

The Maduro Regime Held Another Sham Election—What Happens Now?



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On May 25, Venezuela held regional and parliamentary elections. Amid an environment of political repression, piddling voter turnout, and a boycott by the mainstream opposition, the regime claimed a handy victory with more than 80 percent of the vote. But the patina of legitimacy accorded by the vote does little to remedy the situation for ordinary Venezuelans and may in fact embolden the

regime to pursue a more aggressive stance, including against neighboring Guyana, where the simmering conflict has been stoked in the lead-up to the election.

Q1: Why is Venezuela holding elections again, and what are the expected results?

A1: After the stolen presidential elections of July 28, 2024, and subsequent efforts to obfuscate the results, the Maduro regime is in dire need of two things: a change of narrative and a fig leaf of legitimacy. As CSIS has written previously, “authoritarian rulers do not need elections, but they often have them. Even in closed political systems, elections can be useful—rulers can use them to distribute resources, monitor grievances, and establish a veneer of international legitimacy.” Indeed, the Maduro regime often points to the number of elections it holds to claim it is one of the most democratic countries in Latin America. The stolen mandate narrative and opposition leader María Corina Machado’s continued popularity and presence in Venezuela are all inconvenient facts of life for Maduro; accelerating the timeline for National Assembly, gubernatorial, and regional legislative council elections, usually held in December, is part of the regime’s attempt to distract and change the narrative. This was the intention of Sunday’s vote.

Since the July elections, the United States recognized Edmundo González Urrutia as “the true winner” of the election; the Carter Center declared that the election “did not meet international standards of electoral integrity and cannot be considered democratic”; and the current Trump administration is considering further restrictions on U.S. oil companies operating in Venezuela. Domestically, thousands of Venezuelans took to the streets for weeks after the July election to protest the regime’s fabricated election results.

The Maduro regime is focused on easing domestic and international pressure, and step one is holding performative elections. The elections had the additional goal of dividing the opposition over the difficult question of participation versus an electoral boycott to deny the regime the legitimacy it craves. While there is never a perfect answer to the question of participation in elections under authoritarian regimes, few elements of the opposition decided to participate in Maduro’s sham process. Rather, most of the opposition opted not to participate in these elections after the Maduro regime failed to publish and honor the results of the presidential elections last July. To do so would risk dishonoring the overwhelming mandate

given to the opposition in last year's elections. The Democratic Unitary Platform, the largest opposition conglomerate led by María Corina Machado, strongly criticized two opposition parties that participated in the election and called the action "unforgivable." She also called for a public boycott of the elections and promised "empty streets," given that Venezuelans "have voted already." Absent international observers and given the cooptation of the electoral authorities, turnout is difficult to ascertain; however, according to some pollsters, fewer than 3 out of 10 Venezuelans were expected to show up to the polls, though Maduro has promised to invest in a "special project" in the top 10 localities with the highest voter turnout. According to the opposition, turnout may have been as low as 12 percent, while noted election expert Eugenio Martínez estimated that turnout was likely below 20 percent—even in areas with robust support for the regime.

With minimal participation by the opposition and a lower-than-average turnout, *Chavismo* swept the elections and picked up the majority of the seats in the national assembly and nearly all governorships, including those where the nominal opposition previously governed (Nueva Esparta, Barinas, and Zulia), claiming victory over the opposition. The Maduro regime will now accelerate its narrative of turning the page on the disgraced July 2024 stolen elections.

Q2: What has changed since Venezuela's last elections?

A2: The Maduro regime ramped up domestic repression considerably in the wake of last summer's brazenly stolen presidential election. Maduro appointed longtime regime loyalist and enforcer Diosdado Cabello as interior minister, who has spearheaded widespread terror. The regime recorded live arrest videos of opposition members, even setting them to popular Christmas carols.

The number of political prisoners has decreased as Maduro seeks a rapprochement with the Trump administration. But at one point last year, Venezuela counted more than 2,000 political prisoners, leapfrogging Cuba as the country with the largest number of political prisoners in the Western Hemisphere. Widespread fear of arbitrary detention still prevails, with Venezuelans reluctant to leave home—much less protest—without a burner phone or at least clearing their social media of recent messages and posts. Opposition leader María Corina Machado remains in hiding, while the winner of the July 2024 presidential elections, Edmundo González Urrutia, was driven into exile in Spain. Later, the Maduro regime kidnapped and

disappeared his son-in-law, who was not permitted to leave with González and his wife, and who remains disappeared as of this writing.

The Biden administration responded to Maduro's election theft with several rounds of individual sanctions for those involved, but refrained from issuing sectoral sanctions or revoking lucrative oil licenses to companies such as Chevron that still operate in Venezuela. The Trump administration, on the other hand, has used oil licenses as a lever of negotiation on deportation flights with the Maduro regime, promising to end Chevron's license by May 27, 2025.

Meanwhile, Maduro has hunkered down and focused on consolidating the sources of domestic support for his regime—especially loyalty within the military. In January, he held a hastily arranged and heavily guarded inauguration for his illegitimate third term, a sparsely attended affair featuring a rogue's gallery of authoritarians. In the face of González's promise to return to Venezuela to take the oath of office, the Maduro regime closed the country's borders and airspace, even activating its Russian-made air defense systems. Since the inauguration, the regime has gone about purging the ranks of those suspected of supporting the opposition during the 2024 presidential elections, especially in the face of an increased bounty of \$25 million for Maduro's capture. The regime has also undertaken considerable changes to the country's election system, eliminating a QR code system to secure vote tally sheets at individual polling places—a critical piece of the opposition's strategy last year for proving their victory and thus the Maduro regime's brazen election theft. Lastly, anticipating further sanctions and a possible end to oil licenses, early reports indicate the regime has ramped up drug trafficking and other illicit sources of revenue, such as illegal gold mining.

Q3: What are the stances of the opposition and the international community regarding these elections?

A3: Calling the elections a “farce,” Venezuelan opposition leader María Corina Machado firmly urged a boycott: “May 25 will be a huge defeat for the regime because it will find itself absolutely alone,” Machado expressed on social media, vowing that polling centers will be “empty.” While Machado's message resonated with those demanding justice for the past election fraud, some within the opposition saw participation as the only option. Henrique Capriles Radonski, a two-time former presidential candidate, considered voting a means of preserving

civic power. According to Capriles, abstention would do nothing but surrender more power to Maduro: “I don’t see how the voice of the Venezuelan people is going to be kept alive if it is not expressed.” A previous 2018 opposition boycott of Venezuela’s presidential elections led to a political crisis in 2019, resulting in over 50 governments worldwide rejecting Maduro’s legitimacy and recognizing opposition leader Juan Guaidó as interim president. Still, a vast majority of the opposition agreed with Machado’s call for a boycott, fearing participation would lend legitimacy to a sham process.

For its part, the international community has remained largely disengaged, showing no signs of intervening in the elections or negotiating conditions with Maduro’s regime. The European Union, which rejected Maduro’s claimed mandate in July 2024 and broadened its sanctions earlier this year, has not commented yet as of this writing. This muted response points to a shift in foreign policy priorities among Western nations, as well as pressure from other crises, including Russia’s ongoing war, the Israel-Hamas conflict, and global economic uncertainty. One of the few expressions of solidarity came during the Democracy and Liberty Group Forum on May 22, 2025, in Madrid, where Venezuela’s political crisis was one of the central themes discussed among conservative Latin American former leaders and senior officials from Spain’s opposition People’s Party. For their part, the United States and Canada also issued statements condemning the vote as illegitimate and corrosive to both Venezuelan society and regional stability.

Q4: Voters will elect a governor of a new state, “Guayana Esequiba”—how does this relate to the Maduro regime’s escalating strategy against Guyana over the Essequibo region?

A4: Not content with stealing the National Assembly, gubernatorial, and regional legislative council elections, Maduro used this occasion to try to “steal” the Essequibo region from Guyana as well. Following its December 2023 referendum, Maduro had the National Electoral Council include the fictitious “Guayana Esequiba” as a federal state of the country and organized elections for eight seats in the National Assembly as well as for a putative state governor. Neil Villamizar, an admiral in the Venezuelan Navy, was elected governor, with 97.4 percent of the vote. When Maduro presented him as a candidate in early April 2025, he said his campaign would aim to achieve 100 percent of the vote, leaving little doubt that the election in the Essequibo was nothing but another sham.

The regime organized elections in the Essequibo despite the fact that Venezuela does not exercise any sovereignty over the region, which is an integral part of Guyana, according to an 1899 arbitral award rejected by Venezuela. Venezuela claims the territory for itself, and the dispute is currently before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to be resolved. At the request of Guyana, the ICJ issued a provisional measure on May 1, 2025, ordering Venezuela to refrain from conducting elections, or preparing to conduct elections, in the territory in dispute, “which the Co-operative Republic of Guyana currently administers and over which it exercises control.” Since none of the candidates could campaign in the Guyanese-controlled Essequibo, nor any Guyanese vote in the election, this was simply a provocative political exercise aimed at antagonizing Guyana. It did, however, have the practical effect of adding eight more members of the Chavista-controlled National Assembly who will support the Venezuelan regime. These members are likely to elevate the issue of the Essequibo in Venezuela’s domestic political discourse in the coming months, along with the new governor, who can carry out and oversee actions against Guyana, such as military patrols and further build-up along the border.

The holding of elections, despite the ICJ’s order, is part of Venezuela’s long-running strategy of compellence, which CSIS has documented in detail. The strategy aims to pressure Guyana into some sort of negotiation over the status of the resource-rich Essequibo region, or its maritime boundaries. Villamizar’s active service in the Venezuelan Navy confirms the importance of the military dimension to Maduro’s strategy on the Essequibo question. In the run-up to the election, on May 15, the Guyana Defense Force was conducting riverine patrols along the Cuyuní River (which constitutes the border) when armed men in civilian clothing on the Venezuelan shore attacked them on three separate occasions; fortunately, there were no injuries. This followed a similar attack in February when six Guyanese soldiers were wounded when a similar riverine patrol was ambushed by suspected members of a Venezuelan *sindicato*, or criminal organization engaged in illegal mining. At least one powerful *sindicato* in Venezuela’s bordering Bolivar state has long maintained alliances with state actors. Despite Venezuela’s ongoing efforts to engage in a strategy of compellence, Guyana firmly rejects the idea of any cession of territory, confident that the ICJ will eventually reaffirm its sovereignty over the Essequibo.

Q5: How does this impact U.S. policy toward Venezuela, and how does another round of sham elections potentially affect sanctions policy?

A5: The Trump administration's Venezuela policy has oscillated between limited dealmaking focused on repatriating U.S. hostages and ensuring the acceptance of deportation flights and a return to a more forceful sanctions posture focused on denying Maduro oil revenues. In February 2025, the latter position appeared ascendant, as the White House announced the rescission of Chevron's license, granted under the Biden administration in November 2022, to export oil from Venezuela to Gulf Coast refineries. In March, the administration went further still, announcing that any country importing Venezuelan oil would have a 25 percent tariff applied to all of its exports to the United States after April 2. These "secondary tariffs" represented a novel form of sanctions pressure, with significant implications for China as the primary consumer of Venezuelan oil.

However, Venezuelan oil exports to China continued apace, much of it rebranded as Brazilian crude to evade detection (the Malaysian transshipment route remained active as well). Meanwhile, the U.S.-China tit-for-tat tariff escalation and subsequent drawdown likely diminished the appetite for aggressively enforcing secondary tariffs. Some recent reporting announced that the United States would extend Chevron's license for another 60 days, granting more time for the company to draw down operations. At the time of this writing, however, it appears as though May 27 is the drawdown date for Chevron, as public reporting states the Office of Foreign Assets Control appears to be readying a limited maintenance license similar to Chevron's license under the first Trump administration. It is telling that other sanctions, including targeted sanctions, visa restrictions, and bounties on Maduro regime officials, have been affirmed by the administration.

Within this uncertain context, in themselves, the regional elections and their dubious legitimacy are unlikely to shift U.S. policy in one direction or another. However, given the regime clamped down on the opposition before the election, arresting around 70 members of the opposition and activists, including Juan Pablo Guanipa, and given the regime may leverage the vote as an opportunity to fan the flames of Essequibo annexation, it could provoke a more forceful response from the White House. Indeed, some public reporting suggests President Trump is currently weighing a plan drawn up by Secretary of State Marco Rubio to bring greater pressure on the Maduro regime and to reaffirm the U.S. goal of a democratic transition in Venezuela.

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