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Why Legitimizing Venezuela's Autocratic Remnants Would Be a Strategic Mistake

Venezuela has already entered a new political phase. Nicolás Maduro is gone and will not return. However, the end of his personal rule has not dismantled the system he built. Power has shifted to a new face, but one forged by —and loyal to— the old regime. The emergence of Delcy Rodríguez as the country's *de facto* authority represents continuity, not rupture: a reconfiguration of autocratic control under altered circumstances, rather than a democratic transition.[1]

To treat this moment as a clean break would be a grave misdiagnosis with strategic consequences. The institutions currently governing Venezuela are not neutral administrative remnants awaiting reform; they are autocratic remnants —structures designed to preserve power.[2] Rodríguez is not a transitional technocrat standing outside this history. She is

1 The Journal of Democracy, "Why the United States Shouldn't Run Venezuela", Juan Miguel Matheus, January 2026, https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/why-the-united-states-shouldnt-run-venezuela/

2 LSE, "In Venezuela, the US has removed a dictator, but shows little sign of building a democracy", John Polga-Hecimovich, January 13, 2026, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2026/01/13/in-venezuela-the-us-has-removed-a-dictator-but-shows-little-sign-of-building-a-democracy/

a veteran of the regime's inner core, elevated through the same political, judicial, and military networks that sustained authoritarianism for years.

The risk for U.S. policy is not contact or dialogue. The risk is legitimization. When Washington suggests —explicitly or implicitly— that Rodríguez can serve as a source of stability and governability, it risks granting international validation on *de facto* power.[3] Stability achieved through endorsing continuity may appear pragmatic in the short term, but it entrenches precisely the political pathologies that made Venezuela ungovernable in the first place. There is a familiar temptation in moments like this: to confuse exhaustion with realism, and accommodation with strategy.

It is not merely a matter of rhetoric or optics. In post-authoritarian contexts, legitimacy is a scarce and contested political resource. When external actors attempt to substitute international recognition for internal consent, the result is often the weakening of democratic alternatives and a shift of elites toward foreign patrons rather than toward their own societies. In Venezuela —where institutional trust is already deeply eroded— this dynamic would be particularly corrosive.

Maduro's departure did not dismantle the autocratic infrastructure. The executive apparatus, the judiciary, the security forces, and broad segments of the bureaucracy continue to operate under the logic of the previous regime.[4] They are not neutral tools that can simply be repurposed for democratic governance. They

3 Idem.

4 Entitled, "From Prison to Exile: Leopoldo López and the Fight for Venezuela", Episode 42, January 8, 2026, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/from-prison-to-exile-leopoldo-l%C3%B3pez-and-the-fight/id1577996421?i=1000744344355

are institutions shaped by years of repression, clientelism, and arbitrariness. Treating them as mere administrative remnants underestimates their true function as instruments of authoritarian continuity and obscures the magnitude of the political challenge Venezuela now faces.

Delcy Rodríguez embodies that continuity. Her political trajectory is neither accidental nor peripheral. She has been a central figure in the architecture of chavista power, holding key positions in the vice presidency and in other strategic areas of the state. Her rise to de facto leadership following Maduro's departure is not a temporary anomaly, but an internal solution designed by the regime itself to preserve control under extraordinary conditions. Recognizing her as a legitimate authority amounts to validating that solution and normalizing autocratic succession as a substitute for democratic transition.

Here the most serious strategic problem emerges: the temptation for the United States —particularly under the Trump administration— to become the external source of legitimacy for de facto power. When Washington acts as though its recognition could compensate for the absence of a democratic mandate, it not only alters Venezuela's internal balance, but also assumes a political responsibility it cannot control. Legitimacy borrowed from abroad rarely translates into sustainable governability; more often, it produces dependency, resentment, and backlash.

From a narrowly instrumental perspective, the calculation may appear rational. Rodríguez offers administrative continuity, access to the levers of state power, and a clear interlocutor on matters such as security, energy, and migration. But this logic confuses administrative capability with political authority. That confusion is costly. A government can function without legitimacy for a time; it cannot stabilize without it. By betting on a figure

associated with the old regime, the United States risks mortgaging Venezuela's democratic future in exchange for fragile and illusory stability.[5]

The regional consequences of this approach are no less significant. Latin America closely watches any sign of external tutelage or selective legitimization of power. Backing a successor drawn from the chavista regime under the banner of stability reinforces entrenched narratives of intervention and double standards, weakening regional cooperation precisely where it is most needed —on migration, transnational crime, and economic recovery. It also offers other authoritarian governments a useful precedent: continuity may be tolerated if it delivers order and access.

External validation of Rodríguez also undermines internal democratic actors.[6] Those who have sustained the fight for free elections, accountability, and the rule of law —often at enormous personal and political cost— see their political capital eroded when international recognition shifts toward a figure of authoritarian continuity. The implicit message is devastating: regime discipline and its utility to external actors weigh more heavily than democratic legitimacy and popular support.

The history of political transitions offers clear lessons. When external powers bet on "manageable" figures emerging from the old order, they often prolong authoritarian influence rather than diminish it. The result is a stalled transition: neither full

5 Time, "Trump's Goals in Venezuela Don't Add Up", Javier Corrales, January 5, 2026. https://time.com/7343053/trump-goals-venezuela-dont-add-up/

6 The Unpopulist, "Trump's Betrayal of Venezuela's Democracy Movement, Is Hard to Overstate", Larry Diamond, January 5, 2026, https://www.theunpopulist.net/p/trumps-betrayal-of-venezuelas-democracy

dictatorship nor functional democracy, but a hybrid dependent on external backing, vulnerable to recurring crises, and lacking incentives for deep reform.

Avoiding this outcome does not require isolation or passivity. It requires a clear distinction between cooperation and political endorsement. The United States can —and should— engage with de facto authorities to prevent humanitarian collapse, maintain basic security, and facilitate indispensable technical channels. But engagement must not be confused with recognition or legitimization. In a context where authority is deeply contested, every diplomatic signal and every public narrative carries weight.

At the same time, any credible democratic transition in Venezuela will require dismantling the external ecosystem that sustained the authoritarian regime for years. The regime survived not only through internal repression,[7] but also thanks to dense international ties with illiberal governments willing to provide financial support, political cover, and strategic cooperation.[8] A post-Maduro Venezuela cannot coexist indefinitely with that network. Allowing authoritarian patrons to remain embedded in Venezuela's political and economic life would perpetuate illiberal norms, undermine institutional reform, and constrain democratic sovereignty from the outset.

For the United States and its allies, this does not imply confrontation for its own sake. It implies redefining Venezuela's

7 The Journal of Democracy, "Maduro Rules Through Repression", William J. Dobson, October 2024, https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/why-the-united-states-shouldnt-run-venezuela/

8 The Journal of Democracy,"Will Maduro's Autocratic Allies Desert Him?", Adriana Boersner-Herrera, November 2025, https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/will-maduros-autocratic-allies-desert-him/

international reintegration around democratic conditionality: limiting the influence of authoritarian governments in strategic sectors, reorienting diplomatic recognition toward democratic standards, and clearly signaling that access to Venezuela's recovery depends on adherence to pluralism, accountability, and the rule of law. Democracy cannot consolidate internally if authoritarian power remains normalized externally.

U.S. policy should therefore focus on processes, not personalities. On creating clear incentives for democratic opening: competitive and verifiable elections, effective guarantees for the opposition, judicial independence, and protection of civil liberties.[9] International support must be conditional, transparent, and oriented toward strengthening actors with genuine social legitimacy —not recycling regime elites under new labels. Sequence matters. Without credible rules and independent arbiters, any stabilization will remain fragile.

This approach requires strategic restraint. Restraint is often unpopular in moments of crisis because it offers no quick solutions or convenient figures to embrace. Yet it is precisely this discipline that distinguishes a coherent foreign policy from reactive improvisation. Becoming the guarantor of a reconfigured autocratic power may produce order in the short term, but it compromises the democratic credibility of the United States and forecloses the possibility of a legitimate long-term outcome.

Venezuela does not need a new administrator of the old power. It needs a process capable of rebuilding authority from the ground up, through genuine competitiveness and citizen

9 La Gran Aldea, "Elecciones, elecciones, elecciones...", Juan Miguel Matheus, 9 de enero de 2026, https://lagranaldea.com/2026/01/09/elecciones-elecciones-elecciones/

consent. No external actor can grant that on Venezuela's behalf. When it attempts to do so, it substitutes self-determination with dependency and legitimacy with expediency.

The central paradox of this phase is clear: the more the United States seeks to guarantee stability by legitimizing autocratic remnants, the more it will undermine the foundations of genuine democratic stability. Recognizing this paradox is not moralism; it is strategic realism grounded in comparative experience and in an understanding of how political authority is built —and lost.

The United States has legitimate interests in Venezuela: regional stability, migration management, energy security, and economic recovery. But those interests are not served by becoming the source of authority for a de facto power inherited from authoritarianism. They are served by firmly and consistently supporting a process that allows Venezuelans to determine their future without tutelage or shortcuts. The sooner U.S. policy reflects this reality, the greater the chances that the post-Maduro era will not simply become the Maduro era by other means.