

The political crisis in Venezuela

SUMMARY

In December 2015, the results of elections to the Venezuelan National Assembly saw the Democratic Unity Roundtable coalition (MUD) prevail by a wide majority over the ruling Socialist Unified Party of Venezuela (PSUV) of President Nicolás Maduro. Since then, Venezuela has faced increasing political crisis.

Initiatives by the duly elected Parliament have been systematically blocked, first by the Supreme Court of Justice (TSJ) and the National Electoral Council, and since August 2017 by the new National Constituent Assembly, which has taken over most of the Parliament's legislative powers.

Two attempts at dialogue between the Venezuelan government and the opposition, promoted by international mediators, have so far failed to break the deadlock. The economic and social situation in the country is far from improving, and the number of Venezuelan asylum-seekers abroad has risen exponentially. Nevertheless, regional elections were finally held on 15 October 2017 – with a PSUV victory in 17 of the 23 Venezuelan states, amid accusations of fraud from the opposition – and the government has promised to go ahead with the presidential elections due in 2018.

This is an update of a briefing published in October 2017.



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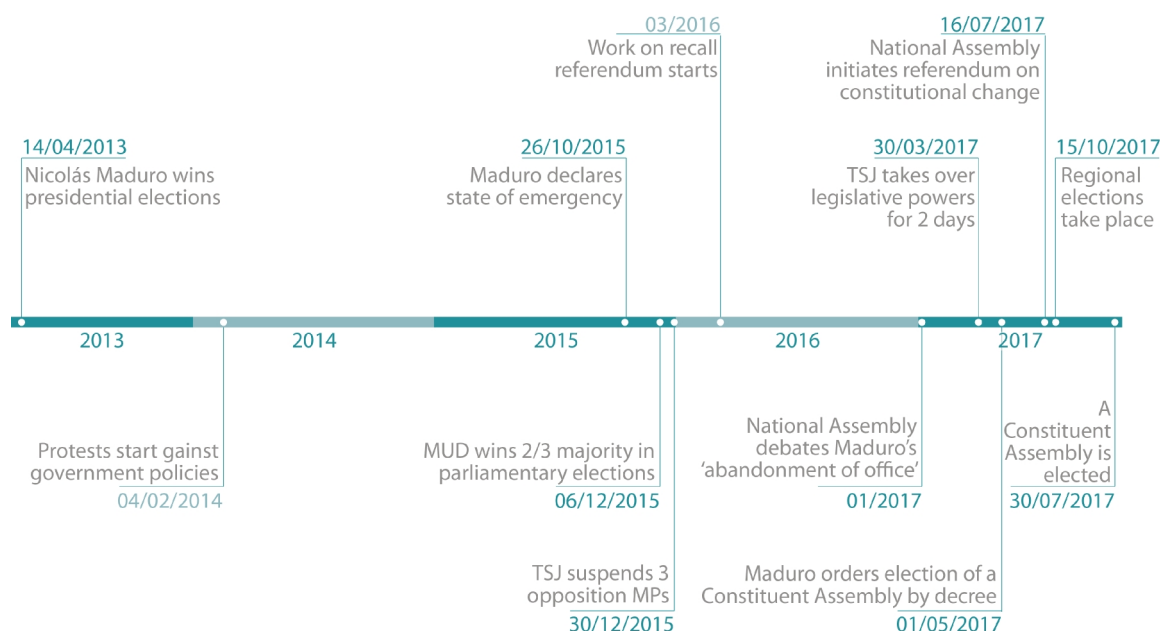
Glossary

MUD:	Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (Democratic Unity Roundtable), opposition coalition which currently holds a majority in Parliament.
PSUV:	Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (United Socialist Party of Venezuela), the governing party in Venezuela, which includes the political forces that support the 'Bolivarian Revolution' initiated by late President Hugo Chávez.
CNE:	Consejo Nacional Electoral (National Electoral Council)
TSJ:	Tribunal Superior de Justicia (Supreme Court of Justice)
ANC:	Asamblea Nacional Constituyente (National Constituent Assembly)
UNASUR:	Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (Union of South American Nations)

Background

After nearly 15 years in power, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez died on 5 March 2013. According to his wishes, his then Vice-President, Nicolás Maduro, was sworn in as 'President in charge', and went on to win the presidential elections held on 14 April 2013 by a narrow margin against the opposition MUD candidate, Henrique Capriles. In response to government measures to control the exchange rate, food shortages and rising public insecurity, opposition-led protests against the government soon began on 4 February 2014, and by the middle of that month had reached their peak, resulting in deaths, injured citizens, and looting. As a result, some opposition leaders, such as Táchira state governor, Leopoldo López, and Caracas mayor, Antonio Ledezma, were imprisoned. Demonstrations ended in May 2014, under police and political pressure from the government, but tensions between the latter and the MUD have since been on the rise, with new intermittent street protests.

Timeline of events in Venezuela since Nicolás Maduro won the presidency



Key stages of Venezuela's political crisis

The 2015 National Assembly elections

Parliament was due to be elected by the end of 2015. Following an unusual delay, on 22 June 2015, the National Electoral Council (CNE) [called](#) for elections to the [National Assembly](#) to be held on 6 December – a symbolic date, as it coincided with that of the first election of [Hugo Chávez](#) in 1998. The opposition [feared](#) the vote would not be held, as for the first time in 17 years the 'chavistas' [risked](#) losing control of the legislative, and most election surveys predicted a wide majority to the [MUD](#). On 26 October 2015, President Maduro declared a [state of emergency](#), supposedly to counter an anti-revolutionary coup by the opposition after the vote.

No election observation missions were authorised by the Venezuelan authorities, except for an electoral accompaniment programme led by [UNASUR](#) – which has a [policy](#) of respect for and cooperation with the electoral bodies of its member states without questioning election procedures. On 17 September 2015, the CNE announced the [extension](#) of the accompaniment programme by inviting a number of prominent people, including a '[special mission](#)' composed of former Spanish Prime Minister, [Jose Luis Rodríguez Zapatero](#) and former Panama President [Martín Torrijos](#), as well as Colombian Senator [Horacio Serpa](#).

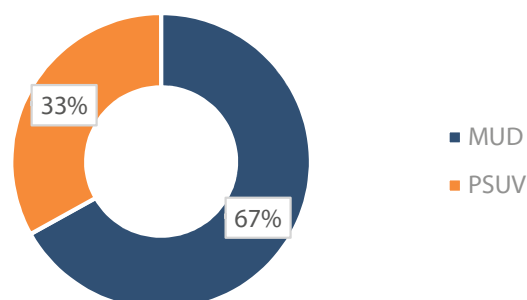
Legislative elections were finally held in Venezuela on 6 December 2015, which the MUD coalition won with [65.27%](#) of the votes, obtaining a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly, its first majority in 17 years. A two-thirds majority is needed to modify constitutional laws (*leyes orgánicas*) or vote a constitutional reform.

Nevertheless, this two-thirds advantage was lost when, on 30 December 2015, the Supreme Court of Justice (TSJ) (whose composition had been arranged in a last minute move by the outgoing Assembly with the appointment of [new judges](#)) temporarily suspended three opposition National Assembly members. Although the National Assembly defied the TSJ by proceeding to swear in the suspended members, it ultimately accepted the decision to avoid political tension. The newly elected MPs – [109 MUD and 54 PSUV](#) (35 women and 138 men) took office on 5 January 2016. The National Assembly had among its priorities an 'amnesty and reconciliation law' and a [recall referendum](#) against President Maduro.

Recall referendum initiative

In March 2016, the opposition began the process, envisaged in Venezuela's Constitution, to trigger a recall referendum ('*referendum revocatorio*') against President Maduro, and began collecting signatures on 28 April 2016. On 1 August, the [CNE](#) declared that the first phase required to convoke the referendum had been fulfilled, but asked that possible irregularities be investigated. On 9 August, [CNE](#) President Tibisay Lucena ruled out the possibility of holding the recall referendum in 2016 – within the deadline required to call for new presidential elections. She stated that the CNE's final decision on the collection of 20 % of signatures would be taken between 14 and 16 September 2016 and, if all

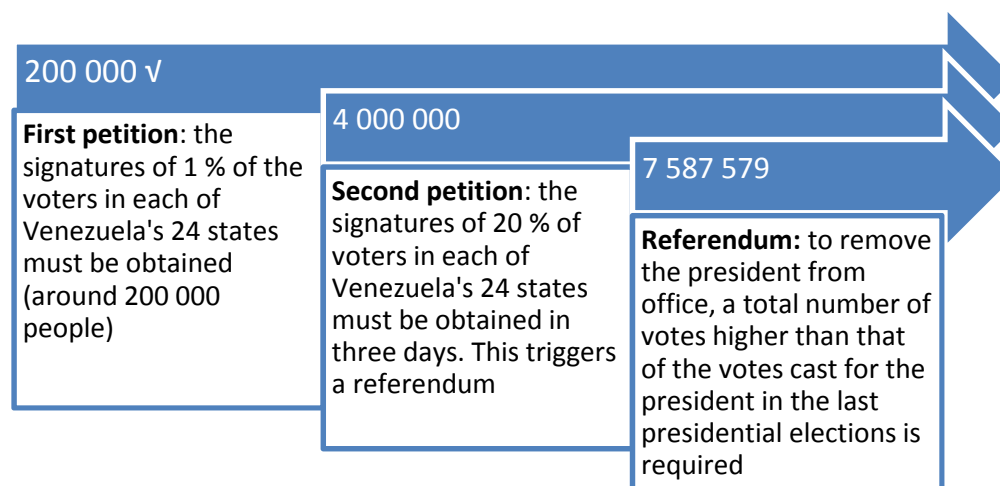
Figure 1 – Composition of Venezuelan National Assembly



Data source: [National Assembly](#), 2017.

requirements were fulfilled, the support necessary to convoke the referendum should be collected by the end of that October. On 20 October, the CNE [suspended](#) the collection of signatures in this second phase of the procedure, pointing to an alleged fraud, thereby paralysing the recall referendum process. In a final attempt to re-activate the revocation, on 9 January 2017, the National Assembly convoked a session to debate the alleged 'abandonment of office' of President Maduro, on the basis that the Assembly's majority considered Maduro to be responsible for the crisis in the country.

Figure 2 – Venezuela's recall referendum process



Source: [BBC World News](#), 21 October 2016.

Venezuelan National Assembly, systematically blocked by TSJ and CNE decisions

Since its constitution, the work of the new National Assembly has been constantly hampered by the pro-government Supreme Court of Justice (TSJ), which has issued a series of [politically motivated decisions](#) in favour of the executive, as well as the CNE, in moves such as slowing down the signature verification process for the recall referendum. The following decisions are among those most relevant adopted by the TSJ:

1. The TSJ ratified the [suspension](#) of the three MUD MPs, thereby depriving the Assembly of its initial two-thirds majority.
2. On 11 February 2016, the TSJ [declared](#) the economic emergency decree adopted by President Maduro in January to be valid, despite having previously been rejected by the Parliament.
3. On 1 March, it [limited the capacity](#) of the National Assembly to exert political control over the remaining powers (citizens',¹ judiciary and electoral), with the exception of the government, thereby limiting the Assembly's power to review the TSJ's composition.
4. On 12 April, the TSJ [declared](#) the Law on Amnesty and National Reconciliation adopted by the National Assembly on 29 March to be unconstitutional, thereby preventing the release of political prisoners.
5. The TSJ [declared](#) the reform of the Venezuela Central Bank to be unconstitutional, and [suspended](#) the articles regarding the internal debates of the National Assembly.
6. On 30 March 2017, [Venezuela's TSJ](#) took over the [legislative powers](#) of the National Assembly, after having ruled that the Assembly was 'in contempt of

court'. This [decision](#) was reversed a few days later, after being questioned by Venezuela's Attorney General, Luisa Ortega.

A new controversial National Constituent Assembly

On 1 May 2017, President Maduro [decreed](#) that a new National [Constituent Assembly](#) be elected on 30 July 2017. This move was widely criticised because, according to Article 347 of the Venezuelan Constitution, the power to convene a National Constituent Assembly is vested with the '[Venezuelan people](#)'. Experts agree that this presidential initiative should have been endorsed in a referendum, in the same way as that of the late President Hugo Chávez [in 1999](#). The official reason given was to bring peace to the country, to improve the economic model to meet people's needs, and to safeguard and expand the social programmes (*misiones*) introduced by the government. However, it was widely seen as a [move](#) to avoid holding new regional and presidential elections, which the government was expected to lose.

The existing election rules were changed in favour of the government and [the procedure](#) was rejected by the [opposition](#), who organised protests. Of the [545 ANC members](#), 364 would be territorial representatives, 173 would represent the different social sectors, and 8 the indigenous communities. The rules forbade political party-backed candidates, and a high percentage of the initial candidates (around 6 000) were therefore members, allies or sympathisers of the government party (PSUV).

On 16 July 2017, the National Assembly convoked a [referendum](#) on Maduro's constitutional reform process, which, despite having been declared illegal and unconstitutional by the government, was allowed to go ahead. The opposition stated it had obtained nearly [7.2 million votes](#), with 98 % against the constitutional change. Soon after, the Assembly also appointed [33 judges](#) to the Supreme Court, a move which was immediately invalidated by the TSJ.

The controversial elections to the Constituent Assembly were finally held on 30 July 2017, with an [official turnout](#) of 41.5 % of the electoral census and more than 8 million voters. The opposition's figures suggested a participation of less than 12 % and 2.5 million voters. Soon after the vote, a [source](#) from Smartmatic, the company in charge of counting the votes, revealed the results had been manipulated, as the number of votes registered in the system was at least 1 million less than the official number.

The new National Constituent Assembly has taken over most of the Parliament's legislative powers. In the first month after its election, it adopted the following [measures](#):

- a) Extended its mandate from six months to a maximum of two years;
- b) Dismissed Attorney General Luisa Ortega, who had opposed the ANC's creation, appointing government loyalist Tarek William Saab in her place;
- c) Created the [Commission](#) on Truth, Justice, Peace and Public Tranquillity, which is considered by civil society organisations as a mechanism for the persecution of dissent;
- d) Established a new date for the regional elections. After having been postponed from 2016 to December 2017, these were rescheduled for 18 October 2017;
- e) Took over the powers of the National Assembly to legislate on issues including the 'preservation of peace, security, sovereignty, and the socio-economic and financial system';
- f) Voted to put opposition leaders on trial for treason.

Dialogue initiatives

Attempts at dialogue between the government and the opposition, were made in 2016 and 2017, with the mediation of the Vatican and international public figures.

2016

On 3 October 2016, [dialogue](#) began between the Venezuelan government and the opposition, in the presence of a Papal envoy, Colombia's ex-president, and UNASUR Secretary General Ernesto Samper, as well as former presidents of Panama (Martín Torrijos) and the Dominican Republic (Lionel Fernández) and a former Spanish prime minister (José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero). However, the talks soon experienced a serious [crisis](#) in November, and the [Venezuelan opposition](#) walked out definitively in January 2017, following the government's suspension of the recall referendum process.

2017

On [12 September 2017](#), President Maduro accepted an invitation from President of the Dominican Republic Danilo Medina and former Spanish Prime Minister Rodríguez Zapatero, to resume dialogue with the opposition. The opposition initially rebuffed the resumption of dialogue, but sent a delegation to Santo Domingo to explore the possibilities. On 26 September, the [opposition](#) announced the [failure](#) of this second attempt, as the Venezuelan government had not fulfilled the [conditions](#) set by them. More recently, during his visit to Russia in October 2017, [President Maduro](#) announced the possibility of resuming the dialogue process, and [negotiations](#) have finally started in December 2017, with the next meeting scheduled for 15 December.

15 October regional elections

[Regional elections](#) for state governors – which had been expected to measure current support for President Maduro and the opposition – were finally held on 15 October 2017. Although the polls suggested that the MUD coalition could win over half of the 23 state governor seats and win up to 62 % of the vote, the [PSUV](#) obtained a 54 % majority (17 governors – only three less states than they held previously). The opposition, which won in five states, and were disputing another seat with the 'chavistas', has accused the government of [electoral fraud](#), as the difference between the results and poll projections exceeds 30 %.

Impact of the political crisis

Popular demonstrations and social unrest

[Street protests](#) against the government in Venezuela began in February 2014, with students contesting mounting inflation and demanding increased security against crime. The political opposition soon joined the protests, which continued intermittently during 2015 and 2016 (demanding a [recall referendum](#)), and 2017 (against the government initiative in favour of the Constituent Assembly). Numerous opposition leaders and protesters were detained and imprisoned in 2016, the most prominent being Leopoldo López – sentenced to nearly 14 years in prison – and [Daniel Ceballos](#), as well as opposition leader and Caracas mayor, Antonio Ledezma – who recently escaped from [house arrest](#) and travelled to [Spain](#). [Food riots](#) also resulted from the crisis. In the 2017 protests, [at least 113 people](#) were killed, and more than 2 000 wounded, between April and July. According to NGO sources, between 1 April and 31 October 2017, [arbitrary detentions](#) affected 5 051 individuals, of which 410 were children, and more than 1 300 persons remained in detention as of 31 July 2017. Others have fled the country, thus avoiding imprisonment, such as deposed Attorney General [Luisa Ortega](#), or many of the [judges](#) recently appointed by the National Assembly to the TSJ, who have vowed to

create a Supreme Court in exile. Luisa Ortega has recently filed a [complaint](#) against President Maduro for alleged human rights abuses at the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

Venezuelan civil society

On 21 August 2017, 57 Venezuelan [civil society organisations](#) publicly rejected the Commission of Truth, Justice, Peace and Public Tranquillity (CVJPTP) recently created by the Constituent Assembly by means of a 'Constitutional Law'. They qualified the CVJPTP as the result of an abuse of power and an act against popular sovereignty, stressing that the only institution competent to adopt laws is the National Assembly.

A worsening economic crisis

According to the latest [International Monetary Fund \(IMF\) forecast](#), Venezuelan GDP will shrink by [12 % in 2017](#), after having experienced an 18 % fall in 2016, and in 2018 the Venezuelan economy will remain in the red. The IMF also estimates that [prices](#) in Venezuela will rise by 17 700 % in two years. Unemployment would also rise from 21.2 % in 2016 to 28.2 % in 2018. According to the [Venezuela National Assembly's](#) own figures, [monthly inflation](#) in the country reached 33.8 % last August (26 % in July and 21.5 % in June 2017), and food prices rose above 50 %, thus reaching hyperinflationary levels; [accumulated inflation](#) in the first seven months of 2017 reached [249 %](#). In January, the government issued new larger denomination [banknotes](#) to counter hyperinflation.

In August 2017, [Fitch](#) lowered Venezuela's credit rating to CC, as it considered there was a bigger default risk following the recent sanctions imposed by the United States of America on the country. Venezuela's reserves have diminished by US\$1 200 million since the beginning of 2017, and are currently estimated at US\$9 800 million. During October and November 2017, Venezuela and its oil company Petr leos de Venezuela, SA (PDVSA) will have to pay out around US\$3 800 million, due to bond maturity. SP Global Ratings warned of a risk of non-payment due to the worsening economic conditions in Venezuela. Likewise, [Moody's](#) has also warned of a 'very high probability' that the Venezuelan state and PDVSA may not fulfil their debt payments. As a result of the lack of materials in the country due to the crisis, the [Venezuelan government](#) has, for instance, recently extended the validity of passports for a two-year period. On 16 November 2017, the International Swaps and Derivatives Association ([ISDA](#)) declared that Venezuela and its state oil company PDVSA had defaulted on their debt.

In an attempt to solve the crisis, Venezuelan authorities have started allowing all kinds of imports by companies, allowing them to pass the [US dollar prices](#) on to consumers at the black market exchange rate, resulting in a de-facto dollarisation, with full shelves but prices that are out of reach for most Venezuelans. On the black market, the US dollar is worth 1 685 times more than at the highest of the three official exchange rates.

A deepening social crisis

The Survey on Living Conditions in Venezuela ([Encovi 2016](#)) presented in February 2017 revealed that, in just three years, the percentage of Venezuelan households who live in poverty rose from 48 % in 2014 to [82 %](#) in 2016, and that 52 % of the population were living under extreme hardship, thus making Venezuela the 'poorest country in Latin America'. It also revealed that 9.6 million Venezuelan citizens eat two or less meals a day, with a low protein diet. The government itself has admitted this lack of food, as it recently made public its '[rabbit plan](#)' to end chronic food shortages, urging citizens to breed and eat rabbits as a cheap and accessible source of protein.

The [survey](#) also revealed that 64 % of Venezuelan citizens have to pay for their own health care – one of the ten highest private health expenditures in the world, while the per-capita government expenditure in health remains just around US\$20 since 2000, the third lowest in Latin America after Haiti and Guatemala. Of those surveyed, 63 % were uninsured, and chronic illnesses such as hypertension and diabetes have risen. All this makes Venezuela the Latin American and Caribbean country that has experienced the biggest deterioration in health and medical financial protection in the last 50 years. In September 2017, the president of the Venezuelan Pharmaceutical Industry Chamber stated that over [US\\$30 million](#) are needed to reactivate the sector and make medicines accessible to the public.

Despite the United Nations, and the governments of the USA and several Latin American countries calling on the Venezuelan government to accept [humanitarian aid](#) to ease the crisis, President Maduro has persistently rejected this offer, as he considers it could be a 'Trojan horse' for a possible foreign military intervention.

Regarding [crime](#), the Venezuelan Security Observatory, part of the Federal Interior Ministry, reported 9 927 homicides between 1 January and 13 August 2017. However, the non-governmental Venezuelan Violence Observatory counts a rise in the number of violent deaths in the country, from 27 875 in 2015 to 28 468 in 2016, and forecasts that the number of homicides for 2017 could exceed 33 000.

Another problem is the deterioration of human rights in Venezuela, a pattern recently denounced by [Amnesty International](#). One aspect is violence against journalists, reflected in the [report](#) published by Reporters without Borders (RSF), who warn that it has 'become a State policy'. According to RSF, there have been over 550 aggressions against reporters since 1 April 2017; 35 journalists were arrested for covering demonstrations; and over 50 radio and TV channels were closed arbitrarily since the beginning of 2017. According to the [National Trade Union of Press Workers](#) in Venezuela, 49 mass media outlets were closed or taken off the air (such as [RCN](#), Caracol, or CNN in Spanish) In September 2017, the [Venezuelan government](#) announced a [new law](#) to 'regulate messages' in mass media and social networks, which has been widely criticised.

Soaring migration

According to a UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) report, published on 14 June 2017, the number of Venezuelan [asylum-seekers](#) in 2017 so far was almost 50 000, up from 27 000 in the whole of 2016 and three times more than in 2015. The main countries of destination in 2017 have been the United States (18 300); where Venezuela has already surpassed China and Mexico as the [largest source](#) of asylum applications; Brazil (12 960); Peru (4 453); [Spain](#) (4 300), up from only 1 275 in 2016; and Mexico (1 044). Other countries that also received asylum applications from Venezuelan citizens in 2017 are Aruba, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Curacao, Ecuador and Trinidad and Tobago.

The UNHCR underlines that these figures represent only a fraction of the total number of Venezuelans who may be in need of international protection, as many of them do not necessarily register as asylum seekers. UN High Commissioner, [Filippo Grandi](#), recently stated that the UN is watching the current rise in the number of Venezuelan citizens that seek asylum in other American countries closely. Since the arrival of Hugo Chávez in power in 1999, more than [2 million](#) people have abandoned Venezuela.

International response

United Nations

In August 2017, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) published a harsh [report](#) on 'Human rights violations and abuses in the context of protests in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela from 1 April to 31 July 2017', pointing to the [possibility](#) of executions and forced disappearances in Venezuela and to the existence of 'a [policy](#) to repress political dissent and instil fear in the population to curb demonstrations at the cost of Venezuelans' rights and freedoms'. The [OHCHR analysis](#) indicated that, out of the 124 deaths in the context of demonstrations that were being investigated by the Attorney-General's Office until 31 July 2017, at least 46 were allegedly caused by the security forces, and 27 by the armed groups known as *colectivos*.

Organization of American States (OAS)

On 31 May 2016, [OAS](#) Secretary General, Luis Almagro, invoked the OAS [democratic clause](#) for Venezuela, at the request of the National Assembly, opening a process that could end with Venezuela's suspension, on the grounds of 'promoting the normalisation of the functioning of democratic institutions in Venezuela'. This [clause](#), envisaged in Articles 20-22 of the 2001 [Inter-American Democratic Charter](#), has been activated twice, on the occasion of the 2002 coup against President Hugo Chávez, and in 2009 with the fall of President Zelaya in Honduras. On [1 June 2016](#), the OAS Permanent Council issued a [declaration](#) on the situation in Venezuela, proposing a conciliatory alternative to the application of the Democratic Charter. On 15 June, the foreign ministers and heads of delegation of 15 OAS countries issued a [communiqué](#) supporting an inclusive and effective political dialogue and the efforts carried out by former presidents Zapatero, Fernández and Torrijos, calling for respect for the Venezuelan Constitution, condemning violence, and asking that human rights be upheld. On 23 June, the OAS [Permanent Council](#) finally met and Almagro presented his [first report](#) on Venezuela. However, [no decision](#) was adopted. A second follow-up report was presented in March 2017, and a [third report](#) on 19 July 2017. A few days later, [13 OAS countries](#) asked President Maduro to suspend the elections to the Constituent Assembly. These elections were described by [Almagro](#) as 'the biggest electoral fraud in Latin American history in percentage and millions of voters'.

On 31 August 2017, the OAS Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ([ICHR](#)) expressed its [concern](#) about further weakening of separation and independence of powers and the undermining of democratic institutions in Venezuela. In this press release, particular concern is expressed about the acts of the ANC regarding the dismissal of the Attorney General of Venezuela, Luisa Ortega Díaz, the creation by the ANC of the Commission on Truth, Justice, Peace and Public Tranquillity in a context of pre-existing conflict, and 'the competencies assigned to the ANC that could allow it to act as a "parallel power", impinging on the role of the National Assembly and its representation of the people'.

Mercosur

On 21 July 2017, [Mercosur](#) asked Venezuela to cancel the elections to the National Constituent Assembly, and on 5 August it [decided](#) to apply the democratic clause to the country and [suspended](#) Venezuela from Mercosur. Venezuela was already provisionally suspended for non-incorporation of Mercosur's rules, but [this time](#) it means that Venezuela will remain suspended from the common market until Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay unanimously agree that normal functioning of the democratic

institutions in the country has been restored. It also means a change in the position of the Uruguayan government, which until then had refused Venezuela's suspension; and the recognition by those four countries of the lack of democracy in Venezuela and their commitment to help restore it. The [implications](#) are that, if Venezuela wants to participate in Mercosur, it must restore the rule of law, guarantee the separation of powers, respect human rights, and open an electoral process.

United States of America

In a [press statement](#) issued on 16 October 2017, the US Department of State condemned the lack of free and fair gubernatorial elections in Venezuela.

On 24 August 2017, following the elections to the Constituent Assembly, the [USA](#) imposed new [financial sanctions](#) against Venezuela, which also affect the state oil company PDVSA. It forbids, among other things, [new debt](#) with a maturity of more than 90 days of PDVSA, and with a maturity of more than 30 days, or new equity, of the Government of Venezuela; bonds issued by the Venezuelan government, dividend payments or other distribution of profits. Earlier that month, the USA had already imposed [sanctions](#) on 13 senior Venezuelan [officials](#), including the head of the CNE, [eight individuals](#) involved in 'Venezuela's illegitimate Constituent Assembly', and on [31 July 2017](#), on [President Maduro](#) himself.

In September 2017, US President Donald Trump announced that Venezuela would be added to the list of countries with [travel restrictions](#) to the USA, with effect from 18 October 2017. In practice, this restriction will only apply to a group of Venezuelan government officials and their families.

Other countries and organisations

Inter-Parliamentary Union

On 1 September 2017, the [Inter-Parliamentary Union](#) (IPU) expressed its 'deep concern' with the decree adopted by the ANC to begin, together with the competent state bodies, a trial against opposition leaders for treason against the country. It condemned the continuous attempts to deprive the National Assembly of its powers and to harass its leaders and members, calling on the Venezuelan authorities to 'fully respect the integrity of the freely elected parliament' and to respect the 'fundamental right of National Assembly MP's to fulfil their mandates freely and in safety without threats'.

The Lima Group

On [18 August 2017](#), a group of [12 American countries](#)² – known as the Lima Group after a [declaration](#) signed earlier that month in the Peruvian capital condemned the rupture of the democratic order in Venezuela – denounced Venezuela's Constituent Assembly for [usurping](#) 'the legislative authority and powers' of the National Assembly, as they consider it 'ratifies the rupture of the democratic and constitutional order in Venezuela'. They also reiterated their non-recognition of the ANC and its actions and ratified their 'full support for the National Assembly'. The group also recently issued a [statement](#) on regional elections in Venezuela, where they urged the Venezuelan Government and the CNE to act within their mandate, fully respecting the Constitution and the electoral law in the 15 October 2017 polls.

Other countries in the region

[Canada](#) has shown concern for Venezuela's political and economic crisis, reaffirming its commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights, and has recently imposed targeted [sanctions](#) against 40 Venezuelan officials and individuals of the Maduro regime.

Mexico has also shown its concern and has announced [sanctions](#) against 13 Venezuelan officials and former officials.

European Union reactions

On 13 November 2017, the Foreign Affairs Council adopted [conclusions](#) on Venezuela, agreeing on targeted sanctions – 'an embargo of arms and on related material that might be used for internal repression' and a 'legal framework for a travel ban and assets freeze'. The Council had already adopted [conclusions](#) on Venezuela on 18 July 2017, fully supporting the dialogue efforts between the government and the parliamentary majority, and stating the EU's readiness to support these efforts.

In a 2 August 2017 [declaration](#), EU High Representative/Vice-President, Federica Mogherini, had stated that the European Union and its Member States 'deeply regretted the decision of the Venezuelan authorities to go ahead with the election of a Constituent Assembly', and that they could not recognise it, as they had 'concerns over its effective representativeness and legitimacy'. She called on the Maduro government to suspend its installation and to explicitly recognise the attributions of 'all institutions foreseen by the Constitution'. She also asked for 'the release of all jailed political opponents' as confidence-building measure and appealed to all responsible authorities to negotiate a way forward.

In a previous [declaration](#) of 26 July 2017, Mogherini had already called for an end to violence, respect for the National Assembly as the legitimate legislative body, and for the independence of the Attorney General to be preserved; the HR/VP also called for urgent [confidence-building measures](#) before the elections to the Constituent Assembly, aimed at de-escalating tensions and facilitating a peaceful negotiated solution.

The European Parliament

In its [resolution of 13 September 2017](#) on EU political relations with Latin America, Parliament expressed its concern at the deteriorating situation in Venezuela; called on the Venezuelan government to restore full constitutional authority to the National Assembly and to ensure the release of all political prisoners; strongly condemned the elections to a Constituent Assembly, recalling that the European Parliament does not recognise those elections or any actions and decisions taken by that Assembly; expressed its grave concerns about the illegal prosecution and repression of National Assembly members; rejected the dismissal of the Prosecutor General Luisa Ortega Díaz, and her political persecution; and called on the VP/HR and the European Council to consider freezing the assets of, and placing restrictions on access to EU territory for, all those involved in the serious violations of human rights in Venezuela.

The European Parliament had already adopted previous specific resolutions on the situation in Venezuela on [27 April 2017](#), [8 June 2016](#), and [12 March 2015](#). The EP has also dealt with this subject in the framework of the Euro-Latin American Parliamentary Assembly ([EuroLat](#)).

In July 2017, following a phone call with opposition leader Leopoldo López on the election of the national constituent assembly in Venezuela, [EP President, Antonio Tajani](#) stated that the European Parliament would not recognise this illegitimate election, as it was not the solution to Venezuela's serious problems of political confrontation and humanitarian crisis; and promised full support for the National Assembly as the representatives of the Venezuelan people.

The [Democratic Opposition](#) in Venezuela (National Assembly and all political prisoners) is the laureate of the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought 2017.

Outlook

The [regional elections](#) on 15 October 2017 seemed to give some hope for the future, but the contested results in favour of the government seem to have reinforced its position. It remains to be seen which constitutional changes are effectively implemented by the ANC in the near future, and whether presidential elections are finally held in 2018, as promised by President Maduro, and under what conditions, as the Constitution may have been already changed by that time. The economic and social crisis experienced by the country may also finally force the government to find a negotiated solution, if it does not improve considerably soon.

International actors, including the European Union and regional organisations, may have an important role to play in finding the peaceful solution to the crisis that most Venezuelan citizens want.

Main references

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Felter, C., and Renwick, D., [Venezuela in Crisis](#), Council on Foreign Relations, 1 August 2017.

Endnotes

¹ The [citizens' power](#) is a new independent public power established in the 1999 Venezuelan Constitution as a pillar of 'participatory democracy'. It is exercised by the 'Moral Republican Council', integrated by the Ombudsman, the General Prosecutor of the Republic and the Comptroller General.

² Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay and Peru.

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