

# VENEZUELA DESK



## VENEZUELA AND THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN AUTOCRACY AND DEMOCRACY

BY LEOPOLDO LÓPEZ

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# **VENEZUELA AND THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN AUTOCRACY AND DEMOCRACY**

**BY LEOPOLDO LÓPEZ**

Venezuela stands at the center of a global struggle between autocracy against democracy. The conflict over Venezuela's July 28 election will not only determine the fate of the South American nation, but also shape the broader clash between two models of governance.

Immediately following the electoral fraud in Venezuela, autocratic powers such as China, Cuba, Iran, Nicaragua, and Russia recognized the distorted results favoring Nicolás Maduro's dictatorial regime. Their support was unsurprising, given their own disregard for human rights and democracy. Soon afterward, other autocracies followed suit, consolidating a bloc that supports Maduro and promotes his style of repressive rule.

Indeed, even as the United States, European Union, and most governments in Latin America refuse to recognize the election results and protests intensify at home, it would be a mistake to say Maduro is isolated. Russia, for example, remains a key ally. Vladimir Putin, no stranger to rigged elections, is an important investor in Venezuela's oil industry despite US sanctions. In July, he sent warships to Venezuela as a sign of support. Iran, where elections select figureheads to serve under the supreme leader, is another pillar of support for Maduro, helping Maduro smuggle gold. China, which does not bother to hold elections at all, has loaned tens of billions of dollars to prop up Chavismo over its quarter-century in power.

The governments that support Maduro share common traits, including systematic human rights violations, censorship, and a refusal to hold free and fair elections. However, their alliance is not ideological. Rather, it is undergirded by a common purpose, to keep one another in power at all costs. They are also united by a common enemy, liberal democracy, characterized by free elections, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. These regimes attempt to undermine democracy wherever it exists and do everything possible to prevent its emergence elsewhere.

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Despite knowing that the elections on July 28 would be neither free nor fair, Venezuelans decided to participate, supporting presidential candidate Edmundo González and opposition leader María Corina

Machado. As polls predicted, González dominated in all states and municipalities, winning nearly 70% of the vote. Nevertheless, what many feared came to pass, Maduro ignored the results and claimed victory.

What happened next, however, was genuinely surprising, and has terrified Maduro. Hundreds of thousands of people spontaneously took to the streets, especially in working-class communities where Chavismo traditionally enjoyed support. Protestors tore down statues of former President Hugo Chávez, mirroring the fervor seen in other nations when dictatorships fall, such as in the Soviet Union, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, and Libya under Muammar Gaddafi. Scenes of police and soldiers removing their uniforms and joining protests raised hopes that anguished Venezuelans might have a chance to peacefully express their frustration.

Instead, Maduro fulfilled his pre-election threat of a “bloodbath.” He deployed armed gangs known as colectivos to assault demonstrators, his security services detained over 1,000 individuals. Among Venezuela’s new political prisoners is Freddy Superlano, the leader of the Voluntad Popular party.

The fate of Venezuela matters to its neighbors, who have already absorbed millions of Venezuelan migrants and refugees. It is also consequential for global oil markets. But there is another reason to focus on the struggles of the Venezuelan opposition: the evolution of this crisis will influence the global struggle between autocracy and democracy. If Venezuela achieves a democratic transition, it would be the first such transition this century, offering a beacon of hope for other nations in similar situations.

For almost two decades, the world has seen a rise in autocracies, with the percentage of the global population living in a dictatorship increasing from



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42% in 2012 to 72% in 2023. Reversing that trend will not be easy. Autocratic forces, both internal and external, will do everything possible to maintain the status quo. That is why the world's democracies should invest similar energy to cooperate in support of the Venezuelan people in their fight for freedom and justice.

The first step is for democratic governments to recognize González as president-elect of Venezuela. That recognition would delegitimize the Maduro regime, defend the rights of Venezuelan voters, and help put Venezuela on a path to rebuild its democracy. Importantly, by acknowledging González's victory, democratic leaders would also send a message to other tyrants who are tempted to commit electoral fraud and crush dissent, and inspire democratic opposition movements fighting for a similar transition of power.

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