement with the political opposition, Maduro's government is assessed to be trying to obtain time from the US to get the maximum benefit of the deal by selling its sanctioned oil. By analysing pro-government social media, it seems that the strategy of Maduro is to take Machado off the electoral race, as she has been able to unite most of the opposition and the citizens and tighten harassment on the opposition. Now virtually out, the government has started to broadcast that they are ready for elections in 2024, that the Supreme Court's decision is independent, and that the real actor that is sabotaging the democratic process is the opposition. If future political talks occur, it is possible that the Venezuelan Government could weaponize some of its social and political problems to get more benefits from the US: in primis, the migration crisis affecting the southern border, of which Venezuelans comprise the largest group. Moreover, the Essequibo dispute with Guyana is causing distress for the US and even the UK, as the Armed Forces have mobilised military units to it as a threat of using force against its neighbour. Although highly unlikely to develop into a proper military confrontation, Maduro could also deploy this crisis to keep pressuring the US for it to keep softening sanctions on Venezuela the US.

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