



## PRE-ELECTION REPORT

# VENEZUELA 2024 ELECTIONS: COMPETING UNDER AUTOCRATIC CONDITIONS

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In Transparencia Electoral  
✉ info@transparenciaelectoral.org  
f Transparencia Electoral en América Latina  
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**Electoral Transparency is a civil association aimed at promoting democratic values and transparent, free, and fair elections.**



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**Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation (VOC) is a nonprofit educational, research, and human rights organization dedicated to commemorating the more than 100 million victims of communism worldwide and fighting for the freedom of those still living under totalitarian regimes.**

This report is based on the three biweekly reports written by Jesús Castellanos, Transparencia Electoral consultant, and available at [www.transparenciaelectoral.org](http://www.transparenciaelectoral.org), and the "Report on the process of registration or updating of data in the electoral register abroad" by Mi Voto Cuenta.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **Autocratic Overtures:** The elections in Venezuela, scheduled for July 28, 2024, are being organized in an increasingly autocratic environment, with a government that has centralized power, dismantled the rule of law, and systematically violated human rights.
- **Polarized Competition:** The race is polarized between Nicolás Maduro, the current president and leader of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), and Edmundo González, candidate of the opposition Democratic Unity Platform.
- **Humanitarian Crisis:** Venezuela's long-standing economic crisis has in recent years shifted to a distressingly humanitarian one. Over 8.3 million individuals have fled the nation, seeking refuge in neighboring countries and beyond due to severe shortages of basic necessities such as food, medicine, and clean water. The mass exodus has created a significant burden on regional stability, with host countries struggling to provide adequate support and resources for the influx of Venezuelan migrants. Additionally, the collapse of the healthcare system, rampant inflation, and pervasive violence have exacerbated the suffering of those who remain.
- **Electoral Manipulation:** The National Electoral Council (CNE) is merely subordinate to the government and has obstructed the registration and updating of data for Venezuelans abroad (it is estimated that about 5 million are of voting age, 25% of the electoral roll), as well as the registration of opposition candidates.
- **History of Fraud and Rejection of Results:** The Venezuelan regime has a track record of proven election fraud and dismissal of legitimate results. In 2015, the opposition's victory in the National Assembly was not recognized, and in 2017, two blatant frauds were recorded. In 2021, the opposition candidate who won in the state of Barinas was disqualified after winning.
- **Criminalization of the Opposition:** The opposition campaign faces persecution and restrictions, not only with the disqualification of María Corina Machado and the blocking of alternative candidate registrations but also with detentions of collaborators of the Democratic Unity Platform and persecution of people interacting with opposition leaders.
- **Biased "Electoral Observation":** International electoral observation is dominated by organizations aligned with the government. The European Union Election Observation Mission has been excluded, and the Carter Center and the UN Panel of Experts have yet to confirm their participation, thereby giving the ruling party a significant advantage in shaping the narrative and outcome of the election.

- **Uncertainty about Transition:** There is concern about how the democratic transition of power will be managed if the government loses the election, given the six-month period between the election and the inauguration of the new president. There is room for potential instability and interference, including efforts to undermine the election results, entrench existing power structures, or create obstacles for the incoming administration.

## INTRODUCTION

According to the latest update from the National Electoral Council (CNE), on July 28, 2024, about 21.5 million Venezuelan citizens will be eligible to elect the president for the 2025-2031 term. Although there are ten registered candidates vying for the Palacio de Miraflores, the competition is in practice dominated between President Nicolás Maduro of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) - in power since Hugo Chávez's death in 2013 - and Edmundo González, candidate of the opposition Democratic Unity Platform. The election's outcome will not only have a profound impact on the Latin American country, but its effects will permeate throughout the entirety of the Hispanic world.

The Venezuelan elections are taking place under clearly autocratic and un-democratic conditions. Venezuela is mired in a deep crisis encompassing virtually all aspects of national life: institutional, economic, and migratory. Its political deterioration is evidenced by a slow transition to authoritarianism since Hugo Chávez's election in 1998 (deepened after his death and succession by Maduro), which involves the increasing accumulation of power in the hands of the Executive, intentional dismantling of the rule of law, and systematic human rights violations. This political instability is compounded by an on-going humanitarian crisis, which has been defined by high levels of extreme poverty, economic inflation, and a complete institutional breakdown of the provision of basic services such as health, education, and housing. As a result, one of the world's largest migration crises has occurred, with estimates exceeding 8.3 million Venezuelans living abroad today.

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Since the latter half of the 2010s, disputes over the independence and credibility of the nation's electoral power have intensified. This has led to strategic divisions in the Venezuelan opposition between sectors favoring electoral participation and political negotiation with the government and sectors defending protest measures and institutional boycotts. This situation has been exasperated by some of the most questioned electoral processes in the country's democratic history, in which even nearly undisputable results were disregarded (2015) and blatant frauds were staged (2017). With the illegal disqualification of opposition leaders and the judicial intervention in several parties to replace their leadership with factions willing to negotiate with the government, the regime has sought to ensure a compliant and harmless political ecosystem.

However, despite their best efforts, recent events have shown the clear fragility of the regime's political situation. The portrayed institutional dominance of the Chavismo ideology contrasts with a reality that sees the movement losing its grip on power. Besides acknowledging fewer votes in each election since 2015 (whether the figures are credible or not), there was very poor turnout in the December 2023 Consultative Referendum on the Guayana Esequiba issue, as well as the April 21, 2024, National Popular Consultation. Despite Venezuela having an automated voting, counting, and tabulation system, disaggregated results of the processes have not been reported.

The upcoming presidential election has been framed by three major events: the selection of an opposition candidate in the 2023 primaries, the unconstitutional dissolution and appointment of a new National Electoral Council (CNE) board, and the signing of an agreement in Barbados between the Maduro government and the Venezuelan democratic opposition.

The progressive reorganization of opposition forces and unification of most of their factions in the Democratic Unity Platform (with later admission of other forces) facilitated the primary elections in late 2023. Despite adverse conditions, María Corina Machado, leader of the Vente Venezuela party, won with about 92% of the votes in an election with more than 2 million Venezuelans participating.

Alongside the time of the primary elections, the CNE board appointed in 2021 was dismantled. The main rectors, linked to the regime, resigned, and the National Assembly elected in 2020 appointed a new board. This move was not without controversy, mainly due to the clear partisan affiliation of most of the appointees, with a staunchly pro-government composition.

The "Partial Agreement on the Promotion of Political Rights and Electoral Guarantees," known as one of the Barbados Agreements, signed between the Maduro government and the opposition with Norway's mediation and the participation of the United States, aimed to improve electoral conditions for the 2024 presidential election, including updating the electoral registry and international observation, thereby attempting to create a more transparent and fair electoral process. Despite these talks and agreements, the Venezuelan regime has already broken many of its stipulations, including continued harassment and disqualification of opposition candidates, manipulation of the electoral registry, and restrictions on independent media, casting doubt on the regime's commitment to a genuinely democratic process.

María Corina Machado, a prominent opposition leader and former member of the National Assembly, is under an unconstitutional administrative disqualification, preventing her from registering her candidacy and leading her to support other candidates. The attempt to register her first choice, academic Corina Yoris, failed due to an unclear blockade by the CNE on her nomination (despite Yoris having no legal impediment). Her next choice, retired diplomat Edmundo González, managed to be registered (initially as a provisional candidate, later definitive) and was supported by other parties after intense international pressure on the Maduro regime. This series of events highlights the ongoing challenges and maneuvering within the opposition, setting the stage for a highly contentious and critical presidential election.

Although according to the schedule the electoral campaign officially starts on July 4, the CNE has not set limitations to prevent pre-campaigning. Both the regime and the opposition have rapidly mobilized since formalizing the candidacies, spreading electoral propaganda on social media and other platforms. The polarization between Nicolás Maduro and Edmundo González, along with official persecution and

intimidation, and the proliferation of fake news, are integral elements of this anticipated 2024 campaign.

The CNE has continued to show great opacity in executing its activities, highlighting misinformation in the publication of the preliminary electoral registry and details on voting centers and polling stations. The audit of the electoral registry has been extended without further official information, and the comprehensive audit of the automated voting system was revealed days after it was conducted. The audit of the voting machine software, crucial in each election, was conducted in less time than stipulated, and the special registration and updating period of the electoral registry abroad was also shortened without justification. These breaches imply clear violations of the current regulatory framework. Similarly, the opacity exposed serious internal divergences when one of the CNE rectors, Juan Carlos Delpino (appointed as a representative of opposition forces), denounced unilateral attitudes by Elvis Amoroso's board.

Furthermore, national electoral observation has not yet been formally accredited. The groups that have been allowed, such as CEELA and OPEIR, are both clearly biased in favor of the regime, as evidenced by their history of endorsing electoral processes that lacked transparency and fairness. CEELA, composed of former electoral officials from Latin American countries with similar political leanings, has consistently validated questionable elections. OPEIR, established with close ties to the current government, has also been known to overlook irregularities and endorse the regime's electoral outcomes, raising significant concerns about the impartiality of the electoral observation process. Additionally, the regime has persecuted and intimidated the opposition, closing hotels where opposition leaders were staying and replicating María Corina Machado's visit agenda, hindering opposition mobilizations. At the time of writing this report, María Corina Machado has reported that 37 people have been detained for their participation in the opposition campaign. The international community is monitoring this electoral process, and governments such as those of the United States, Colombia, and Brazil have insisted on the need for free and fair elections. The European Union, aiming for an Electoral Observation Mission to be accredited, relaxed sanctions against certain high officials, including the CNE chairman, generating strong reactions from the regime sector and the revocation of the invitation to observe the elections.

## **ELECTORAL REGISTRY**

One of the main criticisms of the electoral process in Venezuela is the massive number of irregularities found during the registration and data updating process for voters registered abroad. It is estimated that more than eight million Venezuelans have fled the country due to the ongoing crisis. Despite this, many of these citizens remain registered to vote in their regions of origin. The irregularities include issues such as



outdated voter information, duplicate registrations, and the exclusion of eligible voters from the rolls.

Despite the current electoral law stipulating that voter registration is continuous, it has been subjected to arbitrary deadlines, which are not even respected in practice. Similarly, the procedure has been plagued with irregularities and obstacles that have hindered participation in the presidential elections. The lack of consulate openings on non-working days, failure to meet established deadlines, demands for documents not required by law, discrimination and misinformation towards Venezuelans abroad, as well as limitations in registration capacity, are all notable issues.

The CNE set March 18 as the date for opening the registration process in consulates, with a deadline of April 16, thereby violating the supposed continuous nature of the electoral procedure. However, even this deadline was not respected, as many consulates did not open until April 2. This left only a few days for registration, considering non-working days and the Easter holidays during which consulates were closed. As a result, many eligible voters were unable to register, leaving hundreds of thousands, or even millions, disenfranchised.

Beyond the limited deadlines, it was reported that consular offices managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not timely inform Venezuelans abroad about the promotion of registration and data updating with the CNE, as well as some of the requirements (arbitrary requirements not part of the legal framework were created). This misinformation and negligence by consular authorities, coupled with the already short deadlines, severely hindered the ability of Venezuelans abroad to register or update their data.

Another issue arose with the impossibility of voting for Venezuelan citizens located in countries with which Venezuela has suspended diplomatic relations, particularly the United States and Canada (where there are respectively 37,000 and 5,000 already registered voters), as voting can only be done at designated consulates. These voters will not be able to cast their ballots since they remain registered at non-functional consulates.

Ultimately, the outcome is evident in the numbers. Of an estimated diaspora of more than eight million people, only 3,506 Venezuelan citizens were able to register or properly update their data, with particularly discouraging figures in countries like Colombia or Chile. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (which has expressed concern about this situation, demanding a channel to correct it) estimates that potentially five million emigrant Venezuelans have the right to vote. From the outset, the process appears compromised by this violation of the rights of all these voters.

## ELECTORAL REGISTRY IN NUMBERS

A report presented by *Mi Voto Cuenta* provides a comparison of Venezuelans residing in different countries worldwide regarding the number of Venezuelans that the CNE will allow to participate in the process on July 28<sup>th</sup>.

Country	Venezuelan population	With voting age (67%)	Inscribed and updated in the 2024 registry
Colombia	2.880.000	1.929.600	273
Peru	1.540.000	1.031.800	66
Ecuador	474.900	318.183	387
Chile	444.400	297.748	607
España	438.300	293.661	1829
Argentina	217.700	145.859	440
Dominicana Rep.	124.100	83.147	18
México	113.100	75.777	768
Panamá	58.000	38.994	450
Uruguay	32.900	22.043	37

Source: Mi Voto Cuenta

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Regarding the duration of the registration, according to the *Mi Voto Cuenta* report, the average time a consulate was open was 11.5 days, just slightly more than half the time allotted for registration. The consulate that was open the longest was in Paris (the only one that opened during Easter), reporting only fifteen days. The only consulate known to have opened on Saturdays and Sundays was in Berlin. The consulate that was open the shortest time was in San José, Costa Rica, with only six days.

## INSCRIPTED CANDIDATES

The registration of presidential candidates with the CNE took place from March 21 to 25, 2024. Previously, María Corina Machado filed a protection appeal against her disqualification with the Supreme Court (which was rejected). Exhausting all avenues to have her candidacy authorized by the CNE and seeking to prevent the Unitary Platform from being excluded from the race, Machado announced her support for the candidacy of academic Corina Yoris, using the electoral card of the Democratic Unity Roundtable.

However, during the nomination process, the Unitary Platform was unable to pass the first phase established by the CNE's automated system, as it did not accept the credentials from those authorized to nominate, while the other authorized political organizations did so without problems. The Platform requested an extension on March 24, without success. Almost at midnight on the deadline, the leader of the opposition party Un Nuevo Tiempo, Manuel Rosales, managed to register his candidacy under unclear circumstances.

Throughout the following day, the governments of Colombia and Brazil, led by Presidents Gustavo Petro and Luís Inácio Lula da Silva, generally considered allies of the Maduro regime, surprisingly issued criticisms of the unexplained blockage of Yoris's candidacy, which was seen as unusual pressure on the regime to allow a Unitary Platform candidate to compete. Finally, the CNE granted a twelve-hour extension on the 26th, during which the Unitary Platform was able to register diplomat Edmundo González Urrutia. Initially, González agreed to take the position as a "placeholder" candidate to safeguard the Democratic Unity Roundtable's card until the final candidate was chosen before the replacement deadline on April 23. However, during that period, regime figures suggested that the withdrawal could only be formalized in favor of an already registered candidate.

In this context, the Unitary Platform confirmed González as the coalition's definitive presidential candidate, with the support of María Corina Machado and the other alliance parties. Manuel Rosales announced that he was withdrawing his candidacy in favor of González on April 19, gaining the support of his party (UNT) and the Movimiento por Venezuela party (which also supported Rosales).

Once again, attempts to sabotage the process of transferring the support from UNT and MPV cards from Rosales to González were reported, with allegations that the CNE tried to slow the process beyond the deadlines. It was not until April 23, the last day for registration, that the CNE accepted Rosales's withdrawal and González's nomination through the UNT and MPV cards.

## AUDITS OF THE CNE ADMINISTRATION

The organization of the electoral process has been mired by successive audits of its various components. However, as with the rest of its administration, the CNE has demonstrated significant lack of transparency in its communication regarding the execution of its activities. This includes a lack of clear and timely information about the electoral registry and the audits themselves. Notably, the failure to adhere to established schedules (both for the Electoral Registry and other organizational points) has shortened the timelines for many activities, hindering their timely and proper execution.

Further aggravating the situation, the audit of the Electoral Registry has suffered from a significant lack of official information about the details of the preliminary registry, including new voters and updates both inside and outside the country. This has necessitated the use of secondary sources to obtain data. Although the audit process for the electoral registry was extended by several days beyond the original schedule, the lack of official details has been a persistent and worrying issue.

While some audits of the automated voting system were carried out, they encountered multiple problems. For example, The audit of the voting machine software, a critical review in each Venezuelan election, saw its stipulated period reduced from five to four days without any justification. Additionally, the minutes from the comprehensive audit of the automated system were only made available days after the audit was conducted.

Independent observation participation has also been very limited. The audit minutes record the presence of witnesses from political parties and organizations such as the Council of Electoral Experts of Latin America (CEELA) and the Office of Strategic Planning for Regional Integration (OPEIR), both of which are subordinate to the government and therefore not reliable as benchmarks. Similarly, although the presence of national electoral observation organizations is theoretically allowed, only a few organizations (such as the Electoral Observation Network of the Assembly of Education) have attended the audits online. They have not been given an official registry to safeguard their right to do so.

In this way, the audits essential for the transparency and credibility of the election have been marked by a lack of information, unjustified reductions in time frames, and limited participation by independent observers. These factors, along with the actions of the CNE and the political context, raise concerns about the integrity of the electoral process.

## ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN

As previously mentioned, the campaign is supposed to begin on July 4. However, the CNE has done nothing to stop an extensive and subversive pre-campaign. The campaign has also been marred by a war of polls, fake news, assaults, and political violence. Numerous instances of state arbitrariness against the opposition's campaign activities have been reported, further undermining the fairness and integrity of the electoral process.

The Democratic Unity Platform's campaign continues to be led by María Corina Machado, who is currently undertaking an extensive tour across Venezuelan territory and organizing massive rallies to ask for votes for Edmundo González. Until now, González's participation in the campaign has been limited to Caracas and a few sporadic visits to other cities, such as his hometown, La Victoria, where he held an equally well-attended launch event with Machado.

The ruling party's campaign, directed by Diosdado Cabello, has also seen very limited participation from its own candidate, President Nicolás Maduro, who is regarded by some as a "strongman" within the regime. Cabello's strategy has involved closely mirroring the opposition's campaign events. Supporters of the regime and the Chavismo movement have trailed María Corina Machado on her tour, holding campaign events in the same locations where her platform has done so, sometimes even on the same day and occasionally at the same time in another part of the city.

Meanwhile, reprisals have been reported against businesses or individuals who participated in the campaign in some way. Beyond aggressive persecution against political activists, state entities have sought to hinder the opposition by closing hotels and imposing fines on establishments that hosted leaders of the Democratic Unity Platform. In more blatant cases, businesses that simply sold food to leaders during their visits to certain towns have been subject to surprise inspections by tax or health authorities, resulting in fines or closures.

Censorship and control of information have long been significant components of the political landscape in Venezuela since the rise of Chavismo to power. However, these tactics have intensified in recent months. The government has increasingly tightened its grip on media outlets, restricted access to independent news sources, and employed sophisticated measures to monitor and suppress dissenting voices. Several independent media outlets have been closed or blocked by the government under various legal and administrative pretexts. Additionally, there have been reports of website blockages and internet service interruptions during politically sensitive moments.

The last few months have also seen a repressive escalation resulting in the arrest of dozens of militants and officials from opposition parties. As recently as June 17, the illegal detention of up to 37 collaborators from the Vente party (led by María Corina Machado) and other sectors of the Platform was reported.



The Hotel El Recreo in La Victoria, Aragua State (hometown of candidate Edmundo González), was closed when González and María Corina Machado were going to stay there.

## ELECTORAL OBSERVATION

Electoral observation for the July 28 process faces almost insurmountable challenges due to the restrictions and limitations imposed on both national and international observers. Although the Barbados Agreement provided for extensive observation of the process, this provision has not been respected in practice and has been extensively sabotaged by electoral authorities.

Among the international groups authorized to oversee the electoral process are the Council of Electoral Experts of Latin America (CEELA) and the Office of Strategic Planning for Regional Integration (OPEIR). As clarified before, both organizations respond to the interests of the ruling party, and are being used as a way to legitimize the electoral process. The president of OPEIR, Carlos Aníbal López, was closely linked to Argentina's ruling Justicialist Party between 2003 and 2015 and between 2019 and 2023 (generally considered allies of Chavismo). Nicanor Moscoso, who heads CEELA, was president of the Electoral Tribunal of Ecuador. However, this group has already participated in electoral observation in elections in Venezuela, issuing reports that legitimized processes that other organizations totally questioned, such as the controversial 2017 Constituent Assembly elections, in which the company that provided the electoral technology reported that the results had swollen by at least a million votes.

On the other hand, there are still pending commitments to authorize and accredit the participation of the Carter Center and a panel of United Nations experts.

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One of the most significant events was the decision of the CNE to withdraw the invitation for the European Union to send an electoral observation mission. The EU had decided to partially relax the sanctions on four people linked to the CNE, including the president of the entity, Elvis Amoroso. The measure was intended to be a gesture of goodwill to improve relations with the electoral authority for the process. However, the decision had a very negative reaction from the regime, which saw it as an attempt at “blackmail,” and was thus denounced by Amoroso.

The CNE argued that the presence of the EU was not necessary and that other international organizations, such as CEELA and OPEIR, could play the role of electoral support.

For their part, national organizations face significant restrictions in carrying out their work, including difficulties in obtaining accreditation and full access to audits and other key processes. The Education Assembly Electoral Observation Network is allowed to attend audits online, but has not been given full accreditation to observe.

Although the Unitary Platform has condemned the withdrawal of the invitation to the EU and the lack of accreditation of national and international observers, it maintains that its electoral surveillance strategy through self-organized commands of civil society (the so-called “comanditos”) will serve to defend the transparency of the result.

**\*After publishing the Spanish version of this report, it was informed that the Carter Center would send an Electoral Observation Mission that would have a limited scope (it would not participate in the audits but would evaluate the process against international electoral integrity standards). The Carter Center report will be confidential.**

**Later, it was also reported that a panel of four United Nations experts will observe the elections and prepare a confidential report.**



## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the 2024 presidential elections in Venezuela will be held in a context defined by political strong-arming and fraudulent practices by the authoritative regimes' disparate attempts to remain in power.

Blatantly, the political right to elect and be elected in Venezuela has been violated. Millions of Venezuelans have been unable to register or update their data in the electoral registry, and María Corina Machado, the candidate elected in the 2023 primaries, faces an illegal disqualification preventing her from running.

Despite these profound challenges, the opposition sectors have resolved many of their differences and have organized themselves on the electoral route under the leadership of María Corina Machado and the candidacy of Edmundo González, showing signs of flexibility and strategic behavior to confront an authoritarian regime.

The ruling party makes indiscriminate use of State resources for the campaign, whether with handouts, use of the public media system, or institutions to intimidate and extort citizens who support the opposition. Even so, credible opinion studies indicate that Edmundo González has a voting intention between 20 and 30 percentage points above Nicolás Maduro.

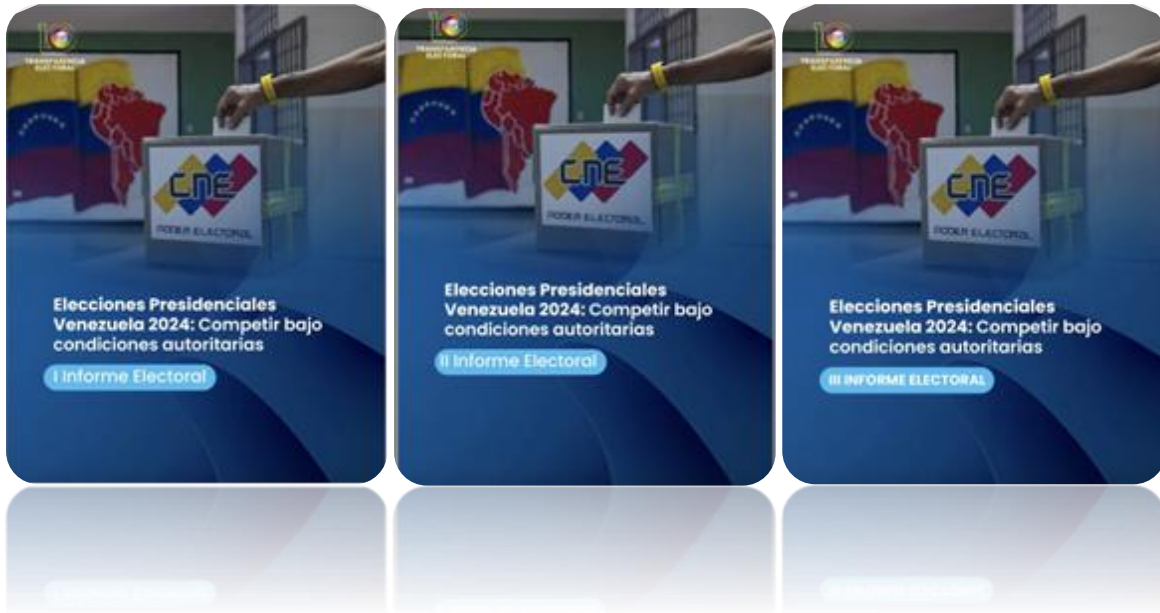
The electoral administration is under the control of the ruling party and is not autonomous. He receives orders that are applied by the head of the CNE, Elvis Amoroso. The electoral schedule has not been respected, although opposition representatives in the audits have assured that the automated voting system guarantees the secrecy of the vote.

The international community has accompanied this process with the objective of promoting competitive conditions. However, the ruling party has not listened even to its allies, which raises fears that they will try to ignore the candidacy of the Unitary Platform, before or after the election.

It should also be noted that between the election on July 28 and the inauguration of the winner there is a period of 6 months. It is unknown how this period will go through in the event of a government defeat.

The outcome of these elections will not only determine the immediate political future of Venezuela, but will also have significant implications for regional stability and international relations in Latin America.

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