

Maduro's narrative to maintain power

Antonio De La Cruz

Executive Director

20/Apr/2024

*"Victorious warriors win first and then go to war,
while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek
to win." – Sun Tzu*

Nicolás Maduro perceives himself as victorious over his internal and external opponents and is poised to claim this victory, a typical maneuver in both politics and war.

At an international stage, a recent meeting in Mexico between the White House and representatives from Miraflores, which included figures like Daniel Erikson and Jorge Rodríguez, devolved into a session of mutual accusations and claims. This meeting highlighted the ongoing tensions and the depth of political deadlock, with Miraflores achieving all its demands. At the same time, Washington has gained little in its efforts to ensure a free, fair, and competitive presidential election.

The Biden administration accused Maduro's government of violating the Barbados agreement by obstructing the participation of opposition candidates in the presidential election, intensifying internal repression, and halting the reception of Venezuelans deported from the United States. Meanwhile, Maduro's negotiator criticized Washington for not adhering to the agreed timeline to lift sanctions and reiterated his rejection of any interference in the country's internal affairs.

In this tense context, the Band of Five (Diosdado Cabello, Cilia Flores, Vladimir Padrino López, Nicolás Maduro, and Jorge Rodríguez) aims to cement their legitimacy in the upcoming elections on July 28, with 13 carefully selected candidates participating. This effort seeks to ensure the U.S. administration's flexibility in managing economic sanctions applied to the state-owned oil company PDVSA and the secondary market transactions of the Republic's bonds.

The Band of Five asserts that free and competitive elections can be held only in an environment free from international sanctions. They argue that the potential re-imposition of economic and financial sanctions complicates the conduct of democratic elections and attribute the severe GDP decline, which approached 80% between 2014 and 2020, to these international measures. Despite having only 12% of popular support, they propose that Maduro needs another term as president, without any restrictions, to foster a sustained economic recovery that includes reactivating foreign investment and privatizing the oil industry.

This proposal, far from demonstrating a genuine commitment to democracy, appears more as a dilatory tactic intended to maintain regime control for another six years. It sells the illusion that after this next period (2024-2030), there will be an opportunity to hold fair and free elections

once the crisis has been overcome with policies that include economic and financial openness measures.

In this scenario, Maduro & Co. suggest the opposition needs to organize and unify to have a real chance of triumph in 2030, as any electoral victory in 2024 could plunge the country into a period of ungovernability. According to the Band of Five, only they and the irregular groups supporting them can guarantee Venezuela's stability while accusing the opposition of being unprepared to assume the next government. Amid this narrative to legitimize Maduro, a movement around the presidential candidacy of Manuel Rosales—chosen by Maduro—and the discussion on lifting international sanctions has emerged.

On April 8, at Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, Caracas, Venezuela, various figures from politics, academia, the business sector, and civil society gathered to reorganize and strengthen this political alternative against Maduro's regime. However, the inability to reach a unanimous agreement among participants, particularly from the Democratic Unity Platform (PUD), reveals significant differences between those who seek change in 2024 and those aiming for it in 2030.

The discussion on the sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union plays a central role in this new political dynamic. Some sectors present, believing in the 2030 agenda and supported by international interests such as oil companies and bondholders, propose lifting these sanctions to validate the next presidential election, as posited by the Band of Five. However, most PUDs consider sanctions to be one of the few effective pressure tools against a regime that has shown little interest in fostering a genuine democratic transition in the country. Lifting them without explicit guarantees of free and fair elections could be seen as a capitulation and a regression in the international commitment to democracy in Venezuela and the defense of human rights.

Moreover, the Band of Five considers the current hope for change represented by María Corina Machado as a fleeting political phenomenon, similar to previous experiences. They cite Juan Guaidó, interim president of Venezuela from 2019 to 2023, who also generated mobilizations and reached widespread acceptance. Thus, they believe the support for María Corina could fade within six months to a year.

Finally, in the context of a critical election year in the United States, Maduro's regime does not expect the Biden administration to reinstate sanctions on April 18, given the impact that the price of oil can have on electoral behavior. Simultaneously, faced with an increase in illegal Venezuelan immigration at the southern border, the White House is more focused on addressing this issue than on promoting democracy and human rights in Venezuela. Additionally, the pressure exerted by Wall Street, Venezuelan, and PDVSA bondholders, along with the lobbying of major oil companies, is considerable in maintaining the status quo. Also,

Maduro & Co. believe that by opening Venezuela's vast hydrocarbon reserves to international private capital, they can mitigate pressure from the United States and liberal Western democracies. They estimate that this approach is favored by an international geopolitical environment, with explicit support from allies like Russia, Iran, China, and amid conflicts in the Middle East and Europe.

In conclusion, the political situation in Venezuela continues to be a complex chessboard where Maduro's maneuvers are clearly aimed at perpetuating his stay in power. With sights set on 2030, the regime attempts to manipulate both the international and local narratives to present itself as the only viable governance option, using the excuse of sanctions as a shield against external and internal democratic pressures. Maduro seeks to change not only the internal perception but also the foreign policy toward Venezuela.

In a world where perception can be as powerful as politics, the international community and the PUD with María Corina Machado must remain critical and persevering. It is crucial to continue working not only to counter Maduro's narrative but also to strengthen a viable political option that is based on democracy and freedom, offering a fair and dignified life to Venezuelans.

Only through a joint and continuous effort of democratic forces along with the international community to restore democracy will it be possible to overcome the cycles of autocracy and crisis that have characterized Venezuela over the last two decades.