

Venezuela's Highly Unusual Presidential Election

This is the best opportunity since 1998 that the opposition has to defeat the Bolivarian Revolution. So why are they boycotting the election? Greg Wilpert asks

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Venezuela will hold its 24th electoral event in 20 years this Sunday, 20 May. The path to this election was perhaps one of the most convoluted and difficult of Venezuela's now nearly 20-year Bolivarian Revolution.

First, there was a snap election in 2013, a mere five weeks after president Chávez died of cancer on 5 March. The opposition believed this was their best chance since 1998 to oust 'Chavismo' from power and so, when its candidate, Henrique Capriles Radonski, lost to Nicolas Maduro by a mere 1.5 per cent, they cried fraud and launched a wave of violent protests and riots that left at least nine dead.

The following year the opposition launched another wave of violent protests (known as 'guarimbas') that lasted about three months and left 43 people dead. This opposition tactic, which the opposition tried again in 2017, was immensely effective on an international level because every time it was applied, and people were killed (most of the time at the hands of the protesters themselves), the international perception of Venezuela - as mediated by international news outlets - was significantly worsened. It was thus only a small step to routinely begin to refer to Venezuela as a dictatorship, despite its more than annual electoral contests.

Meanwhile, following president Chávez's death, Venezuela's economic situation began to deteriorate significantly. The inflation rate rose from 21 per cent in 2012 to over 100 per cent in 2015 (and turned into hyper-inflation in 2018), basic consumer items and of food staples became increasingly difficult to purchase because of shortages, oil revenues dropped by two-thirds, from an estimated \$77 billion in 2012 to \$25 billion in 2016 - all of which gave the opposition additional reasons to launch ever-more uncompromising attacks on the government.

The [reasons for the economic crisis](#) are manifold, but its heart can be found in the confluence of: a fixed exchange rate, a concerted business sector effort to undermine the economy, declining oil prices, and - beginning in 2017 - US financial sanctions, all of which combined to create one of the worst economic crises in Venezuelan history.

Seeing its situation as increasingly precarious, the Maduro government decided to engage in a series of negotiations with the opposition, which the government of the Dominican Republic and Spain's former prime minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero mediated. In the course of the negotiations there was a general agreement that Venezuela's presidential election, which normally was scheduled to take place in October or November 2018, should

be moved up to the first half of 2018.

At first, the 22nd of April was the agreed-upon date, but in the last minutes before the agreement was to be signed in late February, opposition representatives decided to withdraw. Exactly why they withdrew is not completely clear, but it seems quite [plausible that the US government intervened](#) and convinced the opposition not to sign the agreement.

Rodriguez Zapatero went out of his way to criticize the opposition's last-minute withdrawal, [stating](#),

'I find it shocking that the document was not signed by the opposition representation. I do not agree with the circumstances and the reasons, but my duty is to defend the truth and my commitment is not to give up on the achievement of a historic commitment among Venezuelans.'

The Maduro government then announced that it would sign the agreement anyway and proceed with the 22 April presidential election, with or without the opposition. The opposition, in contrast, announced it would boycott the election.

At first, the only major opposition leader to break from this decision was Henri Falcon, who immediately announced his candidacy for the presidency. Eventually, Falcon and Maduro agreed to set a new date - 20 May - for the presidential election, to give more time for campaigning.

Henri Falcon has always been a bit of a 'maverick' politician. Originally, he was a staunch Chavez supporter and governor of Lara state, one of Venezuela's more populous states. However, [he broke from Chávez](#) in 2010. Already before 2010 Falcon had been regarded with suspicion by many Chavistas, mainly for his somewhat pro-business stance and for his often lukewarm support of the governing United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) party. Eventually, in 2012, he joined the opposition coalition, the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) and formed his own political party, Progressive Advance. In 2013 he even became Henrique Capriles' campaign manager in the presidential election of that year.

Falcon's break with the MUD for the 2018 presidential election has caused hardline opposition leaders to regard him very suspiciously. However, despite this, he is enjoying the support of many moderate opposition leaders, such as Claudio Fermin, a long-time Venezuelan politician, who is now Falcon's campaign manager, and of Jesus Torrealba, the former chair of the MUD.

The MUD's decision to boycott the election should be puzzling. This is the best opportunity since 1998 that the opposition has to defeat the Bolivarian Revolution. The economy is now in hyper-inflation territory, real wages have dropped dramatically, and shortages continue to cause problems, especially in the area of medicines. Under such circumstances it ought to be possible to defeat even the enormously popular Chavez himself, were he alive today.

So why is the MUD boycotting the election? The official explanation is that there are insufficient guarantees that there will be no fraud. Key opposition demands and the creation of a new National Electoral Council and the dropping of charges against several key opposition leaders. I will return to the issue of the safety of the vote a little later, but even if

the fraud concern were legitimate, no election in history has been successfully challenged with a preemptive boycott instead of participating and subsequently proving fraud.

The only other plausible explanation for a preemptive boycott is that the opposition does not want to win 'only' the presidency. That is, it wants a radical break from the Bolivarian Revolution and the only way it can do that is to provoke a political and economic crisis that would lead to a coup or some other form of radical regime change. That is, Chavistas continue to dominate not only the Supreme Court, the National Electoral Council, the Attorney General's office, but also the National Constituent Assembly, which is in charge of re-writing the constitution.

Under such circumstances governing from an opposition-controlled presidency, even under Venezuela's somewhat presidential system, would be extremely difficult. Given that opposition leader [Julio Borges and others are lobbying](#) for ever tougher sanctions against Venezuela, it seems clear that the strategy is to force a complete collapse of the government and not to participate any longer in any democratic processes within Venezuela.

Those who know about Venezuela from mainstream media no doubt dismiss Venezuela's electoral system as a sham. However, contrary to popular belief, Venezuela actually has one of the most transparent and fraud-proof election systems in the world. It developed such a system precisely because of the country's pre-1998 experience with rampant fraud, which led to the development of an exceptionally secure voting system.

This is not the place to go into this in detail, but it is a dual balloting system, in which paper ballots and electronic ballots are both cast and compared against one another. Also, every step of [the process](#), from the voter registry, to the voting machines, to the fingerprint scanners, to the tabulation systems are thoroughly audited by election observers from all political parties. All of this makes Venezuela's voting system far more secure and fraud-proof than practically [any other voting system in the world](#).

The main problem that opposition candidate Henri Falcon faces now is not the voting system, but the lack of institutional support. With all of the main opposition parties boycotting the vote (only three parties out of over 20 opposition parties are supporting his candidacy), he is having a hard time mobilizing supporters for rallies and for his campaign more generally. On top of it all, Falcon must convince opposition voters not to participate in the boycott. Maduro, on the other hand, has the formidable machinery of the PSUV at his disposal. The country's severe economic crisis, though, evens the scales quite a bit.

Opinion polls have been all over the place in terms of who is ahead in this race. In the past Venezuelan opinion polls have always been extremely partisan, with pro-government polls reliably showing the government candidate ahead and opposition polls showing the opposition candidate ahead. However, usually in the week before the election the polling numbers of the two sides tended to converge. This time around, though, they have remained as far apart as ever before. Pro-government pollsters, such as the company Hinterlaces give Maduro a 17 point advantage. Opposition pollsters, such as Datanalisis, are giving Falcon an 11 point advantage over Maduro. The main reason for the uncertainty in polling is the boycott. It is extremely difficult to know how many voters will participate. Opposition polls say it will be no more than 35 per cent, while pro-government polls put the participation figure at 70 per cent. In the end, whether Falcon or Maduro will win will depend entirely on how many voters abstain.

Regardless of who wins, however, Venezuela's future remains extremely uncertain. US efforts at radical regime change – targeting not just the presidency, but all state institutions – will make governing the country difficult no matter who wins. Already the US, and under its pressure almost all other conservative governments in the region, has pledged not to recognize the result. The pre-emptive non-recognition of an election, despite the use of one of the world's most secure voting systems, is completely unprecedented in Latin American history.

If Maduro wins, the US will no doubt intensify sanctions, perhaps prohibiting the import of Venezuelan oil. If Falcon wins, he would also have to manage an extremely complicated situation, in which most state institutions remain in Chavista hands and in which the opposition and the US possibly refuse to recognize him as the legitimate president.

As president of the Second Republic of Venezuela, Simón Bolívar, explained in the early 19th century, the US thus continues to 'plague [the] America[s] with misery in the name of liberty.'

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