

Pope calls on Venezuelan leaders to resolve political crisis peacefully

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Pope Francis called on Venezuela's political leaders to resolve their differences through respectful dialogue and he urged the nation's people to reject all forms of violence as the country seeks to move ahead.

Venezuelans went to the polls April 14 to elect a successor to President Hugo Chavez, the socialist who died of complications from cancer March 5.

The National Election Council said Nicolas Maduro, who promised to continue the policies of Chavez, won the election by just 1.8 percentage points. His opponent, Henrique Capriles, raised questions about the validity of the vote and demanded a recount.

The announcement of Maduro's election by such a close margin set off a week of competing protests and celebrations around the country, which officials said led to the deaths of eight people.

After reciting the "Regina Coeli" prayer Sunday at the Vatican, Pope Francis told visitors in St. Peter's Square that he was "deeply concerned" about the unrest in Venezuela and hoped "just and peaceful" paths could be found to overcome the crisis.

"I ask the dear Venezuelan people -- particular the institutional and political leaders -- to firmly reject any kind of violence and to establish a dialogue based on truth," respecting each other and seeking the common good together.

"I ask believers to pray and work for reconciliation and peace," the pope said.

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