



Briefing Notes Summary

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

Venezuela – July to December 2024

31 December 2024

08 July 2024

Tren de Aragua co-founder arrested in Colombia

On 01.07.24, Colombian police arrested one of the co-founders and leading members of Tren de Aragua, Larry Álvarez Nuñez alias Larry Changa, in the department of Quindío in Colombia. According to various sources, Álvarez, who escaped from Tocorón prison in the state of Aragua in 2015, had initially stayed in Chile and, according to the Colombian Ministry of Defence, had recently lived in Colombia, where he was responsible for the criminal gang's expansion strategy. According to Chilean police, however, he was also still in charge of managing Tren de Aragua's business in Chile from Colombia. Insight Crime therefore sees his arrest, alongside the prison raid in Tocorón prison in September 2023, as the most important blow against the criminal gang in recent times, which might well lead to further fragmentation of the group.¹

15 July 2024

Official election campaign launch: further acts of repression, arrests, obstacles for voter registration

Since the official start of the election campaign on 04.07.24, various opposition members, supporters and service providers in several federal states have been arrested, including members of the parties Voluntad Popular, Un Nuevo Tiempo and Causa R. Several of those arrested were merely providing logistical support to the campaign of the opposition unity candidate González Urrutia and to María Corina Machado. According to the opposition, another eight persons were arrested in the states of Anzoátegui, Carabobo, Monagas and Portuguesa between 13.07. and 14.07.24. One of the arrested persons was the owner of a vehicle that González Urrutia and Machado used for their campaign in Valencia. The public prosecutor's office accuses the owner and two other people of blackmail and alleged offences against public officials, among other things. In addition, the house and business premises of a businessman were searched and he himself was arrested on 11.07.24 after hosting Machado in his house in the state of Táchira at the end of June as part of her campaign. According to the Attorney General's Office, he is accused of the theft of strategic material to sabotage the power supply, among other things. In addition, other businesses that had offered González Urrutia and Machado services in various states, such as hotels and restaurants, had been closed by the tax authority SENIAT, at least briefly. In addition, there have been repeated roadblocks on opposition routes. Furthermore, the blocking of websites, such as that of the Observatory for Fake News, by various internet providers has been reported recently.

Already for several weeks, there were numerous reports and criticism of bureaucratic hurdles that made it quite difficult to register in the electoral register and to update data, especially for Venezuelans abroad. A large proportion of the Venezuelan diaspora of legal age have been unable to register at foreign representations or their

polling stations, because these are inactive due to the lack of foreign representations. According to the Supreme Electoral Council, only around 69,200 Venezuelans abroad are registered for the elections on 28.07.24.²

22 July 2024

Further arrests in connection with the election campaign of the opposition's unity candidate

According to the NGO Foro Penal on 16.07.24, a total of 114 people have been arrested for political reasons in 2024 to date. 102 of these arrests were connected with the election campaign of the opposition's unity candidate González Urrutia and election rallies organised by María Corina Machado. The number of people arrested since the official start of the election campaign on 04.07.24 amounts to over 75. According to the NGO Laboratorio de Paz, a large proportion of the arrests were made in the state of Táchira. Most recently, according to Vente Venezuela, the head of security of Machado, Milciades Ávila, was arrested on 17.07.24; however, he was released the following day subject to conditions.³

29 July 2024

Presidential elections: Supreme electoral authority declares Maduro the winner

In addition to the incumbent Maduro and the opposition's unity candidate González Urrutia, eight other candidates stood for election in the presidential elections on 28.07.24. The electoral system is automated; a simple majority in the first round is enough to win the election. On the eve of the election and in the early hours of the morning, queues had already formed outside some polling stations.

While the Attorney General's Office reported generally peaceful elections without any significant incidents, according to the opposition, there were attempts at intimidation by pro-government groups (so-called colectivos) in front of some polling stations. The opposition also spoke of irregularities in connection with the counting, the access of official election witnesses to polling stations and the transmission of results.

After counting around 80% of the votes, the pro-government Supreme Electoral Council (CNE) declared the incumbent Maduro the winner of the election with over 51% of the vote shortly after midnight (local time) on 29.07.24; according to the body, voter turnout was 59%. However, no official counting results have been published to date and, according to media reports, independent verification of the results is currently not possible. Various regional elected representatives have also called for the results to be published and for transparency. While some predominantly left-wing, in some cases authoritarian governments have already congratulated Maduro on his victory, other governments have questioned the results. The opposition does not recognise the result, as it continues to assume a victory for its candidate González Urrutia based on the election protocols available to it. It remains to be seen how the highly polarised situation on the ground will develop. The new president's term of office does not begin until January 2025.

While the EU election observation mission had already been disinvited two months ago (cf. BN of 03.06.24), several Latin American ex-presidents and parliamentarians from neighbouring countries and Spain announced in the immediate run-up to the elections that they had been prevented from travelling to Venezuela to observe the elections. There have also been reports of polling stations being relocated at short notice.

Already earlier there had been reports of numerous arrests of opposition members and supporters in the context of the election campaign, most recently on 26.07. and 27.07.24, in addition the (temporary) closure of service providers (cf. BN of 15.07. and 22.07.24), the (temporary) blocking of several media portals and NGO websites became known. Furthermore, there were numerous obstacles for voter registration, especially for Venezuelan citizens living abroad (cf. BN of 15.07.24). The actual winner of the opposition primaries, María Corina Machado, had been barred from holding public office (cf. BN of 29.01.24).⁴

05 August 2024

Protests in the aftermath of the presidential elections: Killings, injuries and further arrests

In the days following the presidential election, there were repeated protests in various parts of the country against the highly controversial election results published by the Supreme Electoral Council (CNE) which were accompanied by calls for the resignation of President Maduro.

Numerous governments and organisations had insisted that the CNE publish the results broken down by polling station, which has still not happened. While, on 02.08.24, the CNE once again confirmed that President Maduro had won the elections after counting almost 97% of the votes, the opposition claimed that González Urrutia had received a clear majority of the votes based on the election protocols available to it from a large number of polling stations. The opposition has now published around 80% of the election protocols available to it on a website to be checked by independent bodies and for a self-check by voters at their own polling stations by entering their personal identification number. Furthermore, in the light of this evidence, the US, the EU and other countries recently stated that they would not recognise Maduro's election victory.

On 29.07.24, President Maduro had already announced that he would expel the staff of seven Latin American countries following statements relating to the elections, including the staff of the Argentinian embassy. This is where several employees of Vente Venezuela are still staying under protection of embassy asylum. Brazil is now to take over the protection of the people in question.

On 31.07.24, Maduro had already called on the pro-government Supreme Court of Justice (TSJ) to conduct a supposedly independent review of the election results. On 02.08.24, all election participants were supposed to appear before the TSJ for this, however, González Urrutia forewent the meeting.

According to her own statements, María Corina Machado (Vente Venezuela) had recently gone into hiding for fear of arrest and for her life, she reappeared at a large protest manifestation on 03.08.24. According to opposition sources, Machado's campaign office in Caracas was attacked by armed, masked men on 02.08.24. The premises were vandalised and various documents were stolen.

According to the NGO Foro Penal, almost 1,000 arrests, including such of minors, were verified during the protests between 29.07. and the morning of 04.08.24 (10 a.m. local time). President Maduro himself spoke of almost 2,000 arrests at a rally on 03.08.24. Those arrested are to be taken to the Tocorón prison, among other places, he said. Foro Penal warned of proceedings without due process and the denial of representation by lawyers of their own choosing.

It is also said that some prominent party members, including Freddy Superlano (Voluntad Popular), have been arrested. The NGO Monitor de Víctimas has so far reported 22 verified protest-related killings by colectivos, the military and the police and others. In addition, several portals have reported efforts to prevent protests by intimidating particularly the residents of poorer neighbourhoods, which used to be the main bastions of Chavismo in the past. The situation on the ground remains tense.⁵

12 August 2024

Current situation: ongoing repression

The tensions in the country continue and detailed election results have still not been published. According to the NGO Foro Penal, there have been more than 1,300 arrests as of 10.08.24, including of people with disabilities, indigenous people and over a hundred young people between the ages of 14 and 17. While the majority of those arrested come from poorer neighbourhoods (so-called barrios populares), around 50 (local) politicians, human rights defenders and activists have also been arrested recently. Individuals, such as LGBTIQ activist Yendri Velásquez, who was arrested at Maiquetía airport on 03.08.24, and university professor Edni López, who was arrested on 04.08.24, were later conditionally released. According to the national press union SNTP, four arrested media professionals have been charged in connection with alleged terrorism offences. They face long prison sentences of up to 30 years. Many others who have been arrested are also accused of incitement to hatred. According to SNTP and Espacio Público, at least 13 media professionals have been arrested since 28.07.24 for their reporting on the protests. According to the NGO Provea, 24 civilians and two members of the army have been killed in the course of the protests.

Most recently, the Attorney General's Office announced the opening of criminal investigations against María Corina Machado and the opposition unity candidate González Urrutia for conspiracy and incitement to insurrection, among other things, after they published an open letter calling on the security forces to stand with the people and stop the repression of protests. González also faces further legal consequences for ignoring a summons from the Supreme Court in connection with the confirmation of the election results.

On 08.08.24, President Maduro publicly announced that he had ordered the National Telecommunications Authority Conatel to block X for ten days; according to media reports, access to the messenger app Signal was also blocked recently. Information about protests in the wake of the presidential elections had been widely disseminated via social media, which Maduro had recently accused of inciting hatred and violence.

According to France24, a government app for anonymous reporting of opposition protests and subversive activities was recently removed from the app stores by Apple and Android, while a telephone hotline of the military secret service (DGCIM) for the same purpose is still active. Arrests were recently made as part of the so-called Operation Tun Tun, the name of which refers to security forces knocking on doors.⁶

19 August 2024

Current situation: further protests, repression, arrests and disappearances

On 17.08.24, the opposition once again called for protests against the results of the presidential election published by the Supreme Electoral Council (CNE). In the aftermath, images of protests not only in Venezuela, but also from various cities around the world were shared on social media.

The number of arrests has continued to rise. According to the NGO Foro Penal, more than 1,500 arrests were verified by name between 29.07. and 18.08.24, and 90 people were released. The Attorney General's Office speaks of over 2,400 arrests and 25 deaths. According to one of the directors of Foro Penal, the mass arrests on the first days of the protests were specifically meant to intimidate the population in order to curb further demonstrations. An analyst from the International Crisis Group is quoted in a media report as saying that the repression was arbitrary and left people in fear. According to him, people had the impression that the police had to fulfil a quota and that arrests could therefore affect anyone.

Based on relatives' testimony to the media, they reported that numerous people who were only in the vicinity of protests were also arbitrarily arrested. Quite often relatives were not informed which prisons the detainees were being taken to. Most recently, there have also been reports of prisoners being transferred to Tocuyito prison without relatives being informed in advance. The non-governmental Venezuelan Prisons Observatory (OVP) recently drew particular attention to the precarious situation of women in detention.

According to Foro Penal, there were also numerous selective arrests of members of the political opposition as well as of election witnesses and the like. People who had been identified as protest participants by their neighbours or in video footage of protests had also been arrested, Foro Penal said. Furthermore, a Foro Penal lawyer who had worked for political prisoners, was arrested.

In addition, there are still cases of arbitrary disappearances. According to his son, the former member of parliament Williams Dávila (Acción Democrática) was admitted to hospital in critical condition on 13.08.24, after having been taken to an unknown location by masked people dressed in black on 08.08.24 after a vigil.

To illustrate the repression, the NGO Provea drew attention to the particularly high number of arrests compared to previous protests in 2014, 2017 and 2019. In addition, several media reported on the cancellation of passport documents, e.g. for politicians and NGO employees.

However, the top military leadership remains firmly on the side of the incumbent Maduro, recently further promotions had been announced. There have been individual reports that also Cuban security forces were involved in post-election raids. However, this could not be independently verified.⁷

NGO regulation and financing law (so-called Ley Anti-ONG) passed

On 15.08.24, the National Assembly, which is dominated by the ruling party, passed the outstanding articles of the law on the inspection, regulation, activities and financing of non-governmental organisations and similar organisations (cf. BN of 30.01.23) in the second reading, following their postponement in May 2024. The 39 articles of the corresponding law regulate, among other things, registration and verification obligations regarding employees and members as well as the financing of the respective organisations. For example, NGOs may not

receive donations from political parties or use donations for political purposes and must state whether their donors come from Venezuela or abroad. Supporting activities that are directed against Venezuela's national stability or institutions is also prohibited. Organisations that promote "fascism, intolerance or hatred on racial, ethnic, religious, political, social, ideological or gender-specific grounds" cannot be registered. Infringements could result in substantial fines or even dissolution. NGOs criticised this law as a further restriction of civil society's freedom of action and a sword of Damocles, which is intended to silence criticism of the government and enable the criminalisation of human rights work.⁸

Publication of Carter Centre and UN election reports, international criticism and mediation attempts

The Carter Center, which was one of the few organisations authorised to observe elections in the country, had already published a press release on 30.07.24 which included the statement that the presidential elections did not meet "international standards for the integrity of elections", that there had been numerous irregularities and restrictions in the run-up to the elections and a lack of transparency in the publication of the itemised election results. In addition, the Carter Centre was unable to find any evidence of an alleged hacker attack which, according to the government, had disrupted the transmission of the election results. A preliminary report on the elections by a four-member UN panel of experts, which was initially intended to remain internal, but was then published on 13.08.24, also pointed out that the continued failure to publish the results in an itemised form was an "unprecedented event" and supported the information on the lack of transparency and integrity provided by the Carter Center's results. The committee had also received no explanation why the electronic transmission of results from the polling stations to the centre had suddenly been stopped, it said. In addition, a random check of the results uploaded by the opposition for each polling station showed that they had the necessary authenticity features (including QR codes, signatures). Shortly after the publication, the Public Prosecutor General's Office launched an investigation into the web administrators for allegedly falsifying the results. The speaker of parliament and Maduro confidant Jorge Rodríguez recently rejected the UN election panel's report, criticised its uncoordinated publication and proposed a new regulation for international election observation that would no longer allow external observers in Venezuela in future.

In a joint declaration 22 states and the EU once again called for the publication of the results broken down by polling station and criticised the repression and violence in the aftermath of the elections. Colombia and Brazil continue to try to mediate. Brazilian President Lula recently proposed new elections, which both the government and the opposition rejected.⁹

26 August 2024

Supreme Court confirms Maduro's election

The Supreme Court of Justice (TSJ) confirmed the election victory of incumbent Nicolás Maduro on 22.08.24. In a press conference, the court's president, Caryl Rodríguez, stated that the TSJ's investigation had verified the result announced by the Supreme Electoral Council (CNE). The latter had declared Maduro the winner of the election on 02.07.24 with 52% of the vote, but without providing detailed figures on the count. According to Rodríguez, a massive cyber-attack was the reason for the failure to provide the documents. Following protests, Maduro had asked the TSJ to check the results on 31.07.24 (cf. BN of 29.07.24 and 05.08.24). Opposition politicians Edmundo González and María Corina Machado accused the TSJ of assuming the role of the Supreme Electoral Council and thus violating the separation of powers. They also warned of the court's partiality and that the judgement would exacerbate the crisis. In a joint statement, the US and ten Latin American governments, including Chile, Uruguay, Peru and Argentina, joined the criticism of the ruling. According to Rodríguez, no appeal against the ruling is possible. In addition, the Public Prosecutor General's Office will examine a complaint against González for usurpation of authority and other issues, as he did not appear for the summons in the investigation process (cf. BN of 05.08.24).¹⁰

Dismissals of dissenting or critical government employees

Most recently, the Communist Party (PCV) publicly denounced dismissals for political reasons and forced redundancies of employees in state-owned companies who had criticised or expressed doubts about Maduro's supposed victory in the presidential elections or refused to support the government. Employees of the state oil

company PDVSA, the state electricity utility Corpoelec and public health facilities were among those affected. An article by Reuters mentions hundreds of redundancies at PDVSA as well as dismissals at the Ministry of Petroleum. The refusal to participate in pro-government events in the wake of the elections may also have led to dismissals. The national press union SNTP also reported dismissals at the state television station VTV and the radio station RNV, for reasons such as likes of opposition posts on social media or critical WhatsApp statuses. Employees in the education sector also reported intimidation and threats.¹¹

02 September 2024

Current developments: González summoned again; further arrests; cabinet reshuffle

On 26.08.24, Juan Carlos Delpino, one of two main 'rectors' of the Supreme Electoral Council (CNE) who is not considered to be close to the government, spoke out for the first time and pointed out significant irregularities in the presidential election process. He himself had seen no evidence that Maduro had won the presidential elections, he said. Delpino has been in hiding since then for fear of reprisals.

Furthermore, the opposition's presidential unity candidate, González Urrutia, has been summoned by the Attorney General's Office again for 30.08.24 to testify regarding investigations into such allegations as falsification of public documents, usurpation of office and incitement to disobedience. This summons is also related to the publication of itemised polling station results by the opposition on the specially created website Resultados con VZLA. Should he also fail to appear at this third summons, an arrest warrant may be issued against him for risk of absconding and obstruction of the investigation.

The arrests of opposition figures and people critical of the government continue. On 27.08.24, María Corina Machado's lawyer, Perkins Rocha, was arrested. Other opposition party members from Convergencia and Acción Democrática as well as a student leader and the well-known journalist Carmela Longo were arrested last week. The latter had recently resigned from the pro-government newspaper Últimas Noticias. She was later released under conditions but faces terrorism charges.

In addition, there was a comprehensive cabinet reshuffle on 27.08.24, in which Diosdado Cabello, vice president of the ruling party Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) and presumed hardliner, took over as head of the Ministry of the Interior, Justice and Peace. In this context, NGOs fear that the repression of peaceful protests will intensify.¹²

09 September 2024

Large-scale power outage, arrest warrant for and departure of opposition politician González Urrutia

On 30.08.24 at least 20 of the country's federal states were affected by a massive, hour-long power outage. While the government cited acts of sabotage, people with technical expertise attributed the power outage to a lack of maintenance or system overload. As a result of the power outage, militarisation around infrastructure facilities was expanded, particularly in Caracas, and additional road checkpoints (known as alcabalas) were set up.

On 01.09.24, the NGO Foro Penal announced that over 85 young people who had been arrested during the protests had been conditionally released over the last weekend in August. However, other minors remain in custody.

On 02.09.24, the Special Court for Terrorism Proceedings in Caracas granted the application for an arrest warrant against the opposition Unitary Platform's presidential candidate González Urrutia for, among other things, usurpation of office. On 07.09.24, it was announced that González Urrutia had left Venezuela in a Spanish air force plane after spending some time in the Spanish embassy and that he had applied for political asylum in Spain. Also on 07.09.24, there were reports that the Argentinian embassy in Venezuela, which still houses employees of Vente Venezuela in embassy asylum (cf. BN of 05.08.24), had been surrounded by security forces and its power supply had been interrupted.¹³

16 September 2024

Foreign nationals arrested for alleged coup plans

According to ministry information from 14.09.24, six foreign nationals, including three Americans and two Spaniards, have been arrested in Venezuela for allegedly plotting to destabilise or overthrow President Maduro's government by killing him. According to Interior Minister Cabello, the alleged leader of the operation, a US military officer, had already been arrested in August 2024. Cabello also mentioned suspected links between the detainees and the American and Spanish secret services. However, he did not present any evidence for these theories at his press conference. Spain and the US rejected the accusations. The US had recently imposed further sanctions on numerous individuals, including those employed at the Supreme Court of Justice (TSJ) and the National Electoral Council (CNE). Spain had taken in the exiled opposition leader González Urrutia (cf. BN of 09.09.24). In addition, Spanish Defence Minister Robles described Venezuela as a dictatorship. Diplomatic relations between the two countries and Venezuela therefore remain very tense.¹⁴

30 September 2024

UN Fact Finding Mission documents increase in repression

On 17.09.24, the independent international UN Fact Finding Mission for Venezuela published a report on the human rights situation since 01.09.23. The report documents the intensification of the repression of political dissidents and those perceived as such throughout the entire period under review and especially since the presidential election on 28.07.24. The repression has led to human rights violations, including killings, arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearances and sexualised and gender-based violence, which are to be seen as a systematic suppression of all dissidence, and in their entirety constitute a crime against humanity. As part of the mission, which has been active in the country since 2019 under a mandate from the UN Human Rights Council, it was documented that recently also minors had been charged with serious offences such as terrorism as part of the repression. Cases of sexualised violence also increased after the presidential election. According to the report, 158 minors were detained during the post-election protests, some of whom were subjected to sexualised violence.¹⁵

07 October 2024

Carter Center election monitors present OAS election returns

On 02.10.24 a group of election monitors from the Carter Center confirmed to the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States (OAS) the results of the presidential elections as stated by the opposition. In this connection, the group presented what it maintained to be original election returns which had been published by the opposition, pointing out the QR codes on the returns which it claims to verify their authenticity. By the group's own account, it received the returns by international mail. On the basis of these data, the Unitary Platform's opposition candidate, Edmundo Gonzalez Urrutia, won the election with 67 % of the vote. After the election and without publishing the classified election returns per polling station, the pro-government supreme election council (CNE) declared Nicolás Maduro to be the winner (cf. BN of 29.07. and 05.08.24).¹⁶

14 October 2024

More arrests, mandate for UN Fact Finding Mission on Venezuela extended

On 01.10.24 the opposition mayor of the city of Maracaibo, Rafael Ramírez Colina (Primero Justicia, PJ), was arrested together with three municipal employees. The chief public prosecutor's office announced that he has been charged with corruption. Various figures, including the opposition governor of Zulia State, Manuel Rosales (Un Nuevo Tiempo) denounced the arrest, while Colina's family spoke of politically motivated arrests. Ramírez Colina is the fifth opposition mayor to be arrested in 2024. The opposition claims that 154 politicians are currently being held in custody. And so the number of arrests continues to rise. A spokesperson of the NGO Foro Penal stated on 09.10.24 that the number of people detained on political grounds had increased to 1,916. 1,767 of these were arrested in the wake of the disputed 2024 presidential elections and eleven were detained in the first week of

October 2024. Among the latter were once again two members of opposition leader María Corina Machado's security team (Vente Venezuela).

On 11.10.24 the UN Human Rights Council extended the mandate of the UN Fact Finding Mission on Venezuela and the OHCHR by a further two years, with a remit which includes documenting the ongoing human rights violations in the country.¹⁷

21 October 2024

Freedom of expression and freedom of the press: Shut-down of La Voz, Freedom on the Net report, revocation of passports

The temporary shut-down of the print newspaper La Voz, initially until May 2025, was ordered by the SENIAT tax authority on 03.10.24 on grounds of default.

At least 405 print media, as well as radio and television stations, have been closed in the past 20 years.

The 2024 Freedom on the Net report by Freedom House recently recorded numerous restrictions on the freedom of expression and freedom of the press in the digital domain as well. Negative factors mentioned in the report include both restricted access (costs of internet contracts, power failures) and the state censorship of independent news sources, e.g. through regular blocking of digital media websites. Deliberate disinformation and propaganda in favour of the government and campaigns aimed at discrediting the opposition are also reported. The report observes that personal data can be tapped via the government portal of the Patria system, which has to be used in order to access social benefits. Citing a number of sources, the report also criticises the government's VenApp in connection with data security breaches and use of the app as a surveillance tool or as an instrument to support repression measures in the wake of the 2024 presidential elections. Furthermore, the report notes that any comments critical of the government which are posted online may have legal consequences. This is borne out, for example, by arrests of ordinary users in the reporting period after they had voiced comments critical of the government in WhatsApp groups or on social media. This is seen to be increasingly narrowing the scope for online social debate. The report observes that fear-induced self-censorship is common practice.

In addition, on 13.10.24 the Venezuelan NGO Laboratorio de Paz reported in connection with an interview with the Financial Times that the passport documents of at least 40 media representatives and defenders of human rights had been declared null and void in the aftermath of the presidential elections. The report sees this as an effective means of intimidating critical voices which comes at comparatively little political cost while restricting such actors' room for manoeuvre substantially.¹⁸

Supreme election council (CNE): CNE head Delpino discharged, investigations for treason ordered

On 17.10.24 the pro-government parliament discharged the pro-opposition head of the supreme election council (CNE), Juan Carlos Delpino, and appointed his previous deputy in his place. In the aftermath of the 2024 presidential election, Delpino had voiced criticism of president Maduro's alleged victory, citing a lack of evidence to substantiate his claim to power (cf. BN of 02.09.24). He also failed to attend the announcement of the election result. The parliament has additionally called on the chief public prosecutor's office to initiate investigations into Delpino, who is currently residing abroad, for treason.¹⁹

Further arrests of foreign nationals

Interior minister Cabello (PSUV) announced on 17.10.24 that once again (cf. BN of 16.09.24) five foreign individuals, including three US nationals, one Bolivian and one Peruvian had been arrested on suspicion of conspiracy and/or terrorism.

In addition, the humanitarian organisation Danish Refugee Council (DRC) announced on 18.10.24 that one of its Colombian employees who had travelled to Venezuela to carry out project work had been arrested. No further details are known with regard to this incident, however.²⁰

Closure of two NGOs for LGBTIQ rights

Two NGOs (Venezuela Igualitaria and País Narrado) which had been championing the rights of LGBTIQ people have discontinued their activities in the country at least temporarily, on account of the prevailing economic and socio-political situation, the attendant narrowing of the scope for societal actors and the new NGO law (cf. BN of

19.08.24). In a statement on Twitter on 12.10.24, Venezuela Igualitaria announced that in discontinuing its activities it was prioritising the physical and mental well-being of its staff in the current situation. The NGO also cites a shortage of financial resources. According to reports in the media, the founder of País Narrado asserts that championing human rights with regard to the most diverse issues presently entails substantial risks, including threats and attacks by the authoritarian government.²¹

28 October 2024

Arrest of DRC employee also in connection with alleged conspiracy

The recently arrested Colombian national and employee of the humanitarian organisation Danish Refugee Council (DRC) (cf. BN of 21.10.24), Manuel Alejandro Tique Chaves, is also accused by the interior ministry of involvement in an alleged conspiracy to bring down the government, among other charges. Relatives and the DRC continue to deny the allegations.²²

Controversial death of opposition politician Santos

According to relatives and reports from witnesses, opposition politician Edwin Santos (VP) was apprehended by state security forces on his way home in Apure State on 23.10.24. His subsequent whereabouts are unknown. Citing the opposition party Voluntad Popular (VP), individual media have reported that at one point he was questioned at the headquarters of the military secret service (DGCIM) in Guasdalito. On 26.10.24 Santos' dead body was found in El Nula-El Piñal, a road close to the border between Táchira State and Apure State. While VP is holding state security forces responsible for his death, the director of the CICPC police investigation unit is alleging that Santos was killed in a motorcycle accident. NGOs and opposition politicians have called for an independent inquiry into the case, with a number of organisations and individuals questioning the government's portrayal of events. The president of the CICPC has announced that investigations will be carried out in connection with alleged disinformation campaigns in the media aimed at framing state security forces as being behind Santos' death.

On 27.10.24, media organisations additionally called on the authorities to provide information on the whereabouts of the independent journalist Nelin Escalante, who is believed to have been apprehended by the DGCIM military secret service in Caracas on 25.10.24.²³

Venezuela ranks bottom in 2024 Rule of Law Index

In the Rule of Law Index published by the World Justice Project (WJP) on 23.10.24, Venezuela ranks bottom overall in 2024 among a total of 142 assessed countries, behind Cambodia, Afghanistan, Haiti and Myanmar. The country also occupies bottom position in individual categories, including Civil Justice, Criminal Justice and Regulatory Enforcement. Based on eight categories, the index measures how people perceive the rule of law in the examined countries by reference to expert and household surveys. Factors which came in for particularly severe criticism in Venezuela include the sanctioning of public-sector employees in cases of misconduct, the judiciary's constraint of the executive and the enforcement of civil and criminal law. The criminal justice system is found to lack impartiality and efficiency and to be exposed to government influence.²⁴

Arrest of former oil minister Tellechea

Prosecutor general Saab has reported that former oil minister Pedro Tellechea was arrested on 20.10.24 and stands accused of corruption and allegedly passing information on to a company linked to the CIA, among other charges. Back in April 2024, Tellechea's predecessor and former close confidant of Maduro, Tareck El Aissami, was also arrested for corruption (cf. BN of 15.04.24). Tellechea was replaced by vice-president Delcy Rodríguez in a cabinet reshuffle following the presidential elections in August 2024 (cf. BN of 02.09.24). He resigned from his current post as minister for industry and national production on 18.10.24, stating health-related reasons.²⁵

04 November 2024

Report by the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Venezuela (IIFFM)

The main focus of the IIFFM's Conference Room Paper published on 14.10.24 for the reporting period from 01.09.23 to 31.08.24 is on state repression in connection with the presidential elections on 28.07.24. 19 individual

cases are cited in this context. While in the run-up to the elections repressive measures and largely arbitrary arrests for the most part selectively targeted leading figures from the political opposition (first and foremost Vente Venezuela members, but also members of other parties) and civil society (human rights defenders, NGO staff, media representatives) as well as members of the military, the report notes that repressive acts and arrests recorded after the presidential elections were less selective and more widespread. The report also addresses state security operations in connection with alleged conspiracies (e.g. operation Brazalete Blanco) ahead of the elections, observing that since 2014 the government has continually used such allegations to justify actions against opposition figures. In addition, individual cases have been documented in which detainees have been coerced into accusing other people of involvement in conspiracies. The report expresses particular concern at a pattern of arrests of minors in the aftermath of the elections, some of whom have been accused of serious crimes such as terrorism. In the examined cases, arrests after the elections have reportedly always taken place without an arrest warrant and numerous collective trials have been carried out without procedural safeguards. According to the report, enforced disappearance has become established as a "common instrument of repression against actual or suspected opponents of the government." Many arrests are also reported to have taken place by way of denunciation, e.g. via the government's VenApp. The IIFFM has further identified cases of torture and cruel treatment or punishment at the Rodeo I prison in Miranda, among other institutions, and cases of sexualised or gender-based violence against female prisoners, as well as female visitors to prisons. In addition to the personal profiles targeted for arrests in the run-up to the elections, in the aftermath of the elections arrests additionally focused primarily on young men from low-income urban districts (so-called *zonas populares*), as well as individual cases involving lawyers representing prisoners and employees of security services and the judiciary who have refused, for example, to suppress protests, to issue arrest warrants or to bring charges against protesters. Other isolated cases involved minors, students and indigenous people. Most of the arrests after the elections reportedly took place either at or in the vicinity of protests on the first days after the elections, as a consequence of participation in protests and in the course of the so-called Tun Tun security operation. The IIFFM has further received information about isolated forcible arrests of minors and cases of (attempted) forced confessions via (threats of) violence or promises of shorter prison sentences. In the aftermath of the elections, increasing numbers of arrests have been recorded for posting anti-government comments in social media or Messenger apps, on charges of inciting hate. After the elections, complaints and habeas corpus requests from the authorities (e.g. public prosecutor's office, national ombudsman's office) have been largely ignored or shelved.

It has not yet been possible to investigate the responsibility for the deaths in conjunction with the protests in accordance with the IIFFM's methodology.

The IIFFM report concludes with the observation that the numerous examined cases and actions indicate that the government's systematic and widespread policy of repression is continuing and that there are adequate grounds to assume that the government in Venezuela is continuing to commit crimes against humanity for political reasons, including against actual or suspected opponents of the government.²⁶

18 November 2024

Over 100 political prisoners released

It has been reported in the media that the Venezuelan government released over 100 prisoners between 15.11. and 16.11.24. The individuals concerned were arrested during the protests relating to the disputed presidential elections in July 2024 (cf. BN of 05.08.24). The local human rights organisation Foro Penal has stated that it has been able to verify the release of 107 prisoners from a number of prisons up to 16.11.24. Prosecutor general Tarek Saab stated on 16.11.24 that 225 releases had been ordered, allegedly on the basis of new evidence which had been compiled by the public prosecutor's office. Saab had already announced in the previous week that he would be reviewing at least 225 arrests which took place in the aftermath of the violent protests.

The NGO Foro Penal has claimed that at least 1,800 people were arrested in connection with the protests in July 2024. HRW has stated that it has received credible reports of 24 killings during the protests. President Maduro himself reported at a rally on 03.08.24 that almost 2,000 arrests had been made, and according to prosecutor general Saab a total of 28 people were killed and almost 200 injured in the protests after 28.07.24.²⁷

25 November 2024

Prison conditions for people imprisoned on political grounds; death of an electoral witness

Reports in the media and NGO communiqués have furnished information in recent weeks about inadequate food and the delay or withholding of medical care for people imprisoned on political grounds. Hygiene conditions are also reported to be problematic. Minors are not accommodated separately from adults, as is required by law.

Electoral witness Jesús Martínez Medina, who was arrested in the aftermath of the presidential elections and was subsequently held in custody, died at a hospital in Anzoátegui on 14.11.24. NGOs and parts of the opposition are accusing the authorities of having refused to provide medical care for Martínez, who was already ill at the time of his arrest, or of having withheld such care for too long. The chief public prosecutor's office denies such accusations.²⁸

02 December 2024

New law stipulates high fines for endorsing sanctions

A new law (Ley Orgánica Libertador Simón Bolívar contra el Bloqueo Imperialista y por la Defensa de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela), which has been promulgated in the official gazette (N° 6.859 Extraordinario) after being endorsed by president Maduro on 29.11.24, stipulates prison sentences of 25 to 30 years and substantial fines for anyone who calls for, welcomes or supports unilateral sanctions, armed or violent actions or cyber-attacks against Venezuela. The law additionally enables bans on holding public office for up to 60 years and confiscation of the property of anyone convicted of such offences. Art. 18 further allows defendants to be tried in absentia. On the assumption that an accused person who refuses to attend preliminary proceedings or hearings does not wish to exercise their right to be heard, in such cases the trial is to be carried out with the defendant's counsel or, in case of default, with a directly appointed counsel. Art. 23 additionally provides for a register to be drawn up of domestic and foreign natural persons and legal entities against whom/which there is a well-founded suspicion that they could commit such offences. The law also stipulates substantial fines for media, and even closure, according to the type of media concerned. In the past, leading opposition figures in particular have called for or welcomed economic sanctions as a means of exerting pressure in negotiations - a practice most recently applied once again by opposition politician Machado (Vente Venezuela).²⁹

09 December 2024

Austerities continue for opposition figures in refuge at embassy

According to reports in the media, the Argentinian embassy in Caracas, which is currently being run by Brazil and in which six of opposition leader Machado's staff have been staying in diplomatic asylum since March 2024 (cf. BN of 08.04., 05.08. and 09.09.24), has most recently been surrounded by security forces amid threats that the building will be stormed. The embassy's power supply has been cut off for several weeks now, and in recent days deliveries of food to those in the embassy have been hindered. Argentina has repeatedly called on the Venezuelan government to guarantee free passage out of the country for those in refuge at the embassy and to end the siege.³⁰

23 December 2024

Demonstrators released, opposition figures arrested

While there have recently been renewed reports of (conditional) releases of persons who were arrested in connection with the presidential elections in 2024, the past few weeks have once again witnessed the arrests of a number of opposition figures. Human rights defenders speak in this connection of a "revolving door" policy being applied as a form of repression, with individuals continually being released while at the same time new arrests take place, thereby exploiting political prisoners as a means of exerting pressure.

The chief public prosecutor's office claims that in total over 730 people have been released from prison from the first releases in November 2024 (cf. BN of 18.11.24) to 20.12.24. The number of releases verified by NGO Foro Penal

is markedly lower. In addition, the most recently verified release cases are said to have included many minors. Foro Penal has put the number of political prisoners as per 19.12.24 at 1,877.

According to reports in the media, at least nine political activists were arrested in the two weeks up to 19.12.24 alone, the majority of whom belonged to the opposition party Vente Venezuela. Those arrested included the opposition politician and mayor of Cabimas, Nabil Maalour (Un Nuevo Tiempo), who was arrested on 10.12.24, according to interior minister Cabello on charges including administrative corruption, and Jesús Armas (Primero Justicia), also a politician (former city councillor) and director of the NGO Ciudadanía Sin Límites, who was also arrested in Caracas. According to members of Armas' family, his arrest could be linked to a critical tweet which he posted in which he responded to the cancellation of a concert by a popular band by describing Venezuela as a dictatorship in which there was no space for any divergent views even in the cultural sphere. Armas' relatives have also pointed out that around one week before his arrest he was spotlighted and criticised in interior minister Cabello's television programme (Con el mazo dando). A report published by Amnesty International (AI) at the beginning of 2022 apparently reveals previous similar cases in which individuals have been stigmatised and smeared and later arrested either arbitrarily or for political reasons (cf. BN of 28.02.22).

On 08.12.24 a non-commissioned officer of the Argentine Gendarmerie on a private visit to relatives in the state of Táchira was arrested directly upon entering the country from Colombia. He is accused of spying. A local employee of the Argentinian embassy in Caracas is also reported to have been arrested. The Argentinian government has described the arrest of the member of its military as arbitrary and called publicly for the detained men to be released.

On 12.12.24 the NGO HRW called on the Venezuelan government to disclose the whereabouts of Sofía María Sahagún Ortiz, who holds dual Spanish and Venezuelan nationality and has been missing since 23.10.24. Sahagún was intending to fly to Madrid on 23.10.24, but did not board the plane. It is not known whether she has been arrested and where she currently is. Sahagún's husband and their children left the country a number of days later after being subjected to increasing intimidation by the police.³¹

Two more deaths in custody; prison conditions

Two people have died in the space of 72 hours at Tocuyito prison in the state of Carabobo. Media reports and NGOs accuse the authorities of having denied the prisoners adequate and timely medical care, and are calling for independent investigations into the deaths. The two individuals concerned are believed to have been detained on political grounds. Back in mid-November 2024, Jesús Manuel Martínez, a political activist from the opposition party Vente Venezuela and electoral witness, who was imprisoned at Puente Ayala prison in Barcelona, Anzoátegui, died in hospital following complications resulting from an underlying diabetes condition which had rapidly deteriorated in prison. The chief public prosecutor's office has rejected accusations from Martínez's family and members of the opposition that he did not receive the necessary, adequate medical care and was only attended to when it was too late (cf. BN of 25.11.24).

Various actors have repeatedly drawn attention to the precarious prison conditions and violence against inmates, as well as sexualised violence against female visitors (cf. BN of 04.11.24). The civil-society Venezuelan Observatory for Prisons (OVP) most recently highlighted the examination of mobile telephones and body checks carried out on women while they were nude and reported on political prisoners being threatened with bans on receiving visitors and intimidation of their family members.

In a report which appeared on 28.11.24, AI presented identified individual cases confirming the mistreatment and suspected torture of imprisoned minors, and called for the 69 people who were arrested in the aftermath of the presidential elections and who were still in prison at the time to be released.³²

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