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Vote tips life in Caracas further into chaos

Return to dark days as Maduro opponents arrested and sacked

Gideon Long in Caracas

When Javier Hernández turned up to work this week at the state-owned factory in Caracas where he has been employed for the past five years, his bosses refused to let him through the door.

“The head of human resources came out and told me I’d been dismissed,” said Mr Hernández, who is disabled and confined to a wheelchair. “They didn’t confirm it in writing, just by word of mouth.”

Mr Hernández’s offence? He refused to vote in last weekend’s election for candidates to Nicolás Maduro’s constituent assembly — a new legislative body created by the Venezuelan president in an effort to cling to power.

Such is life in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, where the vote for a new assembly with sweeping powers has further tipped life in the capital Caracas into chaos.

In a throwback to Latin America’s dark days of the 1970s and 1980s, the intelligence service, the SEBIN, has been rounding up opposition figures.

The country’s best known political prisoner Leopoldo López was bundled into a SEBIN car in the middle of the night and driven to a military jail. Antonio Ledezma, a 62-year-old opposition mayor, was marched from his apartment in his pyjamas and held for three days before being returned to house arrest on Friday morning.

The Supreme Court, packed with Maduro yes-men, has ordered the detention of more mayors. Four magistrates and a politician, all sympathetic to the opposition, have taken refuge in the Chilean embassy.

“This is the first time in 18 years . . . that I’ve felt in danger,” said one academic, speaking on condition of anonymity. “I’ve been openly criticising the government for years without fear of reprisal but it feels like things have changed.”

The crisis has visibly altered Caracas, a city built on oil wealth but surrounded by hilltop shanty towns. Opposition-controlled areas are littered with trash, stones and branches, informal barricades set up by activists during protests against an assembly they fear will bring the country closer to dictatorship.

These protests have claimed more than 120 lives since April. While people have returned to work since the vote, military police remain on the street. While there is food in the shops, few can afford to buy it.

“People are desperate,” said Vilma Meneses, a 64-year-old woman at an opposition barricade in the district of Chacao. “They don’t have work, they can’t afford food and they don’t want this constituent assembly.”

There is graffiti everywhere, some of it humorous, some poetic and some angry. One piece of stencilled artwork shows Mr Maduro holding up a miniature copy of Venezuela’s constitution, as he often does during his lengthy speeches to the nation. “This is the new Bolivarian toilet paper,” he declares.

Murals of Hugo Chávez, Mr Maduro’s charismatic predecessor, and Simon Bolívar, Latin America’s great liberator, have been defaced. “No more deaths, no more orphaned dreams” reads one piece of graffiti in Plaza Altamira.

People rummage through garbage bags in search of food and a woman with two small children begs for money that is losing value by the day. The currency, the bolívar, has lost 60 per cent of its worth on the black market in the past month and shed 18 per cent on Thursday alone — a massive fall even by the country’s notorious inflationary standards.

The 100-bolívar note, until recently the most common in circulation, is now worth less than a US cent. People carry them around in backpacks.

Mr Maduro blames “speculators” and has threatened to lock up shopkeepers who adjust their prices to reflect the black-market rate, a necessary and widespread practice in Venezuela.

“It’s completely fraudulent,” opposition leader Henrique Capriles said of the assembly which convenes for the first time on Friday. “Maduro has played his last card. He’s put the noose around his own neck because he sold this assembly as the solution to the country’s problems and it’s not going to solve anything.”

And yet, pockets of normality and even opulence survive. In a McDonald’s, shoppers pay 20,000 bolívares — a fifth of the monthly minimum wage — for a burger, fries and coke. In the plush Galerías Sebucán shopping mall, well-heeled Venezuelan women pack the Spa Manos manicure parlour to get their nails done. This is, after all, a nation famous for its beauty queens.

There are still people who believe in the Bolivarian revolution. “All these photos that you publish — the burnt-out buses, the wrecked hospitals, the schools — that’s all been done by the opposition, not by the Chavistas,” said Magaly Briceño, a 60-year-old accountant in the gritty suburb of Catia. “I want my country to be like it was before, when Chávez was in power. The protesters just want to take us back to the time of Hitler.”

In the shadow of the Ávila, the lush green mountain that serves as Caracas's majestic tropical backdrop, gangs of young boys throw sticks into the mango trees to dislodge the fruit. In happier times, mangos were often left to rot where they fell. These days, they are a welcome source of food.

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