News



A Venezuelan woman living in Colombia reacts during a protest at the Plaza de Bolivar in Bogota, Colombia, Aug. 3, 2024, held in support of the opposition amid the disputed Venezuelan presidential election (OSV News/Nathalia Angarita, Reuters)



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Pope Francis has called for both sides to "seek the truth" in Venezuela's contested election as the opposition denounces electoral fraud — publishing tally sheets as proof — while the ruling Chavista regime refuses to release the full information on the vote and cracks down on demonstrations.

During his Angelus address Aug. 4, Francis said, "I make a heartfelt appeal to all parties to seek the truth, to exercise restraint, to avoid any kind of violence, to settle disputes through dialogue, to have at heart the true good of the people and not partisan interests."

Venezuela's two most senior clergy, meanwhile, warned that harassment of priests from pro-government politicians has the country following in the footsteps of Nicaragua, where democracy has disappeared and the church is persecuted.

Cardinal Baltazar Porras, retired archbishop of Caracas, and Cardinal Diego Padrón, retired archbishop of Cumaná, also wrote in a three-page statement that the government has failed to "build bridges" with the opposition and remains trapped in the idea of a "'coup d'etat' constructed ad hoc," rather than releasing the complete results of the July 28 election — a move demanded by the opposition and countries recognizing the opposition victory, including the United States.

"The reaction of the Venezuelan government has been, until now, to flatly deny the opposition victory … without showing evidence, which are the voting records," Porras and Padrón said in the Aug. 1 statement.

"The government, instead of building bridges with the opposition … has widened the abyss in front of it, considering enemies all those who do not approve of its behavior. And it has decided to annihilate (opponents) with repression, prison, violence and death," the statement said.

The Aug. 1 document was not distributed by the Venezuelan bishops' conference or the Archdiocese of Caracas, but was authenticated by Venezuelan media several days later.

"What we cannot do is become another church of silence, letting time pass in vain. We have to discern in the Spirit the present moment as a kairos and act accordingly with courage, in the style of the apostles," the statement said.

"We are not and cannot be neutral," the cardinals continued. "It is necessary to carefully check the facts, to prophetically denounce, even at risk, injustices, and to proclaim our principles and values, accompanying the people in solidarity and pastorally, a task that is not easy but necessary."

Venezuelans voted in a tense election claimed by opposition candidate Edmundo González, a former diplomat whose campaign pointed to exit polls and tallies collected from polling centers as proof of his victory. But the National Electoral Council — packed with Maduro cronies — declared the president the winner with 51% of the vote compared to 44% for Gónzalez, but failed to present proof.

The opposition subsequently published tally sheets from 79% of polling centers showing González receiving more than double the votes cast for Maduro. International media outlets, including The Associated Press, reviewed the tally sheets and confirmed the opposition's findings.

Opposition supporters have protested in the streets, prompting hyperbolic responses from Maduro such as building mega prisons with reeducation centers for protesters. He later boasted of 2,000 protesters being imprisoned, pledging "maximum punishment."

In an Aug. 5 post on X, González thanked Francis "for your prayers for peace and truth of our Venezuela."

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Calls for dialogue have been met with dismay by the opposition, which has unsuccessfully bargained with Maduro for years over holding free and fair elections and accuse him of playing for time, according to analysts.

"People are mad about the framing of a need for dialogue when there's clearly a strong aggressor in the Maduro government and a subjugated opposition," Will Freeman, fellow for Latin American studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, told OSV News.

The Venezuelan issue has proved thorny for Francis, who was elected just eight days after former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez — who claimed power in 1999 and clashed with the country's bishops — died in March 2013.

The Vatican's attempts at brokering deals between the Venezuelan government and the opposition proved fraught early in his pontificate — with the Maduro side failing to uphold its end of the agreements, according to analysts.

"The Catholic Church in Venezuela has come under deep persecution," Geoff Ramsey, senior fellow for Venezuela at the Atlantic Council, told OSV News. "(Maduro) views the church as one of the few institutions in Venezuela that remains outside his control."

The opposition in Venezuela has been feckless and bested by infighting in past years. But it coalesced around María Corina Machado — who was disqualified from running — as voters abandoned the ruling chavistas, including the poor, amid rising poverty, economic collapse and 8 million compatriots fleeing the country.

"Emigration has torn apart families and the perhaps greatest peacetime economic collapse in world history will make people oppose any ruling government," said Daniel Di Martino, a Venezuela native and fellow at the Manhattan Institute. "What's new is the opposition having a well-organized operation."

Episcopal conferences across Latin America joined the pope by praying for peace in Venezuela Aug. 4.

"We are moved by the anguish and anxiety experienced by so many of our sisters and brothers who long for a better future for themselves, their families and communities," The Latin American bishops' council, commonly called CELAM, said in an Aug. 2 statement. "We encourage them to continue asking God, Lord of history, to illuminate Venezuela's path towards peace, justice and the common good."

Archbishop Carlos Castillo of Lima celebrated a special Mass Aug. 4 for Venezuelans living in Peru. "We wish that justice, peace and democracy are ensured for the good

of all. The serious attack against freedom and human dignity cannot continue," he said.

"Please know Venezuelan brothers and sisters, both those in your country and those who have chosen Panama as their home, that you are not alone," Archbishop José Ulloa of Panama said in a Mass celebrated Aug. 4. "May violence be replaced by peace. And may the will of the people expressed at the polls be recognized and embraced by all."