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Venezuela’s Opposition Scrambles to Regroup after Maduro Win

Socialist president re-elected amid crushing economic crisis



Supporters of Venezuela’s President Nicolas Maduro listen to the socialist leader at the presidential palace in Caracas, Venezuela, Sunday, May 20, 2018. Electoral officials declared the socialist leader won a second six-years term, even as his leading challenger questioned the legitimacy of a vote marred by irregularities and called for new elections to prevent a brewing social crisis from exploding.

By Joshua Goodman and Scott Smith, Associated Press

CARACAS, Venezuela — Venezuela’s fractured opposition emerged even more powerless Monday, a day after an election it boycotted propelled socialist President Nicolas Maduro to an easy victory amid a crushing economic crisis.

The coalition’s strategy to sit out the vote succeeded at exposing declining support for the government. Yet it also leaves Maduro’s opponents even more dependent on international pressure seeking to force change in this South American oil-exporting nation where people struggle to find food and are migrating in mass.

Even before the government-controlled National Election Council declared Maduro the overwhelming winner, nations around the world had accused him of taking Venezuela down the path toward “dictatorship.” The election registered the lowest turnout in decades — around 46 percent — as many voters stayed home while the opposition warned the election was rigged.

It’s an outcome likely to further weaken Maduro’s legitimacy in the eyes of many, though not necessarily his grip on power.

There has been no sign of wavering support from the leadership of Venezuela’s military, which long was the arbiter of Venezuela’s political disputes. And Venezuelans busy trying to survive amid widespread food shortages and hyperinflation seem

too demoralized to engage in protests like the ones that last year resulted in more than 140 deaths.

Opponents of the socialist revolution installed by the late President Hugo Chavez have few options, said Jennifer McCoy, a Georgia State University political scientist who led five electoral missions to Venezuela on behalf of the Carter Center until 2013.

“The opposition for some time has been waiting for something to save them,” she said.

In one minor protest Monday, 30 opposition activists marched onto a major highway that a year ago was filled with tens of thousands of anti-government protesters. They unfurled a giant Venezuelan flag shouting, “This was a farce — not an election.” Then they rolled up the flag and dispersed. It lasted 10 minutes.

“It’s so hard to mobilize people who are desperately trying to survive or figure out how to leave the country,” McCoy said.

She thinks it unlikely the U.S. will act on threats to slap an embargo on Venezuela’s oil exports — its main source of cash. Resistance to the idea runs high among international oil companies as well as refineries



Opposition leader Maria Corina Machado holds a Venezuelan flag during a protest against the previous day’s presidential election in Caracas, Venezuela, Monday, May 21, 2018. Opposition organizers like Machado urged people to not participate in the election, in which most popular anti-government leaders were banned from being candidates, and which drew the lowest participation on record for a presidential election in decades.

built in U.S. Gulf states to process Venezuela’s heavy crude, she noted. An embargo would also give Maduro a convenient excuse to blame his mounting problems on what he likes to call the “imperialist” U.S.

President Donald Trump did move Monday to strengthen the financial noose around Maduro, signing an executive order that makes it harder for Venezuela’s government to sell off state assets, including money due from oil sales. Administration officials said top Venezuelan officials use such sales to enrich themselves, while millions struggle.

A senior U.S. administration official told The Associated Press that while oil sanctions are

under active consideration, there is consensus that such a strong-armed tactic might not be needed given the impact of past sanctions, the damage already wrought by Maduro’s own mismanagement and legal actions taken by many of Venezuela’s unpaid creditors. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren’t authorized to discuss the administration’s next steps.

The financial stranglehold on Venezuela triggered by a collapse in oil production and previous U.S. sanctions barring the government from restructuring its debts will likely only worsen the misery. Venezuela’s inflation has soared to 14,000 percent, while the minimum wage has nose-dived to a value of about \$2 a month.

“This election doesn’t solve Maduro’s economic problems, and in some ways makes them far worse,” said Yon Goicochea, an opposition activist who spent 15 months in jail until agreeing last year to run in mayoral elections, also boycotted by the opposition.

A growing roster of nations issued condemnations Monday for Venezuela’s election, threatening to ramp up diplomatic and economic pressure.

A coalition of 14 countries from throughout the Americas, including Brazil, Mexico and Colombia, pledged to scale back diplomatic relations with Venezuela and urge international organizations not to give the Maduro government new credit.

Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy decried the vote as not respecting “minimal democratic standards” and vowed to consult with European counterparts on new measures in hopes of “easing the suffering of Venezuelans.”

The people of Caracas, meanwhile, awoke Monday to return to their daily struggles, either at peace with the election’s outcome or resigned to six more years under Maduro leadership.

Among those getting on with life was Concepción Fernandez, a 47-year-old merchant who stopped to reflect while waiting to catch a bus to work.

“I just might grab my suitcase and go,” she said.