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Venezuela: Political situation, including the 2024 presidential elections; treatment of political opponents and protesters (2023–February 2025)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

1. Overview

Sources indicate that the Venezuelan government and the opposition signed an agreement in October 2023 to hold open and fair elections in 2024 (AQ 2023-10-20; *Forbes* 2024-02-06). However, according to the Carter Center, a US-based NGO that promotes democracy and human rights (The Carter Center n.d.), the [28 July] 2024 elections in Venezuela, "did not meet international standards of electoral integrity and cannot be considered democratic" (The Carter Center 2024-07-30). The interim report of the UN Panel of Experts on the Venezuelan Presidential Elections indicates that in these elections, the Venezuelan National Electoral Council (Consejo Nacional Electoral, CNE) "did not follow national legal and regulatory provisions" and "fell short of the basic transparency and integrity measures that are essential to holding credible elections" (UN 2024-08-09).

BBC reports that the head of the CNE, who is a "close ally" of President Nicolás Maduro's regime, announced that President Maduro won the elections; this was rejected by the opposition, which announced that Edmundo González [Urrutia] had won (BBC 2024-07-29). Edmundo González Urrutia was the candidate of the opposition Unitary Platform [Democratic Unitary Platform (Plataforma Unitaria Democrática, PUD); Plataforma Unitaria (PU)] (Al Jazeera 2024-09-09; Inter-American Dialogue n.d.). Sources indicate that the Supreme Court in Venezuela, which is "packed with Maduro loyalists" (AP 2024-08-22) or "stacked with Maduro allies" (*The New York Times* 2024-08-22), ruled that Maduro had won the presidential election (*The New York Times* 2024-08-22; AP 2024-08-22). For information on the PUD, see Response to Information Request VEN202203 of March 2025.

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a senior analyst at International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) indicated that the election's results "marked the beginning of a transition to outright de facto government" (Crisis Group 2025-02-07). The same source added that

President Maduro has increased his reliance on security forces, and authorities have further reduced the political and civic space, including by passing laws that allow them to "shut down independent organizations, ban political parties, and impose heavy fines and jail sentences on dissidents" (Crisis Group 2025-02-07). Sources indicate that Edmundo González Urrutia fled to Spain, where he has been promised political asylum, after a warrant was issued for his arrest following the presidential elections (*The Guardian* 2024-09-09; BBC 2024-09-08).

Venezuelan authorities have scheduled [early (Regents' Professor 2025-02-06)] regional and parliamentary elections for April 2025 (Regents' Professor 2025-02-06; AFP 2025-01-27) or 25 May 2025, as announced in February 2025 by the CNE, who changed the planned date from 27 April (EFE 2025-02-19). According to Agence France-Presse (AFP), opposition leader Maria Corina Machado [see section 2.1 of this Response] has called for a boycott of these elections (AFP 2025-01-27).

2. Treatment of Political Opponents and Protesters

Sources indicate that since the 2024 presidential elections, the political situation in Venezuela has "deteriorated" (Assistant Professor in California 2025-02-07; Regents' Professor 2025-02-06) "to levels not seen recently in Venezuela" (Assistant Professor in California 2025-02-07). In an interview with the Research Directorate, an assistant professor at the University of California, Berkeley, who specializes in Venezuelan politics, indicated that the political situation in Venezuela has changed "dramatically" following the presidential elections, with new waves of "repression" recorded against political opponents and protesters (Assistant Professor in California 2025-02-07). In an interview with the Research Directorate, an assistant professor at a university in Europe, whose research focuses on the Venezuelan humanitarian crisis, indicated that targeting of political opponents and protesters has

"intensified" following the presidential elections (Assistant Professor in Europe 2025-02-12).

2.1 Situation Prior to the Presidential Elections

According to a report by the UN Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) to Venezuela, in the lead-up to the presidential elections, the mission investigated 42 instances of "arbitrary detention" and "numerous acts of harassment, reprisals and attacks targeting opposition campaign events" (2024-09-17, para. 22). The same source adds that "the authorities detained and sanctioned dozens of persons who had participated in, provided logistical support for or published social media coverage of the events organized" by the opposition, and that arrests of individuals who attended opposition events or were otherwise affiliated with the opposition "increased significantly" during the electoral campaign (UN 2024-09-17, para. 22, 51). According to Foro Penal, a Venezuelan NGO that provides pro bono legal assistance to persons who have been arbitrarily detained (Foro Penal n.d.), 142 citizens, including 19 women and 123 men, were detained for political reasons between 1 and 27 July 2024 (2024-11-30, 4, 6).

Sources indicate that in June 2023, opposition presidential candidate María Corina Machado was banned from running for office (Al Jazeera 2024-03-22; Freedom House 2024-02-29, Key Developments), "due to her support of US sanctions" (Al Jazeera 2024-03-22) or "on spurious grounds, which included purported irregularities in a declaration of assets she made in 2015 while a legislator" (Freedom House 2024-02-29, Key Developments).

2.2 Situation Following the Presidential Elections

According to Human Rights Watch, following the presidential elections, the Venezuelan authorities committed "widespread human rights violations against protesters, bystanders, opposition leaders, and critics" (2024-09-04). A press release by the Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict (Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social, OVCS) and the Centre for Defenders and Justice (Centro para los Defensores y la Justicia, CDJ) [1] indicates that, after the election results were announced, there was a [translation] "wave" of protests across the country calling for transparency and the release of voting records (OVCS & CDJ 2024-08-03). Amnesty International similarly reports that "mass demonstrations" took place across the country in support of the political opposition (2024-08-24). The Assistant Professor in Europe stated that authorities responded to the protests with "repression" and "mass arrests" (2025-02-12). The UN FFM report notes that the repression "was instigated by the highest civilian and military echelons of the State, including President Maduro" (2024-09-17, para. 29). According to sources, the state "repress[ed]" the protests with "violen[ce]" (UN 2024-09-17, para. 28) or "shockin[g] brutal[ity]" (Human Rights Watch 2024-09-04). According to Foro Penal, "an unprecedented escalation of repression" began immediately after the elections, resulting in killings and a "significant increase" in politically motivated detentions (2024-11-30, 4). OVCS and CDJ report that, of 915 protests recorded on 29 and 30 July 2024, 138 were [translation] "repressed" and 119 were marked by the presence of *colectivos* ["[p]ro-government armed groups" (Amnesty International 2024-08-24)] (2024-08-03).

According to Amnesty International, "over" 2,000 individuals, including "at least" 105 minors and 16 people with disabilities, were arrested "for protesting or being perceived as critical of the government" between 29 July 2024 and 7 August 2024 (2024-08-24). According to Al Jazeera, "more than" 2,000 protesters were arrested following the

presidential elections (2024-12-23). According to the Assistant Professor in Europe, there were minors among those arrested (2025-02-12). Foro Penal indicates that it "verified" 1,848 politically motivated arrests between 28 July and 30 September 2024, of individuals including 18 people with a disability, 18 Indigenous people, and 162 minors (2024-11-30, 4, 8). According to the Assistant Professor in Europe, those arrested included journalists, activists, foreign nationals, [and political leaders of opposition parties (Assistant Professor in Europe 2025-02-13)]; additionally, there is "some information" that people of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) were "targeted more" and receive "worse" treatment (2025-02-12). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. The same source noted that arrests were carried out by persons in uniform as well individuals in civilian clothing (Assistant Professor in Europe 2025-02-12).

The UN FFM report adds that "security forces and armed civilian groups aligned with the Government" responded to the protests with "[v]iolent repression," which resulted in 25 deaths "document[ed]" by the mission (UN 2024-09-17, para. 28, 37). According to Amnesty International, between 29 July and 7 August there were "[a]t least" 17 killings by security forces (2024-08-24). Human Rights Watch notes that it received "credible reports of 24 killings in the context of protests" (2024-09-04). Al Jazeera reports that "at least 28 people were killed and nearly 200 injured in clashes with security forces" after the presidential elections (2024-12-23).

After the elections, sources report a ["sharp increase" (Amnesty International 2024-08-24) or "intensifi[cation]" (Human Rights Watch 2024-09-04)] in "repressive" acts by the government (Human Rights Watch 2024-09-04; Amnesty International 2024-08-24). Sources report the following:

- arrest warrants issued against opposition leaders (Amnesty International 2024-08-24; Human Rights Watch 2024-09-04);
- "abusive raids" (Human Rights Watch 2024-09-04) or "illegal home raids" during which activists and protesters were "harassed and detained" (Amnesty International 2024-08-24);
- use of "lethal and excessive force" by non-uniformed security forces and armed groups (Amnesty International 2024-08-24);
- government asking citizens to "report" protesters (Human Rights Watch 2024-09-04);
- arrests of human rights defenders (Amnesty International 2024-08-24);
- cancelled passports (Human Rights Watch 2024-09-04; UN 2024-09-17, para. 30; Assistant Professor in California 2025-02-07) for government critics (Human Rights Watch 2024-09-04);
- civil servants dismissed (UN 2024-09-17, para. 30).

Sources report that after the elections, the government launched Operation Tun Tun (Operation Knock Knock) (Assistant Professor in California 2025-02-07; UN 2024-09-17, para. 29). According to the Assistant Professor in California, this involved "intensified surveillance," including stopping people on the street to check their phones (2025-02-07). The same source added that, as part of the operation, security forces "arrested and tortured" activists, volunteers and individuals who were "even remotely" connected to the opposition (Assistant Professor in California 2025-02-07). In an interview with the Research Directorate, an assistant professor at the University of Toronto, whose research focuses on the political and economic situation and political parties in Venezuela, stated that following the elections, protests took place not only in main cities but also in peripheral regions which have been traditionally supportive of Maduro's regime; this prompted a "crackdown" on the opposition that was marked with "targeted arrests," closures of political spaces and alleged "torture" in detention (Assistant Professor in Toronto 2025-02-18). The same source added that the situation has led to a

"steady flow" of people leaving Venezuela in fear of repression (Assistant Professor in Toronto 2025-02-18). The UN FFM report similarly indicates that under Operation Tun Tun, security forces "harassed, threatened or arrested" protesters and critics of the government, including leaders of political parties and civil society as well as journalists, some of whom "had to go into hiding or flee the country" (2024-09-17, para. 29, 30). The same report notes, however, that "the vast majority of the victims of the repression [under Operation Tun Tun] were persons with no clear political profile" (UN 2024-09-17, para. 30).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a regents' professor of political science at Georgia State University, who is a specialist on Venezuela, stated that, following the presidential elections, "treatment of political opponents and protesters has deteriorated" (Regents' Professor 2025-02-06). The same source added that "[p]olitical opponents have been either forced outside of the country or jailed incommunicado, without defence lawyers and without clear charges" (Regents' Professor 2025-02-06). Amnesty International adds that "reports suggest at least one senior opposition figure has been tortured to force a confession" (2024-08-24).

The Assistant Professor in Europe stated that the authorities use a "technique" of releasing one group of detainees and arresting another to "maintain fear and uncertainty" in the population (2025-02-12).

According to the Senior Analyst, dissidents are "common[ly]" arrested "off the streets by armed, masked men in unmarked cars and taken to clandestine 'jails'," days or weeks before being transferred to official custody (Crisis Group 2025-02-07). The same source added that "[p]rotesters can be held indefinitely without trial in inhumane conditions, tortured and deprived" of access to food, medicine, and their families (Crisis Group 2025-02-07). According to the Regents' Professor, "[j]ail conditions are horrendous, torture is frequent, and prisoners are not allowed family visits, independent legal representation, or due process"

(2025-02-06). The Assistant Professor in Europe similarly noted "reports" of "dire" detention conditions, including "possible torture" and detainees being kept incommunicado, but indicated that ["very few" (Assistant Professor in Europe 2025-02-13)] of those who have experienced this speak out, as they "fear repression" (2025-02-12). The Senior Analyst indicated that if released, prisoners are "usually forbidden from speaking publicly and forced to report regularly to authorities"; "[i]f tried, they are denied the right of access to the case against them and forced to accept a public defender instead of their chosen legal representative" (Crisis Group 2025-02-07). Citing a representative of Foro Penal, a BBC article similarly states that detainees jailed in the context of the protests were denied the right to access a lawyer of their choice, and were instead assigned a public defender (BBC 2025-01-08).

According to the Senior Analyst, while arrested protesters or bystanders are "in many cases ... eventually released," political leaders are "usually" not; individuals associated with Maria Corina Machado or her Vente Venezuela party, are "particularly vulnerable, even if their role was relatively modest" (Crisis Group 2025-02-07). Sources also indicate that Machado is in hiding (Assistant Professor in California 2025-02-07; AFP 2025-01-27; Al Jazeera 2025-01-09), in fear of "repression" (Assistant Professor in California 2025-02-07). Sources report, citing social media posts from Machado's opposition group, that in early January, the politician's caravan was shot at [by "government forces" (Al Jazeera 2025-01-09)] and she was subsequently "brief[ly]" detained (Al Jazeera 2025-01-09; Thomson Reuters 2025-01-09) and "forced to" record "several videos" (Thomson Reuters 2025-01-09).

According to the Assistant Professor in California, in response to Operation Tun Tun, "many" people left the country in fear of repression; there were reports of passports being cancelled to prevent the holder from leaving the country, and cases of Venezuelan citizens who had their passports annulled even while outside of Venezuela (2025-02-07).

According to the Regents' Professor, "[p]rotesters, human rights defenders, and anyone associated with the election process, such as poll workers, observers and party witnesses, have been subject to arbitrary detention and many fled the country" (2025-02-06).

The information in the following paragraph was provided in the UN FFM report:

There was a "significan[t]" increase in arrests of "real or perceived opponents of the Government" during the election campaign and after the election. Following the election, "the authorities launched an unprecedented campaign of mass and indiscriminate arrests, while targeted arrests of opposition and civil society actors also continued" and that "criminal proceedings initiated against the hundreds of detainees have systematically failed to comply with minimum due process guarantees." The mission recorded an increased number of allegations of "enforced disappearance" in the period around the elections. The mission also received "allegations of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment committed against real or perceived opponents of the Government while they were in the custody of security forces in prisons and other detention facilities" and "poor" detention conditions. The number of instances of sexual and gender-based violence against government opponents "increased sharply" after the election; these occurred "mainly ... during arrests, in the context of interrogations and in places of detention" against detainees and visiting family members. The "civic and democratic space" continued to shrink, and civil society actors experienced "acts of harassment, criminalization and other limitations on [their] work." Journalists and social media content creators experienced attacks and "judicial persecution," as did ordinary individuals who posted criticism of the government on social media. Ten journalists were jailed between 28 July and 31 August 2024 (UN 2024-09-17, para. 42, 54, 65, 74, 75, 83, 89, 93, 99, 100).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Note

[1] The Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict (Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social, OVCS) is a Venezuela-based NGO that advocates for human rights (OVCS n.d.). The Centre for Defenders and Justice (Centro para los Defensores y la Justicia, CDJ) is a human rights organization that promotes justice and democracy in Venezuela (CDJ n.d.).

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Internet sites, including: Atlantic Council; Austrian Red Cross – ecoi.net; Brookings Institution; Carnegie Endowment; Chatham House; CNN; Council on Foreign Relations; Deutsche Welle; Factiva; Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom; Global Americans; International

Crisis Group; *Journal of Democracy*; NewsRadio Halifax; North American Congress on Latin America; openDemocracy; Política Exterior; *Time*; UN – Refworld; US – Congressional Research Service, Department of State; Voice of America; Washington Office on Latin America; Wilson Center.

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