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FEATURED Q&A

What Is Behind Maduro's Freeing of Opponents?



Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro last month freed dozens of his political opponents. // File Photo: Venezuelan Government.

Q Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro on Christmas Eve freed dozens of government opponents who had been imprisoned on charges ranging from inciting violence to subversion, and instead gave them lighter sentences, such as community service. The country's best-known political prisoner, Leopoldo López, remains under house arrest, however. The prisoners were freed just days after Maduro and the country's pro-government Constituent Assembly moved to bar opposition parties from participating in this year's presidential election, saying they had lost legitimacy by not participating in the December local elections. What is behind the government's decision to free the prisoners? Does the opposition have any chance or will to compete in elections later this year? Under increasingly desperate economic circumstances, what are the chances that Maduro will be forced from power?

A Peter DeShazo, visiting professor of Latin American, Latino and Caribbean Studies at Dartmouth College and former deputy U.S. assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs: "Were he the leader of nearly any other Latin American country, Nicolás Maduro would be swept out of office in this year's election. Venezuelans are suffering through a profound economic and social crisis, buffeted by a collapsed economy, hyperinflation, food shortages, rising poverty and rampant crime and violence. Maduro's approval ratings are dismal. This notwithstanding, Maduro's control of the mechanisms of state give him the upper hand. Democracy in Venezuela

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TODAY'S NEWS

POLITICAL

Cease-Fire Between ELN, Colombia Expires

The temporary cease-fire between Colombia's government and the ELN rebel group expired, but peace talks are set to resume today.

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BUSINESS

Codelco to Modify Andina Mine to Protect Glaciers

The world's largest copper miner announced a \$250 million plan to modify its Andina mine in order to protect nearby glaciers. The project is expected to take 36 months to complete, following the approval of an environmental study.

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POLITICAL

Peru's Kuczynski Shuffles Cabinet

Peruvian President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski replaced nearly half his cabinet. The shuffle came weeks after several political resignations following Kuczynski's controversial pardon of former President Alberto Fujimori.

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Kuczynski // File Photo: Peruvian Government.

POLITICAL NEWS

Peru's Kuczynski Shuffles Cabinet

Peruvian President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski on Tuesday replaced nearly half of his cabinet, Reuters reported. The move followed political crises last month in which Kuczynski was nearly forced from office and then controversially pardoned imprisoned former President Alberto Fujimori, a decision that led to several resignations, including in his cabinet. Nearly two weeks ago, Kuczynski had vowed to install a "cabinet of reconciliation" following the uproar over his pardon of Fujimori on Christmas Eve. Since Kuczynski took office less than two years ago, at least 19 cabinet ministers have departed, including four whom Congress forced from office. "Despite our differences, I ask you for us to join together to fight the real problems facing our nation: poverty, unequal services and opportunities, the lack of security, corruption," Kuczynski said Tuesday after swearing in nine new cabinet members. Among the changes, Kuczynski tapped Cayetana Aljovín, the outgoing energy and mines minister, as foreign minister. Also, Angela Grossheim, the deputy energy minister, was promoted to lead the ministry, replacing Aljovín. [Editor's note: See [Q&A](#) on Peru in Tuesday's issue of the Advisor.]

Talks Between ELN, Colombia to Resume as Cease-fire Expires

The first-ever cease-fire between the Colombian government and the National Liberation Army, or ELN, rebel group expired without being extended ahead of planned peace talks today, Reuters reported. The two sides were unable to extend the cease-fire due to logistical problems that prevented negotiators from attending a planned meeting on Monday. The ELN and the government have been engaged in peace talks in Quito since the beginning of 2017 in an attempt to end their 53-year-long civil conflict. The ELN has said it is not pushing to extend the cease-fire that began in October, hoping instead to change the terms of the deal. President Juan Manuel Santos has said he would not immediately launch an offensive against the group now that the cease-fire has expired. The terms of the cease-fire stipulated that the ELN suspend kidnapping, attacks on roads and oil infrastructure, the use of landmines and the recruitment of minors. The government agreed to improve protections for community leaders and improve the conditions for the approximately 450 jailed members of the rebel group. The rebels have, however, clashed with other armed groups outside the military during the cease-fire.

NEWS BRIEFS

Strong Quake Jolts Caribbean, No Early Reports of Casualties

A 7.6-magnitude earthquake, one of the strongest to hit the Caribbean in modern times, struck off the coast of Honduras on Tuesday night, the Associated Press reported. There were no early reports of serious damage or casualties as a result of the quake, and tsunami warnings in the region were canceled an hour after the earthquake. Honduran officials said shaking from the earthquake registered throughout the country, and that there were some reports of cracks in the walls of homes in Colón, Atlántida and Olancho provinces.

Ecuador Seeking Way for Assange to Leave Embassy

Ecuador on Tuesday said it was seeking an arrangement that would allow Wikileaks founder Julian Assange to leave the country's London embassy, where he has lived since 2012 in order to avoid extradition, The Wall Street Journal reported. Ecuador's foreign relations minister, María Fernanda Espinosa, said it would be "unsustainable" for Assange to stay in the embassy indefinitely. She added that the government is not wavering in its commitment to protecting Assange. A Swedish investigation into sexual-assault allegations against Assange has ended, but he has stayed at the embassy out of concern that the United States would seek his extradition for leaking classified government documents.

Argentine Central Bank Cuts Policy Rate

Argentina's central bank on Tuesday lowered its policy interest rate to 28 percent from 28.75 percent, just after it relaxed its inflation target for this year, Reuters reported. The cut was Argentina's first in 14 months. On Dec. 28, the bank increased its inflation target to 15 percent from its previous level of 8 to 12 percent.

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since 1999 has suffered death by a thousand cuts. The regime arrests and imprisons opponents and changes the structure of government and electoral rules to nullify gains by the opposition. While the opposition to chavismo has hurt its own cause through factional rivalries, strategic missteps, and a failure to present a clear alternative to voters, the regime's authoritarian practices have drastically reduced democratic space. As unpromising as it may seem, however, this year's election is still the best means available to address Venezuela's crisis. Like the coalition of forces that overcame a tilted

playing field to defeat Pinochet in the Chilean plebiscite 30 years ago, the Venezuelan opposition would have to be unified and determined to compete in the election regardless of its disadvantaged position. As in the case of Chile, the international community, especially the Americas and Europe, must support efforts to promote a democratic and peaceful outcome through a transparent electoral process adhering to recognized standards of fairness and impartiality. That is a tall order. But the alternative—a continued downward spiral—is far worse."

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ECONOMIC NEWS

Venezuela's National Assembly Outlaws 'Petro' Currency

Venezuela's opposition-run National Assembly on Tuesday outlawed the petro, a cryptocurrency promoted by President Nicolás Maduro that would be backed by oil, gas, gold and diamond reserves, Reuters reported. While Maduro has said the new currency would be used to circumvent U.S.-led financial sanctions, legislators called the petro an effort to illegally mortgage the country's oil reserves. On Friday, Maduro announced the government would issue some \$6 billion worth of petros in order to raise hard currency for the cash-strapped country. Experts on cryptocurrency have voiced concerns about the likelihood that the petro would be successful, citing the government's mismanagement of its own currency, as well as the government's lack of respect for property rights, both of which would make it unlikely to attract investors. Legislators warned potential investors against buying petros, saying the currency would be null once Maduro, who is running for re-election this year, leaves office. "This is not a cryptocurrency, this is a forward sale of Venezuelan oil," said legislator Jorge Millan. "It is tailor-made for corruption." Maduro is likely to ignore the National Assembly's ruling. In July, he created a new legislative body called the Constituent Assembly, which declared itself superior to the National Assembly. The Venezuelan Information Ministry did not respond to Reuters' request for comment.

BUSINESS NEWS

Codelco to Modify Andina Mine to Protect Glaciers

Chilean state-run copper producer Codelco, the world's largest producer of the metal, on Tuesday announced a \$250 million plan to

modify the shape of its Andina mine in order to protect nearby glaciers, Reuters reported. The changes, which would take 36 months to carry out, following the approval of an environmental impact study, would not change the mine's lifespan or its expected output. "It modifies the shape of the current pit, maintaining its size but redirecting the mining extraction toward zones where glaciers are not present," the company said. The mine, located in Chile's Valparaíso region, produced 164,000 metric tons of copper between January and Septem-

THE DIALOGUE CONTINUES

Which Issues Are Driving Costa Rica's Presidential Race?

Q **Costa Ricans will go to the polls on Feb. 4 to select their new president. Antonio Álvarez of the National Liberation Party and Juan Diego Castro of the National Integration Party are the candidates currently leading the polls, among numerous others running. What issues are the leading candidates campaigning on ahead of the vote? How will the candidates address issues such as security, migration and the fiscal deficit, which President Luis Guillermo Solís earlier this year said were key issues facing the country? Who is most likely to win the vote in February?**

A **Claudio Alpizar, political scientist and director of television program Noche Sin Tregua:** "As in every country, there is a range of key issues during the campaigns. The fiscal deficit is important as a macroeconomic problem, and is of greater interest to the governing class than to most citizens, who are more concerned by the cost of living and security. These are topics in which the Solís administration has shown the greatest weakness. In the first case, the president has refused since his first day in office to make urgent decisions, and in the case of security, the dismantling of all state sectors involved has been more the deficient, and

has gotten to the point that the country is now seeing record indicators of insecurity. But there is another issue to consider as well: corruption. The worst part is that we've seen a rise in corruption under the very government that rose to power through an anticorruption campaign. The end result is that the outcome of the election is hard to predict. What is evident is that we are going to see a runoff vote for the third time, because it is impossible that any of the candidates will receive the required 40 percent of the vote in order to win in the first round. It seems, according to recent polls, that the candidate who is most likely to advance to the next round is Juan Diego Castro of the PIN party. Others, including Antonio Álvarez, Rodolfo Piza and Rodolfo Hernández, will be the candidates who will fight for second place in the first round of voting. The official candidate of the ruling PAC, Carlos Alvarado, may have the most difficulty, because he will be representing a government that is seeing its popularity in free-fall. The most appropriate words to define this election are unpredictable and uncertain."

EDITOR'S NOTE: The comment above is a continuation of the Q&A published in the Jan. 5 issue of the Advisor.

ber of last year. Most of the money Codelco plans to spend on the project would be used to modify the mine's design for water distribution and treatment, Mining.com reported. The company expects to employ 450 new workers for the project. The Andina mine's location has led environmental groups to express concerns about the fate of dome-shaped glaciers that are located nearby. Codelco said the work to modify the mine's shape will take place at higher elevations of the adjacent mountains, away from surrounding towns.

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A **Diego Arria, member of the Advisor board, director of the Columbus Group in New York and former permanent representative of Venezuela to the United Nations:** “Maduro released more than 40 political prisoners, but more than 200 others remain in jail, also on trumped-up charges. This decision was a public relations exercise due to the coming continuation of the dialogue with some opposition parties in Santo Domingo. The Constituent Assembly is not just pro-government; it is a fraudulent and illegal entity created by the regime as the supreme power of the land. According to the Constitution, the presidential election should be held next December, but it seems that the regime is planning to hold it much sooner. There is no chance at all to compete with an existing electoral board that is totally at the service of the regime, as was recently demonstrated with the sham gubernatorial elections. Venezuela has morphed into a narco-military state, which represents an unprecedented challenge for the international community on how to deal with such a regime. The moment has arrived to accept that Venezuela’s freedom and democracy cannot be achieved through elections. To insist that it can is either to live in denial of the situation, or is an acceptance of coexistence with a narco state, disregarding the consequences for the region’s peace and stability. The regime is not hiding its resolve to stay in power, regardless of international sanctions. It is clear that without the intervention of what is left of the Venezuelan military, or with the participation of a coalition of willing states to rescue Venezuela, the Maduro regime will perpetuate itself. It should not be forgotten, especially by the United States, that Venezuela is not an island, but rather the entrance to South America. Venezuela is rich in all kinds of resources that Cuba never had, making it much more dangerous. It is also within the strategic political radar of Vladimir Putin, but the Monroe Doctrine has already been forgotten.”

A **Ben Raderstorf, program associate in Inter-American Dialogue’s rule of law program:** “In no uncertain terms, the Venezuelan government’s decision to release 44 of its approximately 270 political prisoners over Christmas is a welcome gesture. Every opposition figure released from jail, regardless of circumstances, is a positive development. That said, it would be a mistake to read anything significant into the decision—their release is merely a stunt for the cameras. Delcy Rodríguez, the president of the (illegal and all-powerful) National Constituent Assembly and one of the government’s most militant and recognizable voices, gleefully took the opportunity to publicly harangue the prisoners, all the while claiming goodwill and ‘a moment of reconciliation.’ President Maduro, like Chávez before him, is skilled at playing games with political and legal legitimacy. The government has made a habit of carefully and strategically granting marginal concessions, albeit rarely in good faith and always without risking any real political threats. A similar pattern occurred last year with well-known opposition leader Leopoldo López, who was imprisoned for multiple years, released to house arrest in July, returned to prison in August, and released again less than a week later. At the time, some cited the wavering as a sign that the government’s resolve was cracking. Instead, it was likely just toying with López, who remains functionally imprisoned. Meanwhile, Maduro’s hold on power has grown even stronger. Hopes for more productive negotiations in the Dominican Republic—and for free and fair presidential elections next year—should unfortunately be tempered. Meanwhile, more than 200 political prisoners remain behind bars.”

Editor’s note: The Advisor requested a commentary for this issue from the Venezuelan Embassy in Washington, but did not receive a response.

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