Corruption in Venezuela: A Sunrise or A Sunset On Democracy?

“Hasta aca se escuchan los disparos,” posts my thirteen year old cousin from Caracas at 9:05 on Monday night. *From here you can hear the gunshots.*

In the wake of ten days of unprecedented political action in the US, Americans are left wondering about the state of democracy. From shots fired in Butler, PA, on July 13; cult-like symbols of bandages worn on the ears of MAGA Republicans at the Republican National Convention six days later; Former President Trump nominating JD Vance as his running mate; President Biden suspending his reelection campaign, nominating Harris to run in his place; to Kamala’s “Brat summer” and the mobilization of Gen Z and Millennial voters, America’s attention is turned to the whirlwind the last eight days have been. Across the Caribbean Sea, tornadoes have touched down.

Ballot boxes began filling in Venezuela as early as Saturday, July 27 in the election that succeeded years of protest against twelve-year incumbent dictator Nicolas Maduro. Maduro’s presidency began in 2013 after the death of Hugo Chavez, the populist military officer who took office following his imprisonment for a failed coup against the previous president post-Caracazo.

After years of division between opposition forces, former diplomat Edmundo González Urrutia received unified support to challenge Maduro this year. Less than 80% of the votes were counted before the National Electoral Council (loyal to Maduro) announced on the 29th a third six-year term for Maduro, by an alleged margin of 51% to González’s 49% (NBC). But James “Boz” Bosworth, political analyst and author of the Latin America Risk Report, argued in a memo on the 30th these statistics are inaccurate:

“The totals (rounded) are 6.3 million votes for Edmundo Gonzalez and 2.8 million for Nicolas Maduro. The opposition won in every state. They won in precincts that previously voted heavily in favor of the Chavistas. It is a mathematical impossibility for Maduro to have won the election given that data.”

So what’s the truth, and what comes next? We don’t know. International governments are calling for transparency, but even *if* that happens, the fact remains that the election was never meant to be fair. From military forces blocking protestors to allegedly grounding flights carrying Latin American dignitaries due to be observing the elections, every step of the process was a violation of the rights of Venezuelans, and the effects are immediate.

Journalist Jasmina Kelemen believes these protests to be different from past ones; “I think the government and its forces were genuinely surprised by the display of spontaneous protests that occurred throughout the country yesterday. This is the first time that you’re seeing such
widespread popular actions that are not explicitly organized by the opposition. That is a huge difference from before and genuinely more dangerous for Maduro. …This stolen election sort of rips back the curtain and exposes the dictatorship for what it really is.”

Venezuelan media analyst and attorney Yael Marciano says “Venezuelans are highly educated, [and] at one point it was the largest group with high level education.” They know what they’re doing here. Citizens across the country can all agree on one thing: at least for the next few days, eyes are on Venezuela. While media coverage labels these protests to be a cry for help, many believe they’re just the opposite.

Poet and editor Nidia Hernandez has a message of hope: “Although the dictatorship mocked, as always, the majority and its desire to get rid of the dictatorship with votes, lied to the country and the world and proclaimed itself the winner (because they are scoundrels), today people are in the streets, protesting the impunity and corruption, because those who hold power in Venezuela today have always been cynical, evil, criminals, I ask God that no more Venezuelans die, that democracy prevails, which with all its faces is one of the best civic inventions of man.”

As I write this at my kitchen table, watching the news show people in the street bang pots and pans and wave flags, I know the future of my country is uncertain. In the backyard, my dog who has never known the soil of my homeland chases birds under an orange sky. A part of me can’t help but wonder if the sun is setting on corruption or if the sun is just setting.

Bella Rotker is a proud Venezuelan and 305 local whose work has appeared in Fifth Wheel Press, JAKE, and Best American High School Writing (2022 & 2023), among others. As a high school senior majoring in creative writing at Interlochen Arts Academy, Bella served as Michigan’s Youth Lieutenant Governor and is the youngest ever member of Writers for Democratic Action’s national steering committee.