

How Nicolás Maduro has been able to cling to power

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CARACAS, Venezuela —

He rules a nation where inflation is spiraling toward 10 million percent. The United States and about 50 other countries no longer recognize him as president. His popularity has slumped to about 14 percent.

And yet, Nicolás Maduro has withstood intense pressure from Washington and a Venezuelan anti-government movement that is posing the stiffest challenge to the former union leader since he assumed the presidency in 2013.

For weeks, Venezuelans have jammed demonstrations in support of the opposition leader, Juan Guaidó, including a rally in Caracas on Saturday. Frustration with Maduro's government has surged even higher because of power outages that have brought the country to a virtual standstill in recent days.

How does Maduro manage to cling to power? The short answer is that the authoritarian leader has the military on his side. He has ensured officers' loyalty by offering promotions and allowing them to enrich themselves through state businesses and criminal activities, analysts say.

The Trump administration may face a complicated calculus in the next few weeks. The harsh sanctions it imposed in January on Venezuela's crucial oil industry may soon start to asphyxiate the country's already weak economy, but the military may resist diplomatic and economic pressure to split with Maduro.

"What happens if you don't break that military structure and the country continues to deteriorate? You have the terrible scenario of a Cuba or an Iran or a Syria or a Zimbabwe," said Luis Vicente León, head of the Datanálisis polling firm, referring to countries whose authoritarian governments dug in and survived, despite profound economic and political crises.

Guaidó — who has the support of about 60 percent of Venezuelans, according to a recent Datanálisis poll — and the United States have tried a variety of approaches to lure the military away from Maduro. They range from private talks to a proposed Venezuelan amnesty law that would shield officers from future prosecution.

The trouble is, many senior officers are deeply compromised. Maduro and his predecessor Hugo Chávez, who sought to carry out a left-wing "Bolivarian revolution," allowed officers to make money through activities as varied as organizing the state-run food distribution system and protecting drug traffickers, analysts say.

"The law of amnesty isn't attractive enough," said Félix Seijas, a social scientist who teaches at the Central University of Venezuela. "Those who are compromised are

very compromised. The amnesty law will not benefit them. Those who aren't that compromised won't need the amnesty law."

To accept an amnesty, military officers would have to trust that a future government would pardon them and that institutions would follow the law. But it is difficult to predict how a new government would essentially rebuild Venezuela's institutions, which for two decades have been molded by the "chavista" movement, becoming highly politicized.

Complicating matters, Cuban advisers to the Venezuelan military work to prevent defection, surveilling officers to guarantee their loyalty, according to diplomats, analysts and former military officers. "We have to remember these [Venezuelan] guys are being advised by the Cubans, who are masters of staying in power — 60 years and counting," said Brian Winter, a Latin America expert at the Americas Society/Council of the Americas in New York.

But even the military is not fully insulated from the countless strains on Venezuelans.

The economy has been so devastated by mismanagement and corruption that hunger is widespread, even among mid- and lower-ranking officers. Prices are soaring, and food and medicine are scarce.

This week's blackout infuriated Venezuelans even further, as food went bad and hospitals were forced to turn away patients because of the electrical failure. Maduro accused the U.S. government of sabotaging the system, but experts said the blackout probably occurred as a result of a lack of maintenance and expensive imported spare parts.

More than 700 low-ranking soldiers have fled across the Colombian border in recent weeks, many complaining of dissension in the ranks and limited food.

"We have lots of information suggesting that just as most Venezuelans are clearly unhappy with this regime and want it to come to an end, most members of the Venezuelan military feel the same way," Elliott Abrams, the U.S. special envoy for Venezuela, said Friday at a news briefing in Washington.

Soldiers "may get a small and inadequate lunch at the barracks, but that doesn't help your aunts and your uncles and your cousins and your brothers and your sisters," Abrams said.

Nonetheless, few high-level officers have abandoned the Maduro government.

León noted that anti-government movements trying to replace authoritarian leaders in other countries have sometimes had to make unpalatable choices to ensure the military was in line.

In Nicaragua, for example, when [Violeta Chamorro won the presidency](#) in 1990 and ended a decade of left-wing Sandinista rule, she gave a top Defense Ministry job to Humberto Ortega — the brother of the outgoing president. In Chile, Augusto Pinochet was [permitted to stay on](#) as head of the armed forces after stepping down as president in 1990.

But ultimately, León said, in Venezuela, the issue isn't whether the military is loyal to Maduro. "The military is not defending Maduro," he said. "They are defending themselves."

Carol Morello in Washington and Rachelle Krygier in Miami contributed to this report.