



Venezuela elections

Given all the drama preceding and following the recent elections in the United States, Venezuela's elections for the National Assembly yesterday were definitely low key. In other elections, candidates' names are typically plastered everywhere in posters and leaflets, on walls and bridges, but I didn't see a single campaign sign anywhere. That's not to say that there weren't any candidates. For the 277 seats in the National Assembly, there was a slate of 14,400 candidates, but their names don't appear on the ballot. In this election, people voted for the party, not the individual candidate.

You might recall that, back in the early months of 2019, Venezuela was headline news every night in the United States. The Venezuelan National Assembly, in which the majority of members were from opposition parties, considered the 2018 presidential election of Nicolas Maduro illegitimate and refused to recognize his inauguration to a second term on January 10, 2019. With the assembly's backing, Juan Guaidó, president of the assembly, declared himself interim president of Venezuela until free elections could be held. He quickly received formal recognition from the United States and almost sixty other countries as well as the Venezuelan Conference of Bishops. Maduro retained backing from Russia, China, South Africa, Iran, Syria, Cuba and Turkey. The struggle that followed was one worthy of chess grandmasters, each side concocting elaborate



Nicolas Maduro Juan Guaidó

strategies to defeat their opponent and emerge victorious in the end. Guaidó tried to convince Russia and China that it would pay off for them to back him in the long run, but without success. He tried to entice military leaders to switch their allegiance with an offer of amnesty and retention of bank accounts and investments in the United States and allied countries. Although a few thousand military personnel did come to his side, Maduro was able to hold onto those with most power, offering sufficient incentives to remain true to him.

Guaidó organized an international relief effort to bring food and medicine to needy Venezuelans, but the convoys were effectively stopped at Venezuela's borders with Colombia and Brazil. Unable to generate sufficient traction, the movement to remove Maduro from office floundered and lost its place in the headlines. From February of 2019 when polls indicated that over 80% of Venezuelans recognized Guaidó as president and only 4% for Maduro, by mid-2020 Guaidó's numbers had dropped to 3% while over 70% recognized Maduro as president despite his approval rating being extremely low.

Beginning with Cesar Chavez' rise to power in 1999 and into the Maduro presidency, the National Assembly was dominated by Chavez-Maduro supporters. The 2015 elections turned the tables with opposition parties winning 112 of 167 seats. To weaken the assembly's power, the Maduro government established a Constituent Assembly made up of regime supporters to which he entrusted some authority as a parallel legislature. This past June the Maduro-controlled Supreme Court unilaterally named the electoral board to organize and oversee yesterday's elections, a task which constitutionally belongs to the assembly. To further weaken the opposition, Maduro increased the number of assembly deputies to 277 for yesterday's elections. Citing irregularities, complaints during the planning of the process, and arguing that it was likely the elections would be fraudulent, major opposition parties called for a boycott to demand better electoral conditions. Smartmatic, the company previously employed for the majority of elections here, ceased operations in Venezuela in 2018, stating that their machines could no longer guarantee the validity of election results here. The nations which have recognized Venezuela's opposition movement joined in labeling the appointment of the electoral board as illegal and demanding transparent, free and fair elections.

Unlike the long drawn-out process verifying the winners in the United States, the results of yesterday's election will probably be announced before the week is over, perhaps the first time those not voting will have heard the winners' names. Some pundits opined that the winners could just as easily have been announced prior to the election. Guaidó, still with the backing of the US and allies, has been back in the news lately, but the day he will be back as president of the National Assembly much less interim president of Venezuela no one knows.

Points to ponder

What do you think are the challenges any country faces in making their election process fair and accurate?

The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has staffed and supported parishes in the diocese of Ciudad Guayana in Venezuela since 1970. These "Did you know?" papers are designed to give you a better understanding of life in Venezuela and to strengthen connections between the parishes of the Archdiocese and their archdiocesan mission during our 50th anniversary year. Please direct any comments or suggestions for future papers to Fr. Denny Dempsey at ddempsey@churchofst dominic.org or 651-368-7324.