

## Nicolás Maduro threatens Venezuela's opposition ahead of crucial poll

Joe Daniels, Michael Stott :: 26/07/2024

### Venezuela

Authoritarian socialist leader ends campaign with fiery anti-US rhetoric and predicts big victory



Nicolás Maduro painted Sunday's election as a decisive moment for Venezuela during a rally on Thursday © Yuri Cortez/AF Images

Joe Daniels and Michael Stott in Caracas

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Nicolás Maduro, Venezuela's long-ruling authoritarian president, issued a stark warning to the opposition ahead of Sunday's election, labelling them fascists, cowards and US puppets and telling them not to question what he claimed would be his overwhelming victory.

Tensions have risen sharply in recent weeks as opinion polls have forecast the main opposition candidate, 74-year-old retired diplomat Edmundo González, could beat Maduro by a margin of 20 to 30 percentage points, an outcome that would spell the end of [Venezuela's](#) Cuban-backed revolutionary socialist government after a quarter of a century in power.

In a fiery final campaign speech lasting more than an hour and addressed to an audience of tens of thousands of flag-waving workers bussed in to Caracas, the capital, [Maduro](#) hailed his success in defeating US sanctions on the economy, spoke of his devotion to Jesus Christ and revolutionary socialism and vowed not to tolerate opposition accusations of foul play.

"They are already crying fraud, we won't allow them to keep causing damage," Maduro roared to the crowd. "Their time is up. If they jump a red light [by questioning the results], they will regret it for 200 years. It will be the last mistake they make in their political lives. There will be an iron fist and justice for the violent fascist protesters and the racists."

González earlier on Thursday said the campaign had "without doubt been the most unequal" in Venezuela's history. "They may make illegal use of state resources, they may have control of the National Electoral Council, of the Supreme Court and of a public prosecutor's office which applauds their abuses, but we have the love, the support and the enthusiasm of the great majority of Venezuelans who want peaceful change," he said.

María Corina Machado, the opposition's [most popular politician](#), has been banned from running, forcing her to name González as a surrogate. Police have arrested dozens of her campaign staff and detained the owners of restaurants and hotels that served her on her travels.

In power since the death of his mentor and predecessor Hugo Chávez in 2013, Maduro has [lost popularity](#) after presiding over the collapse of Venezuela's economy, hyperinflation and mass emigration, woes he blames on US economic sanctions. The former bus driver and union official has sought the help of Russia, Cuba, Iran and China to stay in power and now claims he is turning around the economy.

The government and opposition are painting Sunday's election as a decisive moment for the oil exporter. "On Sunday the future of Venezuela will be decided for the next 50 years," Maduro bellowed from a stage featuring giant screens with his name and image. "Peace or war? Opposition protests or tranquillity? The extreme right or the *Chavistas*? Fascism or people's democracy? Savage capitalism or Christian socialism?"

Moments before Maduro took to the stage, throngs of people along the Avenida Bolívar thoroughfare waved flags and sang the "Let's go, Nico!" jingle that has dominated the government's campaign.

"The president is a noble man who works for the people, he is our protector," said Antonio Rodríguez, 24, who works for a local council in Caracas. "This election is a chance for us to build our own future, to rid ourselves of the sanctions that are oppressing us."

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But some of those attending the rally told the Financial Times they had been paid to come and did not intend to vote for Maduro.

Eduardo Meza, a motorcycle taxi driver from Caracas, said he was attending the rally "because they're paying me \$30". He signed up with a local organiser, was given a red T-shirt with the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela logo and said he would pick up his US dollar cash payment when he returned. Meza plans to vote for the opposition on Sunday. "This government is good for nothing," he said.

Opposition politicians and others have questioned the independence of the government-controlled electoral authority, responsible for tallying the votes. The government has refused to allow the Organization of American States to send an observation mission and rescinded an invitation to the European Union to monitor the poll.

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