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## Maduro re-elected president. Election results are clear, but doubts remain regarding transparency.

In the end, Nicolás Maduro succeeded. He won a manifestly 'tainted' election, "rigged" in many ways, but not enough to be considered a blatant fraud, a farce, as had been the case in more recent elections. Chavez's autocratic successor, now that ties with the United States have somewhat thawed, needed a "gimmick" to present his "pro-dialogue" credentials in international fora. **Opposition rejects the results.** There was a serious risk that the 'stunt' would spiral out of control. But in the end, with 80 per cent of the ballots counted, at the end of an election day marked by high turnout, Maduro declared himself the winner with 51 per cent of the vote, versus 44% won by opposition leader Edmundo González Urrutia. These are the official figures, but it has to be said that very few people believe them to be true. Certainly not the opposition, according to María Corina Machado, who would have won if not prevented from standing. "Venezuela has elected a new president, Edmundo González Urrutia. We have won! Everyone knows it. I want you all to know that the result was so overwhelming and so great that we won in every part of the country," she said. "Four independent quick counts gave the same result. When I say everyone knows, I mean first and foremost the regime itself. They know exactly what happened and what they are planning. The entire international community knows what happened." Machado referred to the actual figures, which in some polling stations showed the opposition winning 70% of the vote, and announced "actions" for the coming days. In reality, there was no independent verification of the vote count because international observers were not allowed into the country, and Maduro's victory is being openly questioned not only by the United States but also by left-wing leaders such as Chilean President Gabriel Boric. The National Electoral Council, charged with overseeing the vote count, is doubly tied to Chavism, and yesterday, on election day, its president, Elvis Amoroso, even insulted the archbishop emeritus of Caracas, Cardinal Baltazar Porras, accusing him of being "a liar" and of "scheming conspiracies", when all he had called for was an election day that respected the rights of all citizens. For his part, Maduro has left no stone unturned in recent months. He fanned the flames of nationalist resurgence, threatening to attack Guyana in an attempt to seize the Essequibo territory long claimed by Caracas. He scheduled the elections for the birthday of Hugo Chávez, the 'father' of a 25-year regime. He has continued to persecute some opponents of the regime and has only accepted an electoral competition that is overtly tilted in his favour. Whether, on top of all this, he has 'rigged' the ballot papers, as the opposition claims, remains to be proven, if that is even possible. One-party rhetoric prevails at the moment, as in all elections. Indeed, in a country that has lost 25 per cent of its population, there is no doubt that 'die-hard' Chavismo still has some clout. "I call for the respect of the Constitution, of the public authorities and of the sovereign life of Venezuela. Respect for the will of the people. "I would like to know which country in the world, after having been subjected to 930 criminal sanctions, after having suffered what we have suffered, would dare to hold elections," said the president. **A faulty election.** But the facts tell a different story. Father **Alfredo Infante**, Venezuela's Jesuit provincial and former director of the respected Gumilla magazine Sic, does not mince his words. He told SIR: "There is no doubt that these were flawed elections that lacked fair conditions for all the candidates." The agreement reached in Barbados for regular and verifiable elections has been widely and repeatedly violated - suffice it to say that of the 8 million nationals who fled the country in recent years, only 650,000 were allowed to vote. The border with Colombia has also been closed. But fortunately the opposition is not divided, nor has it adopted an extremist or breakaway stance. Despite the existing imbalance, it took up the challenge of the elections." In essence, the opposition was trying to take the 'narrow path - but perhaps the only one possible - of winning an avalanche of support so overwhelming as to make rigging impossible'. Unfortunately, this was probably wishful thinking. However, the impression is that non-violent mobilisation was preferable to a fruitless withdrawal from the political scene, which has already been tested in recent

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years. It is also the wish of the **Venezuelan Bishops' Conference**, which has consistently encouraged the people to build on their unity and participation in public life. "The free, informed and responsible participation in these elections is of the utmost importance to plan a future of hope and to build a country where progress, peace, justice and freedom can flourish," reads the bishops' latest pastoral exhortation. They add: "there is a new opportunity to make a choice through informed and free elections that will bring about a far-reaching process of renewal in democracy, civil society and in the quality of life. According to the Jesuit provincial, González Urrutia, who replaced Maria Corina Machado, forced to step down from the race by the regime, has shown excellent leadership qualities: "I personally believe that he is a person who deserves to be trusted. He has managed to act with great prudence in a difficult context." Father Infante's analysis shares numerous points of convergence with that of **Felix Arellano**, Professor of International Politics at the Central University of Venezuela: "The imbalance of media resources in this election campaign was nothing short of scandalous." All television and newspaper outlets dedicated their coverage to Maduro, leaving the opposition with no alternative but to rely on social networks. International observers, including those from the European Union, were denied access to the country. Nevertheless, the coalition led by González Urrutia garnered significant support, particularly among the working classes. This latter aspect had not been considered by Maduro. The opposition leader was diplomatic, prudent, and respectful." For Arellano, despite the persistently challenging circumstances, "it is vital that international organisms and the national governments of countries across the continent persist in exerting pressure." (\*) *Journalist at "La vita del popolo"*

Bruno Desidera (\*)