

VENEZUELA DESK



HOW TO STOP A COUP

BY MARK FEIERSTEIN

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Less than a month before the presidential election in Venezuela, a growing sense of hope about the outcome is breaking through the usual skepticism about the country's political prospects.

On the one hand, doubts abound about the authoritarian regime's willingness to allow a vote that would jeopardize its hold on power. Many observers expect Nicolás Maduro to succeed where Jair Bolsonaro and the Guatemalan political establishment failed by suspending, manipulating, or overturning the election. At the same time, the Venezuelan opposition is increasingly optimistic that its unity candidate, Edmundo González, will win the July 28 contest by such an ample margin that Maduro would have no choice but to acknowledge the outcome. That confidence reflects unprecedented cohesion in the opposition coalition despite regime efforts to sow division. It is also a result of artful US diplomacy that helped keep the electoral option alive.

Going forward, there are questions about how the United States and other democratic actors could promote a legitimate election in Venezuela. After all, foreign governments have often appeared powerless to influence Maduro. The Venezuelan leader is rarely responsive to advice from democratic governments, and he regularly breaks commitments to uphold minimal democratic standards.

That said, the United States and other countries could do a lot over the next few days to promote a legitimate election and a democratic transition. Indeed, Washington has already made important contributions to this complex process. Negotiations with the Venezuelan government and the skillful leveraging of economic sanctions persuaded the regime to permit the opposition primary in October. That vote established María Corina Machado as the undisputed opposition leader, forged unity among opposition parties, and revived the Venezuelan people's confidence in elections as the best way to resolve the country's prolonged political, economic, and humanitarian crises. The administration wisely coordinated those diplomatic efforts with Colombia and Brazil, whose leftist leaders have greater

access to the Maduro regime. To be sure, Presidents Gustavo Petro of Colombia and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil have been

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inconsistent in their support for democracy in Venezuela. Yet their intermittent interventions have been timely and consequential. Were it not for Lula’s engagement, for example, the regime likely would have derailed González’s candidacy, as it did to Machado and the

opposition’s second choice, Corina Yoris.

Whether the US strategy ultimately results in a democratic transition depends on three factors: the regime not interfering with González’s candidacy; the government accepting defeat if it loses; and a peaceful and orderly handover of power. The United States has a role to play in all three.

The simplest way for the regime to derail the election would be to disqualify González, leading the opposition to boycott or collectively rally around one of the other ten candidates that qualified to compete. Alternatively, it could ban one or several of the parties supporting González—he appears on the ballot as the candidate representing three parties—but still include those parties on the ballot to confuse opposition voters. That would force the opposition to engage in a massive civic education campaign to help Venezuelans ensure they do not spoil their ballots. For that reason, the United States and its partners in Europe, Brazil, Colombia, and other democratic nations should emphatically signal their repudiation of any additional measures that undermine González’s candidacy. The playing field is already uneven, including as a result of government persecution of opposition campaign personnel. It is critical for international actors to clarify the limits of their tolerance for the regime’s electoral misconduct.

Fortunately, regime hubris is an asset. Jorge Rodríguez, Maduro’s electoral strategist and chief negotiator with the United States, has said that he is confident Maduro will defeat González, notwithstanding public opinion polls that give the opposition candidate a significant lead. If Rodríguez is convinced

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Maduro is coasting to a third term, the international community should take advantage of that overconfidence and counsel against sidelining González and jeopardizing international recognition of the election.

Gathering reliable information on election day will be challenging. The United States has not operated an embassy in Caracas since 2019 and the regime has limited the presence of international election observers by rescinding an invitation to the European Union. Disinformation will likely circulate widely on social media, with run-of-the-mill irregularities—delays in the opening of some polling sites, shortages of voting materials, minor errors in electoral registries—portrayed falsely as evidence of systematic fraud.

That presents the State Department with a challenge, to evaluate the quality of the election and effectively communicate its findings internationally and inside Venezuela. Fortunately, despite systematic repression of the news media and civil society, there are top-notch Venezuelan journalists, independent analysts, and NGOs that specialize in elections. The Carter Center will also provide on-the-ground observations, from its small team and a network of reliable sources.

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No matter what, the vote count will be tense. The opposition plans to deploy a poll watcher to nearly every polling site, despite regime efforts to impede oversight. That means the González campaign should receive printed copies of the results at nearly all polling places, allowing it to verify the official count. That would also permit the opposition and independent observers to conduct so-called quick counts—statistical samples of actual results from around the country—that could reveal the likely winner before the regime has an opportunity to lie about vote tallies or discredit the process.

Either way, regime allies in the National Electoral Council might be tempted to manipulate the results. Fortunately, at that point, the Biden administration would have a successful playbook to draw from, having helped prevent post-election coups in Brazil in 2022 and Guatemala last year.

In advance of Brazil's election, Bolsonaro began spreading spurious claims about potential electoral fraud and allegedly conspired with the country's military to prevent a potential return to power of Lula, his archrival. In response, for more than a year, the White House, Pentagon, and State Department helped avert the plot, including through private engagements with Brazilian officials. Similarly, after Guatemala's attorney general and economic elites sought to overturn the election of the reformist Bernardo Arévalo, the Biden administration marshaled a strong response, imposing individual

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sanctions and threatening broad economic penalties to persuade the influential conservative business community to accept the election results.

The US policy levers that helped preserve democracy in Brazil and Guatemala are not equally available in Venezuela. For one, Brazil and Guatemala are

longstanding political and economic partners, giving the United States a greater degree of influence. By contrast, Venezuela is a heavily sanctioned country, backed by US adversaries China, Russia, and Iran. That said, by coordinating with a range of partners, inside and outside the country, the United States could again play an important role in fighting for democracy in Latin America.

A good place to start might be the National Electoral Council. Though a rubber stamp for the regime—Maduro handpicked its president, Elvin Amoroso, who takes orders from Rodríguez—the council retains the technology and administrative capacity to properly manage an election. The council also had a long history of professionalism in Venezuela's democratic era and its leadership might be subject to influence from counterparts in the region, should the council decide to restore its image. The United States could help encourage that regional outreach.

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Should Maduro choose to derail González's candidacy, manipulate the election results, or obstruct a potential presidential transition, he would rely on the Venezuelan security services to silence dissent and crush public protest. It is not clear that rank and file conscripts and low- and mid-level officers would repress demonstrators on behalf of a president the electorate had just roundly rejected. There might also be an opportunity to convince the military command to protect the rights of voters. That is not an easy sell. After all, Maduro and his predecessor, the former army officer Hugo Chávez, won the loyalty of the armed forces through a long period of indoctrination and by giving senior officers political influence and control of strategic economic sectors. But historically, military leaders have seen themselves as protectors of Venezuela's constitution. As recently as 2015, Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino López quickly accepted the opposition's overwhelming victory in National Assembly elections, foreclosing any attempts to invalidate, or skew, the results. As with the National Electoral Council, the United States might not be the most effective actor to reawaken the Venezuelan military's democratic instincts. But Washington could encourage outreach by military commanders in the region that have maintained ties to senior Venezuelan officers.

To help persuade the National Electoral Council and armed forces to do the right thing on election day, the United States and its partners should issue prompt, clear warnings of any hint of electoral fraud, through public statements and private communications. The release of credible election results should be met immediately by public statements recognizing the outcome. Similarly, any delay in announcing vote tallies, or signals the regime is unwilling to recognize the outcome, should prompt a cascade of international condemnation and outreach to senior Venezuelan leaders. Brazil, given its global and regional diplomatic weight and Lula's image as a leftist icon and longtime friendship with Chávez, could be particularly effective in these international efforts.

There is understandable skepticism that any of these tactics would succeed. After all, Maduro has repeatedly made it clear that he has no intention of leaving power. For that reason, defenders of Venezuela's democracy face another crucial challenge in the run-up and aftermath of the election: convincing Maduro, his closest allies, and the leadership of the armed forces that a democratic transition would not leave them behind bars for public corruption and human rights abuses. Though that fate is

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well-deserved in many cases, fear of prosecution would lead regime insiders to short-circuit a democratic transition.

González is a mild-mannered retired diplomat committed to national reconciliation, but the fiery Machado remains the country’s most popular political figure and she makes regime elites anxious. Machado has sent signals about the need for political compromise, but given her history of uncompromising rhetoric, she has likely failed to persuade the government and military that she is not out for revenge. Here again, Colombia and Brazil could help. Senior officials in both countries have spoken to Machado in recent months and could persuade the regime that she would prioritize national unity should the opposition take power in January. They could also remind their counterparts that Maduro’s Chavista movement would still control the judiciary, legislature, and armed forces following the loss of a presidential election, providing a large measure of protection from persecution and political bloodletting.

The United States could also provide reassurances, before and after the election, that an electoral defeat would not leave Chavista leaders imprisoned. For one, the State Department could withdraw the \$15 million reward for information leading to Maduro’s arrest. More significantly, the Justice Department could drop its indictment of the Venezuelan leader and other senior officials for alleged drug trafficking. Both steps would be politically sensitive and bureaucratically complicated, but they are well worth considering to help restore Venezuela’s democracy and stabilize the country, a development that would expand global energy supplies, reduce migration to the United States, and deprive US adversaries of a key partner in South America.

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Dislodging a longstanding authoritarian regime is always hard to accomplish, and so there is a strong temptation to give up hope on the flawed electoral process underway this summer in Venezuela. But the courageous Venezuelan opposition and its millions of supporters are willing to fight on, despite enormous personal risks. It is in the US interest to exhaust every diplomatic option to help them succeed.

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