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VENEZUELA AND THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN AUTOCRACY AND DEMOCRACY BY LEOPOLDO LÓPEZ

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Despite knowing that the elections on July 28 would be neither free nor fair, Venezuelans decided to participate, supporting presidential candidate Edmundo González and opposition leader María Corina

Machado. As polls predicted, González dominated in all states and municipalities, winning nearly 70% of the vote. Nevertheless, what many feared came to pass, Maduro ignored the results and claimed victory.

What happened next, however, was genuinely surprising, and has terrifed Maduro. Hundreds of thousands of people spontaneously took to the streets, especially in working-class communities where Chavismo traditionally enjoyed support. Protestors tore down statues of former President Hugo Chávez, mirroring the fervor seen in other nations when dictatorships fall, such as in the SovietUnion, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and Libya under Muammar Gaddaf. Scenes of police and soldiers removing their uniforms and joining protests raised hopes that anguished Venezuelans might have a chance to peacefully express their frustration.

Instead, Maduro fulfilled his pre-election threat of a "bloodbath." He deployed armed gangs known as colectivos to assault demonstrators, his security services detained over 1,000 individuals. Among Venezuela's new political prisoners is Freddy Superlano, the leader of the Voluntad Popular party.

The fate of Venezuela matters to its neighbors, who have already absorbed millions of Venezuelan migrants and refugees. It is also consequential for global oil markets. But there is another reason to focus on the struggles of the Venezuelan opposition: the evolution of this crisis will infuence the global struggle between autocracy and democracy. If Venezuela achieves a democratic transition, it would be the first such transition this century, offering a beacon of hope for other nations in similar situations.

For almost two decades, the world has seen a rise in autocracies, with the percentage of the global population living in a dictatorship increasing from

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