



Opinion [Global Insight](#)

Is the game up for Venezuela's ruling party after 25 years?

With polls predicting defeat, fears mount that President Nicolás Maduro may resort to rigged election



[Michael Stott](#)



Nicolás Maduro delivers a speech during a campaign rally in Caracas

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Roula Khalaf, Editor of the FT, selects her favourite stories in this weekly newsletter.

Election posters of an outsize President Nicolás Maduro dominate Venezuela's capital. There is hardly an opposition banner in sight, yet opinion polls predict a crushing defeat for the authoritarian leader.

The contrast between the government's tight grip on power and the opposition's conviction that it can finally win after 25 years has made Venezuela's presidential election on July 28 particularly tense and unpredictable.

In contrast to other recent elections, the main opposition groups have united behind a single candidate, 74-year-old retired diplomat Edmundo González. It hopes that a deep hunger for change will carry it to a victory so big that the government will have no choice but to accept defeat.



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Despite attempts to rebrand himself as a smiling social media personality, Maduro remains deeply unpopular after presiding over years of economic crisis, political repression and the emigration of around a quarter of the population.

Most opinion polls suggest the opposition would crush Maduro by a margin of 20 to 30 points in a clean vote. But few believe that he would readily acknowledge such a result when so much is at stake.

The US has sanctioned the Venezuelan president and his inner circle and indicted them for drug trafficking. The International Criminal Court is weighing a case for crimes against humanity. Senior Venezuelan officials who have benefited from rampant corruption fear retribution.

“At this point Maduro has no good options,” said Geoff Ramsey, a Venezuela expert at the Atlantic Council. “His least bad may be to ban the opposition and move forward with a sham election but that will likely provoke an international backlash.”

Maduro stoked tension this week by speaking of a “bloodbath” and “civil war” if the opposition wins, while also predicting “irreversible results” giving him victory in the vote a week from Sunday.

General Domingo Hernández Lárez, operational commander of the armed forces, has posted a video on X showing his troops training with baton rounds and tear gas.

González, a moderate with no prior political career, has tried to calm the political waters by promising to negotiate an orderly transition and not to pursue vendettas if he wins.

But many in the ruling party remain fearful of María Corina Machado, the charismatic opposition leader, who picked González as her stand-in after she was banned from running. Machado has moderated her stance but

in the past was a harsh critic of the government. She has been constantly harassed by security forces and 21 of her campaign staff have been arrested.

Machado has [warned](#) that only a “monumental fraud” could prevent the opposition from winning.

International powers hope to influence the outcome. The US relaxed some sanctions last year on Venezuela as a carrot to encourage elections, and has signalled through back-channel conversations with Caracas that “everything is on the table” if Maduro and his inner circle agree to leave power after losing an election, according to people with knowledge of the talks.

Russia, China and Iran — Maduro’s key allies — will be hoping for a continuation of the status quo.

The continued belligerence of top Venezuelan officials, who regularly denounce the opposition as dangerous fascists, makes the pre-election period especially fraught.

There are no guarantees the election will happen as scheduled. A pretext might be found for postponing it. The government could ban González before the vote. Or it might manipulate the results.

“Assuming the polls are accurate, Maduro has one of two choices,” said Mark Feierstein, who served as President Obama’s top adviser on Latin America. “Either he accepts defeat . . . or he launches a crackdown, but that is not as easy as people think. If turnout is as high as expected, the results are clear, and people are on the streets celebrating, that changes the dynamic.”

Rigging an election carries other risks. Many in the government want to see sanctions lifted and Venezuela’s international isolation ended, which would be unlikely with a sham result. Nobody knows whether poorly paid rank-and-file soldiers would follow orders to crush protests, or whether members of Maduro’s inner circle might break ranks.

Few observers believe that a contested election would give way to a smooth count and the National Electoral Council (CNE) announcing an opposition victory.

“The best-case scenario is that the government pauses the count in the event of an opposition victory, and starts negotiating,” said one Venezuelan with deep knowledge of the election system.

But the person added: “This is shaping up to be a train crash . . . Neither side appears ready to recognise a victory by the other.”

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