

Q&A: Venezuela election fallout will worsen refugee crisis, expert says

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David Smolansky. Credit: David Smolansky

Venezuela has been ruled by dictators for nearly a quarter of a century, first under Hugo Chavez, and now under his protege, Nicolas Maduro. Their regimes have suppressed free speech, throttled the economy, committed untold human rights violations, and, in typical dictator fashion, ignored election results to remain in power. Maduro recently ran for reelection against Edmundo González, a stand-in for opposition leader Maria Corina Machado, who was arbitrarily banned from running by the government.

Exit polls indicate that the incredibly popular Gonzalez beat Maduro by 30 points, yet on July 28, Maduro declared himself the winner. In more than a month since, his government has provided no proof of victory, but has cracked down on dissent, arresting around 2,000 protestors.

The SNF Agora's Dissident in Residence, David Smolansky, has firsthand experience with Maduro's oppressive governance. Before seeking refuge in the United States, the native Venezuelan was elected mayor of El Hatillo, one of the five municipalities in Venezuela's capital, Caracas, in 2013. During his mayoral tenure, he reduced kidnappings in his district by 84%, gained recognition for establishing one of the most transparent local governments in Venezuela, and used his platform to condemn the Maduro administration.

In 2017, an illegal warrant was issued for his arrest.

"Since [my administration] was a complete contrast to the corrupt regime, they probably saw me as a threat," Smolansky explains. "I was projected to be reelected when they illegally removed me from office. Our local government had a 74% approval rating."

Smolansky had no choice but to flee Venezuela for the U.S., but exile hasn't deterred him in his fight for democracy. He was appointed special envoy to address the Venezuelan migration and refugee crisis, one of the largest in the world, by the secretary-general of the Organization of American States. He serves as deputy director of the ConVzla Campaign in Washington, D.C., leading the diaspora movement in 77 cities around the world to vote for María Corina Machado in the primary election and leading diplomatic efforts in the U.S. capital.

The Hub spoke with Smolansky to learn more about how the recent election's results will reverberate in Venezuela and beyond.

For readers who may be unfamiliar with Maduro, can you explain who he is?

Well, Maduro is a brutal dictator. There's no other way to say it. He has an open investigation for committing crimes against humanity in the International Criminal Court. In 2013, after [former Venezuelan dictator] Hugo Chavez died, we had a presidential election that Maduro stole. Then we had a legitimate election in 2018 whose results [Maduro winning] were not recognized by 60 countries across the world [due to many opposition candidates being barred from running].

Most recently, Maduro was "reelected" on July 28 against all odds. Even though it likely would not be transparent and fair, we wanted to have that election to prove that Maduro was completely alone, that the vast majority of Venezuela wanted change. At least 70% of Venezuelans voted against Maduro and for our presidential candidate, Edmundo Gonzalez, who was supported by the Democratic opposition. But they're not recognizing the results.

So that's who Maduro is. When I say he has committed crimes against

humanity, I want to be very explicit: He led the extrajudicial killing of 20,000 Venezuelans. He is responsible for 8 million people who have fled the country in one of the largest migrations of refugees. He is responsible for tortures that have been reflected in reports by the United Nations and the Organization of American States. He is one of the most dangerous dictators in the world right now.

Were you surprised by the election results, or did you have a feeling something like this might happen?

I was not surprised that the vast majority of Venezuela [voted for] change, because Venezuelans have suffered so much. Just to put it in a nutshell, what is Venezuela right now? Eight million people have fled the country according to the World Food Program; 9.3 million Venezuelans, or one out of every three people in the country, are food insecure—the largest population in the Western Hemisphere in that situation. Our economy has been reduced 75% during the last decade, [a number that's] only comparable with countries that have been through war. And the level of corruption in Venezuela compared to other countries is one of the worst in the world.

So no, I was not surprised that the vast majority want to live in a nation with democracy, freedom, and access to justice. But what was really striking, and at the same time very important for us, is that even though we had an election that was not transparent, not free, not fair, we took that opportunity to mobilize millions to express peacefully that we want someone different in the palace.

We were not surprised that [Maduro's government] has not recognized the election results. And [at the time of this interview] more than 1,300 people have been illegally detained [for protesting], though the regime claims more than 2,000. More than 20 [protestors] have been killed.

Thousands have had their passports canceled. Maduro promised during the campaign that if he loses, there will be a bloodbath in Venezuela. And basically that's what he's doing. But we're still protesting nonviolently in the streets, [advocating for] diplomatic efforts to have Maduro sit at a negotiating table to accept the result, and hoping to facilitate a transition.

Dictators are typically vulnerable to overthrow when the economy is doing poorly and public support is low, but these factors, despite being present, don't seem to be affecting Maduro. What would it take to have him removed from power?

The [armed forces](#) need to step up. They need to stop repressing innocent Venezuelans, obey the constitution, and respect what the vast majority [voted for] a couple of weeks ago. If the armed forces behave institutionally, I am convinced that Maduro is done.

How will the election results affect the refugee crisis in Venezuela?

If we have a transition [of power], I think migration will decrease. And we could create incentives for many people who have fled to come back, because many people want to go back for two reasons: One, to be reunited with their families, and two, to be part of the rebuilding of the country. But if Maduro prevails by force, unfortunately, I predict that we could have a new migration wave. We could see one or two million people desperately fleeing from Venezuela to other countries in the region, and they will try to come to the U.S., as they have done during the last three years.

How do you think the United States should respond to this election?

Strongly and firmly. What Secretary [of State Antony] Blinken said recently was very important: that he recognized that Edmundo Gonzalez won the [presidential election](#). We need the U.S. to be a strong voice condemning the human rights violations going on in Venezuela. They should consider individual sanctions for those responsible for committing illegal detentions, extrajudicial killings, and tortures.

It seems unlikely that the conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine will be solved before the November election, but Venezuela's issues could potentially be resolved before November. I've always said that the situation in Venezuela will be solved by Venezuela, but it needs to be accompanied by the international community.

How might a new government change Venezuela?

A peaceful transition in Venezuela with the restoration of democracy will be not only good for Venezuela, but for the whole region. The longer Maduro stays, the more people are going to flee, which means democratic systems in the region will be more vulnerable and transnational crime will continue.

We [who oppose Maduro] have done everything that politics allows. We had an election that was not free and fair. We won by a landslide. We were able to prove that we won through poll watchers and voting tallies. And then we were able to share proof so everyone could see the results. We hope that the international community will be with us in these difficult moments, and that the armed forces behave constitutionally, step up, and respect what the majority of Venezuelans want.

Provided by Johns Hopkins University

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