

Research collapse feared amid Venezuela election rift

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A disputed election could accelerate a collapse of Venezuela's research capacity which has already seen half of the country's scientists leave, academics fear.

For over 10 years, the oil-rich country has been in [economic turmoil](#) under the authoritarian rule of dictator Nicolás Maduro, who claimed victory in elections held last month (July), despite opposition records confirming Edmundo González Urrutia as the winner.

"As the country's conditions deteriorate, even the most reluctant researchers are seriously considering leaving," said physicist Ismaro Bonalde, a [researcher](#) at the Center for Physics of the Venezuelan Institute of Scientific Research and former president of the Academy of Physical, Mathematical, and Natural Sciences, in an interview with SciDev.Net.

Jaime Requena, a member of the Academy of Physical, Mathematical, and Natural Sciences, said just over 1,000 researchers remained in the country from the 6,831 active researchers there in 2009, according to statistics from the Researcher Promotion Program.

"In a study I'm about to publish, I found that the number is just 1,243 researchers who are still working and publishing in the country," Requena told SciDev.Net.

He is one of the researchers focused on tracking how many scientists remain in Venezuela and how many are still publishing regularly.

In his study, "[The State of Science and Technology in Venezuela](#)" (in Spanish), 2,869 Venezuelan researchers were found to have left the country by the end of 2020.

Currently, more than 3,000 researchers have migrated, representing nearly half of the Venezuelan scientific community.

However, this information, gathered through tracking publications in scientific databases like Biblios or Web of Science, contrasts with

official statistics. For example, the National Observatory of Science, Technology, and Innovation (ONCTI, in Spanish) claims that there are currently 24,000 Venezuelan researchers.

The difference is not just a matter of scale but also of criteria. In 2011, ONCTI changed its standards for qualifying researchers, allowing any publication to be counted as [scientific research](#), even if it wasn't published in peer-reviewed journals or recognized in the [scientific community](#).

Two and a half decades

The migration of Venezuelan researchers is driven by a complex set of causes that extend beyond the various episodes of political crisis that Venezuela has experienced since the presidential inauguration of the late Hugo Chávez Frías in 1999 and the inauguration of his right-hand man Nicolás Maduro in 2013.

"Most importantly, they were stripped of academic freedom and the ability to think critically, which prevented them from using their full capabilities to address the issues that mattered most to them," explained Requena.

Restriction on scientific work was, in fact, the primary reason for 42% of researchers surveyed in the study "[Migration of Venezuelan Researchers: Impacts and Public Policy Implications](#)."

According to the study, 30% said family reasons caused them to leave, 19% cited economic factors, and 18% cited emotional stress.

The migration of researchers is one of the key reasons that Venezuela's scientific production has fallen behind countries such as Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Uruguay, Costa Rica, and even Cuba, which also faces political

and economic challenges, according to the study [Knowledge Production in Venezuela 1970–2022](#).

"That's 25 years of setback," said Bonalde, co-author with Bárbara Montañes of an analysis on the number of papers published by Venezuelan authors in Web of Science.

"Since 2009, we have seen a decline in scientific production in Venezuela. We're talking about a 60% drop, which takes us back to the levels of scientific production we had in 1997 and 1998."

Retaining scientific researchers and revitalizing knowledge production and patents will not be straightforward for Venezuela, even if opposition political forces succeed in assuming the presidency.

The government plan of Edmundo González Urrutia and opposition leader María Corina Machado includes a reform of the Organic Law of Science, Technology, and Innovation, aimed at providing greater incentives for scientific researchers. It also highlights the importance of a special public policy to facilitate the return of Venezuelan migrants.

Bonalde and Requena both agree that rebuilding the minimum conditions necessary for the development of Venezuelan science must involve not only greater recognition for researchers and a larger budget for their projects, but also a plan that integrates the business sector in driving Venezuelan research and innovation.

More information: Requena, J., The State of Science and Technology in Venezuela, [acfiman.org/wp-content/uploads ... II-N1-P7-18.2022.pdf](#)

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