



In Focus

Venezuela's Elections

On 6 December 2015, Venezuelans voted in [elections for the country's National Assembly](#). The [opposition coalition](#), the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD), won a [decisive victory](#), securing 112 seats out of 167. In contrast, the United Socialist Party (PSUV)—the party of the current President, Nicolás Maduro, and the late former President, Hugo Chávez—won 55 seats. The result leaves the MUD with a 'supermajority' in the National Assembly, which some commentators have argued will effectively allow it to [challenge the rule of Mr Maduro](#).

Background

In recent years, Venezuela has suffered from political instability and considerable economic challenges. In March 2013, the then-President, Hugo Chávez, [died](#) following a two year battle with cancer. The BBC [reported](#) that, while Mr Chávez won support among the poor for his socialist policies, opponents accused him of “mishandling the economy and taking the country towards dictatorship”. Presidential elections followed in April 2013, won by Chávez's former Vice-President, Nicolás Maduro, by a narrow margin. Over the course of the Chávez and Maduro administrations, some analysts [argue](#) that “democratic practices have deteriorated and human rights violations have increased”. Indeed, US analyst Mark P Sullivan observes that, in 2014, “deteriorating economic conditions, high rates of crime and street protests” were met with violence by the Venezuelan state, and posed “enormous challenges to the Maduro Government”. For example, student-led anti-Government protests in February 2014 ended in deadly violence and resulted in the [arrest of the opposition leader](#), Leopoldo López, along with two opposition mayors. (López was later [sentenced and jailed](#) for 14 years in September 2015 for allegedly inciting violence during the protests.) Further anti-Government protests in February 2015 also saw a [14-year-old boy purportedly shot by police](#), and that same month the opposition mayor of Caracas, Antonio Ledezma was [arrested for allegedly plotting a coup](#). On 25 November 2015, the leader of the AD party, [Luis Díaz, was assassinated at a campaign rally](#), days before the election.

The election also took place against a backdrop of [severe and ongoing economic problems](#). The International Crisis Group [warned](#) in July 2015 that “a sharp fall in real incomes, major shortages of essential foods, medicines and other basic goods, and breakdown of the health services [were] elements of a looming social crisis”. Similarly, the Council on Foreign Relations has [observed](#) that the Chávez Government's wealth redistribution arguably helped to reduce poverty rates from 50 to 30 percent between 1998 and 2012, yet that today “many analysts say those gains have been erased”. Venezuela holds the [world's largest oil reserves](#) (accounting for 96 percent of the country's export revenues), and the [sharp drop in oil prices from mid-June 2014](#) has had a severe impact on the country; indeed, the International Monetary Fund predicts that the Venezuelan [economy will contract by nearly 10 percent this year](#). In addition, the BBC [explains](#) that the country has been suffering from “chronic shortages of some basic goods”, including medicines, and that “skyrocketing” prices on the black market have driven

up the cost of living. The *Financial Times* reports that [inflation in Venezuela is currently around 240 percent](#).

The Election

After a dramatic election contest, the *Guardian* [argues](#) that the MUD's victory marks a "major political shift" in Venezuela and "deals a serious blow to the socialist revolution started 17 years ago by the late Hugo Chávez". The [MUD comprises some two dozen parties across the political spectrum](#), the largest of which are Justice First (PJ); Popular Will (VP); A New Era (UNT); and Democratic Action (AD) parties. The PJ party is headed by the MUD's 2012 and 2013 presidential candidate Henrique Capriles, and the VP party by Leopoldo López. However, commentators have [observed](#) that the MUD is arguably internally divided and split between [two main factions](#), headed by Capriles and López respectively.

Speaking after the election, President Maduro has said that he would "[recognise these adverse results and accept them](#)", but also [claimed](#) "the bad guys won...with lies and deceitful offers". Further, he [blamed Venezuela's problems](#) on a supposed "economic war" being waged on the country by the United States and by the opposition. However, with a high turnout of 74.3 percent, the BBC [suggests](#) that the results indicate that a sizeable proportion of the population voted for change.

Future Challenges

Analysts suggest that MUD's decisive victory, and its supermajority in the National Assembly could lead to significant change in the country. However, the *Economist* [contends](#) that the "new political alignment is fraught with danger", both for the Government and for the MUD, and it remains to be seen whether the socialist Government will accept a programme of reform. Given that presidential elections are not due until 2018, the paper also [suggests](#) that the MUD may use a [constitutional provision](#) to try to eject President Maduro from office and trigger a Presidential election, although this would require the approval of a fifth of the electorate. The MUD also had promised to free around 70 political prisoners—including VP leader, Leopoldo López. However, President Maduro has said he would [refuse any such attempt to grant amnesty](#).

Following the election, the outgoing President of the National Assembly, Diosdado Cabello, announced the [appointment of new Supreme Court judges](#) before the current National Assembly dissolves. Human Rights Watch's Americas Director, José Miguel Vivanco, [claims](#) that the Government is trying to further pack the Supreme Court with its supporters, which have the power to annul laws adopted by the National Assembly. Although Vivanco [notes](#) that the MUD's supermajority could be used to overhaul the Supreme Court, he argues that the court would "certainly seek to block such efforts, which could provoke a major constitutional crisis that will only further undermine the rule of law in Venezuela".

Moreover, despite Venezuela's ongoing economic difficulties, the *Economist* [argues](#) that the current Government does not appear willing to undertake reforms to stabilise the economy, and that the measures needed to do so—such as devaluing the bolivar—"are likely to deepen the economic distress" in the short-term. However, the [paper suggests](#) that, while the MUD promised change, they also arguably "offered no coherent economic plan".

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