

# *Venezuelan Electoral Authorities Suspend Opposition's Recall Drive against President*

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Caracas, October 21 (RHC)-- Venezuela's electoral officials have suspended a recall referendum campaign against President Nicolas Maduro, in a setback for the opposition which has been pushing to prevent the Bolivarian leader from finishing out his term.

In a statement issued last night in Caracas, the National Electoral Council said fraud allegations in the opposition's preliminary signature gathering were behind its decision to stop it from moving on to the next stage of the recall referendum push.

The announcement came in reaction to rulings earlier in the day by courts in four Venezuelan states that found the initial stage of the opposition's petition drive had been fraudulent. During that phase, the Venezuelan opposition had gathered signatures from one percent of the electorate.

The next stage, which was scheduled to begin next week but has now been suspended, would have seen the signing petitions calling for the removal of Maduro from office before the official expiration of his term in 2017. The opposition needed to collect and validate around four million signatures from 20 percent of the electorate in 24 states

over three days next week.

“In adherence to the constitution, the National Electoral Council abides by the decisions ordered by the tribunals and has sent instructions to postpone the process of signature gathering until new judicial instructions are known,” the statement said. The electoral board’s new decision went against its August verdict that authenticated the signatures and allowed the opposition’s push to proceed.

Maduro’s opponents had pledged to press for a recall vote against him this year. The referendum, if successful, would set the stage for new presidential elections in the country. Venezuela’s electoral authority had already said there would be no such vote before the end of the year. It said earlier that “the event could be held in the middle of the first quarter of 2017.”

The Venezuelan opposition blames what it calls the president’s “dictatorial tactics” for the severe economic crisis plaguing the South American country. Maduro, however, rejects the accusations, saying the opposition, backed by the United States, has launched an economic war against the country in an attempt to bring about a coup d’état against his administration.

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