

The rise of censorship and cyber blockades post July 28

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The events surrounding the presidential election on July 28 in Venezuela are not without precedent. Despite the fear among the population and the surprise of the international community at the escalation of persecution and repression from the Chavista regime following the election, the reality is that this is a pattern of behavior that the regime has adopted for years now to remain in power –implementing force and undemocratic tactics that violate the fundamental freedoms of Venezuelans.

Before July 28, political prisoners, incarcerated activists, arbitrary detentions, censored and self-censored media, disqualifications from office, repression, and murders in the context of protests were not new in the country. The lack of independence in the public branches of government to safeguard the country's democratic structures was already an illusion. Even before July 28, news websites had been censored, traditional media outlets closed or acquired, and dissenting voices on social media were harassed. For years, the Chavista communication apparatus had been developing propaganda and disinformation strategies at all levels, greatly influenced by the Russian model. However, it wasn't until July 28, and even in the months prior, that the Chavista regime, faced with the potential loss of its hold

on power, fully unleashed its repressive strategies and censorship, which had been practiced over two decades.

Before and after the presidential election, more than 60 informational websites were blocked in Venezuela, critical opinions were prohibited in traditional media such as radio and television, and dissenting voices on social media were also censored with the blocking of the social network X and the messaging app Signal.

Although the speed, intensity, and violence with which the repressive and censoring events unfolded surprised many, and have led the international community –including traditional left-wing Latin American allies such as Lula and Petro– to raise their voices about what is happening in Venezuela, the report from the UN’s Fact-Finding Mission² regarding the Venezuelan case is conclusive in stating that the escalating repression by the Chavista government is the result of a plan designed and orchestrated long ago to retain power.

Pre-electoral propaganda, disinformation, and blockade strategy

The Chavista communication strategy before the July 28 elections was based on propaganda, disqualification, blocking, and disinformation to confuse and generate uncertainty. In fact, this strategy began long before the electoral calendar was announced,

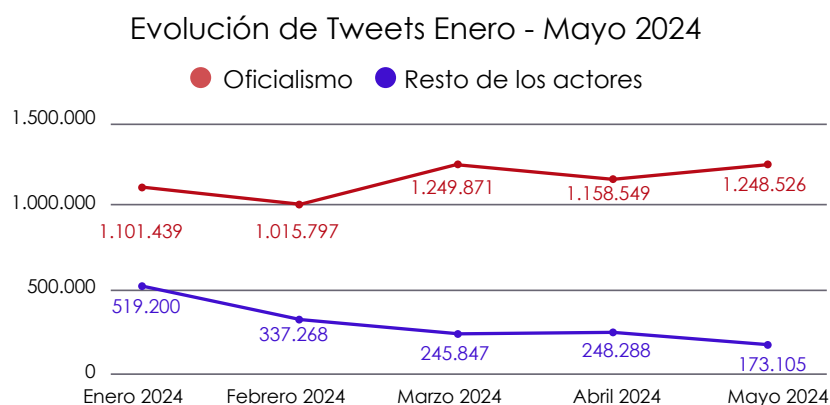
2 *ONU*. Conclusiones detalladas de la misión internacional independiente de determinación de los hechos sobre la República Bolivariana de Venezuela. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session57/advance-versions/a-hrc-57-crp-5-es.pdf>

before the official candidacy was filed with the National Electoral Council (CNE), and before the formal start of campaigns.

The Ministry of Communication and Information (MIPPCI) began promoting trends in favor of Nicolás Maduro one year before the election, with a post on its X account on July 27, 2023.

In 2023 alone, the ProBox Digital Observatory³ identified 115 trends related to the elections, with around 3.5 million tweets. The government managed to dominate the electoral narrative with 68.7% of the trends and 87% of tweets. By the first half of 2024, these figures doubled.

Between January and May 2024, there were 103 electoral trends, almost the same number as in all of 2023. Of these, 90 trends were driven by the Chavista government, having generated 95% of tweets.



3 ProBox, #AlgoritmoElectoral: así se manipularon las redes sociales en medio de la campaña presidencial, (2024). Tomado de <https://proboxve.org/publicacion/algoritmoelectoral-asi-se-manipularon-las-redes-sociales-en-medio-de-la-campana-presidencial/>

Tweet count evolution from January through March, 2024

Pre-election Chavista propaganda on social media was also accompanied by a policy of attacks on opposition figures, mainly María Corina Machado. The second-in-command of the Chavismo, Diosdado Cabello, through his program *Con el Mazo Dando*, was the main promoter of these attacks, driving at least 7 trends against Machado and 2 against Edmundo González in the first five months of 2024.

In addition to the propaganda and attacks, the government orchestrated a disinformation campaign around the possible results of the July 28 elections. False polls were spread to push a narrative of voter intent favoring Maduro, using dubious polling organizations. A study by the *Coalición Informativa* (C-Informa)⁴ found that six alleged polling firms published 37 surveys between March 2023 and June 24, 2024, as part of a strategy to muddy the electoral climate and discredit opposition candidates.

However, the Chavista apparatus did not limit itself to amplifying propaganda and disinformation: it also relied on digital censorship. As the election date drew closer and with a growing perception that the opposition candidate might win, Chavismo applied a massive blockade to most independent news sites in Venezuela. According to data from Ipys Venezuela and

4 *ProBox* (2024). Seis encuestadoras sospechosas promocionan coordinadamente a Nicolás Maduro como favorito para el 28-J. Tomado de: <https://proboxve.org/publicacion/seis-encuestadoras-sospechosas-promocionan-coordinadamente-a-nicolas-maduro-como-favorito-para-el-28-j/>

Laboratorio de Paz,⁵ by July 28, 2024, at least 58 news sites had been blocked by telecom operators, rendering them inaccessible within the country.

Portales web bloqueados hasta el 28 de julio 2024 (Por orden alfabético)	
antena3.com	Lagranaldea.com
aporrea.org	Lamananadigital.com
armando.info	Lapatilla.com
caraotadigital.net	Maduradas.com
cazadoresdefakenews.info	Medianalisis.org
cronica.uno	Minuto30.com
2001online.com	Monitoreamos.com
Diariolaregion.net	Noticialdia.com
Dolartoday.com	Noticias Venezuela
Efectococuyo.com	noticias.com
El-carabobeno.com	Noticierodigital.com
Eldiario.com	ntn24.com
Elestimulo.com	observatoriodefinanzas.com
Elnacional.com	opinionynoticias.com
Elpitazo.com	primerinforme.com
El-politico.com	protonvpn.com
Eltiempo.com	puntodecorte.org
Espaciopublico.ong	runrun.es
Espaja.com	semana.com
Evtv.online	soundcloud.com
Fakenewsvenezuela.org	sumarium.info
Focoinformativo.com	talcualdigital.com
Impactove.com	tvvnetwork.com
Infobae.com	venezuelaaldia.com

5 *Derechos Humanos de Venezuela en Movimiento* (2024). Crisis Poselectoral y de Derechos Humanos 2024 en Venezuela, p. 16. <https://archive.org/details/informe-ddhhvzla/page/16/mode/2up>

Insightcrime.org	vesinfiltro.com
Ipysvenezuela.org	vivoplay.net
Jepvenezuela.org	vpitv.com
Noticiaypunto.com	

But Chavismo didn't just block news sites –it also went after journalists. Data from the National Union of Press Workers (SNTP) show that by July 28, four journalists had been arrested⁶, a number that grew after the elections; at least 13 journalists and media workers were imprisoned after the election.

Post-electoral terror: Forced peace reached social media

Censorship, blocking, and digital persecution reached exponential levels after the first electoral results were announced by Elvis Amoroso (President of the National Electoral Council, loyal to Maduro). After declaring Nicolás Maduro as the winner, discontent spread across social media and the streets.

Protests, especially from popular areas traditionally seen as “Chavista strongholds,” received an excessive and alarming response from the State, with a tragic toll of 24 deaths and more than 2,000 arrests, according to the UN's Fact-Finding Mission report for Venezuela.

Amid this context, the hashtags #Paz and #Justicia (peace and justice) were used by various government entities (both military and civilian) in Venezuela to push a false narrative of “peace,”

6 *Derechos Humanos de Venezuela en Movimiento* (2024). Crisis Poselectoral y de Derechos Humanos 2024 en Venezuela, p. 14. <https://archive.org/details/informe-ddhhvzla/page/14/mode/2up>

which actually masked the use of repressive tactics meant to instill fear and anxiety among regime critics.⁷

In fact, on the election day, MIPPCI promoted #VotaPorLaPaz2024 with over 64,600 tweets, and the following day continued this narrative with #GanóLaPazYLaEsperanza, posting a smiling photo of Maduro after voting.

But the government didn't just use social media to promote this false narrative of peace; it also used it as a tool for mass criminalization and persecution of dissent. Maduro's regime weaponized terror to restrict civic spaces, employing various strategies. One of the most striking was an update in the VenApp mobile application, which enabled a "new window" to report anyone considered a "fascist". This led to the largest digital persecution in the country's history, exposing the identities of ordinary citizens without verifying the validity of these denunciations.⁸

This led to a sharp escalation in the well-known "Operation Knock-Knock."⁹ Anyone posting anti-Chavista content or opposing Maduro's alleged victory on social media could be

7 ProBox (2024). #TerrorEnRedes: la estrategia digital de Maduro para reprimir las voces críticas. Tomado de: <https://proboxve.org/publicacion/terror-en-redes-la-estrategia-digital-de-maduro-para-reprimir-las-vozes-criticas/>

8 ProBox, #TerrorEnRedes: VenApp, la aplicación que "evolució" para reprimir, (2024). Tomado de: <https://proboxve.org/publicacion/terrorenredes-venapp-la-aplicacion-que-evoluciono-para-reprimir/>

9 ProBox, #TerrorEnRedes: «Operación TunTun», la cacería de voces críticas, (2024). Tomado de: <https://proboxve.org/publicacion/terrorenredes-operacion-tuntun-la-caceria-de-vozes-criticas/>

arrested in their homes by police forces, especially if they had been denounced through VenApp.

VenApp, originally created as an application for submitting complaints directly to the government, was transformed after Maduro announced on July 30 the enablement of a “new window” for users to “report those who have attacked the people so they can be pursued and justice can be served.” This new feature allowed users to report “fascist guarimba” activities, such as looting, public disorder, disinformation, and damage to public property.

Although VenApp was removed from Google Play and the Apple Store on July 31, the Venezuelan government generated uncontrolled and free distribution of the APK file, enabling the app to function on Android devices.

On August 2, from the Miraflores Palace, Maduro claimed to have received more than 5,000 reports via VenApp, accusing citizens of threatening neighborhood leaders, PSUV members, and Chavismo supporters. This number not only doubled the arrests made up to that point but also justified new arrests under the so-called Operation Knock-Knock.

Promoted primarily by Diosdado Cabello, Operation Knock-Knock flooded the Venezuelan digital ecosystem with threats of arrest for posting content that the regime considered “coup-like” or “violent.” In this scheme, doxxing was employed, with personal information of accused citizens published online and live capture operations carried out and broadcasted to intimidate, pursue, and arrest thousands of protesters.

The cases tagged with #OperacionTunTun were particularly alarming, as users of X responded to opposition posts with the hashtag to “mark” those posting content against the regime, even tagging the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN).

As if this wasn’t enough, after the July 28 elections, the Maduro regime did not stop at persecuting social media protests; it went one step beyond by attempting to completely eliminate dissenting voices on social media, at least on X (formerly Twitter). On August 8, Maduro declared a “temporary” suspension of X in Venezuela. The blockade was initially set for 10 days but eventually became permanent.

The decision to block X came after a public confrontation between Elon Musk, X's owner, and Maduro, who labeled the billionaire as his arch-enemy, responsible for a "cyber coup" following Maduro's alleged electoral victory.

Maduro's crusade wasn't limited to X. All social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp) were labeled as "fascist," "imperialist," and "conspiratorial." However, this disdainful stance was not always the case. Before blocking X, Chavismo had a different strategy. Rather than shutting down social media platforms, they flooded them with messages, hashtags, and paid X users to spread propaganda and disinformation, creating a communication hegemony in social media for years.

However, the decision to block X in Venezuela reflected a loss of Chavismo's control over the narrative on social media, as evidenced by the campaign led by María Corina Machado and Edmundo González.

Even with the entire communication apparatus against them, the opposition managed to gain momentum, spreading its message across various digital platforms and gaining more followers while turning the polls in their favor. With little to no presence in traditional media, the opposition, led by María Corina, spread its message through different channels and social media platforms. On Instagram, for example, Machado has 8.1 million followers, compared to Nicolás Maduro's 1.6 million.

Amid the waves of protests and detentions carried out by the Chavista government, social media has precisely opened up the channels through which images and videos of arrests, intimidation, and abuse of power by Venezuelan police forces

have been shared. Videos showing how opposition leaders such as Freddy Superlano, Williams Dávila, and María Oropeza were detained circulated globally. In the case of Oropeza, she managed to live-stream the moment when agents broke down the door to her home to take her away without a warrant.

After blocking X, the regime proceeded to do the same with TikTok, though only for a brief period. On Saturday, September 28, for seven hours, TikTok was added to the list of social media platforms blocked by the government of Nicolás Maduro. The restriction began at 9 a.m. on Saturday and lasted until 4 p.m., according to reports from the organization Ve Sin Filtro.¹⁰ This blockade occurred two months after the July 28 elections.

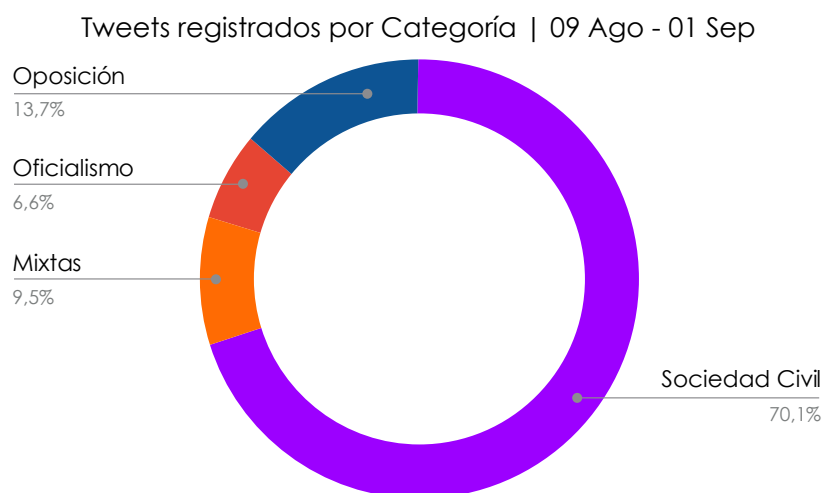
Citizens respond: Digital protest persists

Despite the blocking of X in Venezuela, civil society has managed to grow its influence in shaping sociopolitical narratives and hashtags on this social network. ProBox reveals this growth in a recent analysis.¹¹

After the blocking of X, Chavismo was ordered to cease using the platform, which led to a surge in sociopolitical trends between August 9 and September 1, amassing 1.8 million tweets, with 70.1% of them posted by civil society.

10 *VeSinFiltro*, Tuit bloqueo TikTok, (2024). Tomado de: <https://x.com/vesinfiltro/status/1840210903691661522>

11 *ProBox*, ¿Venezuela sin Twitter? Ciudadanos combaten el bloqueo de X, (2024). Tomado de: <https://proboxve.org/publicacion/venezuela-sin-twitter-ciudadanos-combaten-el-bloqueo-de-x/>



Tweets documented by category

This shows that, despite Chavismo's success in infiltrating and contaminating sociopolitical conversations across social media, civil society (even before the blocking of X) began to become more active in engaging in digital conversations.

Before, during, and after the elections, civil society focused on searching for and disseminating information across digital platforms. It wasn't just about discussing the electoral process; X also became a network for denouncing the disproportionate violence of the regime against dissent in Venezuela. The data proves this.

Between July 15 and August 8 (before the blocking), sociopolitical trends in Venezuela accumulated around 4.7 million tweets. Of those, civil society and independent media generated 36.92% of tweets, while the government produced 36.16%. This represents a historic milestone when considering that Chavismo used to overwhelmingly dominate the sociopolitical conversation

on X, flooding the platform with propaganda, disinformation, and fake news. For further context, in 2023, the government managed to position 81.15% of the trends and 95.25% of tweets.

Despite the objective to censor public and digital protest, we can see that civil society reclaimed the digital frontlines to amplify their protests against arbitrary detentions, against the electoral results announced by the CNE, and at the same time demanding the respect of human rights.

One example of the organized digital protest came in the form of the hashtag #MaduroSecuestraNiños (Maduro, Children Kidnapper), a digital campaign that denounced the escalation of severe human rights violations in the country, particularly in response to the arbitrary detention of minors following the July 28 elections. This hashtag was trending on Sunday, September 1, and continued as a top trend until the early hours of September 3, accumulating over 380,000 tweets and becoming one of the largest trends of the year.

Although the final tally for 2024 may appear bleak in terms of censorship and fundamental freedoms in Venezuela, faced with a regime accused of crimes against humanity, the resilience of civil society in finding alternatives and spaces for expression amidst limitations and persecution demonstrates the will of citizens to reclaim a democracy crushed by Chavismo.