3 October 2024 / Christmas in October

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): Mariah Carey posted a video on social media yesterday. In it, she appears to be comfortably reclining on a private jet.

*<CLIP> MARIAH CAREY TWITTER VIDEO, CAPTAIN: This is your captain speaking. Welcome aboard, Mariah. We are headed to the North Pole.   
<record scratch>   
MARIAH CAREY: Not yeeeet. Sorry.*

SEAN: The message is clear: Christmas is not yet here. Check your calendars again. Because spooky season has only just begun.

*<CLIP> “WATCH WHAT HAPPENS LIVE”, CAREY: I don’t know her! Like, what am I supposed to say? <fade>*

SEAN: We don’t know where Mariah’s plane was heading. But clearly it was not on its way to Venezuela. Because in Venezuela, Christmas has indeed come early.

SCORING <All I Want for Christmas - Kidz Bop Spanish>

ANA VANESSA HERRERO (*Washington Post* reporter): Not even in Santa Claus’s town, you know, do they start Christmas this early, but we do.

SEAN: How Jolly Old Saint Nicolás Maduro stole Christmas… coming up on *Today, Explained*.

SCORING POST

[THEME]

*<CLIP> “ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS” BY MARIAH CAREY: What more can I do? Baby all I want for Christmas is –   
TEX PRODUCER AMANDA LEWELLYN: Today, Explained.   
<jingle bell>*

SEAN: So how exactly does Christmas in October work? Like, is October 1st Christmas Day? Is October 25th Christmas Day? Is there a Christmas Eve? Is it just about the season? What does it do to Christmas in December? I have many questions.

ANA: Yeah, and rightfully so, because, you know, not a lot of people can understand. I mean, we understand because we've lived there so many times, but it's about the season. It's not about the Christmas morning or Christmas Eve. It's about the season. So our Christmas is going to be on the 25th of December. But the season starts October 1st.

SEAN: Ana Vanessa Herrero is a reporter in Caracas, Venezuela, where she covers the country and the rest of South America for *The* *Washington Post*. I asked her if she was surprised when the president of Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro, decided to start the Christmas season a few months early.

ANA: Well, not really. To us here in Venezuela, we're very used to this happening, um…

SEAN: You’re used to Christmas in October?!

ANA: Well, I mean, we're used to the government announcing early Christmases…

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT NICOLÁS MADURO, 2023: Decreto las navidades felices del pueblo de Venezuela el primero de Noviembre, arregla su casa… <fade>*

ANA: Basically, every time that, you know, there are some circumstances that the government can't really handle that well, they announce early Christmas.

*<CLIP> MADURO, 2021: Llegó la navidad, empezando Octubre. Una belleza, mira esta arbolito… <fade>*

ANA: But you know the context now, it's different. We are coming from a very complicated political situation after the presidential elections in July. And then the government comes out and announces an early Christmas in October…

*<CLIP> MADURO: Huele a navidad. Huele a navidad. Y por eso <fade>…*

ANA: That is the shocking part. That is the wild part from our end, but not the fact that they announced it earlier. That's happened before.

SEAN: I'm sure a lot of people out there have heard that there's been some political upheaval in Venezuela. But when a government is trying to appease its people with an early Christmas, what exactly does that look like? Are there trees everywhere? Are there decorations? Are they playing “Feliz Navidad” in the grocery stores?

*<CLIP> “Feliz Navidad” with grocery store sfx*

ANA: Well, on the radios, you can listen to some of the some of the what, what are our, our Christmas music that we call gaitas.

*<CLIP> GAITA - Pa’que Luis, long fade under*

ANA: So it's a very traditional, very unique kind of songs that that we know and we, we link immediately in Venezuela with, with Christmas. And yes, some decorations, or – not all of them, because, you know, to decorate a city, that's… a lot of work. Basically the mandate is: put out the trees. Let's celebrate in peace, according to what Nicolas Maduro said: that he wanted to celebrate. And actually, he said that this was a way of thanking the Venezuelan people after what happened July.

*<CLIP> MADURO, 2024: Y por eso este año, en nomenal a ustedes, en agradecimiento a ustedes, voy a creatar el adelanto de la navidad al primero de Octubre. <applause>*

ANA: But, you know, it is… <sighs> it is really complicated to understand that when, you know, the all or everything shows that actually Nicolas Maduro might have not won the elections.

SCORING <Mono Planet 04 - Banger>

ANA: In July, Venezuela celebrated presidential elections there on July 28th. Nicolás Maduro, who is basically Hugo Chavez's heir, showed for elections for the third time. And the opposition for the first time, organized themselves so well that they went into the election race with a very, very strong hand and an upper hand, I must say.

*<CLIP> OPPOSITION LEADER MARIA CORINA MACHADO: Venezuela unida, a un solo grito: Fuera el dictador!  
CROWD: FUERA EL DICTADOR!   
MACHADO: Viva la libertad <fade>*

ANA: Before the elections, I have to say, the government tried to shut down as many efforts as possible from the opposition. So they arrested a lot of people linked to the opposition's campaign. They banned the main contestant, named Maria Corina Machado, from running, and they almost made it impossible for her to campaign around the country.

*<CLIP> CBS NEWS: But Machado is not the presidential candidate. The opposition coalition selected diplomat Edmundo Gonzalez Rutia to run in her place when the Maduro government and courts banned her candidacy earlier this year…. <fade>*

ANA: I had a really hard time finding people that voted for Nicolas Maduro and the government. I actually had to really look for someone who would say, ‘Yeah, I like the government, I love it, and you know, they should stay.’ With that, I understood that things were changing.

SCORING OUT

ANA: So after the election day was over, you know, people were confident that the opposition – for the first time since Hugo Chavez in 1999, for the first time – the opposition had won the election. And then the electoral council announced extremely quickly without showing any kind of numbers, without specifying the amount of votes that they said that Nicolas Maduro had won the election and that they were going to proclaim, you know, as president the very next day.

*<CLIP> MADURO: Soy Nicolás Maduro Moro, presidente reelecto del Republico … <fade>*

ANA: Immediately after the announcement, you could hear… <scoff> just shouting, yelling, people in their balconies yelling, That's not true. It's a lie.

*<CLIP> PROTESTER: Espero que el Señor Maduro entiende que no ganó la elección…*

ANA: I experienced this. I was in Caracas at the time, at the moment. And people were taking the streets just, you know, banging pots and pans, which is our very Latin American way of protesting against the government.

*<CLIP> PROTESTOR YELLING*

ANA: And at the same time, the opposition came out publicly and said those are not the results. We have the results.

*<CLIP> MACHADO: Ya tenemos, cómo probar la verdad de lo que pasó en Venezuela…. <duck>*

ANA: Because we have all the votes. We collected them and now we're going to show them to the world and confirm that, you know, in fact, the opposition won with 7 million votes. That's what they said.

*<CLIP> MACHADO: <duck up> Lo logramos. Lo logramos. <applause>*

SEAN: How do we know for sure that González won?

ANA: I don't think – we can never know for sure because we would definitely need the government's version of what happened. We would need the government’s counting the votes. We would need the numbers. We would need the percentages that they have. So I don’t think, we will never – really, I don’t think we’d know. But the opposition quickly – and they prepared themselves for months to do this, to collect the tallies. So those tallies are like a large receipt that the electoral machine prints after the election is over. So that really large receipt, whatever what what it says is the amount of votes that each candidate got and, you know, who won in that electoral center. So what they did was prepare normal citizens for months – Citizens, by the way, that risked… were risking everything, everything that they had. Even some of them are in jail now – So what they did was immediately after they printed, they have to print by law, they have to print copies for those witnesses who are there present at each electoral center around the country. And [these] witnesses took the tally and run for their lives. And then after that, they scanned them and they uploaded them to a website that is now, you know, it's available for everyone where you can see who won in each table.

SEAN: How do Venezuelans feel about the lead-up to this election, what transpired in the election, and what's happened since? Are they in a state of shock?

ANA: Well, you know, Venezuela… We’ve experienced a lot of turmoil and, and protests and demonstrations and, and things have gone really bad really quickly for a long time. But this time it's different because for the first time, people feel – people who didn't support the government, of course – they feel they were being absolutely robbed. This is the first time that after an election, the government or the one in power can't show, really, to everyone, to the world that they've won. And now it's a sentiment of despair, almost.

SCORING <Just Leave Me Submerged>

SEAN: It’s just… to hear you explain how all of this happened and run through months of political turmoil and upheaval. It's just… it's so insane that he thinks a fake Christmas in October can fix it!

ANA: Well, but he does. <laughs> But, you know, somehow, that's how the government is used to, you know, survive certain crises. And, you know, they've done this in the past. And for them, it has worked. So why not now?

MINI SCORING BUMP

ANA: But the thing is that: they have no stable ground. Right now, the instability is important. Over 2000 people arrested and 100 of those are underage. So, you know, the crisis and the… and the situation that millions are suffering right now and the fact that other countries are preparing themselves for another huge migration wave, it's enough contrast with Christmas in October. There's … what is it to celebrate? I mean, Nicolas Maduro didn't really explain what he's celebrating. He's celebrating Christmas. But what does that mean? What does that mean?

SCORING BUMP  
  
SEAN: Ana Vanessa Herrero. *WaPo*. Read her at *Washington Post* punto com.

You know, before Biden shut down the southern border, it was Venezuelans who were putting up the biggest numbers. We’re gonna talk about why that was when we’re back on *Today, Explained*.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

*<CLIP> “ALWAYS BE MY BABY” BY MARIAH CAREY: Oo, darlin, cuz you’ll always be my –   
TEX PRODUCER AMANDA LEWELLYN: Today, Explained.*

PROFE JAVIER CORRALES: Sure. My name is Javier Corrales and I’m a professor of political science. I use he/him pronouns.

SEAN: Great. Can I call you professor?

JAVIER: <laughs> Yes, you can, or –

SEAN: Profe? What do they say? What do your students call you?

JAVIER: Oh, Right here? “Professor Carrales.” In Latin America, profe, profe, Profe Javier.

SEAN: Profe, profe, Profe Javier teaches at Amherst College in Massachusetts – and is also the author of several books on the *demise* of Venezuela’s democracy. It wasn’t always this bad.

JAVIER: Yes. Venezuela was known worldwide as an early democratization in Latin America and in the global South. It is a country that achieved very high levels of civil and political rights in the early 1960s. That process of democratization accomplished many things: It lessened the incidence of violence and revolution. It created for alternation in office. It created opportunities for welfare to expand. It expanded political freedoms and a number of very important institutions. And this was happening as Venezuela was also developing its oil industry.

*<CLIP> THERE WILL BE BLOOD: <Spanish> I! Drink! Your! Milkshake!*

JAVIER: And for about two decades, one would have been hard-pressed to find a country scoring higher levels of democracy in Latin America and in the Global South, at least until the 1970s. And when things started to go badly, it didn’t go back into autocracies. There were times in Latin America where countries would flirt with democracy and have vibrant democracies, but those democracies would collapse, morph into military juntas. But Venezuela never did that. Venezuela maintained its democratic institutions, especially when the economic situation started to deteriorate in the early 80s, and into the 1990s.

SCORING <Wormhole Chamber>

*<CLIP> ARCHIVAL: Venezuela has foreign debts of around £18 billion, and its petroleum dominated economy has been hit by falling oil prices.*

*<CLIP> AP, 1989: President Perez is now announcing that the government is suspending all foreign debt payments. Future payments will depend on the effectiveness of his austerity programs… <fade>*

JAVIER: One of the problems of Venezuela's democracy is that, while on the one hand, it didn't collapse, on the other hand, it didn't really reform to keep up with the times. And so the political parties remained in the hands of a group of people who were basically refusing to go away, even though they were not able to deliver solutions to the economic crisis. So this generated two types of discontent: a discontent against the economic conditions – Venezuela was getting poorer and poorer in the 1990s – but also political discontent. And this is the moment when Hugo Chavez steps in…

SCORING OUT

JAVIER:…early in the 1990s, first as a coup-plotter and then later as a presidential candidate.

*<CLIP> AP, 1998 - CHAVEZ: <translation> Our popularity is growing every day. It is because we are in tune with the public, we are in tune with the national spirit- we represent the hope of the nation. That is where our popularity lies.*

JAVIER: A large number of Venezuelans were hypnotized by this message in this moment of discontent.

SEAN: What was he able to get away with while Venezuelans were under his hypnosis?

JAVIER: So in the very beginning everything was being done relatively democratically, although he started to bend rules right away.

SCORING <That Voice is Still There (w beet)>

JAVIER: The first thing he wanted to do was to change the Constitution. There were rules to do so. He didn't like those rules. So he managed to get Venezuela through plebiscites to approve new rules. And once he was able to change the Constitution, he then decided to use his popularity and the fact that he had a ruling party that was fully under the spell, a major enabler, to then capture every other institution of government. And once you have that alignment – a ruling party controlling the executive branch and the legislature, all under the spell of a strongman rather than a system of checks and balances and accountability – you have a system of turbo-enabling.

SEAN: Turbo-enabling!

JAVIER: Turbo-enabling: The legislature was there not to check the excesses of the executive branch, but to expedite anything that the executive branch wanted to do. So in a matter of about five years, you know, basically from 1999 when the new constitution was… when it came into being, through 2005, they revamped every important institution of the country. Suddenly, the institutions lost their independence, their professionalism. They became conquered by members of the ruling party. And so by 2005, 2006, the game was over. The institutional game was over. Rather than a liberal democracy with checks and balances and independent bureaucracies and an independent judiciary, what you have is a ruling party that dominated every branch of government and started to also intervene in even non-governmental organizations. It happened very quickly. And and during that period, it was very difficult to stop him.

SCORING OUT

JAVIER: Venezuela was fortunate in 2004, as did all oil states, to experience their highest increase in the price of oil, which is Venezuela's main export. This generated a huge profit windfall for the state. And Chavez spent this money lavishly. Everybody gained – all levels of society, from the very wealthy, the middle classes, all the way to the very poor. While at the same time he began to introduce what I call autocratic legalism, a significant number of laws and regulations, all designed to make life very difficult to any political actor who was willing to challenge him. So you get this combination, this odd combination of welfare expansion, together with more restrictions on the possible life of civil society and political parties. So by the time that Chavez died, the money was gone, but Chavez had this image of being this patron of the little guy. While the opposition saw him as the deliverer of the most draconian, restrictive laws and regulation that Venezuela had ever had.

SEAN: So when Chavez dies and handpicks, I believe, Nicolas Maduro to be his successor...

JAVIER: Correct.

SEAN: …does Nicolas Maduro decide, ‘Alright, let's start fresh and do a little democracy!’ Or does he skip straight to…?

JAVIER: No. I mean, look, what we observe is that these processes of autocratization can go very far. But one of the things that always survives, one of the things about democracy that never goes away is elections. And in Venezuela, that is the case. So the first thing that Nicolas Maduro does is, ‘All right, you know, Chavez died. There has to be a presidential election.’ The problem occurs in terms of his reaction to the fact that the polls revealed that though he still won, the ruling party was losing votes significantly. And what he decided to do is increasingly become more repressive and expand the autocratic legalism and several other tricks that Chavez had experience with. But he just brought them to higher and higher levels.

SEAN: And that's what leads to this situation in Venezuela in which you could have a stolen election.

JAVIER: So, right. What occurred in this election is that the government thought that it could try traditional tricks, which in the past allowed him to prevail. Except that this time those tricks didn't work.

SEAN: Do you think early Christmas will fix it?

JAVIER: Ha ha ha no, no. I mean, I think… this is a very wounded animal: We're facing a situation of an autocracy that on the one hand has all institutions under its controls. But at the same time, these institutions are bleeding.

SCORING <Gentle Push 2>

JAVIER: The key point is that we know from studying other cases of transition of democracy is that: we still need to be able to see some kind of a crack at the top of some sort. Those cracks have occurred before. The regime has moved quickly enough to reseal them and survive it. But I'm guessing we're going to see another round of internal little earthquakes, and you never know what's going to happen then. The regime may very well survive them. But I am not 100% confident that this regime is going to survive this little crisis in a strong fashion. So the game is not over.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Profe Profe Profe Javier Corrales. Find him at Amherst College.

Amanda Lewellyn produced today’s show.   
  
She was edited by Matthew Collette, fact-checked by Laura Bullard and Miles Bryan, and mixed by Rob Byers and Andrea Kristinsdottir.  
  
I’m Sean Rameswaram and this is *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]