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**The flaws of the political opposition in Venezuela in changing the  
regime of Nicolás Maduro (2014-2020)**

**Bachelor thesis**

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## Zadání bakalářské práce

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**Název bakalářské práce A):** The flaws of the political opposition in Venezuela in changing the regime of Nicolás Maduro (2014-2020)

### **Cíl, metody, literatura, předpoklady:**

The study aims to explore how the organization and strategies of the opposition in Venezuela, in interaction with the government's responses, have led to their failure to change the regime. The research question is: how has the interaction between the political opposition in Venezuela and the incumbent government impacted in the opposition's chances of changing Nicolás Maduro's regime (2014-2020)? The study uses a hybrid approach that combines two types of process tracing methods, theory-testing and explaining outcome, and analyzes the opposition strategies and contextual elements that impact their attempts at regime change.

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## **Declaration**

I declare that I have written this Bachelor thesis independently under the supervision of Mgr. Barbora Vališková, Ph.D. and have presented all the sources and literature utilized.

In Hradec Králové, 29th April 2023

Michelle Stephanie Salguero Márquez

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I have always been aware that life is a collaborative effort, and it is the people around us who make our journeys easier. In this journey of mine, I have counted with the support of incredible people who I would like to express my gratitude to. My parents, in particular, who have been invaluable pillars in my life, providing me with love, guidance, and sacrificing their own needs to help me achieve my goals. I cannot thank them enough for being there for me in every decision and every step I take. I am also grateful for the friends and loved ones who have supported me from afar and those who have been by my side through moments of stress. Finally, I want to express my deepest gratitude to my tutor, whose constructive feedback has played an indispensable role in shaping my ideas and guiding me. Despite my moments of confusion, she has consistently provided me with the necessary guidance and support to stay on track. I feel fortunate to have counted with her advices along this research.

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## **Annotation**

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The study aims to explore how the organization and strategies of the opposition in Venezuela, in interaction with the government's responses, lead to their failure to change the regime. The research question is: how has the interaction between the political opposition in Venezuela and the incumbent government impacted in the opposition's chances of changing Nicolás Maduro's regime (2014-2020)? The study uses a hybrid approach that combines two types of process tracing methods, theory-testing and explaining outcome, and analyzes the opposition strategies and contextual elements that impact their attempts at regime change. It was found that even though the regime has used many destabilizing tactics, the opposition's strategies had a negative impact as well that prevented them in many occasions to achieve a regime change. Through the data analyzed, it could be evidenced various mechanisms that led to this: simultaneous protests and negotiations were found to be counterproductive for their overall strategy, while collaboration in government institutions caused internal divisions, leading to abstention during elections and weakening the opposition's ability to challenge the government. Boycotts by major opposition parties combined with participation of smaller factions also weakened their ability to pose a credible threat and conceded the electoral field to the regime. Finally, the opposition's reliance on Western powers isolated the regime, making it unafraid of Western leverage and strengthening autocratic linkages with other countries.

**Key words:** Venezuela, opposition, authoritarian regime, regime change, Nicolás Maduro.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

AD – Acción Democrática

ANC – Asamblea Nacional Constituyente

CLAP – Comité Local de Abastecimiento y Producción

CNE – Consejo Nacional Electoral

COPEI – Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente

EU – European Union

MPV – Movimiento Por Venezuela

MUD – Mesa de la Unidad Democrática

OAS – Organization of American States

PDVSA - Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A

PJ – Primero Justicia

PSUV – Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela

SEBIN – Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional

TSJ – Tribunal Supremo de Justicia

UN – United Nations

UNASUR – Unión de Naciones Suramericanas

UNT – Un Nuevo Tiempo

US – United States

VP – Voluntad Popular

## Chapter 1: Introduction

The Venezuelan case has been widely labeled as a competitive authoritarian regime, increasing a greater autocracy accelerated over the years (Corrales, 2015: 37). In such a scenario, opposition tends to build coalitions so they can represent a stronger challenge to the incumbent (Helms, 2021). In the Venezuelan case, with the need of a cohesive and coordinated opposition, more than 15 parties got together in the coalition of the MUD (*Mesa de la Unidad Democrática*) in 2008, yet the most noticeable were Primero Justicia (PJ), Acción Democrática (AD), Voluntad Popular (VP), and Un Nuevo Tiempo (UNT). The main goals of this alliance, established in their government guidelines in 2012, were the democratic reconstruction, the promotion of the autonomy of public authorities, the diversification of the economy, and the design of a comprehensive and sovereign foreign policy (Mesa de la Unidad Democrática, 2012). While their main strategy consisted of peaceful demonstrations, *guarimbas*<sup>1</sup> and other violent tactics were also used (Ibíd.: 61). These protests, mainly carried out by students, aimed to defend private broadcasters; to fight against alleged government encroachment on university autonomy; in support of opposition linked “political prisoners”; in 2012 on underfunding in the university sector; and in 2013 against an alleged media blackout on Chávez’s illness (Buxton, 2014, as cited in Cannon, 2014: 62).

On December 8, 2012, Chávez announced that his successor would be the Vice President and Chancellor Nicolás Maduro. After he died on March 5, 2013, he left an immense political vacuum which gave place to the elections that were held on April 14, 2013. Nicolás Maduro won, but in the following days, the government gave signs of condoning acts of violence against opposition leaders and supporters, which deepened the political crisis even more (López, 2014: 68). The MUD, then, managed to become the representation and hope of millions of Venezuelans that sought for a change of the increasingly autocratic and decadent government. This series of turbulent events, together with the discontents of the

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<sup>1</sup> This refers to the street barricades that protesters used as shelters to protect themselves from the repression and to avoid military tanks to proceed forward.



population, meant the success of the government opponents in the National Assembly, when for the first time in years, they won most of the seats in the parliamentary elections of 2015.

However, considering that in these contexts, there is an uneven playing field between the government and the opposition (Levitsky and Way, 2010), the strategy *divide et impera* is one of the most common ones of authoritarian rulers to weaken the opposition as much as they can (Schedler, 2002). Accordingly, despite the MUD managed to electorally win, since the peak of its electoral success in the 2015 legislative elections, they have fragmented and dwindled (Bahar et. Al., 2018: 6). They have navigated through a restrictive setting that has blocked many of their initiatives to fight the regime, which was suppressing the opposition with tactics such as controlling the military for their own benefit, repressing protests, manipulating the elections, and dismissing candidates. Accordingly, the opposition in Venezuela has applied different strategies and has modified its internal organization in relation to the government's tactics and responses as well.

Moreover, all of these repressive tactics of the incumbent regime made possible the visibility of the political, social and economic issues of Venezuela, as well as the international recognition and support of the opposition, which was reflected in the sanctions applied to the people involved in the government; and, in spite of this, the regime of Nicolás Maduro is, up until now, still in force. It is, then, of a great importance, to understand why is it that after all the efforts of the opposition and the fulfilment of the conditions for a democratic transition such as the economic crisis, success in legislative elections and the above-mentioned conjunctural factors (Przeworski, 1986; Whitehead, 1986) that were favorable to them, there has been no regime change and the opposition has not been able to make use of these favorable opportunities.

In this sense, the aim of this case study research is to explore how the organization and strategies of the opposition in Venezuela in interaction with the government responses have led to their failure to change the regime. For that purpose, I seek to answer the following research question: how has the interaction

between the political opposition in Venezuela and the incumbent government impacted in the opposition's chances of changing Nicolás Maduro's regime (2014-2020)?

This study will employ a hybrid approach that combines two types of the process tracing method: theory-testing and explaining-outcome. The former will be used to derive possible causing mechanisms from the existing literature that connect the organization and strategies opposition parties in interaction with authoritarian regimes and their failure to bring about a regime change, which will then be tested in the specific case of Venezuela between 2014-2020 to determine its presence or absence. Meanwhile, the latter will be used to investigate if that causal mechanism has led to the observed outcome in this particular case study (Beach & Pedersen, 2011). Therefore, this research analyzes the different strategies and organization of the political opposition in interaction with the regime, as well as the other contextual elements or *external stimuli* that have impacted in their attempt of changing the regime, meaning: (a) the economic crisis; (c) public opinion towards the government and the opposition; and (d) international involvement. Correspondingly, this research should significantly contribute to the study of the opposition in Venezuela in a more comprehensive way and to the explanation of how opposition parties interact with the incumbent government in a non-democratic context, dealing with many obstacles in between.

The documentary part of this research will be carried out through the consultation of data from the period between 2014 and 2020. This period covers a significant chapter in the Venezuelan politics: from the outbreak of a series of violently-repressed protests against the then new presidency of Nicolás Maduro, the parliamentary success of the Venezuelan opposition and high public support to it, an economic and humanitarian crisis, and high international visibility, to the decrease in political mobilization and opposition activity. I will consult primary sources such as the official website of the MUD, the National Assembly, the Supreme Tribunal of Justice and the CNE (*Consejo Nacional Electoral*). Likewise, the official *Twitter* accounts of the MUD and key leaders of the coalition will be

examined, together with sources such as the *United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner* and *Human Rights Watch*. I will conduct archival research in national and international newspapers and websites at key historical moments, along with data I will collect from opinion polls of four important survey companies in Venezuela: *Datanálisis*, *Datincorp*, *Hercon Consultores*, and *Delphos*. Finally, I will conduct semi-structured interviews with four key figures from the main opposition parties and journalists.

In Chapter 2, first, I present the previous scholarly knowledge on my topic: the different perspectives, debates, and gaps in the research. Thus, I consult relevant scholars within the study of the Venezuelan case: Cannon (2014); Corrales (2015); Cannon and Brown (2017); Buxton (2018); and Jiménez (2021). Second, I explain the existing theories that support my research. It addresses Levitsky and Way (2010) to identify what is the playing field like in a competitive authoritarian context. Schedler (2002), Arriola, Devaro, & Meng (2021), Lust-Okar (2004), and McClean (2021) are consulted to understand how these kinds of regimes act against democracy and block opposition forces from having an actual and significant participation, and, more specifically, through the judiciary branch (Henderson, 1991; Pereira, 2005; Solomon, 2007) and through repression (Davenport, 2007; Escribà-Folch, 2013; Rivera, 2017). It further examines Przeworski and Whitehead's contributions (1986) as a means to observe what are the enabling conditions that lead to a regime change, and those of Levitsky & Way (2006), Keck and Sikkink (1998), Pridham (1999), Weyland (2018), Finkel et al. (2007), and Gratius (2021) will serve to portray the impact of foreign influence in authoritarian regimes, or the lack of it. Finally, the inputs of Blondel (1997), Gandhi and Buckles (2016), Gamboa (2017), Kavasoglu (2021) and Helms (2021) are consulted in order to understand how electoral alliances emerge and work both internally and in relation to authoritarian regimes, and how their characteristics and strategies are important to fight the incumbent. In particular, in the discussion of opposition coordination and fragmentation, it is highlighted the relevance of the findings of Van de Walle (2006), Armstrong, Reuter & Robertson (2019), and Laštro & Bieber (2021).

In Chapter 3, I explain the analytical strategy of this research and the method of recollecting the data used in the analysis. In Chapter 4, I present empirical evidence to illustrate the causal relationship between the organization and strategies of the political opposition in interaction with Nicolás Maduro's regime and the failure of the opposition's chances of regime change. In Chapter 5, I conclude by addressing the implications of my findings.

## **Chapter 2: Theoretical framework**

Due to the increasing significance of the Venezuelan case in the latest years, many scholars have already studied it yet from different perspectives. Some of them have focused on the opposition, some on the regime itself, and others have addressed the conjugation of both, the economic crisis or the democratic backsliding. In this chapter, these authors will be presented in a chronological order as a means to have a broad outlook and different theoretical and analytical views on the topic addressed in this research.

Secondly, the chapter continues with a theoretical approximation of the concept of competitive authoritarian regimes by Levitsky and Way (2010) to identify what is the playing field like in such a context, as well as it addresses Schedler (2002), Arriola, Devaro, & Meng (2021), Lust-Okar (2004), McClean (2021), Henderson (1991), Pereira (2005), Solomon (2007), Davenport (2007), Escribà-Folch (2013), and Rivera (2017) to understand how these kinds of regimes, also labeled as electoral authoritarian, act against democracy and block opposition forces from having an actual and significant participation. Then, I address authors such as Whitehead and Przeworski (1986) on democratic transition to identify what are the enabling conditions or that lead to a regime change and democratization process, an aspect that is complemented by Levitsky & Way (2006), Keck and Sikkink (1998), Pridham (1999), Weyland (2018), Finkel et al. (2007), and Gratius (2021) by portraying the impact of foreign influence in authoritarian regimes, or the lack of it. On the other hand, to have a view from the challenger perspective as well, Blondel (1997), Gandhi and Buckles (2016), and

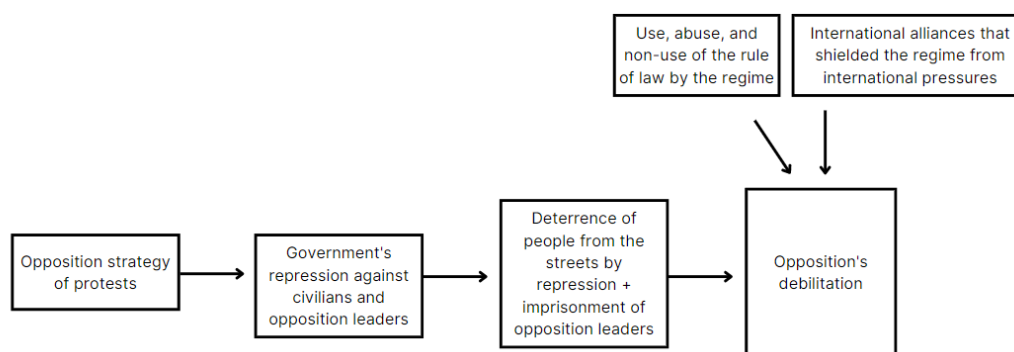
Helms (2021) are consulted, which will enable the understanding of how electoral alliances emerge and work both internally and in relation to authoritarian regimes and how their characteristics and strategies are important to fight the incumbent. In particular, in the discussion of opposition coordination and fragmentation, it is highlighted the relevance of the findings of Van de Walle (2006), Armstrong, Reuter & Robertson (2019), and Laštro & Bieber (2021).

### ***Theoretical perspective of the opposition in Venezuela***

Cannon (2014) in *As Clear as MUD: Characteristics, Objectives, and Strategies of the Opposition in Bolivarian Venezuela*, reexamines the changes of strategy of the opposition in Venezuela and questions whether those changes will remain permanent or could be subject to further modification. He suggests that strategies used by opposition groups range from parliamentary to extra-parliamentary to illegal, which may be activated based on changing circumstances linked to wider socioeconomic and geopolitical objectives. For instance, the author highlights that the opposition has moved to institutional strategies “based on a search of political unity” meanwhile the shift for extra-institutional has been complemented by recall referendums, elections and more recently, “economic problems, including high inflation and food shortages (...) which may have motivated radical leaders to spearhead opposition street rebellions” (Cannon, 2014: 62). Thus, this author's contribution focuses on an endogenous analysis of the opposition strategies.

On the other hand, Corrales (2015) in *The Authoritarian Resurgence: Autocratic legalism in Venezuela* examines Venezuela since 1999 to show how such the transformation from a competitive authoritarian regime to a more autocratic one can take place. The article gives an account of some of the regime's destabilizing tactics towards the opposition that have enabled them to hold power: the use, abuse, and non-use of the rule of law, meaning that (a) the ruling party has dominated both the legislative and judiciary bodies “to enact laws that empower the executive branch”; (b) the “inconsistent and biased implementation of laws and regulations”; (c) reliance in irregularities, as in elections through the National Electoral Council

(CNE). He offers two arguments for that autocratic change in Venezuela: on the domestic side, the ruling party's declining electoral competitiveness since the late 2000s, together with path dependence, and on the side of foreign policy, the fact that by 2010, Venezuela had succeeded in creating a foreign policy that shielded it from international pressures with regional actors such as Bolivia, Nicaragua and Peru, and beyond with China and Russia. Thus, Venezuela has found alternative markets for oil and support in weaponry from these countries and has tried to persuade Venezuela's international partners that altering the status quo could have negative economic consequences for them. And finally, the author points out that in relation to opposition strategies such as protests, the government responded with repression against civilians and went after opposition leaders weather arresting them or expelling them from the National Assembly. This possible causal mechanism can be seen in *Figure 1*.



*Figure 1:* created by the author.

For its part, Cannon and Brown (2017) in *Venezuela 2016: The Year of Living Dangerously* examine the government's reaction to the crisis looking at particular policy initiatives from 2017 and review the actions of the MUD regarding the crisis as well, in terms of their declared strategies and some specific laws which they attempted to enact to resolve it. In the author's opinion, both the government and the opposition were responsible for the situation as they did not provide effective policy responses to the issues confronting the nation. The government lacked rigor in dealing with the crisis and appeared more focused on holding onto power. The opposition, represented by the MUD, solely advocated for the removal of the government as the solution to the crisis. Nonetheless, their policy proposals were weakly formulated and did not offer sustainable solutions to the country's problems, which ended up deepening the continued struggle between the MUD and the

PSUV<sup>2</sup>. While the authors suggest that “Maduro has surrounded himself with personnel who face high exit costs should the PSUV lose power, thereby ensuring their support for his remaining in office” (Cannon & Brown, 2017: 615) they do not provide a clear causal mechanism linking the strategies of the opposition to their failure in achieving a regime change.

Other authors seem to have adopted a more comprehensive perspective on the matter, such as Buxton (2018) in *Venezuela: Deeper into the Abyss* examines the events that happened mainly during 2017<sup>3</sup> in Venezuela and the most significant issues: fissures between the ruling Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV); the economic crisis and chronic insecurity that accelerated migration; and the opposition's inability to take advantage of social discontent due to their tactics of using violent protests, international lobbying, and boycotts, as well as internal divisions within the Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD) coalition regarding approaches to removing the government. Regarding the opposition boycott tactic, for instance, the electoral space was conceded to the regime's party, the PSUV, which allowed them to win the majority of seats. She points out that the actions and measures of international actors aggravated rather than alleviated political tensions since countries such as Russia and China were an important counter to the United States, the European Union, and the Organization of American States (OAS), whose sanctions appeared to bind officials to Maduro's regime rather than encourage dissent or which did not effectively contain Venezuela's crisis and failed to achieve necessary consensus due to the lack of diplomatic overtures to states sympathetic to Venezuela. She concludes that neither the government nor the opposition have had effective actions in the crisis, the former due to their incapacity to fix the economic and social issues, and the latter for not proposing concrete policy-proposals and due to the prioritization of foreign opinion (see *Figure 2*). Finally, as it is a shared responsibility, she asserts that a dialogue must happen between both parties.

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<sup>2</sup> Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela, Hugo Chávez's party.

<sup>3</sup> A failed dialogue between the opposition and the regime, opposition-led massive protests, an attempt of recall referendum, a plebiscite convoked by the opposition, and regional and local elections.

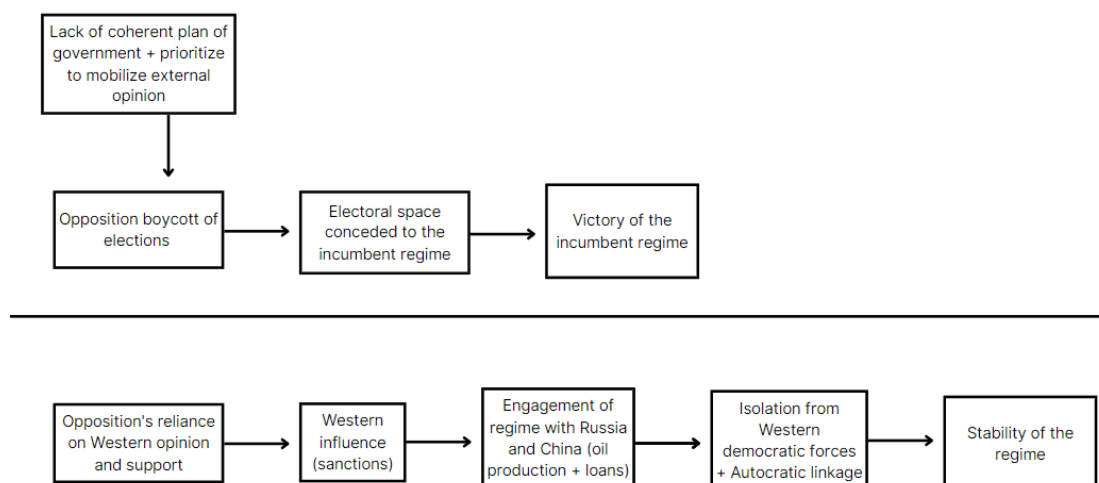


Figure 2: created by the author.

Jiménez (2021) in *Contesting Autocracy: Repression and Opposition Coordination in Venezuela* analyses the Venezuelan opposition from 1999 to 2018 in an effort to explore the factors that motivate opposition parties to coordinate in non-democratic regimes and explain the causal relationship between repression and opposition coordination. The author argues that the level of repression from the incumbent regime influences the decision-making and strategy formation of opposition parties. More specifically, she finds that informal coordination occurs when repression is low or high, formal coordination occurs when repression is at intermediate levels, and informal or clandestine coordination occurs when repression is high. In a case of high repression,

“While the utility of formal OC<sup>4</sup> is still high because it could boost the opposition’s competitiveness, the incentives for doing so will vary across parties. As the autocrat now systematically uses repression to further weaken and divide its opponents, as well as reducing the possibilities of regime transition, X, Y and Z might strategize differently. This is so because in C<sup>5</sup>, formal OC brings high personal risks, such as being jailed, killed or sent into exile. Consequently, while some politicians may decide to stay in the race, others may choose to exit or to cooperate with the autocrat to guarantee their personal safety. For example, while X might prioritize

<sup>4</sup> Opposition coordination.

<sup>5</sup> High repression.



personal safety and decide to tone down its activism, Y could give in to regime co-optation strategies by accepting bribes or an office, thereby assuming the role of a loyal or systemic opposition. However, Z could still assume the risks of challenging a highly repressive incumbent and pursue OC with other allies”. (Jiménez, 2021: 53).

She concludes that in Venezuela, between 2015 and 2018, the opposition moved from being coordinated and competitive to being seriously divided and incapable of challenging Maduro’s rule. Thus, this research, even though it does not connect opposition strategies with their failure, it does give an account on how repression has shaped the decisions of the opposition and their coordination.

All in all, some of these authors suggest, individually, that there is the need to observe the internal dynamics of the opposition when it comes to strategy shifts (Cannon, 2014); how those strategies might have contributed to the crisis in the country rather than alleviated it (Cannon and Brown, 2017); and the effect of regime’s tactics in destabilizing the opposition (Corrales (2015). On the other hand, scholars such as Buxton (2018) and Jiménez (2021) offer a more comprehensive perspective: the former pointing out how the opposition strategies and divisions have prevented them to capitalize on social discontent and recognizing foreign involvement as a crucial factor in the sequence of events that took place in Venezuela; and the latter explaining the existence of a causal relationship between repression from part of the regime and opposition coordination.

By building on and synthesizing these inputs, this paper takes a broader view by integrating those key factors in an interactive dynamic. Since in the existing literature there is no clear causal mechanism that explains the relationship between the independent variable of this research (opposition strategies and organization in interaction with the regime) and the dependent variable (the failure of the opposition in achieving a change of the regime of Nicolás Maduro), this study will build upon them to explore a causal mechanism on the base of empirical data. Filling this gap is important because it involves not only assessing the actions of the opposition and the regime separated, but also understanding how their interaction has led to the failure of regime change efforts in Venezuela. Therefore,

this research represents an important empirical contribution to the study of the Venezuelan case since it offers as well the opinion of some of the main actors in Venezuelan politics, evaluating their organization and strategies from a reflective point of view on both their wise choices and mistakes, which can be later employed even with other Latin American countries.

## ***Theoretical Concepts***

### ***Defining the playing field***

Competitive authoritarianism, as Levitsky and Way (2010) explain, frequently violates the minimum criteria of modern democracy. An uneven playing field is created between the government and the opposition, and although elections are regularly held, incumbents routinely abuse state resources, deny the opposition adequate media coverage, and in some cases manipulate electoral results, which make the opposition's chances to win the elections rather low. Likewise, Schedler (2002) point out that electoral authoritarian regimes, by organizing periodic elections, try to obtain at least a semblance of democratic legitimacy, hoping to satisfy external as well as internal actors, yet manipulating the elections to their own benefit. One of the mechanisms that they use is the "element of surprise", that is, "incumbents can use their control over election timing to exploit the weakness of the opposition by catching them off guard and unprepared for an election" (McClean, 2021). Thus, the opposition, which already faces disadvantages and restrains in relation to the incumbents, has to deal with this information asymmetry as well. And considering the context, being aware of such information matters to the opposition in terms of its organization, candidate recruitment, and coordination with other parties (Ibíd.). Therefore, this demonstrates how a surprise election can greatly impact electoral outcomes and political power dynamics, as well as it can constrain opposition coordination.

All too often, those in power employ other various methods to deliberately undermine opposition parties and weaken their position, using *divide et impera* tactic as one of their most frequent strategies to engineer the failure of the

opposition. The incumbent can use pre-electoral promises about post-electoral gains to fragment the opposition, for instance. In this sense, co-optation is one of the most used tactics: incumbents offer incentives to opposition parties or members, promising cabinet positions, financial benefits, or other forms of preferential treatment in exchange for their agreement to not join a unified anti-incumbent alliance for the election, weakening the opposition as a whole (Gandhi & Buckles, 2016: 3; Arriola, Devaro, & Meng, 2021) since it neutralizes potential threats. Consequently, once the incumbent government effectively divides the opposition, the opposition is less likely to mobilize the masses in cases of crisis (Lust-Okar, 2004).

Furthermore, even though justice and authoritarianism might seem opposite concepts, it has been demonstrated how law can be used to reinforce such a type of government. Law, being a significant tool for social and political power and the primary means for a government to validate itself and achieve its goals and might be co-opted for authoritarian ends, such as “judicializing” their repression or attempting to create a *façade* of legality. The judiciary may participate in authoritarian uses of law by unquestioning obedience to rule and other authorities, and through legislative tinkering, judicial manipulation, and tolerating legislative bodies and trials. Such tactics, if carried out effectively, can be translated into a great disadvantage for the opposition and the survival of the authoritarian regime (Henderson, 1991; Pereira, 2005; Solomon, 2007). What is more, authoritarian leaders have been proved to make use of the strategy of discriminatory legalism, meaning that they “use constituent assemblies to augment executive powers, allow for presidential reelection, and weaken institutional checks and balances (...) they have attacked, undermined, and intimidated the opposition in their respective countries” (Weyland, 2013: 19).

Authoritarian leaders may as well use repression, not only as violating personal integrity but also restricting civil liberties, which are generally used in combination in order to prevent coordination of those who oppose them (Davenport, 2007). To be more precise, these tactics range from the use of physical

violence, imprisonment, and killings to harassing opposition candidates and their followers, suspending basic civil rights, disqualifying candidates, and banning political parties, which could potentially result in the disenfranchisement of potential opposition voters (Schedler, 2002; Escribà-Folch, 2013). That need for repression can be determined by authoritarian leaders' fear of losing power and by the level of influence of opposition parties because they help non-supporters of the regime to work together and mobilize, and thus the government may be more inclined to use repression tactics to suppress them (Escribà-Folch, 2013; Rivera, 2017)

However, in general, in competitive authoritarian regimes, the incumbents are faced with the decision of either allowing significant opposition challenges to take place, which could result in their own defeat, or violating democratic principles in an extreme manner, which could lead to international criticism and even isolation (Levitsky & Way, 2006). In this sense, this research investigates the specific strategies employed in Venezuela by the authoritarian regime to weaken and destabilize the opposition through the manipulation of the electoral process and the legislative and judiciary bodies, as well as the use of repression. The analysis will explore the impact of these strategies on the opposition's ability to challenge the regime and bring about democratic change.

### ***Democratic transition – what are the enabling conditions and what is the role of the opposition?***

Many authors have studied democratic transitions from an authoritarian regime yet with very different perspectives. One of the factors that seems to enable such a process is the loss of legitimacy of the regime since without support, acquiescence and consent, it disintegrates (Przeworski, 1986). That legitimacy can be affected by some conditions that can lead to the initiation of the democratization process since there are valid reasons for all parties involved to anticipate some form of conflict within the ruling group. Examples of such are (a) a problem of succession due to the death of the founding leader of a regime; (b) a forthcoming economic crisis; (c) mass unrest and noncompliance; and (d) strong foreign

pressures to reform (Przeworski, 1986: 55). Such conditions, precisely, became part of the political scenario in Venezuela from 2013, after the death of Hugo Chávez, yet the regime of Nicolás Maduro is still in power. It is thus understood that there must be a reason why even when fulfilling these conditions, there has been no regime change; these factors could have played some role in the process yet for the opposition disadvantage. Thus, these elements will be explored in this research along the strategies of the opposition in interaction with the regime to determine their influence.

Economic crises, as they increase popular discontent over declining standards of living, promote political unrest, which can provide an opportunity for the opposition to mobilize and push for their political demands by leveraging the public's dissatisfaction. (Lust-Okar, 2004). In relation to foreign pressure, there are two factors that have had influence on competitive authoritarian regimes: “linkage (the density of economic, political, social, organizational, and communication ties to the United States, the European Union, and Western-led multilateral institutions) and leverage (governments’ vulnerability to international democratizing pressure)” (Levitsky & Way, 2006: 200). Authors such as Keck and Sikkink (1998) even describe the concept of “moral leverage”, whereby the actions of the incumbents are scrutinized internationally under the assumption that governments care about others' opinions and with the expectation of creating enough pressure to provoke a change. Although the use of leverage on its own, whether through diplomatic pressure, conditionality, or military intervention, was often insufficient to bring about a change in those regimes, the approach of linkage did have a positive impact since, following Pridham’s idea, “sudden shifts in trade or investment flows caused by regional or international isolation would be costly” (as cited in Levitsky & Way, 2006: 204). Moreover, linkage increased the cost of authoritarianism by making repression, fraud, and other abuses more visible on the international stage. This, in turn, increased the likelihood that Western governments would respond to these abuses and created domestic constituencies that were invested in upholding democratic norms (Levitsky & Way, 2006). More specifically, linkage to the West might allow oppositions to benefit from ties to foreign actors in terms of protection

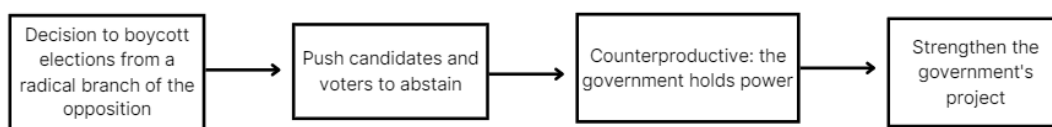
against repression, as it can increase their international reputation and status (Keck and Sikkink, 1998), and to rely on the West can be a significant source of financial and organizational assistance (Pridham, 1999). In fact, evidence shows that several methods have been applied to assist the promotion of democracy in Latin America, such as international treaties and economic incentives and “aid packages”, which intervene in the internal affairs of another sovereign state yet indirectly (Whitehead, 1986: 19), but it is “through the local action of individuals, political organizations, and social movements that funding decisions can translate into democratic change” (Finkel et al., 2007).

Notwithstanding, Levitsky & Way (2006) also highlight that a state's susceptibility to Western pressure to democratize may decrease if it receives political, economic, or military backing from a different power. Thus, if a state has a weak linkage with democratic forces, external influences become less powerful, and the results of the regime change are more influenced by domestic factors. This argument is consistent with recent research that has highlighted the fact that US influence in Latin America has declined significantly over time and despite maintaining extensive linkages with Latin American countries, the US has been unable to prevent the rise of competitive authoritarianism since the strengthening of Latin American states and the professionalization of their militaries have increased the costs of US intervention and Southern states have pursued their own national interests and counterbalance US efforts (Weyland, 2018), as well as inputs on how pressure such as broad sanctions can drive the country into greater isolation—thus promoting even greater autocracy (Way & Levitsky, 2007). Unintentionally, the isolation of authoritarian regimes by the West has increased their autocratic leverage, contributing to the resilience of these regimes through international cooperation among authoritarians (Gratius, 2021). Unlike Western leverage, which is often aimed at promoting freedom and democracy, autocratic leverage involves relying on the support of other authoritarian regimes to maintain power.

All of these conditions might be inflection points for the regime and suppose a democratic transition since they produce cracks in the regime and give visibility to the political, economic, and social issues both domestically and internationally. However, even though the existence of external pressures to uphold democracy can make it more difficult for an incumbent to manipulate election results, it's important to avoid overstating its significance as a supporting factor for the opposition (Schedler, 2002; Van de Walle, 2006). Likewise, “the importance of ties to the West in no way means that domestic factors are irrelevant”, instead, linkage works through domestic actors (Way & Levitsky, 2007). Therefore, this research tries to explore the combination of these elements, meaning, for example, opposition strategies (domestic actor) in their utilization of international influence and reliance on international pressure, in interaction with government strategies and their potential impact on the opposition's inability to achieve a regime change.

Hence, it seems important to recall what Przeworski suggests, following Max Weber’s idea, that this aspect has been incorrectly posed. “What matters for the stability of any regime is not the legitimacy of this particular system of domination but the presence or absence of preferable alternatives” (Przeworski, 1986: 52). It is important to look at the opposition and their choices both in preventing authoritarian leaders from assuming power, as well as in shaping their actions while those leaders hold the presidency (Gamboa, 2017). The characteristics of opposition parties significantly influence the ability of autocratic regimes to co-opt them since when they count with extensive organizational structures and distributed decision-making authority, they are better equipped to mobilize against the regime and survive in an autocratic setting, which reduces their incentives to compromise with the incumbent regime (Kavasoglu, 2021). Moreover, opposition parties, actors or groups that are anti-government and antiregime may build pre-election alliances and post-election coalitions, as well as organizing electoral boycotts in order to present a more solid alternative (Helms, 2021). In particular, the opposition has institutional (presence in the parliament and courts) and non-institutional (ability to mobilize) resources to use against the ruler, and they can rely on institutional (recall referendum, presidential impeachment, electioneering,

legislating, lobbying, and litigation) or extra-institutional (coups, guerrilla warfare, protests, boycotts and strikes) strategies to achieve their goals (Gamboa, 2017), and research has denoted that is worthwhile for the opposition to make use of the institutional leverage a regime provides them with, rather than to rely primarily or exclusively on radical extra-institutional strategies (Helms, 2021: 573). Therefore, both the goals and strategies the oppositions use to fight autocratic regimes are critical to understand the prevalence of the incumbent in power since both which strategies and how they use them are significant elements (Gamboa, 2017). More specifically, this author shows that the decision to boycott elections from a radical branch of the opposition due to a previous defeat can push candidates and voters to abstain and rather than delegitimizing the government, allows them to hold power and strengthen their project. The possible causal mechanism deduced from this can be evidenced in *Figure 3*.

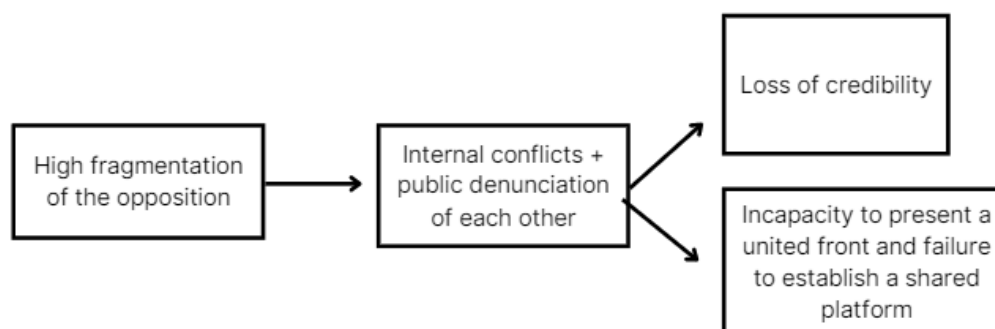


*Figure 3*: created by the author.

In order to provide a viable alternative to the ruling government, the opposition must possess strength and unity. However, parties in authoritarian and hybrid regimes face several challenges: assessing the likelihood of a regime transition; resolving commitment problems among themselves; and contending the risks of government strategies such as co-optation and repression. That is to say, they cannot assume that the incumbent regime is willing to lose the election, and must work together to align their expectations, persuade their supporters to vote for a united candidate, negotiate power-sharing agreements, and ensure they are upheld (Gandhi & Buckles, 2016: 4-11). Cohesiveness among opposition groups is more likely to happen when there is also the likelihood of a regime transition because of the chances to see the results of their efforts and when there was already a victory. Thus, it poses a significant threat to the ruling government, making them harder to repress and less vulnerable to divide-and-rule tactics in order to inhibit that cooperation (Blondel, 1997: 486; Van de Walle, 2006; Armstrong, Reuter &



Robertson, 2019). On the contrary, divisions within opposition groups can lead to internal conflicts, public denunciation of each other, and a loss of credibility, which not only weakens their ability to present a united front but also makes it difficult to establish a shared platform, particularly in situations of high polarization within the opposition (Van de Walle, 2006; Laštro & Bieber, 2021). This causal mechanism is portrayed in *Figure 4*. At last, according to Schedler (2002), the structural ambiguity of electoral autocracies is determined by the strategic interaction between authoritarian incumbents and the democratic opposition. As such, when the competition becomes a zero-sum game, opposition parties are obligated to adjust their strategies to align with the characteristics of the regime, as noted by Helms (2021).



*Figure 4:* created by the author.

Concisely, authoritarian regimes operate against opposition parties, applying repressive tactics in order to divide them, and the opposition, coping with this situation, changes over time both their organization and strategies due to that interaction process. However, the literature suggests that even when a regime suffers a loss of legitimacy, there is a need of a coherent alternative to that regime that manages to pose a challenge to the incumbent government and to represent a real choice for those who want a change. Thus, it is crucial to stress the importance of opposition strategies and internal coherence in enabling a regime change, and by focusing on them, this research provides added legitimacy and highlights the key role the opposition plays in the process. Moreover, as the case of Venezuela demonstrates, the presence of conditions that are meant to be favorable for a

transition such as the economic crisis, the public opinion, and the international involvement, has not necessarily led to a successful change of regime, which suggests the need for further examination of those factors and their impact in the regime change.

### **Chapter 3: Methods of analysis and data**

Considering that the analysis will be addressed as a case study, the method used in this research will be a combination of theory-testing process tracing and explaining-outcome process tracing in order to explain how the organization and strategies of the political opposition in Venezuela in interaction with the government responses have influenced their chances in changing the regime of Nicolás Maduro. Therefore, the analytical strategy of this research is the following: First, to ground the study of the key strategies and organization of the opposition in interaction with the government, intended to determine the panorama between 2014 and 2020 and the changes over time, along with the different contextual elements or *external stimuli* such as (a) the economic crisis; (c) public opinion towards the government and the opposition; and (d) international involvement, in an effort to explain how those links have influenced the chances of the opposition in changing the government of Nicolás Maduro. To gather the necessary evidence, my research will involve examining the opposition's ability to propose clear and effective strategies, coordinate their efforts, and mobilize support from both domestic and international actors. Additionally, I will analyze the role of the government in destabilizing the opposition through tactics such as repression, manipulation of legislative and judicial bodies, and interference with the elections. The economic crisis will also be evaluated through data such as inflation rates and the humanitarian crisis. The public opinion will be reflected through surveys conducted within the country, and the involvement of the international community will be assessed through official reports, statements from foreign actors, dialogue initiatives, and sanctions imposed on the regime.

The data collection will be carried out through the consultation of primary sources such as the official websites of the MUD, the National Assembly, the Supreme Tribunal of Justice and the CNE (*Consejo Nacional Electoral*). Likewise, the official *Twitter* accounts of the MUD and key leaders of the coalition will be examined, together with sources such as the *United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner* and *Human Rights Watch*. I conduct archival research in national and international newspapers and websites at key historical moments, along with data I collect from the World Bank and official statements from the European Union, the United States, the United Nations, and the Organization of American States.

In regards to the opinion polls, these will be taken from four important survey companies in Venezuela: *Datanálisis*, *Datincorp*, *Hercon Consultores*, and *Delphos*, which will allow me to describe the attitude of the population towards the opposition during several busts –from 2014 until 2020- and, thus, discover the impact of their performance on the way people perceived them. These polls provide information regarding the sympathy of the voters towards the opposition, their view on the effectiveness of the opposition, the credibility and trust on them, the preferences of the population among the different leaders of the opposition, and the willing of opposition voters to participate in electoral processes. However, taking into account the scarcity of data regarding the situation in Venezuela and the fact that these survey companies are private, some of the results of the polls are only available on national newspapers.

Finally I conduct semi-structured interviews with four key figures from opposition parties and journalists: José Calzadilla (Secretary General of the party *Movimiento Por Venezuela -MPV-* and member of the coalition *Mesa de la Unidad Democrática -MUD-*); José Chuo Torrealba (politician and journalist; former Secretary General of the *MUD* in 2014); César Perez Vivas (a leader of the party COPEI<sup>6</sup>, governor of the Táchira from 2008 to 2012, and current candidate for the

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<sup>6</sup> It is a Christian Democrat party in Venezuela that played a significant role during the 20th century as one of the signatories of the Puntofijo Pact.

presidential elections that are scheduled for 2024); and the last interviewee, a well-known journalist involved in Venezuelan politics, decided to remain anonymous since he is currently in exile. These interviews will provide valuable insight into the motivations, decisions, and experiences of the key figures, which will help to fill in the existing gaps in the documentary information and to understand the internal logic of the opposition strategies and its organization.

## **Chapter 4: Analysis**

In this chapter, key milestones are observed in order to identify the causal relationship between the strategies and organization of the opposition in interaction with the regime and the chances of the opposition to change the regime. Throughout these years, between 2014 and 2020, the opposition played different cards, as well as the government has responded with different tactics.

### ***2014: “La Salida”***

After Chávez’ death and the opposition’s loss of the presidential elections in 2013, the resentment from the opposition towards the government translated into different propositions that led to the division of the MUD. There were two visions on how to change the regime within the opposition forces – the radical branch and the institutional one. The radical part of the opposition sustained that the change of regime needed to happen right away by massive protests (that is, out of institutional channels that are defined by authoritarian rulers) and that waiting for the electoral alternative would not work. The institutionalist believed that they had to maintain the electoral route and achieve the regime change through negotiations with government (Calzadilla, personal communication, 2022). Therefore, the political activity wasn’t carried out by the MUD as a whole, but rather by specific parties. Within the radical branch, three political parties activated their own initiative, and the most remarkable of those was that of Leopoldo López<sup>7</sup>, joined with Maria

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<sup>7</sup> He is a political and economic figure from the opposition, who previously held the position of mayor of Chacao between 2000 and 2008, and later served as the National Coordinator of the political party Voluntad Popular (VP) from 2009 to 2014.

Corina Machado<sup>8</sup> and Antonio Ledezma<sup>9</sup>, calling people to protest in the streets against the regime (Calzadilla, personal communication, 2022; Lozano, 2014), and later highly supported by students' movements. This strategy was an expensive and pitiful expression of the internal fights in the opposition. That is what determined that they did not opt for the institutional and electoral route, the one that had given the opposition a recovery process from 2006 to 2013 (Torrealba, personal communication, 2022). That call resulted in one of the biggest waves of social demonstration in the country. The Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict (OVCS) registered between January and December 2014 at least 9,286 protests, equivalent to 26 daily protests throughout the country (OVCS, 2015). However, regardless of the pacific nature of it, the government responded with the use of excessive force against largely peaceful demonstrators and from February 2014 onwards, various state security forces in Venezuela, such as the Bolivarian National Guard, the Bolivarian National Police, and local police forces, frequently repressed with severe beatings, shooting live ammunition, rubber bullets, and teargas into crowds, and in some cases, shooting at close range at individuals who were already in custody, while they either ignored or actively participated in attacks carried out by pro-government armed groups on protesters (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

On the other hand, within the institutional branch, there were leaders such as Ramón Guillermo Avelado<sup>10</sup>, Henry Ramons Allup<sup>11</sup>, and Henrique Capriles Radonski<sup>12</sup>, who participated in a round table with the incumbent government on

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8 She is a prominent figure in Venezuelan politics, who founded and currently leads the political party Vente Venezuela. She was elected as a deputy for the state of Miranda in the National Assembly in 2010. Following her involvement in the "La Salida" movement, she was barred from leaving the country.

9 A politician and lawyer who served as the mayor of the Metropolitan District of Caracas until 2015. On July 1, 2017, he was forcibly taken from his home by officials of the SEBIN (Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional) and was later put under house arrest. On November 17, 2017, he escaped to Colombia and then requested political asylum in Spain.

10 He is a Venezuelan lawyer and politician who served as the Executive Secretary of the MUD from March 2009 until July 30, 2014, when he resigned from the position.

11 He is a Venezuelan lawyer and politician, leader of the social democratic party Acción Democrática (AD) and the president of the National Assembly of Venezuela during the year 2016.

12 He is a Venezuelan politician and lawyer, leader of the party Primero Justicia (PJ) and former governor of Miranda State. He was the opponent of Nicolás Maduro in the presidential elections of 2013.

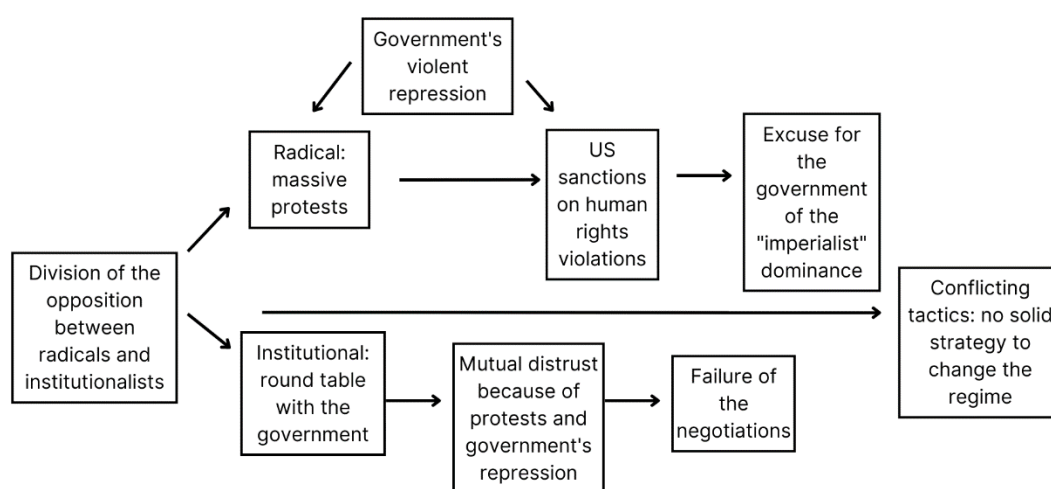
April 10th, 2014. During the dialogue, the opposition members presented their four demands: release of political prisoners, disarming of armed groups, establishment of a joint commission to examine the violent incidents of previous two months, and restructuring the judicial and election systems (Noticias 24, 2014; Scharfenberg, 2014; BBC Mundo, 2014a), yet no significant change was achieved due to mutual distrust. The opposition believed that if that process was in crisis was because of the national government's responsibility, as they did not provide results and did not stop police repression against the university students, which were at the forefront of the demonstrations. Meanwhile, Maduro called for the dialogue as a means to stop the protests (DW, n.d.).

Domestically, the survey carried out by Venebarómetro (2014) showed that, in relation to the protests, 64% of Venezuelans declared the violation of human rights by the government, including even a 33% of the government supporters. And, alongside with the opposition mobilization and regime repression, the economic situation of the country worsened. Since 2013, the inflation rate in the country passed from 40.64% to 62.17 (World Data, n.d.) becoming one of the most important problems of Venezuelans, together with the scarcity and security. In fact, 63.2% of the people believed that the situation was *by far* worse than in prior years. It is not casual, then, that Maduro's government was evaluated negatively with 73.2% and 60.1% considered him to be the responsible of the economic issues. In contrast, when it comes to the evaluation of the opposition and the strategies used by them, 46% thought that protests should keep on and 64% that the way to get out of the regime should be constitutional (Datos Group, 2014). 62,8% of a survey respondents believed that the country needed a change of regime and while 28% would vote for Maduro, 63% would vote for the opposition (Hercon, 2014). It is thus understood that the opposition counted with the support of the public opinion, meaning that they had a good opportunity, yet they did not capitalize on it due to disruptive tactics that led to imprisonment and violence in the streets. In reaction to the whole panorama, under Barack Obama's government, the US Congress enacted the Venezuela Defense of Human Rights and Civil Society Act of 2014, in which they express their concerns about the Venezuelan government's

mismanagement of the economy, failure to guarantee public security, and suppression of political opposition and free speech. It set US policy to support peaceful democratic processes and civil society development in Venezuela, and directs the President to impose sanctions against those responsible for human rights abuses and violence against antigovernment protests (U.S. Congress, 2014). However, these sanctions did not have an impact on the regime of Maduro since they had a limited scope and Maduro could still make deals with powers such as China, who agreed to give Maduro a loan of \$4 billion and to cooperate in areas of transportation, technology, and education. And thus, even though Maduro made use of the US measures to say that "they try to increase economic problems through an economic war to cut the supplies of basic goods and boost an artificial inflation" (Milne & Watts, 2014), this discourse did not work for him as 70% of Venezuelans did not believe that such a war existed (Briceño, 2015).

Overall, there was a clear failure of the opposition's efforts to achieve a regime change partly due to the division within the opposition forces, with two different visions on how to proceed. This resulted in a fragmented and ineffective response to the government: the radical branch's strategy turned out to be costly and ineffective, as the government counted with the necessary means to suppress protests and maintain control, and, on the other hand, the institutional branch's attempts to negotiate with the government did not lead to any effective action plan because the requirements of both parts were not met: the protests did not stop and the regime did not controlled the use of violence. By having these two different views and strategies, the disruptive faction gained more prominence, undermining the intended dialogue and leading to a tragic loss of lives. Even though the events in Venezuela during 2014 indicate that the actions of the government led to widespread discontent since it violated human rights and the economic situation worsened, resulting in increased domestic and international calls for change, favoring the opposition, public opinion on the protests was mainly negative and their preferred strategy, the institutional, was the one that ended up having less prominence, which prevented the opposition in capitalizing from the discontent of people. Moreover, the international support in favor of the opposition, including the

United States' sanctions based on human rights violations did not represent a real threat for Maduro and just nourished his “anti-imperialist” discourse. Seemingly, the external stimuli affected the government's legitimacy, but it did not necessarily translate into success for the opposition. This highlights the need for a cohesive and well-planned approach in efforts to achieve political transformation, particularly in repressive governments such as in Venezuela, where the authorities frequently employ violence against the opposition leaders and supporters. This causal mechanism is shown in *Figure 5*.



*Figure 5*: created by the author.

### ***2015: Success of the Opposition in the Parliament***

After a turbulent period that brought out all the weaknesses of the economic and financial apparatus of the Venezuelan State, the opposition realized the importance of coming together and understood that if their political coalition, known as the MUD, were to fall apart, they would lose their main tool for fighting and participating in elections, which could lead to a clear path towards violence. Therefore, they made an effort to regain their unity (Torrealba, personal communication, 2022). The political parties of the coalition managed to agree on a plan and signed up for electoral participation (Calzadilla, personal communication, 2022), unifying both branches of the opposition (RTVE, 2015). The proposal of the MUD to alleviate the crisis, reflected on the *Oferta Legislativa para el Cambio*, was to enact laws to achieve a change towards a better quality of life. Within the key



areas proposed to work on (supply, consumer protection, citizen security, and salaries), the opposition proposed the elimination of obstacles and facilitation of procedures for the circulation of essential goods, the creation of a law for consumer protection, the implementation of a law for police coordination to decentralize security bodies, and the enactment of a law allowing for salary increases to address high inflation in the country (MUD, 2015). Hence, the opposition represented a preferable alternative to the problems of Venezuelans with their unified plan of action and consequently obtained the triumph of the National Assembly. On December 6, the coalition obtained 109 seats (Election Guide, 2015) with the addition of three seats belonging to the indigenous constituency, which meant two thirds of the Parliament. As stated by Julio Borges<sup>13</sup>, the opposition was able to democratically defeat a non-democratic government through electoral means in the Parliament, which granted the opposition newfound strength and determination to drive forward with their reforms. They aimed, as well, to enact a reconciliation law that encompassed the freeing of political prisoners, the repatriation of exiled people, and the reunification of the nation, as well as they expected to carry out an investigation and open to public debate cases that the National Assembly had refused to discuss and investigate (RTVE, 2015; MUD, 2015).

However, despite the recognition of the election results by the incumbent regime, the lead-up to the election and its aftermath were fraught with difficulties. At first, the regime decided that eight opposition politicians or activists were ineligible to hold office for at least a year, eliminating them as candidates in the coming election. Within the list were Leopoldo López (jailed since February 2014 on charges that he incited violence during *La Salida*) and Maria Corina Machado (Neuman, 2015). Additionally, shortly after the elections, Nicolás Maduro's regime began to remove deputies from office for various reasons by making use of the judiciary branch, showing to the people that he held absolute power. The Supreme Tribunal of Justice (TSJ) of Venezuela ordered to suspend the proclamation of three

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<sup>13</sup> Julio Borges is a Venezuelan politician and lawyer. He co-founded the party Primero Justicia in 2000 together with Henrique Capriles Radonski and Leopoldo Lopez. In 2015, he served as the National Coordinator of the party Primero Justicia.

indigenous deputies from the opposition, accusing them to have bought their votes, and then Diosdado Cabello<sup>14</sup>, the then president of the old National Assembly, approved and made official the appointment of 13 new TSJ magistrates (Reuters, 2015; BBC Mundo, 2015) allowed by the TSJ itself (Sentencia del Tribunal Supremo de Justicia N° 1758, 2015) in a desperate measure to uphold pro-government figures in the judiciary branch before losing the legislative one. That is to say, during the month of December, there were two flagrant violations of the Constitution by Maduro's regime, before they even got installed on January 5<sup>th</sup> of the following year: the removal of three deputies from the indigenous district (Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela, Art. 63, 123, 1999)<sup>15</sup> and the appointment of 13 deputies and 13 magistrates to the Supreme Tribunal of Justice (Ley Orgánica del Tribunal Supremo de Justicia, Art. 38, 74, 2010)<sup>16</sup>. The former meant the loss of the two-thirds majority, which would have enabled the opposition to pass organic laws (Ibid: Art. 203), suggest constitutional reforms and amendments (Ibid: Art. 187), and replace members of the Supreme Tribunal of Justice (Ibid: Art. 265), the CNE (Ibid: Art. 296), and other public powers, leaving the opposition without any real legislative influence. The latter entailed the control of the judiciary power in hands of the incumbent, enabling him to cut the legislative branch, for the moment controlled by the opposition forces, off power. As a result, tempers began to flare within the opposition and with time it got demoralized since it was a truly complex and difficult period, in which the government used 54 sentences to annul all the decisions of the National Assembly, openly ignoring the popular will. At that moment, the reality of Nicolas' government began to be unmasked and it accelerated towards an authoritarian, undemocratic government

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<sup>14</sup> Diosdado Cabello Rondón is a Venezuelan military officer and politician. Between 2018 and 2020, he was the president of Venezuela's National Constituent Assembly. Cabello is accused of corruption, money laundering and drug trafficking.

<sup>15</sup> These articles state that suffrage is a right that shall be exercised through free, universal, direct, and secret voting. The law shall guarantee the principle of personalized suffrage and proportional representation. Moreover, it is stated that indigenous peoples, as cultures with ancestral roots, are a part of the nation, the state, and the Venezuelan people as a whole, and have a duty to safeguard the integrity and sovereignty of the nation.

<sup>16</sup> It is established, for instance, that the procedure to elect them needs to be approved by a two-thirds majority of the National Assembly.

that violated the Constitution (Calzadilla, personal communication, 2022). Nevertheless, the destabilizing tactics from part of the government were also favored by the internal fights of the opposition: even though they joined forces in the pre-election period, later on all the parties sought to deprive one over the other in order to be in the front to replace Maduro and seeking for the ruling place, as Maria Corina Machado openly did, expressing that she was the “only national figure” and criticizing the errors of the MUD (Europa Press, 2015; Pérez, 2022). And, as seen in the previous year, internal differences within the opposition existed prior to the regime's strategies in relation to the National Assembly, but they had diminished for a time once they decided to unite forces and participate in the legislative elections. However, opposition's internal differences resurfaced after the government's tactics left them feeling powerless.

Contextually, it became clear that after two years of the death of the former president, Hugo Chávez, two aspects changed noticeably: the economic situation of the country and the support of the people to the incumbent regime. Inflation in the country had a substantial increase that passed from 40.6% in 2013 to 62.17% in 2014, and then to 121.7% in 2015<sup>17</sup>, having a profound impact on the public's support for Nicolás Maduro's administration. Venezuela was experiencing a humanitarian crisis, characterized by severe shortages of medicines, medical supplies, and food, which made it difficult for people to maintain adequate nutrition and meet their basic needs. All of these elements represented a good opportunity for the opposition yet it was not effectively utilized. The government's response to the crisis was inadequate, as authorities continued to deny its existence and failed to implement effective policies to address it (Human Rights Watch, 2016). This led to widespread criticism from domestic sources and translated to greater support for the opposition: some people held the opinion that their vote for Chávez was not for the current administration, as they believed it to be corrupt and ineffective (Pardo,

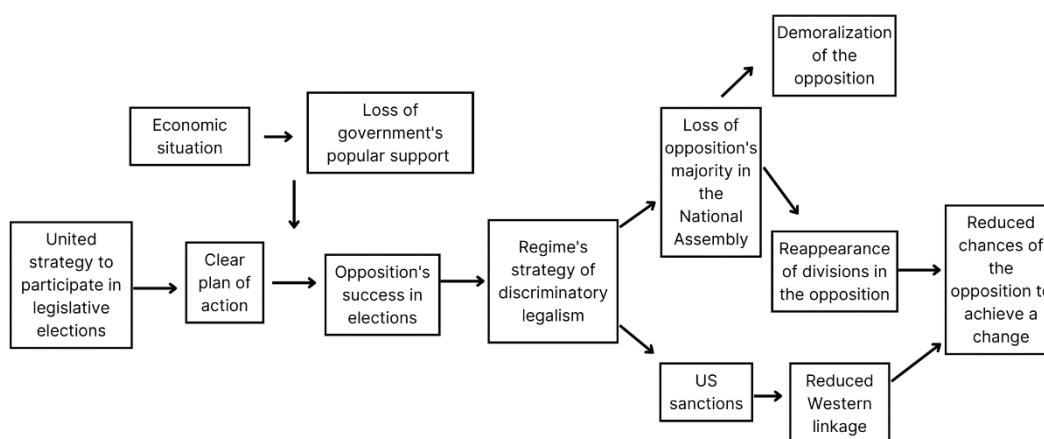
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<sup>17</sup> “Inflation as measured by the consumer price index reflects the annual percentage change in the cost to the average consumer of acquiring a basket of goods and services that may be fixed or changed at specified intervals, such as yearly” (World Bank, 2016).

2015). This sentiment was evident in the results of the public opinion survey carried out by the polling company *Datanálisis*, which showed that 92 % of Venezuelans considered that the situation of the country was “bad or very bad”, and the popularity of the President of the Republic, Nicolás Maduro, remained between 20% and 25% while Venezuelans still maintained a positive evaluation of the late President Hugo Chavez, whose approval was at 58%. The poll indicated that 63.2% of the Venezuelan electorate intended to vote for the opposition in the December 6 parliamentary elections. The opposition was ahead of the ruling party by 35 points, which had a voting support of 28.2% (Briceño, 2015). Namely, as the inflation rate increased from 2014 to 2015, the public opinion became less favorable to Maduro domestically and internationally, increasing the chances of the opposition that year. Lastly, in 2015, the US government declared that Venezuela was “a threat to its national security” and issued an order that imposed travel bans or blocks assets of those responsible for human rights violations, persecution of political opponents, press restrictions, violent responses to protests, arbitrary arrests, and corruption by government officials (Exec. Order No. 13692, 2015), reducing US linkage with Venezuela in economic, political, and diplomatic terms. By reducing this linkage, the US limited its ability to apply pressure on the Venezuelan government and made it easier for the Maduro regime to carry out repressive and fraudulent tactics without significant consequences, making the conflict to escalate rather than moderate. Moreover, this led Maduro to start his strategy of “changing important cabinet positions” including those sanctioned government officials to assure their support, as Cannon & Brown (2017) already pointed out.

Accordingly, the results of the legislative elections show that the opposition could succeed in the electoral field with a unified speech and strategy and making use of their favorable conditions, meaning a worsening economic situation, accumulated popular discontent and international criticism. However, the tactics of the government meant a significant impact on the opposition's ability to bring about any change: the opposition was unable to fully utilize its influence in the political process, leaving them at a legislative and judiciary disadvantage in the face of a

government that was increasingly hostile. As a result, the efforts of the United States of imposing sanctions rather reduced its linkage with the Venezuelan government, reducing as well the costs of repression and fraud and the chances of the opposition. Likewise, the unconstitutional decisions of the regime of Maduro made it difficult for the opposition to pose an effective challenge against the government and bring about the reforms they sought through the legislative means since they no longer counted with the majority in the National Assembly, and this gradually led to the opposition decomposition and demoralization. However, as the literature shows, there was cohesiveness in the opposition before the elections due to the likelihood of a regime transition (Gandhi & Buckles, 2016) yet they failed by only staying united prior to the elections, and once the government responded, disagreements and individual interests reappeared (see *Figure 6*).



*Figure 6:* created by the author.

## **2016: Recall Referendum**

2016 meant an opposition leadership that was limited to the parliament. Different than before, where the coalition of the MUD was that one body that brought together the majority of the opposition, the Parliament became the greatest protagonist of the Venezuelan opposition. There began a dynamic in which the hegemony of four parties that had the largest faction within the Parliament, called

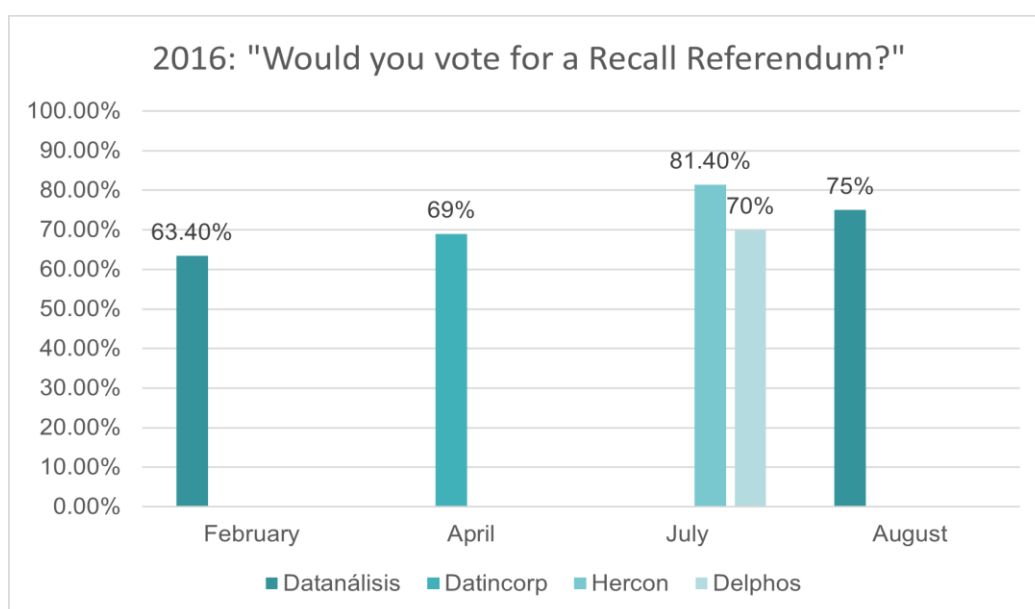
the G4<sup>18</sup>, prevailed (Calzadilla, personal communication, 2022), which caused even more inconveniences and critics from opposition political actors such as Maria Corina Machado, who pointed out that the MUD had not held meetings for a long time and condemned that only "four parties" were deciding (La Voz, 2016). This can be explained through the "laws of oligarchy" developed by Michels, which explains that the more a collective party grows, the more monopolization its leaders have through their access to information and communication channels, as well as their proficiency in managing the organization. As a result, the other members are unable to participate in decision-making processes, eventually becoming passive members (as cited in Seippel, 2001: 124-125). And in the Venezuelan case, the G4 did not maintain a strategic unity counting with all the members of the opposition nor a common objective to guarantee the strength of the legislative power, and then it was easier for the government to ignore the parliamentary majority of the opposition (Pérez, 2022). As a result, rather than working towards a consensus on the allocation of political roles and upholding agreements to share power, as the literature suggests as ideal (Gandhi & Buckles, 2016), the G4 limited the participation of the rest of the opposition parties.

The opposition in the Parliament, in response to the restrictions imposed by The Supreme Tribunal of Justice (TSJ) in allowing them to lead the National Assembly, decided to reincorporate the three deputies from the indigenous constituencies (BBC Mundo, 2016). Soon after, Maduro put a stop to the payment of wages to the assembly's lawmakers (EFE, 2016) and while it did not immediately push them away from the fight, demoralized them and opened up the possibility of co-optation. Then, in the document released by the MUD, *Hoja de Ruta Democrática 2016*, the opposition explored multiple strategies to bring about regime change, including a constitutional amendment, a constituent assembly, requesting Maduro's resignation, or a recall referendum (MUD, 2016; El Nacional, 2016a). Ultimately, the opposition decided unanimously as the MUD (controlled

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<sup>18</sup> The G4 was composed of the four main parties of the MUD with the most seats obtained in the December 6, 2015 parliamentary elections: Primero Justicia (PJ) with 33 seats, Acción Democrática (AD) with 25, Un Nuevo Tiempo (UNT) with 21 and Voluntad Popular (VP) with 14.

by the G4) and settled on the recall referendum as their action plan. Although there were radicals (a minority) who contended that a recall referendum would only restrict Nicolás Maduro's regime to a few additional months, the rest held that, unlike a coup, it was a constitutional and electoral approach, even if it was not the ideal solution. Thus, even when initially divided on how to proceed, they opted to work together and advocate for a recall referendum, which would be led by Henrique Capriles Radonski and start in April (Crónica, 2016; Torrealba, personal communication, 2022). The results of the opinion polls carried out throughout 2016 by *Datincorp*, *Delphos*, *Hercon* and *Datanálisis* showed that the recall referendum had strong support and people were willing to vote for it (see *Figure 7*), meaning that the opposition counted with enough popular back up to carry it out. After a prolonged period of waiting, the CNE (*Consejo Nacional Electoral*), controlled by pro-government magistrates, announced that the collection of 20% of signatures to activate the recall referendum against President Nicolás Maduro would take place at the end of October 2016 and, if the requirements were met, the opposition would need 4 million signatures in three days to call for a recall referendum. The regime used this delay tactic because opinion polls indicated that if a recall referendum were held immediately, the regime would lose. If the recall referendum happened



*Figure 7:* created by the author. Results from the opinion polls of four of the main survey companies in Venezuela. The bars show the percentage that voted “Yes” to the question “Would you vote for a recall referendum?” Source: NotiBolivar, 2016; La Patilla, 2016; El Nacional, 2016b; El Impulso, 2016.

before January 10, 2017, and Maduro was revoked, new presidential elections would have to be called within 30 days. In this case, the opposition would have had the opportunity to present a candidate and win the elections, as the government would not have control over the succession process. This is based on Article 233 of the Venezuelan Constitution, which states that if the President of the Republic is absent during the first four years of their term, a new election will be held within thirty days yet if the President is absent during the last two years of their term, the Vice President will assume the presidency until the end of the term (Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela, 1999). The opposition, in response to this delay tactic from the government to gain some time and avoid the referendum, called for the *Toma de Caracas* (takeover of Caracas) on September 1, 2016. Despite attempts by police and national guard units to obstruct access to the capital, hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans marched peacefully to demand a recall referendum and to protest against the government of Nicolás Maduro (BBC Mundo, 2016; The Guardian, 2016). This strategy of political pressure was a turning point in the process, demonstrating the opposition's significant social influence and leadership control over the protest. The demonstration showed the government that the opposition could mobilize massive crowds peacefully, prompting the decision to snatch the referendum (Torrealba, personal communication, 2022). Thus, the CNE arbitrarily and intentionally changed the rules of the game by determining that the collection of 20% of the signatures necessary to call the referendum would be carried out by states, instead of at the national level (OAS, 2016), which entailed that the opposition had to collect the required percentage of signatures in each state separately, making the process more difficult for them. Instead, with a national circumscription, if the opposition did not get enough signatures in one state, they could try to collect more from another one. Finally, in October 2016, the CNE suspended the signature collection, alleging fraud (Meza, 2016) yet there was no foreign observation to the process to either confirm or deny it, only commissions of auditory from the government and the opposition. By this decision, the regime manipulated the recall referendum process through the CNE and violated civil rights by ignoring the popular will (Schedler, 2002; Escribà-Folch, 2013), and once



again, demoralizing the opposition as their efforts to fight the government through democratic means did not yield results.

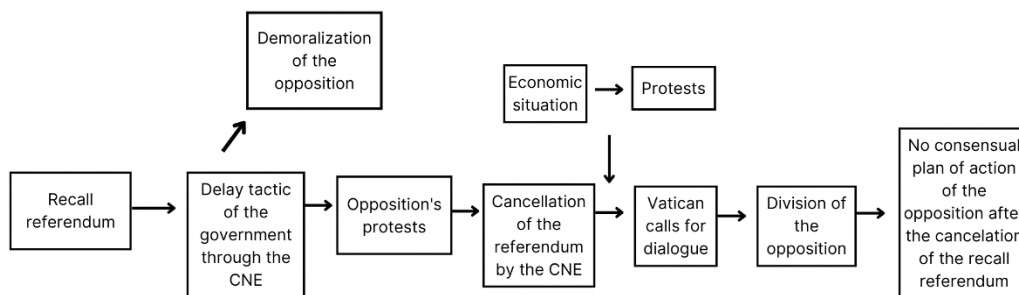
Considering the cancelation of the recall referendum, Freddy Guevara, on behalf of the MUD, urged people to peacefully protest in all states of Venezuela. The “Toma de Venezuela” would have served two purposes: to show the world that the opposition is a sizable group of people and that they refuse to yield to an unconstitutional and illegitimate government (El Nacional, 2016c). In view of the economic situation, which passed from 121.74% inflation in 2015 to 254.95% in 2016 (World Data, n.d.), and that call for mobilization, the opposition and the government, with the international sponsorship of the *Unión de Naciones Suramericanas* (UNASUR), the endorsement of the Vatican and three former presidents (from Panama, Martín Torrijos; from the Dominican Republic, Leonel Fernández; and from Spain, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero), agreed to hold the first meeting of a dialogue on October 30th (Oré & China, 2016). However, this decision reflected as well the disagreements within the opposition: It was revealed that the Secretary General of MUD, Jesús Chuo Torralba, along with other members of the coalition, participated in meetings prior to the dialogue with the government, which both parties admitted (Castro, 2016), while some of the main actors of the opposition such as Henrique Capriles Radonski and Henry Ramos Allup pointed out that they heard about the “dialogue” in television. The former stated that they would attend a call from the Church, but that no dialogue had started in Venezuela yet. The latter explained that not all the parties were called to that meeting and that the government was uninterested in dialogue because it would have to make concessions and restore rights, while the opposition has nothing to offer and much to demand (Oré & China, 2016; Oré & Polanco, 2016; Ramos Allup, 2016). Thus, this dialogue showed the flaws of the opposition in presenting a united front, as half of the parties that integrate the MUD decided to stay out of those negotiations (Van de Walle, 2006; Laštro & Bieber, 2021) and rather publicly show the internal disagreements and miscommunication. The decision to participate in the dialogue was seen by some opposition leaders as a betrayal, as they were not consulted

beforehand and had instead been calling for continued mobilization and protests against the government. This means that the lack of unity and clear decision-making within the opposition during this period exposed its weaknesses and contributed to the difficulties it faced in challenging the government because if one faction of the opposition is engaged in negotiations while another faction calls for protests, the likelihood of successful negotiations may be diminished.

On November 11th, despite some uncertainty, they held a meeting with the regime where the MUD, without the approval of its main leaders and important political parties such as Voluntad Popular, made several demands, including the release of over a hundred 'political prisoners', the allowance of humanitarian aid, the replacement of CNE leadership, and the lifting of legal restrictions on the opposition-led Parliament, in addition to a recall referendum. The outcome was an agreement to work and prioritize the economic situation and food supply yet they did not agree on the recall referendum or possible presidential elections (Oré & Buitrago, 2016). On the other hand, Henrique Capriles Radonski and Leopólido López (who was imprisoned) called for mass street mobilizations again after the meeting with the government (Capriles, 2016; López, 2016) and after some weeks, the part of the MUD involved in the meetings decided not to join the one scheduled for December of the same year since the government had not fulfilled the previous agreements, such as the release of some jailed opposition members and the entry of medicine and food into the country. Hence, the strategy of the dialogue proved to be more a tool for the opposition fragmentation than for their tactics and discourse unification. Ultimately, despite recognizing that the government's delaying tactics were serving their interests, a part of the Venezuelan opposition entered into negotiations. Both the government and the opposition participated on it to avoid negative perceptions from the international community and to showcase their commitment towards resolving the issues at hand, which makes evident the influence of the economic crisis and international involvement in their actions. That is, the initiative of the dialogue from the international community and the repeated calls for participation on it, made both parts to participate on it, even when the

opposition as a whole did not consider it to be a good tactic and the government used it to show how committed it was to find a peaceful solution to the rivalry (Maduro, 2016).

Therefore, by recapitulating the events that occurred in 2016 in Venezuela, it is seen how the strategy of the opposition to bring about a change of regime through a recall referendum was sabotaged by the regime’s manipulation of the Electoral Council, which started as a delay tactic of the initiative and ended up with the cancellation of it. By doing this, mass mobilizations were called by the opposition once again, leading to international involvement to find a solution to the crisis and the violence. However, such a negotiation did not include all the members of the opposition, aggravating the differences within the coalition and proving to be counterproductive. The lack of a clear plan of action after the cancellation of the recall referendum prevented the opposition from effectively challenging the government and achieving the goals they planned, causing them to lose the momentum they had built back in 2015 (see *Figure 8*).



*Figure 8:* created by the author.

### ***2017: The so-called “La Salida II” and the National Constituent Assembly***

During 2017, the opposition used both institutional and disruptive strategies. First of all, they had two clear institutional tactics: (a) the declaration of Nicolás Maduro’s abandonment of the position of president, based on the Article 233<sup>19</sup> of

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<sup>19</sup> This refers to the situation where the president is considered to be completely absent or permanently unavailable to fulfill their duties due to reasons such as death, resignation, physical or mental incapacity, abandonment of office, or the popular revocation of their mandate. As a result,

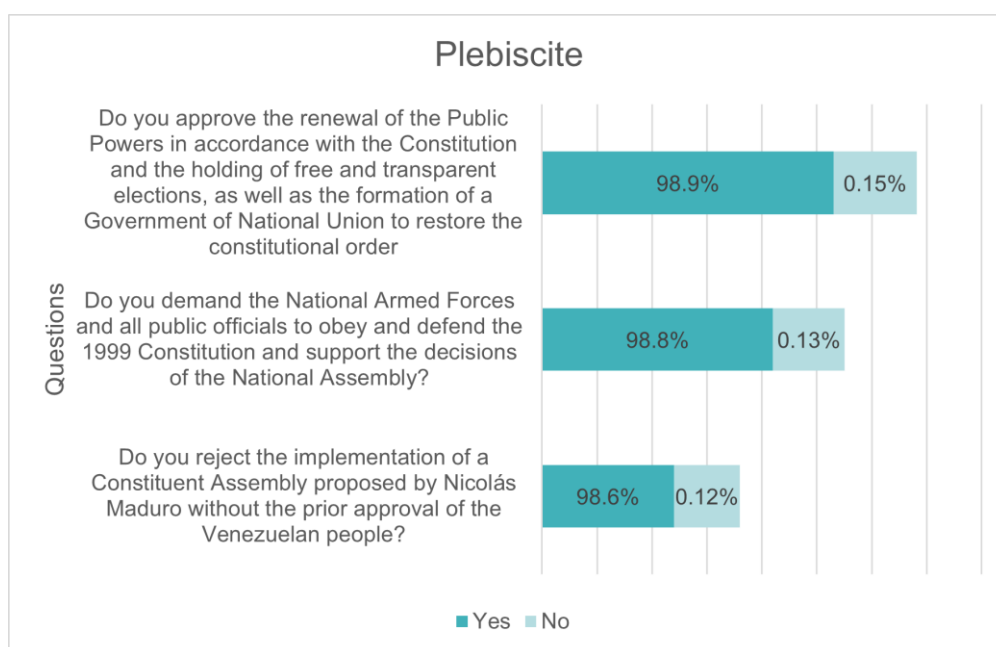
the Constitution, which contemplates the non-compliance of his office as "absolute misconduct" and which would entail the need for presidential elections, and (b) the disincorporation of the three indigenous deputies from Amazonas, whose investiture was impeached by the TSJ and for which the National Assembly had been declared in contempt of court and prevented from carrying out its legislative duties (Asamblea Nacional de Venezuela, 2017a; CNN Español, 2017a). However, Henry Ramos Allup stated that they were aware the declaration would not bring about any change. He emphasized that they were not naive and knew that presidential elections were not going to take place after that move of theirs, yet they could not avoid fulfilling their constitutional obligations (García, 2017), and no sooner said than done, the TSJ cancelled it (Sentencia del Tribunal Supremo de Justicia, 2017).

Later on, they continued with the disruptive strategy, which is what some people called *La Salida parte II*: a set of demonstrations from February to July 30 that meant the death of more than 160 young people and ended in a very important defeat of the opposition (Torrealba, personal communication, 2022). The number of protests, which surpassed the 9,286 registered in 2014 (OVCS, 2018), were partly organized by the opposition leaders while some others were led by students' organizations against the incumbent and fighting due to the crisis. In the midst of this, on May 1st, Nicolás Maduro, called for a National Constituent Assembly (ANC) to transform the state, create a new legal framework, and draft a new constitution (Gaceta Oficial de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela N° 6.295 Extraordinario, 2017), violating Articles 347, 187 and 296 of the Constitution, by calling for a process that should be led by the civilians and by taking competencies that corresponded to the National Assembly. In response, the opposition, united, called for street mobilizations and a plebiscite with the aim of allowing the people to decide whether to reject or approve the constitutional process proposed by the President (CNN Español, 2017b). The plebiscite took place on July 16<sup>th</sup> showing

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the Parliament has the authority to declare the president's absence from office and call for new elections. During this period, the President of the National Assembly assumes the role of interim president (Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela, Art. 233, 1999).

positive results for the opposition (see *Figure 9*), yet the government labeled it as unconstitutional because the initiative was not his as the President of the country (Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela, Art. 71, 1999). However, even when the same article establishes that the National Assembly can as well approve such a public consultation, this strategy resulted in no real change since the incumbent counted with the support of the CNE and the TSJ and managed to overturn the results of the plebiscite, continuing with the promotion of the ANC. By having sympathizers of his government in strategic positions within the Electoral Council and the judiciary branch, Maduro managed to manipulate the law at his convenience without these bodies questioning him.



*Figure 9:* created by the author. Results from the plebiscite organized by the opposition. From 7.535.259 people who participated, the results showed that: in the first question, the “Yes” obtained 7,432,764 votes, while the “No” obtained 9,078, in the second question the “Yes” obtained 7,446,381 and the “No” 9,835, and in the third question the “Yes” obtained 7,454,703 votes and the “No” 11,348. Source: Asamblea Nacional de Venezuela, 2017b; MUD, 2017.

In light of that, the international community mostly showed support for the opposition. The U.S. government under Donald Trump’s rule, right after the plebiscite, threatened to impose economic sanctions on Venezuela if Nicolás Maduro went ahead with his plan to create a Constituent Assembly since people had made it clear that they stood for democracy, freedom, and the rule of law. The

United Nations expressed their concern due to the violence that had been displayed by the police and National Guard and made a call to the government to not interfere with peaceful demonstrations. (Bendix, 2017; The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2017)<sup>20</sup>. Nonetheless, the protests continued, being July 30 the bloodiest day: the day of the election of the ANC with a result of “8,089,320” votes<sup>21</sup> in favor of the regime (CNE, 2017a). This had serious implications for the opposition-led National Assembly since it invalidated it and eliminated its legislative powers, as the ANC started passing laws, such as the *Ley contra el odio, por la convivencia pacífica y la tolerancia*, which condemned protests in the country (Gaceta Oficial de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela N° 41,276, 2017). The ANC assumed all legislative functions and total control of power without any democratic separation. However, since Smartmatic, the company in charge of the voting machines used in Venezuela, announced that the elections were manipulated, the European Union and its Member States expressed deep rejection for the Constituent Assembly on 30 July; they could not recognize it due to concerns over its legitimacy, and urged Nicolas Maduro's government to take corrective actions. Specifically, they called for the suspension of the effective installation of the ANC and the explicit recognition of the attributions of all institutions provided for in the Constitution. Donald Trump authorized the restriction of the Venezuelan government's access to U.S. financial markets, including PDVSA<sup>22</sup>, with a few exceptions that aimed to limit the adverse effects on both the Venezuelan people and U.S. interests, and the Lima Group<sup>23</sup> declared their rejection to the ANC and violence and their concern about the humanitarian

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<sup>20</sup> These are just a few examples, as there was support from other countries as well, including Brazil, Argentina, Canada, and Colombia (Infobae, 2017; Fuarie, 2017; Government of Canada, 2017; Santos, 2017).

<sup>21</sup> As explained later on, Smartmatic, the company that manages the voting machines in Venezuela, stated that only 3.7 million people had voted by 5.30 p.m. “Although it’s possible to have a late push at the end of the day, and the Socialist Party has tried to do that in the past, to double the vote in the last hour and a half would be without precedent” (Gupta, 2017). That, together with the results of the plebiscite the MUD organized, make these results unreliable.

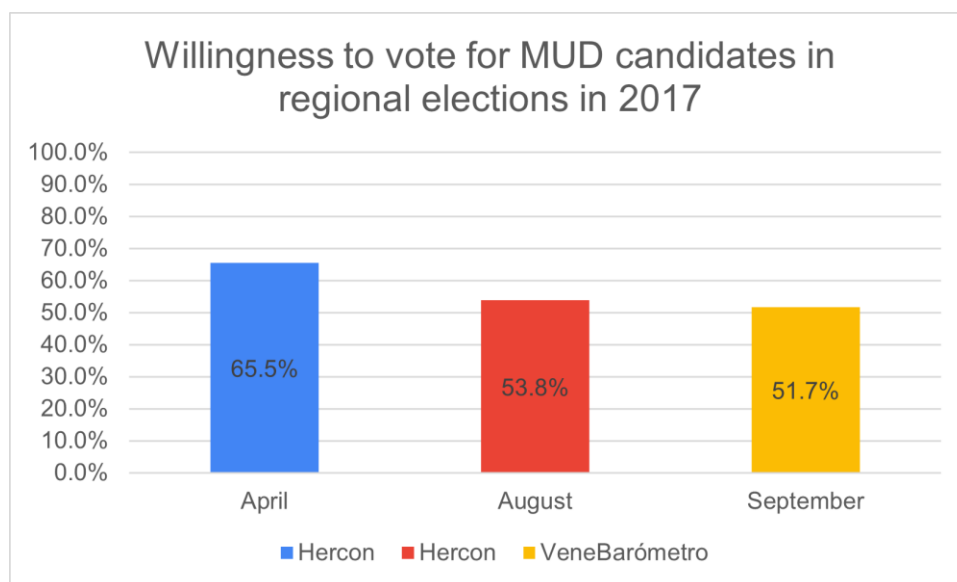
<sup>22</sup> Acronym: Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. - the Venezuelan state-owned oil and natural gas company.

<sup>23</sup> A multilateral body composed by the governments of Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay and Peru, established to attempt to contribute to the restoration of democracy in Venezuela.

crisis, among other things (Smartmatic, 2017; Council of the European Union, 2017; Exec. Order No. 13808; Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, 2017). These actions, rather than increasing the leverage, kept on reducing the linkage between the US and the incumbent regime in Venezuela and boosted the linkage between the opposition and Western powers. With this restriction of the Venezuelan government's access to U.S. financial markets, Maduro found support in the authoritarian China joining the Belt and Road Initiative. As Gratius (2021) explained, Maduro's regime was seen as a way for China to enhance its own power status in the region by resisting pro-US liberal democracies that may threaten its economic and political interests; "China acts as a passive autocracy promoter with low leverage and high linkage" (Gratius, 2021: 151). Therefore, this was advantageous for Maduro as he could receive loans from China without being subjected to any conditions or criticism, which the US did. Moreover, the regime utilized the US sanctions to explain the economic crisis in Venezuela, which reached 274.40%. Maduro accused banks and other international financial entities of alleged discriminatory treatment towards Venezuela, and blamed the US sanctions against Venezuela for the country's difficulties in accessing credit (EFE, 2017; World Data, n.d.). In other words, as a result of US democratic leverage in terms of imposed sanctions, the authoritarian linkage of Maduro's regime to China increased, providing the incumbent regime with necessary means to retain power. And precisely due to the economic crisis, it was very difficult to control the protests; every time a march was called, thousands and thousands of people arrived and everyone wanted to remove Maduro right away (Calzadilla, personal communication, 2022), that is, the opposition lost control of the protests and even though they call for mass mobilization, they could not canalize the rage and desperation of people.

After all, the opposition thought that with the different strategies they tried, joined with the international pressure and critic to the government, would destabilize Maduro but after four months, that was not the case. Therefore, after the opposition's defeat with the ANC, they abandoned the insurrectionary discourse and

adopted a new approach. Leaders such as Henrique Capriles Radonski, later backed up by the majority of the MUD coalition, began to advocate for regional and local elections, different to their previous stance of not participating in the electoral process and calling for protests to march towards *Miraflores*<sup>24</sup> as a way out of the crisis (Torrealba, personal communication, 2022). After such a decision, Maria Corina Machado, one of the most radical figures of the opposition, decided to abandon the MUD since “people would not understand” their change of strategy of participating in elections after considering a fraudulent system (BBC Mundo, 2017a; BBC Mundo, 2017b). However, the public opinion seemed to favor them in relation to voting in the regional elections (see *Figure 10*).



*Figure 10:* created by the author. Results from opinion polls carried out by Hercon and VeneBarómetro in 2017. Sources: América Nuestra, 2017; La Patilla, 2017; Prodavinci, 2017.

Yet public support for the opposition was not enough for winning the regional elections, the results show that they won only in 5 out of the 23 states of the country (CNE, 2017) because Maduro used the *Carnet de la Patria* (Homeland Card) with the purpose of distributing food packages (CLAP boxes), an initiative that has been proved to be highly politicized since the provision and distribution of food were focused on regions that were supportive of the government (Buxton,

<sup>24</sup> The official residence of the president of Venezuela.



2018; Vinogradoff, 2017), and which was necessary requirement to access certain social benefits such as student scholarships (Acceso a la Justicia, n.d.)<sup>25</sup>. In a situation where there was little access to food and an ongoing economic crisis, this factor played a crucial role in securing the backing of individuals who did not necessarily want him in power. Thus, the MUD announced that they would not recognize the results of the fraudulent electoral process since it was full of irregularities, violence, and manipulation, with at least 1,000,080 electors impeded from voting and more than 700,000 Venezuelans migrated from their centers 48 hours before or on the day of the election. The opposition party also reported cases of violence and intimidation within and outside polling stations, the inability to substitute fraudulent candidates, and coercion of public employees (Runrun, 2017).

After Nicolás Maduro announced that governors would be required to swear oaths in front of the Constituent Assembly, the MUD issued an official statement declaring that they would not comply with the requirement because it would legitimize the body (MUD, 2017). However, despite this declaration, four out of the five opposition governors, who were members of the party Acción Democrática, swore their oaths anyway. This move revealed the fractures within the opposition, resulting in a contentious situation where Henry Ramos Allup was blamed as the responsible of that betrayal. For instance, members from Voluntad Popular and Primero Justicia declared that such a decision was a political and personal mistake and that it was an act of cowardly (Voz de América, 2017; Guevara, 2017). Key members of the MUD called for a party reorganization and threatened to withdraw from the coalition, including Henrique Capriles Radonski (Capriles, 2017) if Henry Ramos Allup continued in the MUD. This corresponds with what the literature explains, that divisions within opposition groups can lead to mutual attacks (Van de Walle, 2006; Laštro & Bieber, 2021), which undermines their organization and affects the organic dynamics of the coalition.

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<sup>25</sup> By December 2017, there were already 16.217.408 Venezuelans enrolled in the program (Agencia Venezolana de Noticias, 2017).

As a result of the failure in regional elections, the issue of abstention began to emerge with great determination within the opposition and parties such as Primero Justicia, Acción Democrática, Voluntad Popular and Movimiento por Venezuela did not participate in the municipal elections, the opposition was defeated again (Calzadilla, personal communication, 2022). Afterwards, due to their abstention, those parties were disqualified from participating in the following elections due to sanctions imposed by the National Constituent Assembly (Gaceta Oficial de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela N° 41.308, 2017)

Likewise, parallelly to those events, the MUD engaged in negotiations with the regime again, organized by the president of Dominican Republic and with the chancellors of Bolivia, Chile, Mexico, and Nicaragua participating as guarantors, even when 69,5% of the population had stated months before that such a dialogue would just allow the government to gain time to stabilize (La Patilla, 2017). The opposition posed its objectives: (a) the assurance of free and fair presidential elections in 2018; (b) release of political prisoners; (c) lifting of political disqualifications on opposition leaders; and (d) the establishment of a "humanitarian corridor" to enable the import of essential food and medicine to ease the severe economic crisis, and stated that the dialogue would start when those conditions were met (MUD, 2017), yet no relevant solution or policy was achieved from that since the dialogue was not taken seriously by the regime and ensuring the conditions the opposition demanded entailed losing power and facing a worst economic loss. However, engaging in these negotiations was against both public opinion and inconsistent with their past actions. Participating in a dialogue with a government considered illegitimate and that has proven to not comply with guarantees in previous negotiations affects the credibility of their decisions and strategies.

What the evidence shows is that despite receiving public support from the Venezuelan citizens, an increasing economic crisis, and having international alliances, these conditions were not enough for a change of regime. The organization of the opposition and its tactics were frequently altered in response to

the regime's divisive and destabilizing methods, while the regime was, in fact, able to achieve some success, causing disagreements and conflicts among the opposition and, once again, affecting the opposition's chances to change the regime. On the one hand, declaring Maduro's absence of power did not represent a threat to the regime because of the regime's judiciary control, this caused a shift in the opposition's methods, calling for protests that were fueled by the economic situation and were difficult to control. As an answer to that, the government decided to call for a National Constituent Assembly (ANC) to finish taking away the only weapon the opposition counted with: the National Assembly. The opposition called for a plebiscite which showed favorable opinion for them but once again, the lack of separation of powers made it difficult. Maduro made the elections and won through manipulation of the voting machines, which led to increased international pressure and non-recognition of the ANC, but this pressure pushed Maduro to find what the US took from him in another partner: China. A partner that offered high linkage and low leverage (see *Figure 11*). On the other hand, the opposition's participation in the regional elections did not have the expected results from the opinion polls because such a call fragmented the opposition as there were some members who did not conceive participating in unfair elections and because of the regime's tactic of the *Carnet de la Patria*, which conditioned people to receive food boxes. This resulted in the regime receiving the majority of the votes and the opposition won only in 5 out of 23 states. After the results, the majority of opposition's governors swore oaths in the ANC, a body the opposition and the whole international community did not recognize. This led to more fragmentation of the opposition and mutual attacks, motivating abstention for the following municipal elections, eliminating those major opposition parties from the competition and reducing the chances of the opposition to challenge the regime (see *Figure 12*).

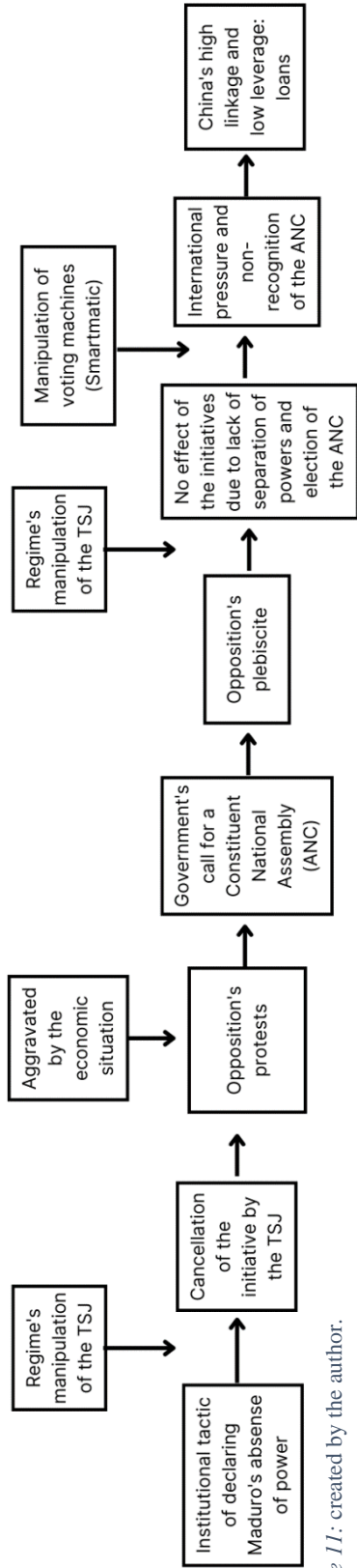


Figure 11: created by the author.

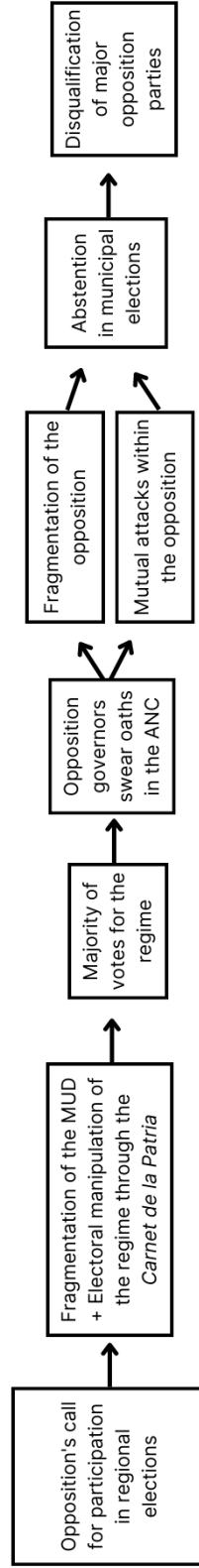


Figure 12: created by the author.

## ***2018: Abstention in elections***

The dialogue in Dominican Republic restarted early in January 2018 with the opposition leaders demanding and proposing the same solutions to the crisis as they did in 2016 and 2017, while the government wanted the opposition to push for the elimination of sanctions levied in 2017 by U.S. President Donald Trump's administration, which had added to economic woes and complicated a debt restructure (Pineda, 2018). Nevertheless, even though they had agreed on a peaceful treatment, the government carried out a military operation (*La Masacre del Junquito*) on January 15 in which Óscar Pérez<sup>26</sup>, a persecuted leader of the anti-regime movement, was massacred when he was surrendering. This extrajudicial execution created both domestic and international criticism (Ledezma, 2018; Ramos Allup, 2018; El Nacional, 2018a; Amnesty International, 2018) and was used by the opposition as a proof of a lack of commitment of the regime and to demand electoral guarantees. But parallelly to this, the TSJ ordered the CNE to exclude the MUD, as a coalition, from the parties' validation process, necessary to participate in the following elections (Sentencia del Tribunal Supremo de Justicia N° 0053, 2018). This had a tremendous implication for the opposition organization and cohesion since they would not have enough time to create a new coalition before the deadline for the parties' validation and would have to participate as individual parties.

Thus, after meetings with no agreement achieved nor signed, the dialogue was finally canceled on February 7 (Infobae, 2018) and despite the disagreement between both parts, the CNE announced that the elections would happen in April (García, 2018). This unilateral decision, described in the literature as “the element of surprise” affected the opposition since they were not prepared for it. The opposition had the duty of choosing a presidential candidate to confront Nicolás Maduro in 2018, but they did not carry out the primary elections. Calzadilla explains that this was a deadly tactical mistake from the opposition's side: to sit

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<sup>26</sup> He was a policeman that carried out an attack to both the Ministry of Interior and the Supreme Tribunal of Justice in 2017, calling the military and the police for an uprising against the regime.

down to negotiate an electoral date without having the candidate previously chosen. The negotiations in Dominican Republic allowed the government to trap them and set a date that would not allow them to go for primary elections because they knew beforehand that the opposition was already divided (Calzadilla, personal communication, 2022), meaning that the mistakes of the opposition in coordination were aggravated and put into evidence through those negotiations. Consequently, three of the main parties of the opposition (Acción Democrática, Primero Justicia and Voluntad Popular) decided to boycott the elections since that would entail endorsing the anticipated electoral process which the ANC and the CNE organized, without the guarantees that the opposition demanded, which were: (1) free elections within the framework of the Constitution and with a viable date; (2) free participation; (3) conditions for Venezuelans abroad to vote; (4) professional international observation (El Nacional, 2018b; Borges, 2018). However, even when most of the opposition supported this and moved in the same line, there were two political figures, Henri Falcón<sup>27</sup> and Javier Bertucci<sup>28</sup>, who decided to participate and gained critics and disapproval from the other opposition figures (Guanipa, 2018). Thus, these two candidates broke with the logic the opposition had been sustaining. By having these candidates of the opposition, the government could have *façade* of democracy although it did not necessarily mean the legitimation of the elections, as it will be further explained. As a consequence, the CNE announced, based on a decree issued by the ANC, that the presidential elections would be rescheduled and take place on May 20th (CNE, 2018a), which led the MUD to present its new platform to apply pressure, Frente Amplio por Venezuela, including representatives from civil society, trade unions, universities, churches, NGOs, and political parties. They proposed a series of actions, including the call to not recognize the results of the election, a march to the UN headquarters on March 12th to request support for free and transparent elections, a national and international

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<sup>27</sup> He is a Venezuelan politician and former military officer. Since he was a former member of Hugo Chávez' party yet he became part of the MUD in 2008, he has been a controversial figure and criticized for collaborating with the regime of Nicolás Maduro.

<sup>28</sup> He is as Venezuelan evangelical pastor, businessman, and politician. He has widely criticized Maduro's government and advocates for addressing inequality. However, he became known since the 2018 presidential elections.

protest on March 17th, recognition of the National Assembly, rejection of the ANC; support for international aid, and the demand for free elections before January 10th, 2019 (Frente Amplio Venezuela Libre, 2018; El Nacional, 2018c; Efecto Cocuyo, 2018). Likewise, as the MUD, they decided to reaffirm their call for abstention, as well as they incited people to protest and promised to articulate solutions between the MUD and its parties and the Frente Amplio (Acción Democrática, 2018).

All those elements created the ideal conditions for Maduro to “win” the electoral process with 67,84% of the votes (CNE, 2018b), which even though it was impartial and it lacked transparency (Observatorio Electoral Venezolano, 2018), it was left in hands of the government. The decision of abstention and boycott of elections conceded the electoral arena to Maduro. Since the agreement of the Dominican Republic was not signed and there was no agreement on the electoral date, Maduro made the elections with unfavorable conditions for the opposition and counting with a small faction of the opposition that allowed him to have a “competition”. That information asymmetry together with the already existing fragmentation and waste of time of the opposition, prevented the majority from participating and prompted the abstention, which the interviewees evaluate as following:

"In 2018, we repeated the worst of the strategies we have developed: the electoral abstention. In 2005 we gave Chávez the National Assembly, and in 2018 we gave Maduro 6 more years in government" (Torrealba, personal communication, 2022).

Calzadilla evaluates that “if the opposition had managed to have a unitary and strong candidate, possibly the story would have been different. Maybe Maduro would have been imprisoned because he would not hand over power. At this moment, it seems that they were not going to hand over power and that they were going to use another trap if plan A (that we abstain and maintain divided) did not work for them. However, it was our duty to do things right, it was our duty to unmask him and present a unitary candidate, but it was not possible to reach an agreement between us” (Calzadilla, personal communication, 2022).

And thus, little by little, the MUD disappeared as such, with a significant part of the coalition’s leadership either in exile or prison, and evolving into three smaller groups at that moment: Soy Venezuela (with leaders such as Maria Corina Machado and Antonio Ledezma) calling for Maduro’s immediate removal,

Concretación por el Cambio (with parties such as COPEI and Avanzada Progresista), willing to participate in elections, and a third group comprising the majority of former coalition parties as Acción Democrática, Primero Justicia, Voluntad Popular, Un Nuevo Tiempo y Causa Radical (Moleiro, 2018). Still, having the *Frente Amplio* which aimed to serve as an umbrella platform where spaces for encounter and discussion could be generated. Yet no real effective move was made and the regime achieved its mission of *divide et impera*, having by this time a clear fragmentation within the opposition.

However, as César Pérez Vivas (2022) states, the only tangible result of the abstention was that the international community did not recognize Maduro as the legitimate president of Venezuela. For the international community, the actions of Maduro created the conditions for the opposition to ignore the electoral process and to internationally disavow his presidency more than before. And thus, 2018 was a year of strong involvement of foreign forces in which both the US and the EU issued several sanctions for the government of Maduro, such as E.O. 13835 which forbade any transactions linked to buying Venezuelan debt, and E.O. 13850 to freeze the funds and restrict specific transactions with individuals from the government engaged in corruption and to sanction those involved in currency manipulation, who embezzled millions from emergency food aid, and who aided Maduro and PDVSA in evading oil sanctions (Exec. Order No. 13835, 2018; Exec. Order No. 13850, 2018). The EU sanctioned 11 members of the government due to human rights violations and for undermining democracy and the rule of law in Venezuela (Council Decision (CFSP) 2018/901, 2018), and the UN passed a resolution urging the government to allow humanitarian assistance in the country (United Nations General Assembly, 2018). But as the theory suggests, external pressure can also lead to unintended consequences, such as pushing regimes closer to other external actors who are willing to offer support or protection. In this case, Western pressure and isolation of Maduro's regime pushed the government closer to Eastern rulers, such as Turkey and Russia, who were willing to provide military and economic support. More specifically, Maduro was backed up by Turkey and was signing deals

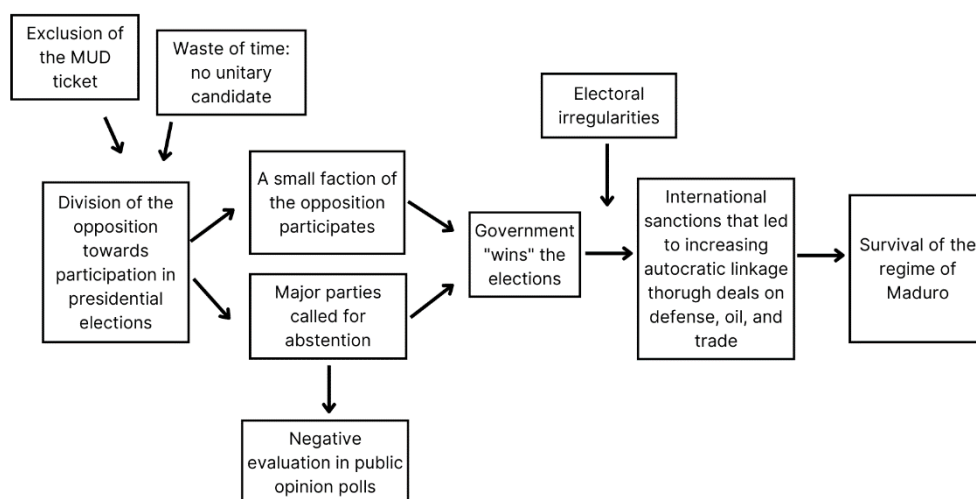


with the government of Russia on defense, finance, oil, and trade for more than 6.000 million dollars (Erdogan 2018; Maduro, 2018a; Maduro, 2018b). This rapprochement helped Maduro not only militarily but economically as well, offering the regime an alternative to Western attacks and isolation.

The economy reached the highest inflation rate that the country has faced so far, reaching the 130,060.20 % (World Data, n.d.), 80% of Venezuelan households were food insecure and had lost an average of 11 kilograms by then (Human Rights Watch, 2019), and the public opinion showed the desperation and disillusionment. In the opinion polls, eight out of ten Venezuelans thought that the situation was serious enough for the government to accept the humanitarian aid offered by other countries; two thirds of the population believed that the cause of the economic crisis is the mismanagement of the Government and seven out of ten Venezuelans negatively evaluate the management of President Maduro. But, even though nine out of ten respondents believed that the CNE was not reliable, seven out of ten Venezuelans believed it was better to participate in the elections (Martínez, 2018). Some other surveys reveal that 77,2% considered that Maduro was not the ideal option to solve the crisis (Hercon, 2018a) yet the MUD had a negative evaluation of 61,3% regarding their decisions to bring about a change in the country (Hercon, 2018b). Seemingly, the public opinion did favor a change of regime and despite concerns about the reliability of the electoral system, many Venezuelans saw participating in elections as a way to express their dissatisfaction with the incumbent government and try to bring about change through the democratic process. This may have been seen as a more feasible option than the other strategies they had such as participating in the dialogue and calling for abstention. What is more important, it can be understood that the opposition did not meet the demands of the citizens and acted against their will by not following the electoral path as a united coalition but rather smaller factions with less relevance.

Overall, despite favorable enabling conditions for a regime transition, including a serious economic situation with the worst hyperinflation, widespread public dissatisfaction with the government, and the backing of over 50 nations to

the opposition, Nicolás Maduro's regime remained in power. This can be attributed, in part, to the opposition's failure to maintain unity and coordinate effective strategies in their efforts to propose and represent a real alternative to people and achieve a change. While all opposition factions ostensibly advocated for a better future for Venezuela, their inability to work together impeded their progress. Instead, individual factions seem to have prioritized their own methods and goals over the greater good. Therefore, the opposition failed to present a unified candidate for the presidential elections, leading the majority to call for abstention. However, this went against public opinion, which wanted to express its dissatisfaction with the government through voting. As a result, a small faction of the opposition decided to participate, causing further fragmentation. Ultimately, the opposition conceded the electoral arena to the regime, as the participating opposition candidates were not trustworthy in the eyes of the people. Although Maduro won the election, there were irregularities, leading the international community to refuse to recognize the results and impose stricter sanctions, including the EU and the US. This forced Maduro to seek alternative alliances, which he found in countries such as Russia and Turkey, providing the necessary autocratic support for the regime's survival. Thus, clearly, the regime was responsible for its electoral manipulation but rather than creating divisions among the opposition, it made them more visible (see *Figure 13*).



*Figure 13*: created by the author.

## ***2019: Presidential crisis – Interim government***

As a result of the presidential elections in 2018, the newly elected president of the opposition-led National Assembly, Juan Guaidó<sup>29</sup>, announced in an open cabildo his plan of action: following articles 333, 350 and 233 of the Constitution<sup>30</sup>, he would assume the interim presidency to achieve “the cessation of the usurpation and call free elections with the union of the people, the military and the international community”<sup>31</sup> (Asamblea Nacional de Venezuela, 2019a). From the beginning of the year, Guaidó called for “street of no return” (*calle sin retorno*), prompting people to go to the streets until the incumbent left office, setting a record for the highest number of protests recorded in the past nine years across the country, with a total of 16,739 (OVCS, 2020). While Maduro swore oaths in the TSJ as the president of Venezuela, Guaidó swore oaths as the interim president in the National Assembly, giving way to a presidential crisis. This strategy, led by Guaidó’s party, Voluntad Popular, was initially supported by the opposition as a whole and by more than fifty democracies around the world, including the United States (Calzadilla, personal communication, 2022; U.S. Department of State, 2019), the countries within the European Union (European Parliament, 2019), Argentina (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, 2019), Brasil (Ministério das Relações Exteriores, 2019), which matches what the theory says, that linkage with Western powers increased the international reputation and status of oppositions (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Specifically, Trump’s administration went forward expressing that “all options were on the table to respond to Maduro if he did not agree to hand over

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<sup>29</sup> Before being president of the National Assembly, Guaidó had a political career that started with his participation in the student movement. He was part of the opposition party Un Nuevo Tiempo and then became one of the leaders of the party of Leopoldo López, Voluntad Popular. He also participated in politics as a candidate for governor and as a deputy of the Assembly.

<sup>30</sup> Article 333 states that if the Constitution is violated, citizens, regardless of their position, must collaborate to restore its effectiveness. Article 350 states that the people of Venezuela will reject any authority or legislation that contradicts democratic principles or violates human rights. Article 233 outlines the circumstances that constitute an absolute fault of the President, including death, resignation, destitution, physical or mental incapacity, and abandonment of the position. It also provides for the succession of the Vice President or the President of the National Assembly in case of a presidential vacancy and outlines the procedures for new elections (Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela, 1999).

<sup>31</sup> The motto was: “cessation of the usurpation, transitional government and free elections with international observation”.

power to Juan Guaidó” (Heraldo, 2019), reason why the government of Maduro decided for the severance of diplomatic relations with the United States and obliged US diplomats to abandon the country (Ministerio del Poder Popular para Relaciones Exteriores, 2019).

In the first four months of the year, the tactics of the interim government were promising, such as the announcement of humanitarian aid entering the country (Wallace, 2019), and the *Operación Libertad*, an uprising that counted with the support of some military officers<sup>32</sup> and that started with the liberalization of Leopoldo López from prison (ABC, 2020). However, what it was thought to be an action that would trigger more military support for a change of regime and would bring them to participate in the process, it ended up failing perhaps because despite the agreement on Nicolás Maduros’ abandonment of power between Guaidó and Vladimir Padrino López (Minister of Defense), Maikel Moreno (President of the Supreme Tribunal of Justice of Venezuela), and Iván Hernández Dala (head of Military Counterintelligence), when the moment to act arrived, they were not willing to do so (Infobae, 2019a). The US and Guaidó stated that Maduro was ready to leave the country that day, but Russia hold him back (Hansler, 2019). However, the regime responded by violently blocking the access of the humanitarian help (The New York Times, 2019), showing that even though Guaidó was recognized outside of Venezuela as the president, Maduro still held power over the military and controlled the territory.

Rapidly after, politics in Venezuela started to be prominently shaped by the international dispute between the United States and the government of Maduro (supported mainly by Russia and China). While the US imposed sanctions to Maduro, to governors of the government’s party, and to the Military Counterintelligence Agency, declared economic embargo to anyone who supported Maduro, blocked the property Government of Venezuela (under Maduro and provides additional authority to entities and individuals linked to the Venezuelan Government, froze the assets of the incumbent in the United States, (U.S. Embassy

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<sup>32</sup> Six lieutenant colonels, three majors, four captains, and four lieutenants.

Montevideo, 2019a; U.S. Embassy Montevideo, 2019b; U.S. Department of the Treasury, n.d.; U.S. Embassy in Chile, 2019), Maduro's economic and military linkage increased towards Russia, who deployed Russian military personnel on a "military-technical operation", shipped humanitarian aid, and sent hundreds of millions of dollars in cash to Venezuela estimated that more than 260 million dollars (CNN, 2019; Infobae, 2019b), and to China by accepting loans (Lu & Jiménez Morales, 2019). In words of Gratius (2021), "given that regime change would risk all Russian investment, maintaining Maduro in power became part of Russia's domestic agenda to preserve its 'national interests'" (Gratius, 2021: 149). That is to say, that the pressure of the West aggravated the situation as it made Maduro closer to other authoritarian governments and by counting with that support, the regime is not that fragile and could survive. That division was noticeable during the meetings of the Grupo de Lima in terms of the level of support, with a majority of countries pushing for the continuation of international pressure on Venezuela due to the belief that the issues there could have negative effects on regional peace, security, and stability, as well as global consequences, and, on the other hand, Mexico, Uruguay, Russia, Iran, China, Cuba, and Turkey that opted out of the meetings (Infobae, 2019b). And in these scenarios, where external influences become less powerful, the theory suggests that domestic factors are more relevant (Levitsky & Way (2006), yet domestically, the regime hold control of the military, and the opposition left that fight in hands of the Western powers. As Calzadilla pointed out in the interview for this research: "It was very bad for the Venezuelan opposition politics because the hope for political change was shifted to an external entity that was going to come and save us, instead of us taking action ourselves".

Furthermore, another impact of the sanctions and pressure of the US government was the absence of Maduro's government in the round of negotiation held in Barbados, under the initiative of Norway, in which the opposition aimed "to negotiate the end of the dictatorship" (Asamblea Nacional de Venezuela, 2019b). Those talks that started in July, were already canceled in September by Guaidó due to the nonattendance of the incumbent (BBC, 2019a). Shortly after the cancelation of the negotiations, the regime started a series of tactics of co-optation to debilitate

the opposition. First of all, the government signed an agreement with minority parties of the opposition (Cambiamos, MAS, Avanzada Progresista and Soluciones) that would allow around 50 deputies from the government's party to return<sup>33</sup> to the opposition-led National Assembly (BBC, 2019). That decision from some factions of the opposition was apparently backed up with the idea that none of the strategies carried out by the opposition seemed to have had results, neither protests, abstention nor dialogues (Fermín, 2019), but rather than creating a different solution, it created more divisions in the opposition since the major parties and the interim government stated that such an agreement did not represent the "true opposition". Coupled with this, it was discovered that the regime set in the *Operación Maletín Verde* (Operation Green Suitcase) in order to buy deputies from the opposition (Guerra, 2019). What is more, according to a report by *Armando.info*, some deputies<sup>34</sup> from the opposition made informal requests to organizations such as the US Department of Treasury and the Office of the Attorney General of Colombia to improve the reputation of businessmen involved in the corruption scandal of the importation of food for the Venezuelan government's CLAP boxes<sup>35</sup> (*Armando.info*, 2019), and finally, by the end of the year, opposition leaders announced that the government set in the *Operación Alacrán* (Operation Scorpion) to bribe opposition deputies and avoid the re-election of Juan Guaidó as the president of the Assembly in 2020 (CNN, 2019). The government was aware of the human weaknesses of those who had been involved in opposition politics for many years. Without access to public positions, some opposition leaders became easy targets for the government's bribery and manipulation tactics and by accepting those deals, Maduro managed to weaken the overall strength and effectiveness of the opposition (Pérez, personal

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<sup>33</sup> Those deputies had left the National Assembly, which they considered illegitimate, to join the National Constituent Assembly that supported the regime.

<sup>34</sup> From Primero Justicia (PJ): Luis Parra, Adolfo Superlano, José Brito, Emilio Fajardo and Conrado Pérez Linares; from Voluntad Popular (VP): Richard Arteaga, Freddy Superlano and Guillermo Luces, and from Un Nuevo Tiempo (UNT): Chaim Bucaram, Héctor Vargas and William Barrientos.

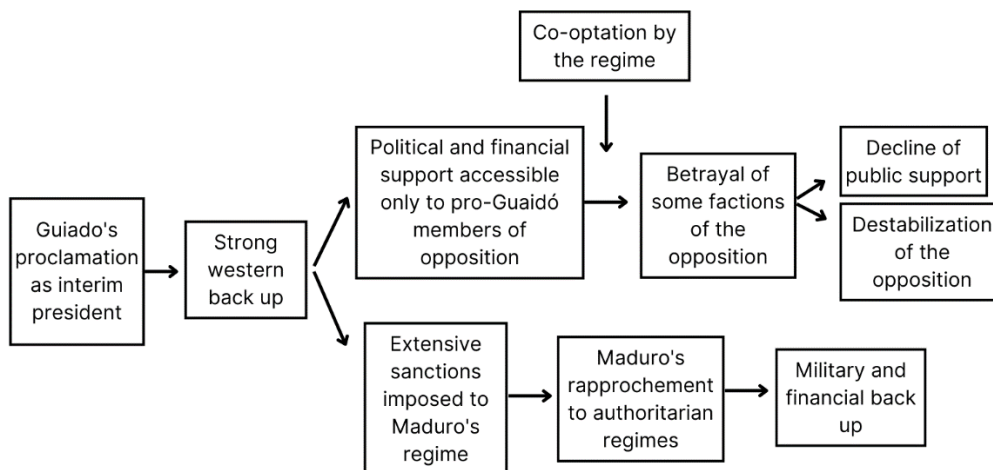
<sup>35</sup> A program for distributing food at controlled prices by the state. It has been proved that it lacks clear procedures and mechanisms for accountability, and that it has been used as a tool for political propaganda and social control (OHCHR, 2018)

communication, 2022), as well as its credibility. As a result, opinion polls in the subsequent year indicated a significant decline in support for the opposition, which was partly influenced by these factors.

In economic matters, despite the sanctions, the inflation rate lowered dramatically, from 130,060.20% in 2018 to 9,585.50% in 2019 (World Data, n.d.) due to the incumbent's abandonment of price controls (Reuters, 2020). And the public opinion on the opposition changed with the appearance of the interim government, with slight differences throughout the year. At the beginning of the year, the leader who generated more trust was Guaidó, with 81,9%, while Maduro had 13,3% (La Patilla, 2019a). In contrast, in November, Guaidó got 57,6%, Maduro 18,2% and there was a 24,2% that preferred not to answer (La Patilla, 2019b). And when evaluating specifically Guaidó's management, 49.7% of those surveyed rated it as "good", while 46.9% evaluated it as negative (UCAB, 2019). These differences show that at first, the interim government created high expectations among the people and by not achieving a change through none of the ways (protests and international actions), the trust among the population decreased. Yet even considering this, the support for the opposition remained high: 77,6% would vote for the opposition in elections, while only 12,1% would vote for Maduro (La Patilla, 2019a), and contrary to 2018, in which 69% of Venezuelans were hopeless and distressed, in 2019, the number lowered to 36,5% (Medianalisis, 2019; Tal Cual, 2019), which can be explained by the plan of the interim government but mostly because of foreign involvement.

Hence, the interim government initially gained a lot of support and momentum among the people, causing a revival and putting the opposition on the political offensive. However, their efforts to change the regime did not yield results over time because the opposition placed most of their fight in the international community and they underestimated the autocratic leverage in the country, meaning strong back up from countries such as Russia for Maduro and their influence economically and militarily. Likewise, the interim government's Western support made them the de facto representation of the entire opposition. This means that the

political and financial support from the US may have benefited some, but also had negative effects on those opposition factions who held different views. That, together with the fact that many National Assembly deputies were not receiving their wages and were in need may have motivated some members of the opposition to act in their own interests and play against the overall opposition agenda, meaning that they accepted the co-optation tactic of the regime and collaborated with the government in exchange of financial support, destabilizing the opposition. This shows that those co-opted opposition members were not fully committed to the primary goal of changing the regime and that by not having much participation or advantages as opposition, decided to look out for their economic interests. And so, the interim government's initial success was not sustainable because of the unintentional increase of autocratic leverage due to Western pressure, tactics of the regime as repression and co-optation, and competing interests within the opposition. All these factors entailed that support for Guaidó began to diminish (see *Figure 14*).



*Figure 14:* created by the author.

## **2020: Operation “Gedeón”**

On January 5th, 2020, the day of Juan Guaidó’s re-election as president of the National Assembly, Venezuelan security forces prevented opposition deputies from entering the building. A group of the PSUV, the ruling party, and co-opted



opposition deputies appointed Luis Parra<sup>36</sup> as president of the National Assembly, without meeting the required quorum. Guaidó and his supporters denounced this move as a parliamentary coup and held a session at the headquarters of *El Nacional*<sup>37</sup>, where he was re-elected as president of the National Assembly with 100 votes (Prodavinci, 2020). From that moment on, the National Assembly led by Juan Guaidó was not allowed to enter the Federal Legislative Palace again and they were forced to meet in the streets and squares (Calzadilla, personal communication, 2022). Hence, the government found another way to exploit the democratic deficit and lack of values within political parties by using opposition party members to go against their own partners (Pérez, personal communication, 2022).

As for Guaidó, he started an international tour, passing by Colombia, England, Switzerland, Spain, Canada, France, and the United States, to reassure their support for the interim government (Guaidó, 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2020d; 2020e; 2020f; 2020g). Upon his arrival, he declared that they had formulated solutions and measures to address the problem and that they planned to intensify their pressure “as far as it takes” (Guaidó, 2020h). He introduced, then, a new plan of action in collaboration with the National Assembly and in response to global pressure to resolve the issue domestically: the *Pliego Nacional de Conflicto* (National Conflict Statement). Its objective was to bring together various civil society groups such as workers, students, and the church, who all agreed that the only solution to the situation was to remove Maduro from power through free elections. To achieve this goal, Guaidó and the National Assembly members called for a mobilization on March 10th, leading up to the Federal Legislative Palace, where they aimed to hold a session and approve the plan (Asamblea Nacional de Venezuela, 2020a; Angola, 2020). And, regardless of the violent response of the government, who deployed the armed forces on the street and impeded the opposition to hold the session there, they approved it on a square. Up to this point, the prevailing approach among the majority of the opposition was to continue

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<sup>36</sup> As explained before, this is one of the opposition members who was proved to collaborate with the government in the investigation of *Armando.Info*.

<sup>37</sup> One of the most important newspapers in the country.

mobilizing and push for the National Electoral Council (CNE) to hold fair elections and enable them to participate in a democratic process (TVV Noticias, 2020).

Nevertheless, two of the members of the Center of Government of Guaidó<sup>38</sup>, Juan José Rendón and Sergio Vergara<sup>39</sup>, had considered another way out: a paramilitary operation to capture those government-related officials who were responsible of violating human rights. They initially signed a contract with a US veteran, Jordan Goudreau, who would provide this service through his private-security company, Silvercorop USA, yet seemingly, Rendón and Vergara never proceed with the operation (*Gedeón*) and cancelled their agreement. However, the US veteran moved forward with the plan and was caught by Maduro's regime (CNN en Español, 2020). This caused stir and inconveniences for the interim government since Goudreau presented a document signed by Guaidó (The Washington Post, 2020), even though both Rendón and Guaidó rejected such an accusation. It caused, as well, more discontent among members of the opposition towards the interim government since none of them seemed to be aware of such a plan (Calzadilla, personal communication, 2022) and national funds were implicated. Even though the other parties of the National Assembly continued supporting the interim government, Primero Justicia openly demanded Guaidó to (a) remove the responsible actors of the operation; (b) rethink the decision-making mechanisms within the opposition and reconsider the role of the Center of Government, in order to truly respect unity and refocus the political struggle on removing Maduro from power; (c) initiate an independent investigation by the National Assembly (Primero Justicia, 2020).

Once again, the regime of Maduro employed tactics to weaken the opposition which were mainly concentrated in the abuse of the judiciary branch. First of all, the TSJ declared the unconstitutional omission of the National

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<sup>38</sup> This was an institution created by Guaidó in order to coordinate his presidential commissioners, most of which were in exile.

<sup>39</sup> Juan José (J.J) Rendón is a Venezuelan political strategist of great importance in Latin America (he has participated in several presidential campaigns within the region). He became the strategist of Guaidó until he resigned after the Operation *Gedeón*. Sergio Vergara is a Venezuelan politician member of the party Voluntad Popular and deputy of the National Assembly in 2015.

Assembly and orders the National Electoral Council (CNE) to call for legislative elections (Sentencia del Tribunal Supremo de Justicia, 2020a). Secondly, the TSJ appointed the members of the CNE, violating article 8 of the Organic Law of the Electoral Power, which establishes that the members of the CNE have to be elected by two thirds of the National Assembly (TSJ, 2020a; Ley Orgánica del Poder Electoral, 2002). Thirdly, the TSJ intervened into three of the main political parties of the opposition (Primero Justicia, Acción Democrática and Voluntad Popular), leaving those parties in hands of co-opted opposition members (TSJ, 2020b; TSJ, 2020c; TSJ, 2020d). Next, the CNE increased the number of deputies from 167 to 277, violating article 186 which requires a proportional representation, according to a population base of one-point one percent of the total population of the country (Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela, 1999), meaning that the impartial Electoral council increased the number of seats the government could hold. All of these tactics prevented the opposition from legislatively attack the regime of Maduro.

After all these irregularities and last-minute changes, the opposition, led by Guaidó decided not to participate in the legislative elections in December and called for a unitary pact (*Pacto Unitario*) in which 37 parties joined (Guaidó, 2020i). It seemed to be a unanimous decision but one month later, Henrique Capriles Radonski announced his participation after a dialogue round organized by the Turkish government only with him and Stalin González (another member of the MUD and Un Nuevo Tiempo) (Çavuşoğlu, 2020). Even though those talks entailed the release of 110 political prisoners, this tactic meant again disputes among the leaders of the opposition, with two different positions towards electoral participation and the regime itself, and so Capriles and González retired from participating after critics of the rest of the opposition (Centro de Comunicación Nacional, 2020). Despite the fact that was the majority against two opposition leaders, it is important to take into account the significance of Capriles in Venezuelan politics since the presidential elections in 2013, that is, though not being a big faction, it still caused a short period of destabilization. Yet finally, all agreed on boycotting the elections and called for a popular consultation where

6.471.428 Venezuelans participated. The consultation counted with three questions: (a) Do you demand an end to the usurpation of the presidency by Nicolás Maduro and call for free, fair and verifiable presidential and parliamentary elections? (b) Do you reject the event of December 6 organized by Nicolás Maduro's regime and ask the international community to ignore it? and (c) Do you demand the necessary efforts to be made with the international community to activate cooperation, accompaniment, and assistance to rescue our democracy, address the humanitarian crisis, and protect the people from crimes against humanity? And even though the results were favorably: 97% voted yes for the first two questions and 99% voted for the last one (El Nacional, 2020) this consultation was initiated not with the aim of getting rid of Maduro's regime but with the idea that it would reinforce the "spirit of Venezuelans" against the regime (Efecto Cocuyo, 2020).

Nevertheless, the legislative elections took place on December 6, with the participation of the regime's party and the opposition parties controlled by co-opted members. The results of the CNE show that from the 6.251.080 people that participated, the regime got 4.321.975 votes, meaning 253 out of 277 seats in the parliament (CNE, 2020). As a response, the interim government approved in the National Assembly the *Estatuto de la Transición* (statute of the transition), a document where they portray the irregularities mentioned in this research before, which disaccredit Nicolás Maduro as a president and enables the National Assembly established in 2015 to legislate until 2021 (Asamblea Nacional de Venezuela, 2020b). Yet as the last word was in hands of the government, the TSJ issued a document where such a statute was annulled and the National Assembly elected in 2020 was validated (Sentencia del Tribunal Supremo de Justicia N° 0274-2020, 2020b). Once again, the regime's control over the judiciary branch cancelled any legislative initiative of the opposition.

Internationally, the United States kept being a great supporter of the opposition and recognizing Guaidó as the legitimate president. The US sanctioned previous opposition members that contributed with Maduro for attempting to prevent a majority of legitimate Venezuelan deputies from voting (Pompeo, 2020a),

Rosneft Trading S.A.<sup>40</sup> and its board chair and president for operating in Venezuela's oil sector and the Russian oil brokerage firm TNK Trading International for aiding the Maduro regime and evading US sanctions (Pompeo, 2020b; Pompeo, 2020c). Besides, Maduro was charged with narco-terrorism, conspiracy to import cocaine, possession of machine guns and destructive devices, and conspiracy to possess machine guns and destructive devices, for which the U.S. Department of State offered a reward of up to \$15 million for information leading to his arrest and/or conviction (Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, 2020). However, these actions have resulted in a limited leverage for the United States on Venezuela. As Venezuela lost its capacity to refine crude oil and became dependent on gasoline imports, the regime had to turn to other countries, such as Iran, for gasoline imports due to the US sanctions. That is to say, this has created linkages between Venezuela and Iran since Russian companies, previously providing gasoline to Venezuela, had to deal with US sanctions (Sharafedin, 2020). Moreover, this dramatically decreased the linkage to the US, whose leverage by that moment was already low.

Contextually, the inflation rate in the country kept decreasing, passing from 9,585.50 % in 2019 to 2,959.80 % (World Data, n.d.), but this did not mean an alleviation of the crisis, as it kept being the major concern of Venezuelans (Hercon, 2020). What it is important to consider is that even though 84.5% evaluated Maduro's government negatively and 83.4% believed there was the need of a change of regime, around 70% of the interviewees were not willing to vote in the parliamentary elections of December and when being asked about their preferences in presidential elections, the results show that 30.3% opted for Guaidó, 16.7% for Maduro and 53% would not vote for neither of them. Likewise, compared to previous years, the majority (57%) responded not to be aligned with any party, nor from the government or the opposition. And to end up with, 45.8% believed that the political and strategical mistakes of the opposition since 2019 allowed Maduro to keep power (Hercon, 2020). And it can be seen that even when the interim

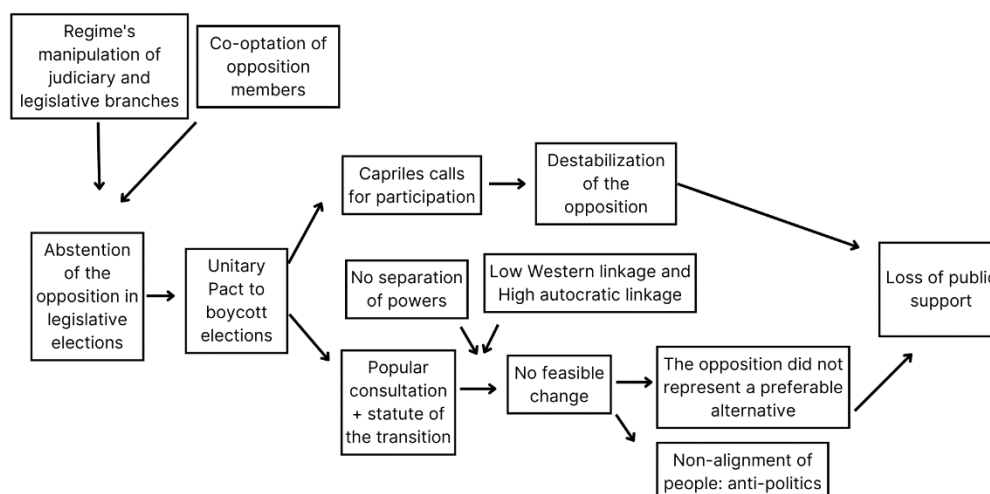
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<sup>40</sup> A Russian-owned oil brokerage firm.

government continually called for protest, either by the lack of motivation or by the COVID situation, in 2020 there were 9633 protests, which represents a 42% decrease compared to 2019 (OVCS, 2021). It can thus be understood that the opposition did not effectively make use of the conditions available to them to challenge the current government, resulting in a decline in their popular support. This led to a general sense of disappointment from political leadership in the country, as neither the government nor the opposition presented viable solutions to the economic challenges faced by Venezuelans. The resulting erosion of ideological polarization created a situation where the opposition was not perceived as a preferable alternative to the government, despite widespread dissatisfaction with the latter. Consequently, Venezuelans were experiencing a growing sense of disillusionment and disengagement from politics.

Altogether, the government used its power over the judicial system to deepen the divisions within the parties, and the strategy of Maduro was strengthened by the opposition itself. The parties' internal conflicts resulted in each group (those who supported the interim government and the co-opted ones) acting separately and towards their own interests, which was exactly what Maduro wanted. The opposition's divisions were exacerbated by the feeling of anger and betrayal towards those who sided with the government, rather than the goal of removing Maduro from power. And even within factions that supported the interim government, such as the one led by Henrique Capriles Radonski, there were differences in the way and means to find solutions. The most salient strategy of the weakened interim government was the abstention in the legislative elections of that year. They carried out a popular consultation on those elections and issued a statute of the transition showing the irregularities of Maduro's government and the electoral system yet by that moment, these strategies proved to be inefficient because of the lack of separation of powers. Not having a system of check and balances plus counting with insiders from the opposition as supporters made those efforts unfeasible. Likewise, the efforts of Western powers to destabilize Maduro were not successful and applying sanctions to Russian companies just generated new ties between Maduro and the government of Iran, which made Maduro fearless

of the manipulation of these branches. Therefore, both because of the opposition's ineffective strategies and the internal betrayal by some members, the public opinion that was initially in favor of the opposition deteriorated, as the economic crisis continued to be a significant concern for the people, and the opposition failed to provide a viable solution for it. That polarization that once existed banished and the non-alignment increased (see *Figure 15*).



*Figure 15*: created by the author.

## Chapter 5: Conclusions

This research aimed to understand the situation in Venezuela, where despite an unpopular government and a desire for change among the majority of the population, conditions for a regime change have been met but a transition has not occurred. The existing literature on the Venezuelan case offers insights on the whole spectrum of tactics that both the regime of Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro have employed to stay in power, as well as it gives account of some of the failures the opposition has had in the process that have led to their destabilization or debilitation. However, there was no clear causal mechanism between the independent variable of this research (opposition strategies and organization in interaction with the regime) and the dependent variable (the failure of the opposition in achieving a change of the regime of Nicolás Maduro). Therefore, this research has tried to explore the possible causal relationship between these two variables. Bearing that in mind, the goal was to answer “how has the interaction

between the political opposition in Venezuela and the incumbent government impacted in the opposition's chances of changing Nicolás Maduro's regime (2014-2020)?"

To address this, the research collected data from a range of primary sources, including official websites of the MUD, the National Assembly, the Supreme Tribunal of Justice, and the CNE (Consejo Nacional Electoral). Additionally, archival research in both national and international newspapers and websites was conducted, alongside data from survey companies and semi-structured interviews with key figures from opposition parties and journalists. Although censorship in Venezuela was sometimes a limitation to access important data, the interviewees corroborated certain aspects and added their valuable inputs. Finally, the analysis was contextualized by factors such as the economic crisis, public opinion towards the government and opposition, and international involvement, to assess how these factors influenced the opposition's chances to change the government led by Nicolás Maduro.

According to the results obtained from the empirical data, it can be concluded that even though the impact of the opposition strategies and organization in interaction with the regime has not been a linear process in which the opposition has had absolute responsibility, there are several peaks in the analyzed period where such a causal relationship is evident and the influence of the opposition's actions has been more pronounced. First of all, the use of conflicting tactics at the same time, such as protests and negotiations with the government, had a negative impact on the opposition's ability to effect change due to the distribution of efforts and resources, which resulted in a lack of focus and coherence in their overall strategy. This is evident in years such as 2014 and 2016, where strategies overlapped and reduced the effectiveness of negotiations.

Moreover, collaboration of opposition members in government-led institutions such as the National Constituent Assembly caused more internal divisions, particularly between radical and moderate/institutionalist groups, which increased the risk of cooptation by the government, led to mutual attacks, and



decreased motivation for collaboration among opposition members, resulting in abstention in following elections, thus weakening their ability to challenge the government effectively and united. Also, it was found that the boycott strategy, motivated by a lack of a coherent plan of government and waste of time of the opposition to elect a unitary candidate, pushed voters to abstain and conceded the electoral field to the regime, allowing Maduro to win the presidential elections in 2018 without being challenged, in accordance with the previous ideas of Buxton (2018) and Gamboa (2017). Besides, boycotts in elections by major opposition parties combined with participation of smaller factions weakened the opposition's ability to represent a credible challenge to the incumbent regime, as the resulting division created a façade of democracy through the smaller factions' participation, without posing a genuine threat to the regime's hold on power since they did not count with enough popular support.

Furthermore, there are parts of the causal mechanism, such as international involvement, that evolved and became more significant for the detriment of the opposition over the years; in line with Buxton (2018), Gratius (2021), the reliance of the opposition on Western powers to try to enforce pressure to the regime isolated and pushed the incumbent to strengthen autocratic linkages with China, Russia, Turkey and Iran, countries that provided him with military and economic support and that offered Maduro's regime an alternative to oil trade, which turned out to be counterproductive as the regime needed less and less Western linkage and it became unafraid of Western leverage.

And thus, it is important understand that the nature of the opposition dynamic that led them to carry out those strategies was conditioned by an already existing fragmentation. As one of the interviewees said: “in the Venezuelan case you cannot talk about *the opposition*, but *the oppositions*” (Calzadilla, personal communication, 2022). Consequently, their different views on how to change the regime made them more vulnerable to fall on the destabilizing tactics of the regime, aggravating those differences even more.

To better understand the implications of these results, further research could continue to explore the dynamics of the opposition-government interaction in Venezuela, including the impact of recent developments and events that have occurred since 2020. Besides, the findings of this study may be considered to research in detail elements such as the political interests of opposition members and to explore potential alternative strategies for opposition groups in Venezuela in order to be able to pose a real challenge to the regime. Understanding that opposition strategies and their organization is one of the elements that has contributed for the incumbent regime to still hold power, it would be necessary for the opposition to unify their efforts and coordinate their strategies, utilizing all available paths, including the electoral one, and focusing on a future-oriented plan of governance rather than focusing on the past.

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## **Interviews**

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## **Appendix**

### **Data collection instrument: semi-structured interview**

#### **Introduction:**

1. Presentation of myself
2. Objectives of my research
3. Purpose of the data that will be collected
4. Terms of confidentiality and permissions: to openly notice the use their personal information, the record the interview, and the later provision of the transcription of the interview for final adjustments and considerations.
5. Thanks for the participation of the interviewee.

#### **General questions**

1. **Ice-breaking and contextualization:**
  - a. ¿Puede hablarme un poco sobre usted y su rol o cargo dentro de la política venezolana?
    - i. Nombre, edad, trayectoria.
2. ¿Cuál cree usted que es el rol de la oposición en Venezuela?
3. ¿Cuáles han sido los objetivos y estrategias de la oposición en Venezuela desde el comienzo del gobierno de Nicolás Maduro hasta ahora?
  - a. ¿Podría evaluarlas?
4. ¿Cree usted que la oposición ha podido actuar de manera diferente?
5. ¿Considera usted que la oposición ha cometido posibles errores en cuanto a su actuación en relación al gobierno y a su interacción con actores internacionales?
  - a. De ser así, ¿cuáles?
6. ¿La oposición en Venezuela está unida o fragmentada?
  - a. ¿Por qué?
  - b. ¿Cuáles son las causas de tal configuración?
  - c. De estar fragmentada, ¿cuáles han sido los intereses de cada una de las facciones?
7. ¿Cree usted que la oposición en Venezuela ha cumplido con sus propósitos de democratización?

#### **Concrete questions**

8. ¿Qué tácticas del régimen de Maduro considera usted que ha cambiado el juego de la oposición? Y viceversa.
9. ¿Cómo cree usted que el rendimiento de la oposición en Venezuela ha influido en la opinión pública?
  - a. ¿Considera que aún hay seguidores de la MUD en Venezuela?

10. ¿Qué papel ha tenido la crisis económica en la configuración y estrategias de la MUD?
11. ¿Cuál considera usted que ha sido el rol de los actores internacionales en la crisis de Venezuela?
  - a. ¿Cómo influyeron en la actuación de la oposición?
  - b. ¿Su rol fue positivo o negativo? ¿En qué sentido?
12. ¿Por qué cree usted que, pese al apoyo internacional a la oposición en Venezuela, los esfuerzos no han dado los mejores resultados?
  - a. ¿Considera usted que los actores internacionales hubiesen podido hacer algo más?
  - b. ¿Qué medidas de la comunidad internacional considera usted que han ayudado a la oposición?
    - i. ¿Y cuáles han significado el detrimento de la oposición?
      1. ¿Por qué? ¿En qué ámbito?
13. ¿Por qué cree usted que Nicolás Maduro sigue en el poder?
14. ¿Cuáles son los planes actuales de la oposición venezolana?
15. ¿Cree que ha cambiado la situación política entre la oposición y el gobierno en comparación con el inicio del mandato de Nicolás Maduro?
  - a. ¿En qué sentido?
  - b. De haber cambios, ¿cómo han impactado estos factores en las oportunidades de la oposición?
16. ¿Considera que la oposición en Venezuela tiene esperanzas de derrocar al régimen?
17. ¿Cuál considera usted que sería la salida ideal?

### **Open questions**

- The interviewee will have a space for asking questions about my research or adding any comments.

### **Conclusion**

- Thanks for the participation of the interviewee.