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FEATURED Q&A

What Could Come of Talks Between Maduro & the U.S.?



Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro said last week that he would be open to talks with U.S. officials. // File Photo: Venezuelan Government.

Q Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro announced July 1 that he will resume talks with the United States. The announcement came just weeks before the country's July 28 election, in which Maduro is seeking another term. The Biden administration, which said it was open to such talks, reimposed some economic sanctions on Venezuela earlier this year, saying Maduro had failed to uphold an agreement on free and fair elections when the opposition's favorite candidate, María Corina Machado, was barred from running. What are the main motivations on both sides to engage in talks? What are the talks likely to accomplish, and how likely is the United States to ease sanctions? How might talks between the two countries affect Venezuela's upcoming election?

A Tamara Taraciuk Broner, director of the Peter D. Bell Rule of Law Program at the Inter-American Dialogue: "At this point, elections in Venezuela will not be free nor fair. Yet, despite the government's ongoing attempts to tilt the playing field, the Venezuelan people are eager to vote, overwhelmingly, for change. Venezuelan authorities know this and will keep trying to narrow the opposition's margin, likely to make it easier to announce results favoring the government that would differ from what reliable polls indicate will happen on July 28. In this context, talks between Venezuela and the United States—or anyone else—will not focus on significantly changing electoral conditions at this point, but rather on keeping a communications channel open for what will happen during and after election day. For the

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TODAY'S NEWS

ECONOMIC

U.S. Imposes Tariffs on Some Steel Imports From Mexico

The United States will start imposing tariffs on some steel imports from Mexico in an effort to curb the importation of metal from China.

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BUSINESS

Judge in Puerto Rico Power Authority Case Orders Mediation

A judge on Wednesday ordered all parties to mediation in the debt restructuring case of the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority.

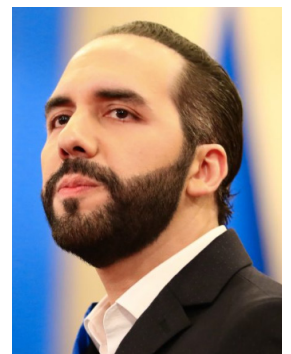
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POLITICAL

At Least 261 Have Died in El Salvador's Prisons: Report

At least 261 people have died in El Salvador's prisons since President Nayib Bukele launched a crackdown on gangs in 2022, a human rights group said Wednesday in a report.

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Bukele // File Photo: Salvadoran Government.

POLITICAL NEWS

At Least 261 Have Died in El Salvador's Prisons: Report

At least 261 people have died in El Salvador's prisons since President Nayib Bukele launched his anti-gang crackdown in 2022, human rights group Cristosal said Wednesday, the Associated Press reported. As of April, 88 of those deaths "may have been the result of a criminal act," the rights group's report said, though it did not specify what those acts were. Of the other deaths, 87 were related to illness, 12 were apparent "acts of violence" and there was no cause that could be determined for the remaining 72, the report said. "People have died in El Salvador's prisons and jails because of torture, a lack of food, unhealthy conditions, an inhuman lack of attention and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment," said lawyer Zaira Navas, the author of the report. "There is a deliberate policy of not protecting the rights of incarcerated people," Navas added. Bukele's government had no immediate reaction to the findings, the AP reported. Under the state of emergency that Bukele's government implemented in March 2022, and which is still in effect, authorities have arrested more than 81,000 suspected

gang members in sweeps that human rights groups criticize as frequently arbitrary. At the same time, the country's homicide rate has dropped sharply, and Bukele won re-election in February despite a constitutional ban on presidents serving a second consecutive term. "In El Salvador, the picture is frightening. The government and security forces are rapidly accruing power while Salvadorans are stripped of rights, protections and freedoms," Leonor Arteaga, program director at the Due Process of Law Foundation, told the Advisor in a [Q&A](#) published Feb. 6.

ECONOMIC NEWS

U.S. Imposes Tariffs on Some Steel Imports From Mexico

The United States will begin to apply national security tariffs to some imports of steel and aluminum arriving from Mexico in an effort to curb Chinese metal entering across the U.S. southern border, the Financial Times reported Wednesday. The White House said duties of 25 percent would be applied to any steel that was not melted and poured in North America. Aluminum from Mexico but containing primary

NEWS BRIEFS

Colombian Warlord Freed From Prison After Serving Sentence

Colombian warlord Salvatore Mancuso, a leader of a paramilitary group founded by cattle ranchers and who was found responsible by Colombian courts for 1,500 murders and disappearances, was released on Wednesday from prison, the Associated Press reported. Mancuso was repatriated from the United States in February after spending 12 years in prison and three years in an immigration detention facility. He repeatedly asked Colombian courts to grant him his freedom, and he promised to work with the Colombian government in its rapprochement with illegal armed groups.

Mexico's Sheinbaum Planning to Build New Passenger Rail Lines

Mexican President-elect Claudia Sheinbaum is planning to build three new passenger rail lines running from Mexico City to cities along the country's border with the United States, outgoing President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said Wednesday, the Associated Press reported. The trains would be electric, Sheinbaum said.

Grenergy Renewables Secures \$345 Million Loan for Chile Energy Project

Spanish energy recovery marketing company Grenergy Renewables has secured a \$345 million green loan for the first two parts of the Oasis de Atacama project, a solar and battery energy storage system in Chile, Power Technology reported today. One of the largest storage projects in the world, Oasis de Atacama is projected to supply electricity to 145,000 homes annually, removing 146,000mt of carbon dioxide emissions. The first phase should connect by the end of this year, and the second by 2025.

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U.S. government, this should include being able to reach out to Venezuelan authorities if there is an attempt to steal the election or if an institutional crisis leads to violence and repression. For the Maduro government, it is a way of demonstrating that it represents legitimate authorities who have a direct channel with the United States, instead of negotiating with the united opposition. Keeping this door open is essential because July 28 is not the end of the road, but rather a key political moment that could be the starting point for Venezuela's future. If the United States wants to play an important role, it should today send unequivocal messages

that going further down the repressive path will have high costs for Venezuela. Yet, simultaneously, it needs to prepare for a negotiation that provides incentives to key people in power in Venezuela who are willing to pave the way for a transition to democracy after the elections."



Michael Shifter, senior fellow and former president of the Inter-American Dialogue: "For

both the United States and Venezuelan governments, it makes sense to keep a channel of communication open. As the crucial July 28 election nears, bilateral

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smelt from China, Belarus, Iran or Russia would be taxed at 10 percent. The aim is designed to close a loophole that, according to officials, allows metals made partly in China to arrive to the United States duty free, The New York Times reported. "Chinese steel and aluminum entering the U.S. market through Mexico evades tariffs, undermines our investments and harms American workers in states like Pennsylvania and Ohio," said Lael Brainard, U.S. President Joe Biden's economic advisor, the Financial Times reported. The policy follows a series of tariff increases on Chinese goods as the Biden administration attempts to bolster support from former industrial heartlands as he faces his second election against Donald Trump in November. Earlier this year, Biden moved to prevent Pittsburgh-based producer U.S. Steel from being acquired by Japanese-owned Nippon Steel in what Biden characterized as a show of support for steelworkers in Pennsylvania, a key swing state in the presidential election.

BUSINESS NEWS

Judge in Puerto Rico Power Authority Case Orders Mediation

A U.S. federal judge who is overseeing the debt restructuring of the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority on Wednesday ordered all of the parties to mediation in an effort to break an impasse in the process, the Associated Press reported. Efforts to restructure the utility, which holds more than \$10 billion in debt, have failed in recent years. The drawn-out process has harmed the U.S. territory's ability to attract investment, the wire service reported. "Movement is necessary to resolve this," Judge Laura Taylor Swain said during a court hearing in New York. "I need response with alacrity," she added. At the same time, Swain imposed a stay on litigation for two months as she urged all sides to work together to find a compromise. "Please keep Puerto Rico's people in mind as you go into this," she told the parties. The judge's order came almost a month after an appeals court

THE DIALOGUE CONTINUES

Has An Apparent Coup Attempt Weakened Bolivia?

Q **Bolivian Army General Juan José Zúñiga is accused of leading a coup attempt against the government of President Luis Arce on June 26. In the episode, a small tank rammed the gates of the presidential palace, a contingent of troops rushed in and a shouting match ensued between Zúñiga and Arce before Zúñiga finally exited the palace and sped away in a bulletproof military vehicle. Zúñiga is now in jail and accuses Arce of staging a sham coup in an effort to bolster his own popularity, which the president denies. What effects does the incident have on Arce's government? How firm is the government's control of the military? What will be the impact of the event in the run-up to next year's presidential election?**

A **Kathryn Ledebur, director of the Andean Information Network in Cochabamba:** "The June 26 anomalous coup attempt is difficult to decipher. It was brief, with no serious injuries and no clear explanation of why Arce and cabinet members put themselves at risk. The subsequent investigation has presented more questions than answers. Arce hand picked Zúñiga as army commander, passing over dozens of officers who were more qualified, and he was considered to be his closest ally in the armed forces. Despite clashing hypotheses about the causes of

the incident, it reflects uncertainty about the loyalty of the military to the democratically elected government, less than five years after it accepted payment to violently install an illegal president, committing two massacres and gross human rights violations. Continuing impunity for many of these offenses, a lack of justice reform or restructuring of the security forces makes the government increasingly vulnerable to future undemocratic attempts to displace it. An economic crisis, gasoline shortages and the disappearance of dollars from the market, as well as a constitutional tribunal that illegally extended its mandate generate greater instability. A bitter division between Arce and his predecessor, three-time President Evo Morales further exacerbate the crisis. In short, Bolivia's newly reinstated democracy has become even more fragile. There is a significant possibility that the right could win the next elections, legally or by other means. The election of Donald Trump could well support a violent attempt to take power and instate a far-right leader, as it did in 2019. A sector of the armed forces would most likely welcome this option."

EDITOR'S NOTE: The comment above is a continuation of the Q&A published in Tuesday's issue of the Advisor.

in Boston revived \$9 billion in bondholders' claims following the bankruptcy of the Puerto Rico Electric Power authority, the AP reported. However, a federal control board that oversees the territory's finances pointed out that the utility cannot pay bondholders as it has no net income. Shortly before Swain's order on Wednesday, the lead mediator, Judge Shelley Chapman, expressed "immense frustration and disappointment" that no compromise had been

reached, the AP reported. "The mediation team has been acutely aware of the suffering of the Puerto Rican people," as debt restructuring efforts stall, said Chapman. Puerto Rico has faced chronic power outages and crumbling infrastructure since Hurricane Maria destroyed much of its electrical grid in 2017. Last month, an outage struck the island during a heat wave, leaving some 350,000 customers without power, The New York Times reported.

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talks can be useful in seeking to shape the conditions for an eventual stable, peaceful and democratic transition in that crisis-ridden country. The talks are unlikely to have much impact in the short term. The vote will be neither free nor fair. The authoritarian regime will need to resort to massive and blatant fraud to perpetuate itself in power. No serious person doubts that the

“For both the United States and Venezuelan governments, it makes sense to keep a channel of communication open.”

— Michael Shifter

opposition candidate, Edmundo González, backed by Venezuela's most popular political figure, María Corina Machado, enjoys broad and enthusiastic support, whereas Nicolás Maduro is immensely unpopular. After a quarter century of Chavismo's ruinous rule, the overwhelming majority of Venezuelans are clamoring for fundamental change. The key question is what happens after July 28. Should the fraud scenario materialize, with the opposition rightly claiming victory and popular legitimacy despite what the National Electoral Council declares, a political crisis could well ensue. One possibility is that the regime intensifies its already harsh repression of the opposition. There is, however, a far more hopeful prospect. The massive fraud could generate considerable pressure, both within Venezuela (particularly Chavismo) and among regional and international actors, for a serious political negotiation between the regime and opposition. In either case, the role of the United States will be crucial. Washington needs to do what it can to protect human rights in Venezuela and, under a more promising scenario, support

efforts to pursue democratic reforms and effective governance.”

A **Marc Becker, professor of history at Truman State University:** “It would help to put the upcoming Venezuelan election in a bit of a historical and political context. First, remember that the U.S. State Department similarly led a full-court press against the Nicaraguan election of 1990 declaring in advance that no way, no how would they accept the outcome of such a rigged electoral system—until Violeta Barrios de Chamorro unexpectedly won, and then it suddenly became the most free and fair election ever in Nicaraguan history that reflected the democratic will of the Nicaraguan people. Also remember that the leftist Sandinistas—unlike, say, Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro—recognized and accepted their defeat. Everyone knew that María Corina Machado was never going to be a candidate due to judicial rulings barring her from being a candidate because of her calls to overthrow the Venezuelan government. Trump, of course, engaged in similar conduct, and the only reason he is on the ballot this fall is because he packed the judiciary before leaving office. At the same time, the Green Party faces insurmountable barriers to ballot access, and its presidential candidate Jill Stein was imprisoned in St. Louis earlier this year. And speaking of political prisoners, may I point out that once again the American Indian Movement (AIM) activist Leonard Peltier has been denied parole and will probably die in jail? What we have learned from election deniers—both those in Venezuela and those in the United States—are that the only free and fair elections are those that we win; all others are fraudulent.”

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta.

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