

Venezuela at the crossroads: The presidential elections of July 28 and their consequences

By Nizar Messari

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Venezuela holds crucial presidential elections on July 28. The results might substantially alter the political system in that country, since, for the first time since 1998, the opposition candidate has a clear chance of winning the vote. Why has the opposition been unable to win elections in that country for almost three decades now? And why is it on the verge of winning elections this time? What is the international dimension of this electoral process? How might it impact Morocco? These are the questions that are discussed in this paper.

INTRODUCTION:

Venezuela has been a very interesting case in Latin American politics for a long period of time. In the 1970s and 1980s, it was a special case because while most of the continent was reeling under military dictatorships, it was one of the very few examples of democratic political systems holding regular elections in which opposition political parties could win elections and rule the country, and in which ruling parties would accept elections results. In the 1990s, the Venezuelan political system started calling attention again after an unknown military officer conducted -from behind the scenes- a coup against the president, failed, and expressed openly his intention in trying again to reach power. That was Hugo Chávez, who ended up creating a political movement which led him to win the presidency through democratic elections, and rule the country until his death. Since then, his appointed successor, Nicolás Maduro, has also been elected and has been ruling the country. In sum, instead of parties taking turns, Venezuela became the country in which the press talks about a "regime" instead of a government, as a single party has dominated the Venezuelan political scene, while the rest of Latin America has returned to democratic rules and to competitive elections. So why did Mr. Chávez attempt a coup against the then democratically elected president? Why was he elected democratically despite being a putschist, and why has his movement ruled the country uninterrupted since 1998? And why is that likely to change after the presidential elections of July 28, 2024?

These are the questions I answer in this paper. As I do so, I shed light on some of the debates that have been mobilizing several scholars of democracy over the last few years. One of these debates relates to the challenge that results from the observation that competitive elections, a multiparty system and freedom of speech -and a free press- might not bring the appropriate answers to all dilemmas facing a society (Corrales, 1999). Indeed, Venezuela of the 1960s and 1970s and 1980s is only one example of a country with a long streak of regularly and transparently held national elections, both for the legislative and presidential powers, in which opposition parties could win elections and have access to power, but in which large sectors of the population felt unrepresented, disenfranchised, and saw elections as merely a game that had no impact on their lives. Other countries have experienced that paradox, and not only in recently democratized political systems, but also in countries with deep and long democratic traditions.

This is why the elections of July 28¹ hold a major importance in the political history of the country: for the first time since what is referred to as the Bolivarian revolution by Hugo Chávez, the opposition to the regime has a real chance of winning the elections and defeating the movement created by him over 30 years ago, and which has ruled that country since 1998. Will this potential major change in Venezuelan politics herald a new era for the country, with ruling parties and opposition parties competing for votes and trying to convince a majority of the Venezuelan electors of their political, economic, social and cultural agendas, or will it start a new era of domination of one side at the detriment of the other? Maybe a prior question is: will President Maduro -who is running for re-election- accept the results of the elections?

It is relevant to note that Latin America has a relatively impressive -maybe even surprising- trail of non-democratic regimes and/or imperfectly democratic regimes accepting the results of the votes that have ended their hold on power. When General Augusto Pinochet, of Chile, lost the referendum that would have extended his presidency by 9 more years, he accepted

1. July 28 was the date of birth of Hugo Chávez. The choice of that specific date by the electoral authorities to hold crucial presidential elections was probably not a mere coincidence.

the results and eventually stepped down from power. When PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional or Revolutionary Institutional Party) lost the presidential elections in Mexico in 2000, it accepted the results also.² And even in Venezuela, instructions were given that Chávez, who had attempted a military coup in 1992, should become president if he won the elections of 1998, which he did, and which he became.

It is also relevant to note that the presidential elections in Venezuela exhibit an important international dimension. They are held after the accords of Barbados, signed in October 2023, in which the US, the European Union (EU), Brazil and Colombia -among many others- mediated the agreement between President Maduro and the opposition under which auspices these elections are held. The US committed to lift sanctions against the regime in case it respected the terms of the agreement -part of which was to allow opposition leaders to run freely for the elections-, while Brazil and Colombia, which are both ruled by presidents who are supposed to be close to Mr. Maduro -and who can hence hold some influence on him-, provided relevant international guarantees for his government. Those accords also came after the territorial dispute with Guyana calmed down: indeed, given his domestic vulnerability and challenges, Mr. Maduro resorted to the territorial dispute between Venezuela and Guyana, which is an object of national consensus in his country, to deviate attention from his internal challenges and try to mobilize the population behind him by holding a referendum.³ Although the latter has a lesser direct impact on the presidential elections in Venezuela than the former, both bring an undeniable international dimension to the process.

In this paper, I first present a brief overview of the Venezuelan political system before I focus on the current political moment. I shed light both on the domestic and international dimensions of the ongoing crisis in Venezuela, and explore some of the consequences of that crisis. Before I finish, I discuss Morocco's relations with Venezuela and the impact of these development on those relations.

A BRIEF HISTORY:

The so-called pact of Puntofijo in 1958, according to which three of the main political parties⁴ -Accion Democratica (AD), Comité de Organizacion Politica Electoral Independiente (COPEI) and Union Republicana Democratica (URD)- agreed to rules by which -among other things- they had to accept the results of elections while winners of elections committed to include all other parties in their governing coalition, brought stability to the Venezuelan political system, a stability that lasted 40 years. Although the pact per se was short lived, it is an undeniable historical fact that since then, elections were regularly held, their results accepted and transitions from government to opposition took place, including in 1998, when Hugo Chávez won the elections.

That political stability was further reinforced after the first oil crisis in 1973. As the other countries of the region went into deep recession and a financial crisis of great magnitude,

2. It is true that the PRI had been accused of forging results that elected his candidates in a couple of elections before the 2000 presidential elections and even after that.

3. For more details on the dispute, refer to Bess, Duanne Abigail, "Impact of Refugees on Small Islands Developing States and Low-Lying Coastal Countries National Security: A case study of the impacts of Venezuelan Migrants on the National Security of Guyana" Master's thesis defended at Al Akhawayn University's Master in International Studies and Diplomacy, July 14, 2023. Archive of Mohammed VI Library, Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane.

4. The Communist Party of Venezuela was excluded from the pact, despite the important role it played in fighting the military dictatorship. The resistance of the more traditional and conservative parties of the pact to communism, combined with the Cold War and the traditional close relations Venezuela used to have with the US made the participation of the communist party to the pact virtually impossible.

Venezuela, which was an oil producing country, profited from the bonanza brought about by the new income, and engaged in a period of unprecedented wealth, prosperity and development. Carlos Andrés Pérez, who was the President in that moment, earned a popularity not often enjoyed by presidents, which eventually granted him to be elected once again -although under very different economic and financial circumstances- to the presidency.⁵ However, if Venezuela was positively affected by the first oil crisis, the country was affected negatively by what ended up being known as the crisis of the external debt of the 1980s. The Venezuelan GDP shrunk by 22.2% between 1980 and 1985, and just like the other countries of the region, Venezuela engaged in hard fought negotiations with international lenders, including the International Monetary Fund. The years of wealth were quickly replaced with years of crisis. Carlos Andrés Pérez, who had earned large popularity during the oil boom, was re-elected president, but his second mandate was far more dramatic than the first one. He started it by deciding to slash state subsidies to some essential goods, which caused street riots, which he repressed violently in what became known as the Caracazo, causing hundreds of death -massacres were so widespread that the exact numbers of people who died remained unknown-. The end of his second presidency was as melancholic as he was impeached for corruption. In between times, he barely survived two military coups, the first of which -in 1992- was led -behind the scenes- by an officer who was back then very little known, whose name was Hugo Chávez.

Speaking of Chávez, as his coup attempt failed, he circulated a statement to his followers and supporters admitting that their attempt had failed “for the time being”. In other words, as the great Colombian novelist and Nobel Prize winner -and an acute observer of Latin American politics and society- Gabriel Garcia Marquez noted, he was giving an *Hasta luego* (see you later), not an *Adios* (goodbye): although he was sent to jail, he was clearly convinced of the fairness of his cause, and indicating that he would attempt again to reach power, which he eventually did. The main question then is: how did a putschist become popular and why did he win the presidential elections of 1998 after attempting to seize power through weapons?

Part of the answer was already given here: after a short moment of prosperity and wealth, Venezuela went through a major economic and financial crisis, which impacted the population at large: in comparison to 1960, in 1998, the GDP of Venezuela had grown by meager 1.8% ... for the whole period (Carta Capital, 30/8/2017). Meanwhile, inflation reached 103% in 1996, and in 1998, the middle class represented barely 11% of the population (Carta Capital, 30/8/2017) while the poverty ratio in the country rose from 33% in 1975 to 70% in 1995. According to Javier Corrales (1999), in 1999 -the year Hugo Chávez became president- over two-thirds of the Venezuelan population lived below poverty level. In parallel to that, corruption scandals of the political and economic elites showed the majority of Venezuelans that part of the population was not affected by the crisis. When another former president, Rafael Caldera, was returned to the presidency for a second mandate right after the impeachment of Mr. Pérez, one of his first political decisions was to pardon Chávez in an attempt to open a new page in the political history of the country and rebuild national unity. With that, President Caldera allowed Mr. Chávez to recover his political rights, and to launch what became later the Bolivarian movement, which led him to the presidency.

Mr. Chávez was elected president in a landslide: in the presidential elections of December 1998, he received 56.2% of the votes, the most any president had received in Venezuelan

5. According to the constitution that existed at that time, presidents could run for another mandate, but not in the subsequent election cycle to their first election. This forced presidents, like Carlos Andrés Pérez, to step down at the end of their mandates, get some distance, and run for the presidency later.

history. But when in February, he was sworn in as president and committed to respect the constitution, all observers and all his followers knew already that he was not going to respect it: he quickly held a referendum asking for a mandate to elect a new constitutional assembly, which he got, and the constitutional assembly -which was dominated by his followers- drafted in a relatively record time a new constitution which was approved in December of that same year. In sum, a year after he was elected, Mr. Chávez had already a new constitution to follow. The new constitution gave unprecedented rights to the poor and marginalized in Venezuelan society, and developed a system of rights for the disenfranchised. Subsequently, he quickly called for a new presidential election in 2000, which he also overwhelmingly won. The opposition, which accused him of increasing authoritarianism, attempted a coup against him in 2002, which was briefly successful, but which ultimately failed and Mr. Chávez was returned to power.

As Latin America was apparently being swept by a leftist wave, Jorge Castañeda, the great Mexican intellectual and a great observer of the Latin American political scene, distinguished, in a seminal article published in *Foreign Affairs* in 2006, between two types of lefts in the region. He called one the "right left" -which indicates a sarcastic sense of humor-, a left made of Tabarez Vasquez from Uruguay, Ricardo Lagos and his successor Michelle Bachelet from Chile, and to a lesser extent Lula from Brazil, and a wrong left, a left made not only by Chávez in Venezuela and Fidel Castro in Cuba, but also by Nestor Kirchner in Argentina, among others. According to him, the former " ... is modern, open-minded, reformist, and internationalist, and it springs, paradoxically, from the hard-core left of the past. The other, born of the great tradition of Latin American populism, is nationalist, strident, and close-minded. The first is well aware of its past mistakes (as well as those of its erstwhile role models in Cuba and the Soviet Union) and has changed accordingly. The second, unfortunately, has not." (Castañeda, 2006) Mr. Chávez followed this playbook almost to the letter:

Economically, Mr. Chávez benefited from a new oil bonanza, but as opposed to the 1970s, when Venezuela took advantage of a crisis provoked by Arab states from the Gulf -and mainly Saudi Arabia-, in this new oil price hike, Venezuela and its leader played a significant role: Mr. Chávez coordinated with other OPEC leaders to reduce oil production in order to force a price hike which allowed him to enforce his populist social policies and distribute wealth to the poor. This populist distributive agenda provided him with a wide popularity, which allowed him to survive opposition coup attempts, win elections and rule the country for more than 14 years, until he died.

If domestically, Mr. Chávez followed a populist agenda, which was made possible by the above-mentioned oil bonanza, regionally and internationally, he followed what he referred to as an anti-imperialist agenda, through which -and thanks to the oil wealth he was enjoying- he supported fellow leftist governments in Latin America, from Cuba under the Castros to Evo Morales in Bolivia and Rafael Correa in Ecuador. Internationally, he opted to get closer to one of the countries US President G.W. Bush defined as part of an axis of evil, i.e., Iran, while he also forged closer relations with China and Russia, which, of course, were back then nowhere close to have the same relations they have today with the West in general, and the US in particular.

Moreover, his progressive adherence to socialism, his support to Cuba and to other states called by the US rogue states -such as Iran and Gadhafi's Libya- earned him the enmity of the United States. In a weird episode that underlines the open antagonism between the Venezuelan leader and the US, in an address to the general assembly (GA) of the United Nations in 2006, Mr. Chávez called US President George W. Bush the devil and said that the tribune of the UN -from which he was addressing the GA- still smelled sulfur after US

President Bush had made his address from it, upon which Mr. Chávez crossed himself, symbolizing his need for divine protection from what he named the devil. This is folkloric -and many in the GA laughed loudly, although it is not clear whether the laughs were about the joke or the joker- but it shows the deteriorated relations Chávez' Venezuela had with the US.

As mentioned earlier, the distributive domestic agenda provided Mr. Chávez with a wide popularity among the poor and the marginalized that carried him to victory for several election cycles, including his last one, when he had been diagnosed with cancer but still run for the presidency and won. After his death in 2013, he was replaced by Nicolás Maduro, a far less charismatic politician who is nevertheless astute and very agile in the art of surviving.

Mr. Maduro has benefitted from the aura of the movement created by his predecessor and mentor. However, his hold on power had been as troubled as that of Mr. Chávez. Indeed, the presidential elections of May 2018 were marred by irregularities, which outcome was not recognized by the opposition as well as by many other countries. This stalemate as well as the acute economic crisis in the midst of which it took place -with hyperinflation and a major devaluation of the Bolívar, the national currency- resulted in street demonstrations throughout the country. In January 2019, an escalation move by the opposition took place: the president of the National Assembly, Juan Guaidó, who was from the ranks of the opposition, proclaimed himself as interim president, and was swiftly recognized by the US, several fellow Latin American states -including Brazil, who was then at the beginning of the Bolsonaro presidency-, and major EU state members, including, symbolically, Spain -which was ruled by a socialist Prime Minister, Mr. Pedro Sanchez-, Britain, Germany and France. Morocco also recognized the interim government of Mr. Guaidó. The interim government tried to take several initiatives, including introducing humanitarian aid by land and calling for street demonstrations, but the government of Mr. Maduro resisted, notably thanks to the support of the military. It was under those very tense circumstances that one of the numerous dialogues between the opposition and the government of Mr. Maduro took place in November 2019 in Barbados, although with very little achievements. Mr. Guaidó, who was re-elected president of the National Assembly twice (in 2020 and in 2022), kept gaining support, although most of it was symbolic and did not allow him to kick Mr. Maduro out of power and establish himself as an undisputed president for the country. Consequently, in December 2022, the opposition admitted the failure of its attempt to impose an interim government and disbanded it.

THE ELECTORAL PROCESS OF 2024:

The launch of the electoral process of 2024 took place in 2023 already. Although the constitution mandated for presidential elections to take place, the conditions under which those elections would take place were undefined. One negative indication for the opposition was that its paramount and most expressive leader and a presumptive powerful presidential candidate, Ms. María Corina Machado, was declared by a court to be inapt to hold any public office for 15 years due to presumed corruption under the interim government of Mr. Guaidó. That important incentive -for the opposition-, added to an international mediation, pushed all parties to yet another national dialogue, also in Barbados, to smooth the path for the elections. The parties agreed to hold presidential elections in the second semester of 2024. The government committed to provide conditions for a smooth electoral campaign, including but not limited to allowing all legitimate candidacies from the opposition. In counterpart, the US government, one of the international mediators, committed to lift sanctions it had imposed on the Venezuelan economy.

However, events did not unfold so smoothly. First of all, although Ms. María Corina Machado won easily the primaries organized by the opposition -as she secured over 90% of the votes (El País, 5/3/2024), in an election that witnessed a massive and unprecedented mobilization of voters⁶-, the supreme court of justice maintained the decision to not allow her to run for elections due to corruption accusations. Ms. Corina Machado then indicated, as a successor, an 80 year old scholar who, despite being widely respected in academia, was totally unknown to the wide public, Ms. Corina Yoris, whose candidacy was unanimously accepted by the newly unified opposition. However, without any justification, the electoral court rejected Ms. Yoris' candidacy too (France 24, 20/4/2024). Moreover, many activists from the opposition were sent to jail by the authorities. Consequently, the US government declared that since the Maduro government was not delivering on its part of the deal -i.e., allowing a smooth electoral process to take place-, the US was going to reimpose the sanctions it had lifted, allowing for a short transition period of 45 days to allow businesses to adapt to that old/new reality (O Globo, 17/4/2024).

Back to the election trail, the opposition faced a double challenge. On the one hand, it could not agree on a unitary candidate to replace Ms. Yoris. On the other hand, it could not access the electoral court website to register a candidacy, any candidacy, which, it suspected -and for very good reasons- was not a mere accident. That imbroglio lasted until the last hours of candidacy registration. Once the deadline passed, the electoral court first announced the list of candidates who had been able to register, before it extended the deadline by 12 hours. Those few extra hours revealed to be crucial as the opposition registered Mr. Edmundo González Urrutia, a 76 years-old retired diplomat who had served as Ambassador in Algeria and Argentina -the latter, already under Mr. Chávez-, but who clashed with the President in 2002, decided to retire and shortly after joined the ranks of the opposition (O Globo, 22/4/2024). Since then, he has been active academically, with several publications on Venezuelan foreign policy, but he has also been active with the opposition and an articulator of some of its foreign policy positions. In sum, Mr. González has managed to combine a significant diplomatic career with a respectable academic production and a dense political presence, and although he was not a leader of the opposition, he enjoyed wide respect among its ranks.

If the immediate support of opposition leaders for the name of Mr. González was lukewarm, it became very quickly clear, loud and enthusiastic. One of the first leaders to declare support for Mr. González was Ms. Corina Machado, which was extremely important due to her wide popularity. Shortly after her, Ms. Corina Yoris as well as many other prominent opposition leaders also declared their support for him. The governor of the state of Zulia, Mr. Manuel Rosales, who had previously run against Hugo Chávez but who was neither very popular in the opposition ranks nor a consensus candidate, but who had managed to register his candidacy at the eleventh hour of the registration process, also quickly withdrew his candidacy in favor of that of Mr. González. With that, the latter became the consensual candidate of the opposition, and the person to carry its colors on the presidential ballot against Mr. Maduro and a few other also-runs.

The electoral period has been tense and intense. Both Mr. Maduro and Mr. González have traveled the country and held numerous rallies. Mr. González has been very often accompanied by Ms. Corina Machado, who managed to transfer to him her popularity and credibility. Consequently, most credible opinion polls have shown the opposition

6. More than two million individuals voted in the primaries organized by the opposition, which surprised both Mr. Maduro and the opposition leaders, and indicated to the former the strong mobilization of the supporters of the latter. The massive support received by Ms. Corina Machado, who was a prominent and hardline opponent to Mr. Chávez and to Chavismo, indicated that her attempt to moderate her positions had been successful as it allowed her to appeal to a wide specter of voters.

candidate over thirty percentage points ahead of the seating president. Mr. Maduro has shown discomfort and concern and has used very strong and threatening language to intimidate and frighten his opponents and the opposition voters at large. In a recent meeting, he threatened bloodshed in case the opposition candidate would win. All the intimidations and threatening language has led to international admonition for all parties -but mainly for the government of Mr. Maduro- to respect diversity and the democratic process, as well as to accept the results of the political and electoral game. But when Lula, the Brazilian president and a leader who is expected to exercise some influence on Mr. Maduro declared that that threat of bloodshed by Mr. Maduro was frightening, Mr. Maduro maliciously responded -without quoting the Brazilian president by name- that whoever is frightened should drink chamomile. The violent language has also been accompanied by a campaign of intimidation: opposition leaders kept being sent to jail, the head of the security of Ms. Corina Machado was also taken into policy custody, and the breaks of her cars were cut, putting her life under serious risk.

THE INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION:

In this tense context, what can international players do to help in solving the Venezuelan crisis? As mentioned hereabove, close neighbors such as Brazil and Colombia, the regional hegemony -the US-, and distant actors, such as Norway, France, and Spain, have mediated several rounds of dialogue, with varying degrees of success. The latest one, the Barbados accords of October 2023, have at least managed to establish an agreement on the realization of the electoral process, and have -ultimately- created the conditions that are allowing the opposition not only to compete for the presidency, but also to envision winning it. The challenge is that in case the mentioned opinion polls are confirmed and Mr. Maduro loses the elections, there are very few ways to force him to accept its results, if he decides not to. Indeed, there is a long-standing rivalry between Venezuela and Colombia that goes beyond the heightened tensions between Mr. Chávez, his successor, Mr. Maduro, and the different Colombian Presidents. Although those relations have seen better days now that Colombia is governed by the leftist Mr. Gustavo Petro, there is this innate competition between the two countries that share borders, a common history and the rivalry. As for Brazil, although not from the same "left" -as per Castañeda's distinction-, President Lula used to have a very close relationship with President Chávez, and the latter not only respected but looked up at the former and occasionally sought his advice. But although Mr. Maduro is the successor of Mr. Chávez and Mr. Lula is back in power, both leaders do not enjoy the same kind of relationship. Of course, Brazil under Lula has in no way a comparable attitude with Venezuela as Brazil under Bolsonaro used to have. However, with the significant changes in the international scene between the first decade of the century and the current one -the rise of China, the change in Russia's relationship with the West, not to mention the increasing assertiveness of Iran- have provided Mr. Maduro with an international support that allows him to dispense with the support of his immediate neighbors, Brazil and Colombia. The border crisis with Guyana and the appeals to calm made by international actors and regional players such as Brazil showed the limit of the influence of the latter country on the government of Mr. Maduro. This is not to mention that the US has been imposing harsh sanctions on the country -with a heightened intensity under former President Trump- to no avail. Even regionally, Cuba and Nicaragua are more unconditional supporters of Mr. Maduro than Colombia and Brazil. All of this means that in case Mr. Maduro is defeated but does not want to recognize his defeat, there is very little foreign countries can do to force him to follow the rules of the game and accept the election results.

MOROCCO AND VENEZUELA:

Morocco did not traditionally have negative relations with Venezuela until the arrival of Mr. Chávez to power. But the election of the latter, his anti-US rhetoric, his rapprochement with rogue states -and mainly, Iran, but also Libya- have all resulted in the degradation of relations between both countries. A turning point in that degradation took place in January 2009, when Morocco moved its embassy from Caracas to the Dominican Republic, alleging for that the explicit support of Mr. Chávez to the Polisario front (Aujourd'hui le Maroc, 1/19/2009). A few years after that significant diplomatic move, Morocco -as noted earlier- was one of the countries that recognized the interim government of Mr. Guaidó. In retribution for that recognition -the first of an African country- Mr. Guaidó declared his support to the Moroccan plan of autonomy in the Sahara. This is to say that, in case the opposition to Mr. Maduro wins the presidential elections and Mr. González becomes president, the likelihood of major improvements in Morocco's relations with Venezuela is significant.

FINAL REMARKS:

The presidential elections of July 28, 2024 in Venezuela and their aftermath are part of a process that has been taking place for a long period of time, in the sense that the regime created by Mr. Chávez and led now by his successor, Mr. Maduro, has seen its legitimacy and hold on power questioned by the opposition for a long period of time. Some of that contestation was legal and followed the rules of law -with joint candidacies of the opposition for the presidency, joint boycotts of elections, and participation, with the government, in national dialogues-, whereas others were less so, with coup attempts and a de facto interim government, among other things.

If opinion polls are correct and Mr. González, the opposition candidate, wins the presidential election, the question will be how Mr. Maduro and his allies will react. Will they graciously accept the results of the elections or not? And if they don't, how violent and intense will be their reaction? In the last confrontation between Mr. Maduro and the opposition, Mr. Maduro prevailed, in part thanks to the support of the army. How will the army react this time? Will it embrace the regime of Mr. Maduro and protect it -since most military leaders owe their appointment to it- or will it be sensitive to international pressure and to the harm to the image of the country that supporting a regime that would have lost elections might represent? To this respect, the wider the eventual margin of victory of the opposition will be, the more reduced the margin of contestation of the electoral result will be. International pressure, from friendly and less friendly countries, will only be effective if the local actors -and specifically, Mr. Maduro and his allies in politics, in the judiciary and in the army- are ready to listen to it. Brazil's president, Mr. Lula, has dispatched his international affairs advisor, Mr. Celso Amorim -who used to have friendly relations with Mr. Chávez, and who has a solid network in that country- to Venezuela to allow Brazil some ability to act quickly, and eventually preemptively, in case of a crisis. But the effectiveness of that presence is subject to many other factors, among which, Mr. Maduro's willingness to act reasonably ... in case he loses the elections.

However, Mr. Maduro might win the elections. In the week preceding the elections, he affirmed that the Venezuelan voting system is transparent and verifiable -as opposed to the one in the US and the one in Brazil, countries he specifically named in his speech at a rally-. This might indicate his trust in the system, and his expectation that he will win the election. How would that be possible? By intimidating opposition voters which might lead them not to go to vote. Reports about voters having their registration transferred to other regions of the country without informing them have also circulated in the Venezuelan press. Mr. Maduro might also count on

mobilizing his voters through scaring them with the specter of an opposition victory. All of this is very hypothetical but possible. There is also the fact that the regime of Mr. Maduro holds a very large sympathy within the judicial power. All these factors might ultimately lead to a very surprising but possible victory of Mr. Maduro. If that happens, the question will be how will the opposition react, and how will international players react? Will the opposition take its struggle to the streets? Will it encourage demonstrations, or even riots? What kind of external support will it obtain? It is almost certain that China and Russia will show support to Mr. Maduro, so what would the US do? Will the international front of mediators, made also of Brazil and Colombia in addition to a few other European countries and the US, remain cohesive or not? Although this is a remote scenario, it is a possible one that needs to be considered.

The few hours and days after the elections will be crucial for the immediate political future of the country.

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About the author, Nizar Messari

Nizar Messari is Associate Professor at Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane (AUI), Morocco. He served as Dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences (2012-17), and then as Vice President for Academic Affairs (2017-21) at the same university. After stepping down at the end of his mandate as vice president, he moved to the USA where he was Rice Scholar at Yale University's MacMillan Center during the academic year 2021-22. Before returning to Morocco in January 2010, he was Assistant Professor at Pontificia Universidade Catolica do Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio), Brazil, between 2001 and 2009. He has published in journals such as Security Dialogue, International Studies Perspective, Refugee Survey Quarterly, The Journal of North African Studies, Cultures & Conflits (in French), Contexto Internacional and Politica Externa (both in Portuguese) as well as many chapters in co-edited volumes in English, Portuguese and French. He is the co-author with João Pontes Nogueira of an International Relations Theory textbook in Brazil: Teoria das Relações Internacionais – Correntes e Debates (Rio de Janeiro: Elsevier/Campus, 2005), 9th. Edition. He is currently finalizing a book on security studies from a non-Western and critical perspective.

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Policy Center for the New South

Rabat Campus of Mohammed VI Polytechnic University, Rocade Rabat Salé - 11103

Email : contact@policycenter.ma

Phone : +212 (0) 537 54 04 04 / Fax : +212 (0) 537 71 31 54

Website : www.policycenter.ma

