

Washington threatens to escalate sanctions in wake of Venezuelan regional elections

Andrea Lobo
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In a further intensification of the political war in Venezuela, the US-backed opposition and the Trump administration claimed that Sunday's regional elections, in which the ruling party coalition won 17 of the 23 governorships, were rigged.

Nonetheless, the results and the relatively small turnout of 61 percent--compared to over 74 percent in parliamentary election two years ago--reflect widespread opposition to both factions of the ruling elite amid a worsening economic and social crisis.

The Bolivarian coalition led by the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) received slightly less than the 5.6 million votes that it received in the 2015 legislative elections. At that time, as the country's economy plunged along with oil and other commodity prices, the opposition MUD coalition won an overwhelming majority in the National Assembly with 7.7 million votes. However, this weekend it obtained only 4.8 million votes, presaging a similar or worse result in next year's presidential elections.

President Nicolás Maduro has publicly proclaimed a "strong victory" for the ruling party, in spite of its losing control of three states, Mérida, Táchira and Zulia, all of which were centers of the provocative anti-government protests organized by the MUD earlier this year that left at least 125 protesters dead and thousands injured.

After polls showing the MUD comfortably in the lead, the opposition has reacted to the vote totals with anger and despair. Once polling stations had closed on Sunday night, the former secretary general of the MUD, Ramón Guillermo Aveledo, told the press: "What happened today in Venezuela, which we feel so proud of, is an enormous, gigantic popular victory of historical dimensions."

Once the results were made public, however, they confirmed not only that the MUD has failed to garner mass support beyond its base among more privileged layers, but that its right-wing politics and encouragement of the Trump administration's threats to impose further sanctions on the crippled economy and even intervene militarily have turned more Venezuelans against it.

Most recently, Washington targeted the country's economic lifeline, the state-run oil company PDVSA, and imposed a travel ban on Venezuelans.

Maduro and the PSUV-run Constituent Assembly, which anti-democratically sidelined the MUD-led congress in July, have since been able to pin the blame for the country's worsening economic crisis and lack of essential goods and medicines on US aggression.

While decades of US neocolonial exploitation of the country's working class and natural resources bear chief responsibility for its desperate social conditions, since late PSUV leader Hugo Chavez was elected in 1998 professing an "anti-imperialist" nationalism, the *chavistas* have only deepened the country's dependence on the US oil market and foreign credit. This has resulted in widespread deprivation from triple-digit inflation and an 80 percent fall in imports in five years. The firm Torino Capital indicates that Venezuela's debt service payments amount to about 75 percent of total exports, the highest level in the world.

According to the *Financial Times*, the country's sovereign bonds fell to their lowest level since April 2016, with further US sanctions threatening to push Venezuela over the brink of default.

The US State Department rejected Sunday's election, complaining that the PSUV government "conducts itself as an authoritarian dictatorship," and threatened to "bring the full weight of economic and diplomatic power to bear" against it.

The US financial elite hoped that the elections would signify a turn away from the PSUV. Washington's hostility to the government in Caracas has increased in response to its accumulation of Chinese and Russian loan deals, including the ceding of shares and permits to pump Venezuelan oil to the Russian company Rosneft.

The *Financial Times* reports that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is already "crunching numbers" for how a new government more subservient to Washington would manage the country's \$140 billion debt. As in Greece and, more recently, Puerto Rico, such processes entail a

plundering of state assets and the imposition of devastating austerity.

There is one thing the *Times* congratulates the PSUV for: it has already taken care of “the most painful” part of imposing these measures. “Venezuela has already suffered a massive drop in consumption,” the newspaper of the British financial oligarchy writes, underscoring the role of the so-called “Bolivarian revolution” in suppressing the struggles of the Venezuelan working class and protecting capitalist property and the business interests of imperialism more generally.

Even recent revelations by the top Venezuelan functionary of the Brazilian construction giant Odebrecht that the Maduro ruling clique had received \$35 million in kickbacks for contracts did not prevent the ruling party from getting a majority of governorships. In fact, the Odebrecht scandal has demonstrated the corrupt nature of wealth accumulation under capitalism, implicating top opposition leaders in Venezuela as well, including Henrique Capriles, along with capitalist parties and politicians of all shades across the region.

The MUD leader Ángel Oropeza expanded on the opposition’s fraud allegations on Monday. These included charges that voting machines were broken, voting places were moved within 48 hours of the election, voters were violently harassed, public employees coerced, MUD votes counted as null and PSUV sympathizers voting more than once.

While promising an “exhaustive report,” no evidence has been presented so far to substantiate the impact from the relocation of polling stations nor of any of its other claims, in spite of having announced that 363,000 MUD representatives would be present across the country as witnesses and to help guide voters to their respective centers given the changes.

But, more importantly, instead of appealing to the majority of the Venezuelan masses that supposedly supports them, Oropeza reiterated the MUD’s orientation toward and dependence upon the imperialist ruling centers. “We’ll send a delegation to the governments of the world to explain the abuses in this electoral process,” he concluded.

Such maneuvers in their struggle against the PSUV, including their recent trips across Europe, demonstrate their reliance on international sanctions partly aimed at starving Venezuelans into supporting them.

The divisions within the opposition have also deepened in the face of an embarrassing defeat at the hands of a government that has presided over one of the worst economic and social crises in Latin American history. Moreover, since MUD leaders had previously legitimized these elections as “the law,” they fear that their participation

has also given legitimacy to the Constituent Assembly.

Two gubernatorial candidates conceded defeat against the official party line. “I wouldn’t speak of fraud, because you have to have proof and, where is it? Having the advantage is one thing, fraud is something else,” commented the MUD Caracas deputy José Guerra to Reuters. “We hurt ourselves.”

The top European Union diplomat, Federica Mogherini, gave a more reluctant response than Washington, calling on “all parts in Venezuela to unite and find a credible and constructive dialogue.” This is in reference to the “peace dialogues” started in the Dominican Republic last month between the PSUV government and the MUD.

The MUD has declared that it will not join any talks until after an independent inquiry into the elections, which could mean that the “dialogues” will conclude after just one session.

Growing popular hostility towards the MUD has not translated into more support for the Maduro government. The latter has used the provocations of the right-wing opposition to prepare to suppress what it considers to be the gravest threat to its interests, an independent uprising by the restless Venezuelan working class.

For instance, it has intimidated social opposition with a *de facto* martial law it enacted in April, ostensibly targeting the MUD demonstrations. The head of the Bolivarian Armed Forces announced that 267,000 military and security personnel had been deployed to oversee the elections. The Constituent Assembly has also approved several laws criminalizing all opposition, justifying these measures as a response to the MUD’s support for US sanctions.

In the state of Bolívar, the only one with a still inconclusive vote count, protesters were gathering outside the offices of the electoral body on Monday demanding a fair result, when the military police lunged themselves at the crowd and dispersed them with volleys of tear gas.



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