

Election Watch for the Digital Age



Venezuela

Preelection assessment

Legislative elections set for December 2020

Venezuela's de facto leader, Nicolas Maduro, was sworn in as president after a snap 2018 election that failed to meet minimum international standards and was widely condemned as illegitimate. The democratically elected National Assembly declared its head, Juan Guaido, to be Venezuela's interim president in line with the country's constitution. Guaido has since received the backing of more than 50 countries, including the United States. Maduro, however, has refused to relinquish power. Since Guaido's legal mandate expires at the end of this legislative term, the December 2020 elections have a direct bearing on the future of the political opposition.

As in 2018, the upcoming elections for the National Assembly in December 2020 are highly vulnerable to interference and do not meet minimum conditions for credibility. Over 25 opposition parties have declared that they will boycott the vote, citing clear instances of political interference by Maduro and his allies. The Supreme Court side-stepped the constitution by assigning directors of the National Electoral Council, a body normally appointed by the National Assembly to oversee the election. The court has also interfered with opposition parties, including by ordering that party leadership be replaced with Maduro sympathizers. Meanwhile, the authorities have closed off virtually all channels for political dissent by restricting civil liberties and prosecuting perceived opponents without regard for due process, as well as through enforced disappearances, torture, and extrajudicial killings.

Venezuela has a score of 17 out of 100, with 100 representing the least vulnerability in terms of election integrity, on Freedom House's Election Vulnerability Index, which is based on a selection of key election-related indicators. Venezuela's score reflects a poor performance across all categories, including the political environment and past elections, as well as broad failure to respect human rights. The country is rated **Not Free** in *Freedom in the World 2020*, with a score of 16 out of 100 with respect to its political rights and civil liberties, and **Not Free** in *Freedom on the Net 2019*, with an internet freedom score of 30 out of 100. To learn more about these annual Freedom House assessments, please visit the Venezuela country reports in [Freedom in the World](#) and [Freedom on the Net](#).

Freedom House has identified the following as key issues to watch ahead of election day:

- **Influence operations:** There is extensive evidence that the regime of Nicolas Maduro has manipulated online discussions through state-run media and covert influence campaigns. State officials, public agencies, party activists, semi-automated accounts, and bots harassed the opposition and spread misinformation on Twitter during the May 2018 election. The broader digital environment will likely see increased manipulation ahead of the December vote, including narratives aimed at dividing the opposition.
- **Blocking social media:** Social media and livestreaming platforms such as Twitter, Periscope, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube are frequently blocked during sensitive political events. The state-owned provider CANTV blocked platforms in November 2019 during protests for fair elections, and again in January 2020 when the opposition-controlled National Assembly was

scheduled to swear in new leadership. Shutdowns may occur before, during, or after the December vote, particularly if the regime feels threatened by digital activism and online reporting, which is likely to increase both within the country and among the diaspora.

- **Arrests and intimidation:** Political activists, journalists, and low-profile individuals are routinely harassed, arrested or arbitrarily detained, and violently targeted for their online writing. As tensions rise and the regime seeks to control the information landscape, users may face an uptick in legal and extralegal repercussions for social media posts and online reporting.
- **Cyberattacks:** Digital media outlets and human rights organizations have faced widespread phishing campaigns, DDoS attacks, and other attempts to disrupt their activities and gain access to sensitive information. Observers strongly suspect the actions are sponsored by or linked to the state, given that attacks often coincide with politically sensitive issues, including the publication of an interview about the “secrets of the Maduro government” in 2018 and Guaidó’s return to the country in 2019. Digital insecurity remains a major vulnerability in the pre-election period.