

Maduro Forces Oust Guaido from Congress, Spark Day of Chaos



(Bloomberg) — Venezuelan politics descended into disarray on Sunday when security forces barred opposition leader Juan Guaido and his backers from entering the National Assembly, allowing loyalists to President Nicolas Maduro to choose an assembly president instead of Guaido.

His suit torn from scaling a fence, Guaido and his supporters went elsewhere and re-elected him anyway, drawing backing from Washington and Latin American and European powers that consider Maduro illegitimate and condemned his actions.

“This is a farce,” said lawmaker Stalin Gonzalez, a Guaido lieutenant after the assembly chose a new leader. “Where is the vote, the list of attendees or the quorum necessary for a vote like this?”

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in a statement congratulated Guaido on re-election, adding that “arrests, bribes and blocking access to its building were

unable to derail“ the assembly. But with Washington preoccupied over threats of retaliation from Iran, this could prove an opportune time for Maduro to pressure Guaido with relative impunity.

Maduro's Growing Confidence

The move certainly illustrated growing confidence by Maduro that, despite the country's spiraling poverty, hunger and dysfunction, Guaido's yearlong attempt to oust him is losing steam.

A year ago, when Guaido, 36, announced that, as president of the National Assembly, he was interim president of the country since Maduro's election was rigged and illegitimate, he was greeted with hundreds of thousands of citizens backing him in rapturous rallies. His popularity topped 60%.

On Sunday, the streets didn't ring out with support for him. They were largely empty. He is polling now in the high 30s, according to Datanalisis. He is still the most popular politician in the country and when guards barred him, he shouted, "Does your girlfriend or your mother agree with what you're doing? What do they say to you at home?"

After being re-elected by his colleagues, Guaido said they'd go to the assembly on Tuesday to meet. It seems unlikely to occur without a struggle. He added, "Today we defeated the dictatorship again. They did not succeed. 2020 is a second opportunity for Venezuela. We have no doubt that we have the majority, we will use it, we must pressure the dictatorship."

Three Legislatures

But Maduro controls all the key institutions, including the military, electoral council, and judicial system. In 2017, he also set up an alternative legislature, the National Constituent Assembly. As of now, there appear to be three legislative bodies in an increasingly authoritarian system.

On Sunday, Maduro said new assembly elections were coming this year — and Guaido and his backers will have to decide whether to take part in them. By doing so, they risk losing in a rigged process; by staying away, they lose the only body they still control. Even if they have little power to do much, they have the moral suasion of having been elected.

The man who has now declared himself president of the assembly is Luis Parra, a deputy ensnared in a corruption scandal. While officially a member of the opposition, he has abandoned Guaido. Maduro saluted Parra on television, declaring that the nation's legislature now has new leadership.

Luis Vicente Leon, head of Datanalysis, called Sunday's events "the equivalent of a coup against the only legitimately elected institution" in the country. "For an opposition that was already very weak, this is not good news."

Guaido and the rest of the opposition went to the eastern Caracas headquarters of El Nacional newspaper to hold their vote. Inside a cramped room, a large flag framed Guaido and his deputies, who sat on plastic chairs and listened as lawmakers announced their votes, yelling out "traitor" and "sellout" when Parra and his supporters' names were called. He won with 100 votes.

Agents in Ski Masks

From dawn on Sunday, the streets around the National Assembly were dominated by the National Guard and National Police. They closed vehicular access with checkpoints and anti-riot trucks. The information ministry barred a number of journalists. Nearby, intelligence agents armed with rifles patrolled wearing ski masks.

Several opposition lawmakers who spent the night in a hotel said agents knocked on their doors claiming there was a bomb threat, checked around and left.

Carlos Romero, a political analyst at Central University of Venezuela, said, "Tomorrow Maduro's government will undergo even more criticism than before. What happened went beyond what anyone could have predicted. Maduro's government feels strong enough to carry this out right now because they have succeeded over Guaido's failed plan to end his government. Maduro was able to forge international allies and divide the opposition."

While the U.S., most of Europe and most Latin American countries have backed Guaido, Maduro has maintained the support of Russia, China, Cuba, Iran and Turkey, evading U.S. oil and other key sanctions by trading through those countries.

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