

Venezuela vote fix: President added an extra MILLION votes in blood-soaked election to make him a dictator as fears are raised country will default on huge debts

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- Voting company Smartmatic claims voting numbers were inflated
- President Trump has condemned the arrest of Venezuelan opposition leaders
- Antonio Ledezma and Leopoldo Lopez are critics of President Nicolas Maduro
- Men have been arrested from their homes by intelligence services, relatives say
- Came after a vote to choose controversial assembly that supersedes parliament

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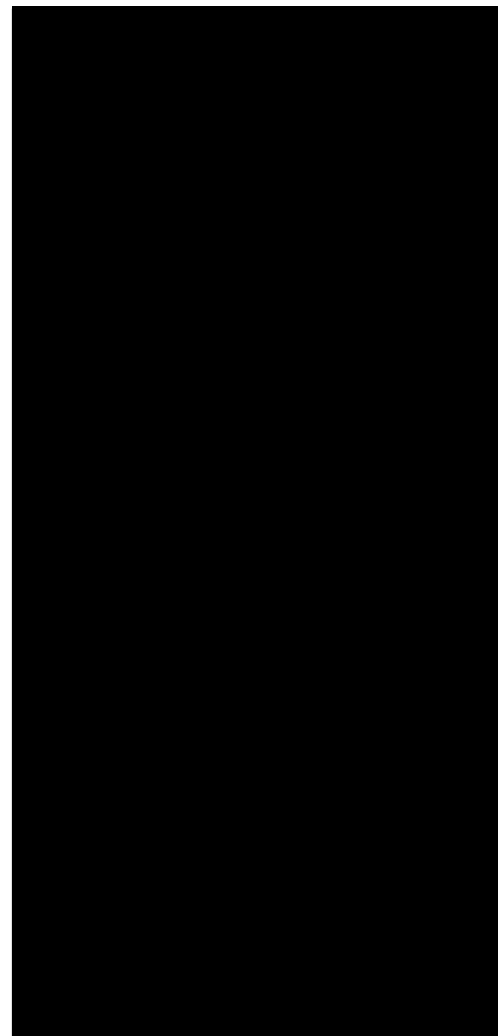
Voting turnout figures during Venezuela's blood-soaked election were heavily manipulated - with at least one million votes added, it is claimed.

Polling company Smartmatic, which provided the Latin American country's voting system, has alleged large scale tampering during Sunday's election, which saw 10 people killed in violent clashes.

Opposition to the socialist president Nicolas Maduro have claimed voting numbers were inflated to keep the under-fire leader in power.

The claim comes as Madura faces international pressure following the arrest of two opposition leaders in the wake of the weekend's vote.

Experts have warned that Sunday's election means the cash-strapped country could be on the verge of defaulting on its \$5billion of foreign debt.





© AFP/Getty Images

The government of President Nicolas Maduro (pictured) has been accused of manipulating voting figures in Sunday's elections



© AFP/Getty Images

A member of the national guard fires his shotgun at opposition demonstrators during clashes in Caracas over the weekend



Violence swept the country on Sunday as Maduro, 54, defied international condemnation to hold elections for a powerful new 'Constituent Assembly'. This was the scene as police clashed with protesters in Caracas yesterday

The country went to the polls to choose a much-condemned assembly that supersedes parliament.

Smartmatic chief executive Antonio Mugica told a news briefing in London: 'We know, without any doubt, that the turn out of the recent election for a National Constituent Assembly was manipulated.'

'We estimate the difference between the actual participation and the one announced by authorities is at least one million votes.'

Mr Mugica said the company, which has provided machines for Venezuelans to cast their votes electronically since 2004, provided the correct data, but misleading results were announced in their place.

He said he has not been in contact with the Venezuelan government because it 'would not be sympathetic to what we'd say'.



Opposition supporters stand behind a barricade as the Constituent Assembly election was being carried out in Caracas, Venezuela yesterday



Opponents have vowed to keep protesting after the election, which was called in a bid to pick a new assembly to rewrite the constitution

Venezuela's National Electoral Council said turnout was 41.53 percent, or 8,089,320 people. The result would mean the ruling party won more support than it had in any national election since 2013, despite a cratering economy, spiraling inflation, shortages of medicine and malnutrition.

Opinion polls had said some 85 per cent of Venezuelans disapproved of the constitutional assembly and similar numbers disapproved of Maduro's overall performance.

Opposition leaders estimated the real turnout at less than half the government's claim in a vote watched by government-allied observers but no internationally recognised poll monitors.

An exit poll based on surveys from 110 voting centers by New York investment bank Torino Capital and a Venezuela public opinion company estimated 3.6 million people voted, or about 18.5 per cent of registered voters.

The electoral council's vote counts in the past had been seen as reliable and generally accurate, but the widely mocked announcement appeared certain to escalate the polarization and political conflict paralyzing the country.

Yesterday Luis Emilio Rondon, the only opposition representative on the National Electoral Council's five-member board, charged there were irregularities in Sunday's elections.

MADURO MOVES FAST TO SWEAR IN UNDER-FIRE NEW ASSEMBLY

Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro moved quickly today to swear in a new assembly with extraordinary powers.

The election of the new super-assembly, with candidates selected from the ruling party, drew international condemnation as a power grab by the unpopular Maduro, whose leftist government is beset by violent street protests and an economy on the brink of collapse.

Those fears were underscored on Tuesday when two prominent opposition leaders were hustled off to jail in the middle of the night by armed members of the Venezuelan intelligence services.

Maduro planned to swear in the 545

'I consider to be reasonable the doubts the people may have about the results offered by the CNE,' he said, referring to the election authority by its Spanish acronym.

The National Assembly on Tuesday agreed not to recognize 'the fraudulent and illegitimate' Constituent Assembly, which will have the power to dissolve it.

More than 125 people have been killed in clashes between security forces and protesters since April 1 in an uptick of resistance to the Maduro government.

Alarm has been raised over the possibility the US may impose restrictions on Venezuelan oil exports and the impact this could have.

Warning that Venezuela may default on its debts, FTI Consulting analyst Roberto Simon told the [Wall Street Journal](#): 'There's a huge dependency on exports to the United States at a time of profound economic turbulence.

'It would be basically cutting off the single most important source of revenue. It would significantly raise the risks of default.'

Yesterday President Donald [Trump](#) condemned the arrests of two opposition leaders in Venezuela, branding the country's president a dictator.

The White House called for the release of Antonio Ledezma and Leopoldo Lopez, high profile critics of Maduro. They were reportedly hauled out of their houses by intelligence services and jailed earlier this week.

In a statement released on Tuesday, Trump said the pair were being held illegally, calling for their immediate release.

members of the so-called Constituent Assembly, including his own wife and son, on Wednesday at a concert arena in Caracas, his press office said.

They will then take their seats on Thursday in the formal chamber of the National Assembly, which is now controlled by the opposition but whose powers will be superseded by the new body.

The opposition has called a major rally for Thursday as well.

Venezuelan officials claim that more than 40 percent of the country's 20 million voters cast ballots on Sunday, which were boycotted by the opposition.





© NurPhoto via Getty Images
Strong message: President Donald Trump called for the immediate release of two high profile critics of Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro, branding Maduro a 'dictator'

'The United States condemns the actions of the Maduro dictatorship,' the White House said in a statement.

'Mr. Lopez and Mr. Ledezma are political prisoners being held illegally by the regime,' the statement read. 'The United States holds Maduro - who publicly announced just hours earlier that he would move against his political opposition - personally responsible for the health and safety of Mr. Lopez, Mr. Ledezma, and any others seized.'

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'We reiterate our call for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners.'

Yesterday, dramatic footage emerged showing Mr Ledzema and Mr Lopez being dragged away from their homes after controversial elections marred by bloodshed.

Dramatic footage has emerged showing two Venezuelan opposition leaders being dragged away from their homes after controversial elections marred by bloodshed. One clip (above) shows Antonio Ledezma being forcibly removed from his house as women scream in the background



US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said the 'illegitimate elections confirm that Maduro is a dictator who disregards the will of the Venezuelan people.'

In one arrest video, Ledezma can be seen being forcibly removed from a building as women scream in the back ground. Another purportedly shows Lopez being bundled into a vehicle.

Lopez and Ledezma were both already under house arrest when they were picked up by the intelligence service.

Both had called for a boycott of Sunday's vote for a so-called and all-powerful constituent assembly tasked with rewriting the constitution.

Both of their families said they held President Nicolas Maduro, the driving force behind the vote, responsible for the leaders' lives.

'They just took Leopoldo away. We do not know where he is or where they are taking him,' Lopez's wife Lilian Tintori said on Twitter.



Another purportedly shows Leopoldo Lopez, another high profile critics of President Nicolas Maduro, being bundled into a vehicle



Arrest: The footage shows him Lopez being marched to a vehicle by intelligence services



The children of Ledezma - named Victor, Vanessa and Antonietta - also said on Twitter that the Sebin had taken away their father.

Opposition leaders and local media posted cell phone footage of Ledezma being taken away from his home forcibly.

Opposition lawmaker Freddy Guevara said the arrests were aimed at 'frightening us and demoralising us.'

Last night, Maduro brushed off new U.S. sanctions on him and condemnation at home and abroad of the newly chosen constitutional assembly, saying the vote has given him a popular mandate to radically overhaul Venezuela's political system.

Maduro said Monday evening he had no intention of deviating from his plans to rewrite the constitution and go after a string of enemies, from independent Venezuelan news channels to gunmen he claimed were sent by neighbouring Colombia to disrupt the vote as part of an international conspiracy led by the man he calls 'Emperor Donald Trump.'

'They don't intimidate me. The threats and sanctions of the empire don't intimidate

me for a moment,' Maduro said on national television. 'I don't listen to orders from the empire, not now or ever ... Bring on more sanctions, Donald Trump.'



Opposition leader Leopoldo Lopez (pictured) was arrested at his home, his wife has claimed



The children of Caracas Mayor Antonio Ledezma (pictured) - named Victor, Vanessa and Antonietta - also said on Twitter that the intelligence services had taken away their father

A few hours earlier, Washington added Maduro to a steadily growing list of high-ranking Venezuelan officials targeted by financial sanctions, escalating a tactic that has so far failed to alter his socialist government's behavior.

For now, the Trump administration did not deliver on threats to sanction Venezuela's oil industry, which could undermine Maduro's government but raise U.S. gas prices and deepen the humanitarian crisis here.

The sanctions came after electoral authorities said more than 8 million people voted Sunday to create a constitutional assembly endowing Maduro's ruling party with virtually unlimited powers - a turnout doubted by independent analysts while the

election was labeled illegitimate by leaders across the Americas and Europe.

Maduro called the constitutional assembly in May after a month of protests against his government, which has overseen Venezuela's descent into a devastating crisis during its four years in power.

Due to plunging oil prices and widespread corruption and mismanagement, Venezuela's inflation and homicide rates are among the world's highest, and widespread shortages of food and medicine have citizens dying of preventable illnesses and rooting through trash to feed themselves.

The president of the opposition-led National Assembly, Julio Borges, told Venezuelan news channel Globovision on Monday that Maduro's foes would continue protesting until they won free elections and a change of government.

He said Sunday's vote gave Maduro 'less legitimacy, less credibility, less popular support and less ability to govern.'



A policeman receives aid from his colleagues after an explosion at the Altamira Square surroundings in Caracas, Venezuela,

'If it wasn't a tragedy ... if it didn't mean more crisis, the electoral council's number would almost make you laugh,' opposition leader Freddy Guevara said on Twitter. Maduro has threatened that one of the constitutional assembly's first acts would be jailing Guevara for inciting violence.

The constituent assembly will have the task of rewriting the country's constitution and will have powers above and beyond other state institutions, including the opposition-controlled congress.

Maduro has said the new assembly will begin to govern within a week. Among other measures, he said he would use the assembly's powers to bar opposition candidates from running in gubernatorial elections in December unless they sit with his party to negotiate an end to hostilities that have generated four months of protests that have killed at least 120 and wounded nearly 2,000.

Colombia, Mexico, Peru and other nations joined the US in saying they did not recognize the results of Sunday's election, which appointed a new 'Constituent Assembly' superseding Venezuela's legislative body, the opposition-controlled National Assembly.

Maduro's own attorney general, Luisa Ortega - who broke with him months ago over his policies - also said she would not acknowledge the body, calling it part of the president's 'dictatorial ambition.'

The European Union expressed 'preoccupation for the fate of democracy in Venezuela' and said it, too, doubted it could accept the results.



Protesters attacked polling stations and barricaded streets around the country, drawing a bloody response from security forces, who opened fire with live ammunition in some cases

And Britain's Foreign Minister Boris Johnson warned that Venezuela 'stands on the brink of disaster.'

'Nicolas Maduro's government must stop before it is too late,' he said.

Maduro said he had received congratulations from the governments of Cuba, Bolivia and Nicaragua, among others.

The monetary impact of the new U.S. sanctions wasn't immediately clear as Maduro's holdings in U.S. jurisdictions, if he has any, weren't publicized.

However, imposing sanctions on a head of state is rare and can be symbolically powerful, leading other countries to similarly shun such a leader.

For example, the U.S. has had sanctions against Syria's President Bashar Assad since 2011. Other heads of state currently subject to U.S. sanctions include Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe and North Korea's Kim Jong Un.

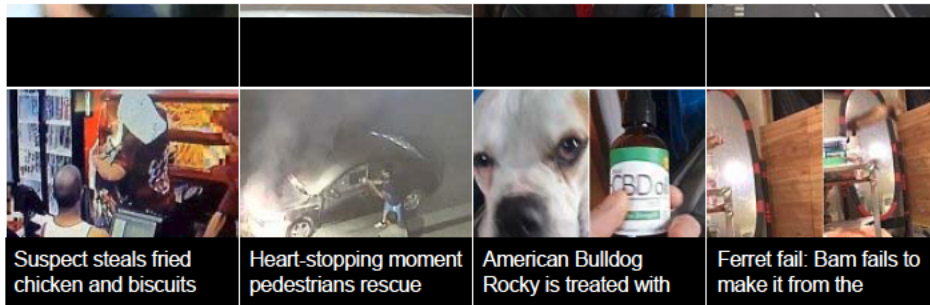
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 **iggle**, pittsburgh, 14 minutes ago
Where is the UN condemnation? Oh, pardon me, Venezuela has a Socialist government . No criticism here! My payers are with he Freedom Fighters. God be with you. LIVE FREE OR DIE!
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 **Adam M**, London, 15 minutes ago
Corbyn's favourite state! Mind you, his many student supporters of his voted twice? Socialism!
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 **Bubby3**, London, United Kingdom, 20 minutes ago
All heir exports have gone down by extreme percentages, some starting as early as 2009. The only one that's gone up is Cereal. THAT is pathetic!!! This is what happens when you focus too much on social programs and not enough on building economy. CAN'T FOR THE LIFE OF ME FIGURE OUT WHY PEOPLE STILL BUY INTO SOCIALISM!!!??
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 **Glynn13**, Churchill, United Kingdom, less than a minute ago

Stoopidity.

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Jacob London Great, London, United Kingdom, 27 minutes ago

just bloody unbelievable Venezuela got plenty of oil and they can't even feed their own people... that's socialism to you...

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Bubby3, London, United Kingdom, 34 minutes ago

Would feel like a MAJOR D BAG if I was a cop in this country. In one way I get they need to keep the chaos at bay and people safe but at the other hand they are protecting a Dictator. I'd feel sick inside, real sick!

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Charles Martel, Dublin, Ireland, 42 minutes ago

Hillary tried the same thing but the electoral system got in her way, evil schemer.

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chrissp, Redhill, United Kingdom, about an hour ago

Just copying the Trump election - typical of the US to criticise the vote - don't do as I do - do as I say

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Bubby3, London, United Kingdom, 36 minutes ago

Loads of Americans voted for him but won't admit it. compared to She Who Must Not BE Named...he was the only choice. And they hate it.

Click to rate 9 1



Bubby3, London, United Kingdom, 33 minutes ago

Says the Brit paying taxes to Germany? No country is free from political hypocrisy and/or irony.

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Pilchard the cat, Up North, United Kingdom, about an hour ago

"So that's where we went wrong"-Theresa May.

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Yawn Enough Already, Patriotville, United States, about an hour ago

Isn't socialism great!

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Preds, Nashville, United States, about an hour ago

"These days, the American Dream is more apt to be realized in South America, in places such as Ecuador, Venezuela, and Argentina where incomes are more equal today than they are in the land of Horatio Alger". - Bernie Sanders, 2011

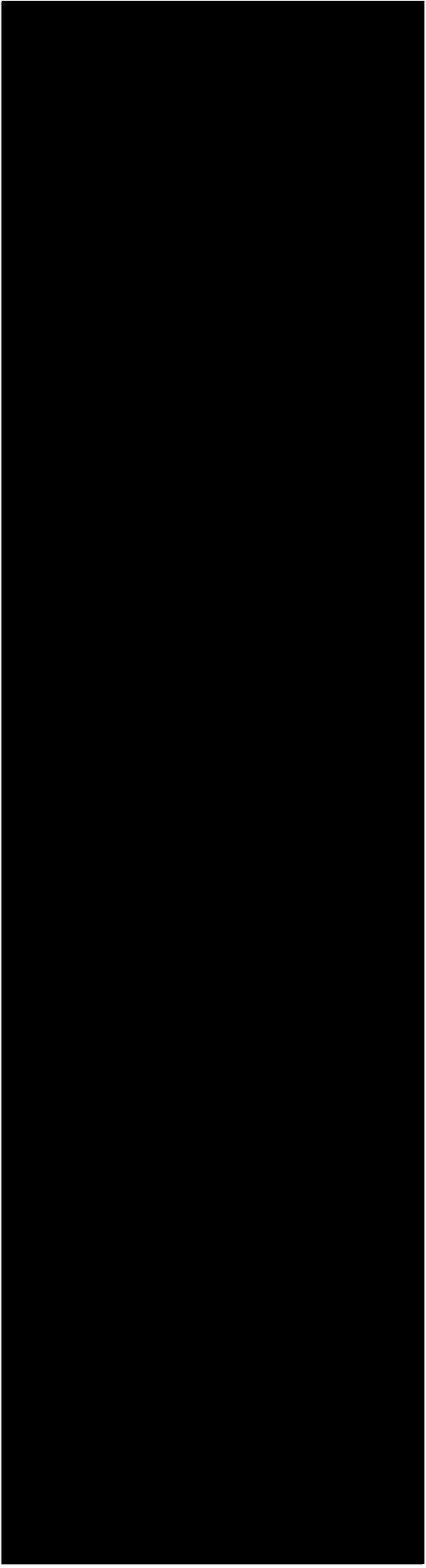
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Bubby3, London, United Kingdom, 32 minutes ago

The Scots would like to add themselves to his list.



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