



## Venezuela's Regional Elections: October 2017

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### Introduction

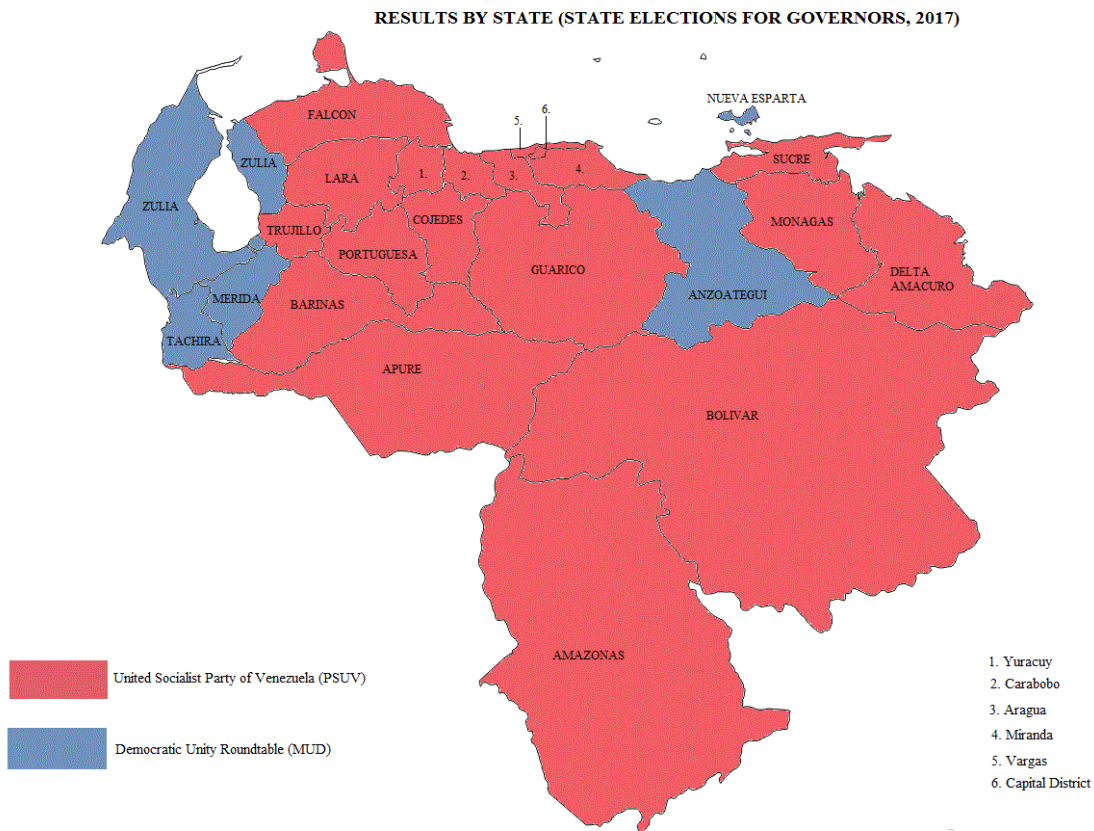
Venezuela's regional elections took place on October 15, 2017 after a series of protests by anti-Chavista forces both inside and outside the country. The Maduro government managed to turn the conflict to an electoral one after the four months violence, from April to July 2017, had ended. It is interesting to note that Venezuela's United Democratic Roundtable (MUD) opposition alliance which boycotted the elections to the National Constituent Assembly (ANC) on July 30, 2017 participated in these regional elections. The opposition and the international powers denounced President Nicolas Maduro for dismantling democracy in the country and called him a "dictator." The participation of the opposition in this election was the first since the legislative elections in December 2015, which gave it a majority in the National Assembly. This election proved to be a temporary stabilising the political situation in Venezuela and strengthened the legitimacy of President Maduro.

On October 15, 2017, President Maduro criticised the silence on the elections, of the corporate media, governments and politicians, who have questioned the legitimacy of Venezuela's democracy. He accused them of attempting to hide the regional elections and their results. He pointed out that Venezuela is living under a full democracy and the campaign against Venezuelan democracy stands demolished. Despite these influences, the stability of Chavismo in the country has enabled the authorities to organise these elections and contain inside and outside Venezuela the anti-Chavismo forces that have tried to undermine Venezuela's institutions by pushing the country to the beginnings of a civil war.

### State-level Results

More than 10 million out of 18 million eligible voters, i.e. 61.14 percent, in 23 states voted in these elections to elect governors for four-year terms. It was announced that the voter turnout in these elections was the highest in the last 15 years. This figure was considered a high level of participation, much bigger than in similar elections in neighbouring countries like Colombia,

Chile, Argentina, Mexico, or in other parts of the world, for example the United States, France or Germany. Nationally, Chavismo got 54 percent of the total vote, while the MUD received 45 percent. The governing socialist coalition party, PSUV has won 75 percent, i.e. 18 out of the 23 state governorships. The Chavista coalition which won 18 state governors in this election is known as the Great Patriotic Pole (GPP). The GPP is an electoral alliance of Venezuelan political parties created in 2011, which formally unites 35,000 Venezuelan movements and collectives. It includes the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), Alliance for Change (APC), Venezuelan Revolutionary Current (CRV), Independents for the National Community (IPCN), Organized Socialist Party in Venezuela (PSOEV), Venezuelan Popular Unity (UPV), among others. The MUD won just five governorships.



Map by author

The PSUV candidates won in the states of Amazonas, Apure, Aragua, Barinas, Carabobo, Cojedes, Falcon, Guarico, Lara, Miranda, Monagas, Sucre, Trujillo, Yaracuy, Delta Amacuro and Varagas. The opposition MUD coalition won in the states of Anzoategui, Merida, Tachira, Zulia and Nueva Esparta.

## Venezuela Regional Election Result<sup>1</sup>

Table 1.

State	PSUV	MUD
Amazonas	59.85%	---
Anzoategui	---	52.01%
Apure	51.92%	---
Apragua	56.83%	---
Barinas	52.88%	---
Bolivar	49.09%	---
Carabobo	51.96%	---
Cojedes	55.48%	---
Delta Amacuro	58.78%	---
Falcon	51.86%	---
Guarico	61.68%	---
Lara	57.65%	---
Miranda	52.54%	---
Monagas	53.94	---
Merida	---	51.05%
Nueva Esparta	---	51.81%
Potuguesa	64.34%	---
Sucre	59.89%	---
Trujillo	59.9%	---
Tachira	---	63.29%
Vargas	52.35%	---
Yaracuy	61.88%	---
Zulia	---	51.66%

It is worth noting that the MUD dropped almost three million votes in comparison to their best ever result of more than seven million votes in the parliamentary elections of December 6, 2015. Yet Chavismo, intimidated and blockaded by the United States, its neighbours and some European countries, managed to maintain and recover its political ground in this political crisis. Chavismo's victory can be measured not just by the number of governorships it won and the votes it received but by the electoral decline of the MUD, which had hoped to capitalise on the economic crisis it helped to worsen. It was the opposition that called for sanctions on Venezuela and which worsened the economic woes. The Maduro government has criticised the MUD's support for US-imposed economic sanctions against the country. Recently, the Trump Administration even threatened to use military intervention against Venezuela. The Venezuelan government argued that the MUD's declaration was a message of hate and violence and that they are "openly servile to foreign interests and in accord with a military intervention in the country."<sup>2</sup> The regional elections was Venezuela's second election in 2017—the first was held on July 30, 2017 to elect 545-members of the ANC. The ANC was convened by President Maduro to rewrite the existing constitution, which was drafted and passed in 1999 under President Hugo Chavez. All the 545-seats of ANC election was won by the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) as the opposition boycotted the election, calling it fraudulent, and saying the new Constituent Assembly will assault on democracy. The Maduro government praised the Venezuelan people for participating in the elections and endorsing their aspiration to live in peace.

Following the announcement of the results, President Nicolas Maduro said: "This homeland wants, with all its heart, to build itself in peace, with all its independence." Jorge

Rodriguez, the head of the Zamora 200 Campaign Command, also said that the result is the response of the Venezuelan people to foreign interference, and in defence of their sovereignty.<sup>3</sup> The result would indicate that Chavismo's core support remains strong. Due to its less than coherent actions, it was the opposition that failed to mobilise its supporters.

### **Response of Regional and International Powers**

The Latin American Council of Electoral Experts (CEELA) has validated that Venezuela's regional elections was clean and transparent. The CEELA delegation comprised of 1300 international observers, including former Colombian Electoral Court President Guillermo Reyes, ex-president of the Honduran Supreme Electoral Court, Augusto Aguilar, and former Peruvian electoral magistrate Gaston Soto. According to CEELA, the elections was conducted under conditions of "total normality" and the right to a secret ballot was "guaranteed."<sup>4</sup> The Ecuadorian representative of the Council of Electoral Experts of Latin America (CEELA), Alfredo Arevalo said that "It is one of the best electoral processes, audited many times by all parties and political actors".<sup>5</sup> Pedro Bregier, the Argentine representative, said he and his colleagues had seen no irregularities. Cuba, Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Honduras have all sent their congratulations to Venezuela. Evo Morales, the Bolivian President, tweeted a post which said, "Democracy has won over intervention and conspiracy. The people defended their sovereignty and dignity."<sup>6</sup>

However, the Trump Administration and some other governments worldwide, including President Emmanuel Macron of France, denounced the election results. In a press statement issued on October 16, 2017, the US Department of State condemned the lack of free and fair gubernatorial elections in Venezuela.<sup>7</sup> US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley tweeted that "dictator" Maduro had used manipulation and intimidation to rig the election. It is not known what new actions of President Trump against Venezuela would follow as a result of this election outcome. France's Foreign Ministry issued a statement in which it alleged "serious irregularities" and "lack of transparency in the verification and tabulation process. France deplores this situation and is working with its EU partners to examine appropriate measures to help resolve the serious crisis affecting the country."<sup>8</sup> On October 17, 2017, the Canadian Foreign Minister, Chrystia Freeland, said that Venezuela's regional elections were characterised by many irregularities that have credible concerns regarding the validity of the results.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, the Maduro government has rejected the US statements and accused the Trump Administration of encouraging the destabilising violence in Venezuela. In response to the statement by French government, Venezuelan Foreign Minister, Jorge Arreaza, tweeted on Twitter on October 16, 2017, criticising European interference in his country's internal affairs.

The Organization of American States (OAS) has criticised the Maduro government due to rupture of democratic order in the country. Mr. Luis Armagro, Secretary General of the OAS, has questioned the legitimacy of the Constituent Assembly and regional elections and has said that the Venezuelan opposition, by participating in regional elections, has become complicit in fraud. However, Mr. Henry Ramos Allup, leader of the MUD, responded that Mr. Almagro shouldn't be "giving us so many lessons from the outside because we are here." According to Mr. Ramos Allup, the opposition lost the election because of abstention—despite the increase in turnout of over 10 percent compared to the 2012 regional elections.

UNASUR—a 12 member regional organization, did not comment on the result but Ms. Tibisay Lucena, president of the Venezuelan Electoral Council, presented a report of recent electoral management in the Electoral Council of UNASUR in a meeting held in Quito on November 8, 2017. The meeting verified the report and witnessed that there has been impartiality and independently transparency of electoral processes in Venezuela. Lima Group—a regional

organization of 12 countries including Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay and Peru, met in Toronto on October 26, 2017 to continue their evaluation of the situation in Venezuela for the third time. The group condemned the electoral abuses and call for electoral reform including a new National Electoral Council and issuance of a new electoral calendar, which should be overseen by independent electoral observers.<sup>10</sup>

### **Factors Affecting the Results**

Chavismo's electoral organisation and its election campaign—which offered solutions to the main demands of the population—worked well together. Many voters viewed Chavismo as the best available political force to deliver on the major challenges facing the regional governments. In a situation of its worst economic crisis, Chavismo established safety net systems of food support delivered to many people. The Local Supply and Production Committees (CLAP) have been the key to protecting broad sectors of the population, and containing the spread of the price and supply chaos used to attack Venezuela's economy. In August 2017, the CLAP could cover nine million families. The Barrio Adentro Mission, implemented to provide good-quality health care services to poor people could take care of about six million patients who need surgical treatment in over 600 health care centers.<sup>11</sup> Venezuela's social programmes, known as the Patriotic Card, has been instrumental in organising socially marginalised groups. In contrast, the MUD's electoral campaign, given the current economic crisis, offered no concrete solutions, which directly affected its electoral support base.

The Trump Administration's sanctions and open military gave more cohesion to the Chavistas and considerably increased the role of national defense, security, independence and sovereignty as ideals on which to mobilise support for Chavismo. Part of the voters rejected the Trump Administration's aggressive measures of economic sanctions which the MUD leadership has consistently demanded. Since winning the parliamentary elections in December 2015, the opposition leaders have openly pursued economic intimidation by lobbying foreign banks and governments against advancing loans to Venezuela.<sup>12</sup> When it came to the polls, most people were opposed to that economic intervention which only complicated their lives for the worse. Even Datanalisis, one of the most influential opposition aligned polling companies, acknowledged that the approval rating of President Maduro had increased by almost six percent by the end of September 2017.

The MUD's violence and their leadership's frequent visits overseas, calling for sanctions against Venezuela, worked in a similar way. Chavismo articulated a campaign advocating political peace and rejecting foreign intervention, which thus polarised the political scene between those trying to destroy the country and those seeking peaceful solutions to the country's problems.

Chavismo went into these regional elections with a new strategy by choosing new regional populist leaderships. While, for the opposition, the mixture of little known leaders and discredited mayors were the main causes of poor results in some states. Chavismo as a political identity was also instrumental in the result. It has significant influence domestically. Its revolutionary forces won by big margins, arguably in some states worst hit by the economic crisis. This was only possible because of the high level of political consciousness among the citizens. In addition, Chavismo has strongly opposed MUD's neo-liberal economic policies.

There were also instances where some opposition supporters did not vote for the MUD, for they believed it to be a violent organisation because of its involvement in organising roadblocks, disturbances and damage affecting the citizens. The radical sections of the opposition

which had fanatically pursued overthrow of President Maduro felt frustrated when the MUD chose to participate in the elections. These groups expressed disenchantment with the MUD leadership which they regarded as treacherous, erratic and incoherent. Those of this sentiment argued for “no vote under dictatorship” and said that participation in the elections would “legitimise the regime.”<sup>13</sup> They decided on electoral abstention which worked in favour of the PSUV.

The still fresh images of the political violence that was almost careening Venezuela into civil war between April to July 2017, leaving over 150 people dead, created an electoral climate unfavourable for the MUD in terms of electoral support. The MUD’s failure to overthrow President Maduro’s regime has strengthened perceptions of Chavismo as representing order and stability. The MUD’s claim of President Maduro’s government being a “dictatorship” has also fallen flat. It did not help in mobilising support because it was focussing more on attacking Chavismo rather than the immediate popular demands of the people. There were no concrete plans for the future from the opposition and this also favoured Chavismo in this turbulent time. The loss of MUD strongholds like the states of Lara, Miranda and Amazonas, showed that regional governments under MUD are supposedly not effective or in tune with the people’s expectations. This created a perception that the MUD is an organisation associated with false promises and that also eroded its electoral support.

### **Conclusion**

The Chavismo leadership has shown that it can bring a solution to the political conflict via elections rather than violence despite having experienced great difficulties in addressing the crisis of the economic war. However, despite temporarily stabilising the political situation in Venezuela, this victory has done nothing to improve the political situation in the country. Venezuela has been facing the worst economic crisis since 2014, mostly due to the sharp decline in the price of oil, by far its main export, to world markets. The country has suffered hyperinflation, shortages of food and medicines, and public safety challenges. The Venezuelan opposition has taken advantage of this state of affairs to destabilise and discredit the government. Presidential elections are due in December 2018. The Maduro government can be expected to keep working to create an environment that allows them to hold elections without any risk of losing. However, the biggest challenge facing the Maduro government is the economic recovery of the country and restoring the supply of food and medicines. The voters have demonstrated with their votes that they still want a Chavismo government and historic political project to resolve the immediate problems the country is facing. Given the situation, Chavismo needs to develop a vital strategy for domestic and international alliances, particularly alliances with Russia, China and India.

In terms of the electoral calendar, municipal elections are scheduled to be held on December 10, 2017 and presidential elections in December 2018. The results of the regional elections indicate that Chavismo still has the potential to remain in power, although the economy would be the determining factor. The opposition faces more uncertainties after the regional elections. That could mean that it may attempt to gain power by other methods such as violent overthrow of the elected government or by aggravating the economic crisis. But, for the international community which has been pressuring the Chavismo government, the message is clear: the people voted for peace, they do not want foreign military intervention, violent street protests, financial blockades or terrorism. It is high time for launching a diplomatic strategy to reverse the proposed isolation of Venezuela.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

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<sup>1</sup> “Venezuela Regional Elections Live Updates,” October 15, 2017, <https://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/Venezuela-Regional-Elections-Live-Updates-20171015-0007.html> , Accessed on October 19, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> “Venezuela Slams Opposition’s Statement Supporting Sanctions,” August 28, 2017, <https://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/Venezuela-Slams-Oppositions-Statement-Supporting-Sanctions-20170828-0007.html> , accessed on October 31, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> “Electoral Victory Consolidates the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela,” October 18, 2017, <http://en.granma.cu/mundo/2017-10-18/electoral-victory-consolidates-the-bolivarian-revolution-in-venezuela>, Accessed on October 24, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Lucas Koerner, “International Electoral Observers Validate Venezuela Regional Vote as US, France Reject Results,” October 16, 2017, <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/13442>, Accessed on December 6, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> “Governing Socialist Party Wins Venezuela’s Regional Polls,” October 15, 2017, <https://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/Governing-Socialist-Party-Wins-Venezuelas-Regional-Polls-20171015-0031.html>, Accessed on October 17, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Heather Nauert, “Gubernatorial Elections in Venezuela,” October 16, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/10/274833.htm>, Accessed on December 6, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Lucas Koerner, “International Electoral Observers Validate Venezuela Regional Vote as US, France Reject Results,” October 16, 2017, <https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/13442>, Accessed on December 6, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> “Venezuela Lodges Protest with Canada for Condemning Regional Elections,” October 19, 2017, <https://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/Venezuela-Lodges-Protest-With-Canada-for-Condemning-Regional-Elections-20171019-0028.html>, Accessed on October 18, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> “Statement of the Third Meeting of the Lima Group on the Situation in Venezuela,” October 26, 2017, <http://www.international.gc.ca/americas-ameriques/statement-lima-declaration-2017-10-26.aspx?lang=eng>, Accessed on December 7, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> “While Opposition Riots, Venezuelan Govt. Builds Social Programs,” May 16, 2017, <https://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/While-Opposition-Riots-Venezuelan-Govt.-Builds-Social-Programs-20170516-0045.html>, Accessed on October 17, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Emiliana Duarte and Andres Rojas Jimenez, “Julio Borges, Unplugged,” October 12, 2017, <https://www.caracaschronicles.com/2017/10/12/julio-in-russia/>, Accessed on October 18, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Mision Verdad, “Decisive Factors in Venezuela’s Regional Elections,” October 13, 2017, <https://www.telesurtv.net/english/opinion/Decisive-Factors-in-Venezuelas-Regional-Elections-20171013-0010.html>, Accessed on October 19, 2017.