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## How to Manage an Autocrat

On January 3, 2026,<sup>1</sup> the United States removed Nicolás Maduro and Cilia Flores from Venezuela. Two days later, the former dictator and his wife appeared before federal Judge<sup>2</sup> Alvin Hellerstein in the Southern District of New York, facing charges<sup>3</sup> related to drug trafficking and organized crime.

Although this military operation removed the dictator from power, it did not dismantle the dictatorship. While bombs were still falling over Caracas, Maduro's vice president assumed control. Delcy Rodríguez took power and immediately began working closely with the United States.

From that moment, President Trump promoted a close relationship with the new dictator and declared that she was “essentially willing to do what we believe is necessary to make Venezuela great again.”

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1 Reuters, “Scenes from Venezuela as U.S. forces capture Maduro”, January 3, 2025, [https://www.reuters.com/pictures/scenes-venezuela-us-forces-captured-maduro-2026-01-03/?user\\_id=66c4c6035d78644b3ab4d27c](https://www.reuters.com/pictures/scenes-venezuela-us-forces-captured-maduro-2026-01-03/?user_id=66c4c6035d78644b3ab4d27c)

2 CNN, “Maduro appears in US court”, January 5, 2026, <https://www.cnn.com/world/live-news/venezuela-maduro-court-trump-01-05-26>

3 U.S. Department of Justice, United States District Court, Southern District Of New York, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/media/1422326/dl>

A month has passed since January 3. This article offers an assessment of Venezuela's political situation, focusing on the relationship that has emerged between the United States government and the dictatorship of Delcy Rodríguez, and examining the first thirty days of this new version of the Chavista regime.

### Managing an Autocrat

After Nicolás Maduro's departure from the country, Delcy Rodríguez assumed power and the United States announced the beginning of a cooperative relationship with her regime. In President Trump's first press conference after the operation, he confirmed direct contact with Rodríguez and emphasized her willingness to comply.

He reiterated the United States' commitment to the reconstruction of Venezuela, stating from Mar-a-Lago that the United States would "run"<sup>4</sup> the country – an assertion he repeated aboard Air Force One: "We are going to run it, fix it."<sup>5</sup>

Senator Marco Rubio echoed these statements. In an interview with ABC on January 4, he said that Maduro "was not the legitimate president"<sup>6</sup> and that the legitimacy of the new administration

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4 NBC News, "Trump says U.S. is 'in charge' of Venezuela and warns interim leader to cooperate", Megan Lebowitz and Alexander Smith, Jan. 4, 2026, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/Venezuela-trump-maduro-rcna252177>

5 Fox News Channel, "Trump vows US 'in charge' of Venezuela as he reveals if he's spoken to Delcy Rodríguez", Greg Wehner, January 4, 2026, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/trump-vows-us-in-charge-venezuela-he-reveals-hes-spoken-delcy-rodriguez>

6 CBS News, Transcript: Secretary of State Marco Rubio on "Face the Nation with Margaret Brennan," Jan. 4, 2026, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/marco-rubio-secretary-of-state-face-the-nation-transcript-01-04-2026/>

would be determined by the actions the current authorities take –or fail to take.

Rubio made the tutelary nature of the relationship explicit, reinforced by Trump’s warning: “If she doesn’t do what’s right, she is going to pay a very big price, probably bigger than Maduro.”<sup>7</sup> With this, the U.S. government made clear that its relationship with Rodríguez’s interim government is a relationship of subordination.

According to Javier Corrales, this initial approach can be described as “nation-coaching.”<sup>8</sup> Unlike earlier cases such as Panama or Afghanistan, the United States does not appear –at least initially– to be seeking regime change, but rather a modification of the regime’s behavior through coercive incentives, including the prior or potential use of force.

What has been established so far is a tutelary relationship<sup>9</sup> between the Trump administration and the dictatorship of Delcy Rodríguez, in which the United States uses force as the principal stimulus to ensure the Venezuelan regime’s political obedience.

In his testimony before the Senate, Secretary Rubio clearly underscored this logic: “We will closely monitor the performance

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7 Politico, “Trump warns acting Venezuelan leader will ‘pay a big price’ if she doesn’t cooperate”, Aaron Pellish, Jan. 4, 2026, <https://www.politico.com/news/2026/01/04/trump-warns-acting-venezuelan-leader-00710314>

8 WSJ, “U.S. Tries a New Playbook: Regime Management, Not Regime Change”, David Luhnnow, Jan. 12, 2026, <https://www.wsj.com/world/americas/venezuela-trump-maduro-regime-change-9433883d?mod=Searchresults&pos=2&page=1>

9 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/>

of the interim authorities as they cooperate with our stage-based plan to restore stability to Venezuela. Make no mistake, as the president has stated, we are prepared to use force to ensure maximum cooperation if other methods fail.”<sup>10</sup>

### **An Autocrat Being Managed**

Force plays an essential role in this power dynamic. Its use –or the credible threat of its use– is the mechanism that triggers Rodríguez’s political obedience and enables consent mediated by coercion. Rodríguez herself has acknowledged this: “It’s not that the interim president is scared or threatened... Venezuela is threatened. All of Venezuela is threatened.”<sup>11</sup>

In saying this, Rodríguez admits that her stay in power depends primarily on the quality of her relationship with the United States. By presenting herself as threatened, she acknowledges her fragility and that her political survival depends on maintaining a functional relationship with the Trump administration.

This observation helps situate Venezuela’s current political moment. In practical terms, the country is not yet going through a democratic transition; it remains in a phase prior to regime change. The Trump administration’s tutelage strategy appears aimed at creating pre-democratic conditions that might eventually allow the country to move toward democracy.

A few days ago, President Trump explained why he made that decision and chose to work with Rodríguez. In a brief exchange

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10 El País, Marco Rubio: “Estados Unidos usará la fuerza si Rodríguez no coopera en Venezuela”, Macarena Vidal Liy, January. 27, 2026, <https://elpais.com/america/2026-01-28/marco-rubio-estados-unidos-usara-la-fuerza-si-rodriguez-no-coopera-en-venezuela.html>

11 <https://x.com/delcyrodriguezv/status/2012000856795754718?s=20>

with the press, he emphasized the risks of pursuing regime change without territorial control, citing Iraq as a cautionary example and stating that if everyone in power was to be abruptly removed, the security structure in the country would be destroyed, creating a vacuum that could be filled by much worse forces, like ISIS.<sup>12</sup>

Time will tell whether this gradual strategy leads to democracy. For that to happen, the Venezuelan dictatorship –deeply embedded within the structures of the state– would have to be dismantled. It is not an easy task. In many ways, dismantling the dictatorship means dismantling the state itself, a challenge reminiscent of post-Soviet transformations.

The United States is betting that Delcy Rodríguez will carry out this task. However, this strategy faces two obstacles: one **situational** and one **structural**.

Delcy Rodríguez is not the transitional Spanish leader Adolfo Suárez, nor the Soviet reformer Mikhail Gorbachev. She is not a reformer. She is an autocrat in distress –existentially committed to 21st-century socialism, yet forced to make decisions that contradict her political convictions in order to survive and remain in power.

Her autocratic nature reinforces a coercive dynamic marked by tension and contradiction. The docility demanded by this “management” generates significant political and human costs. Every decision made under coercion erodes authority and weakens governance.

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12 YouTube, Hindustan Times, “Venezuela Is Next Iraq? Trump Drops ISIS Shocker As Iran Claims ‘Foreign’ & ‘Daesh’ Plot In Protests”, Jan. 16, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=talgAOMPxSA>

This experiment –attempting to modify an autocrat’s behavior through the use or threat of force– may work, but its scope is limited and depends largely on the effectiveness of coercion.

The structural obstacle is the immobility of the Chavista regime itself. Chavismo is fundamentally corrupt –not minor corruption, but systemic corruption that has shaped its political culture and its relationship with the state. It is a mafia-style state, where organized crime, drug trafficking, radical leftist ideology, and alliances with global autocracies converge to form a non-democratic system with little capacity for reform.

Thus, the success of *state-coaching* depends on three variables: the coercive capacity of the tutor, the docility of the autocrat under management, and the flexibility of the system to be reformed.

### How Is Delcy Doing It?

Rodríguez’s objective is to survive,<sup>13</sup> and to survive means managing contradictions. Her relationship with the United States fluctuates depending on the audience and the context. She openly contradicts herself in public statements.

On social media and in formal settings, she is conciliatory. On Instagram she wrote: “We invite the government of the United States to collaborate with us on an agenda of cooperation aimed at shared development within the framework of international law to strengthen lasting community coexistence.”<sup>14</sup>

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13 Journal of Democracy, “How Maduro’s Dictatorship Plans to Survive”, Freddy Guevara, January 2026, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/how-maduros-dictatorship-plans-to-survive/>

14 <https://www.instagram.com/p/DTHIbhkjPSf>

However, when addressing militants of the governing Socialist Party, she is confrontational. On January 26 she declared: “Enough with Washington’s orders about Venezuelan politicians –may Venezuelan politics be the one that resolves our disagreements and our internal conflicts.”<sup>15</sup> Perhaps for that reason, Rubio emphasized that her performance would be judged not by her words but by her actions.

### *Security*

A decision that would have been unthinkable a few weeks earlier: the director of the CIA, John Ratcliffe, visited Caracas and met with Rodríguez.<sup>16</sup> Although neither government officially announced the visit, journalistic sources reported that the meeting lasted two hours and focused on strengthening cooperation between the United States and Venezuela.

Subsequently, U.S. diplomats visited the country<sup>17</sup> to begin steps toward reopening the United States Embassy in Caracas, which has been closed since 2019. Secretary Rubio has announced that the reopening is expected soon –a significant step in bilateral relations.

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15 Swissinfo.ch, “Delcy Rodríguez: «Basta de las órdenes de Washington sobre políticos en Venezuela»”, 25 de enero, 2026, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/delcy-rodr%C3%ADguez%3a-%22basta-de-las-%C3%B3rdenes-de-washington-sobre-pol%C3%ADticos-en-venezuela%22/90833577>

16 AP, “CIA director meets Venezuela’s acting president in Caracas,” David Klepper, January 16, 2026, <https://apnews.com/article/ratcliffe-cia-venezuela-maduro-trump-7f29b37161100b6cab31036f5292559d>

17 PBS News, “U.S. and Venezuela take initial steps toward restoring relations after Maduro’s capture”, January 9, 2026, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/u-s-and-venezuela-take-initial-steps-toward-restoring-relations-after-maduros-capture>

### *Human Rights*

Progress has been limited when it comes to human rights. The clearest indicator is the lack of transparency surrounding the release of political prisoners.

According to Foro Penal,<sup>18</sup> only 266 political prisoners had been released as of January 26. The Democratic Unitary Platform<sup>19</sup> reports 277 releases and maintains that 835 remain imprisoned. These figures contrast sharply with Rodríguez's claim that 808 detainees have been released<sup>20</sup> —which has not been validated by any international organization.

Moreover, those who have been released are not fully free: their criminal proceedings remain open, and they are prohibited from speaking to the press. The process has been devastating for families. In recent days, three mothers of political prisoners died<sup>21</sup> while fighting for their children's freedom.

At a deeper level, Rodríguez has taken no steps to dismantle the repressive apparatus or to restore political rights. On the contrary, the DGCIM and SEBIN —repressive agencies that were previously under her authority— are now headed by General Gustavo González López, appointed commander of the Presidential Guard.

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18 <https://x.com/ForoPenal/status/2015783993589784612?s=20>

19 <https://x.com/unidadvenezuela>

20 CDN Digital, "Agence France-Presse, Venezuela: 808 political prisoners freed, gov't claims", January 27, 2026, <https://cebudailynews.inquirer.net/691980/venezuela-808-political-prisoners-freed-govt-claims>

21 <https://www.instagram.com/p/DUDiX9rjmh7/>

Rather than being dismantled, repression has been centralized under the presidency. This adaptation of authoritarian control constitutes a major obstacle to democratization.

### *Economy*

In economic terms, progress has been concentrated on reactivating the oil industry. The National Assembly –controlled by the dictatorship and without the presence of democratic opposition– approved in first reading a reform to the Hydrocarbons Law<sup>22</sup> aimed at increasing production and attracting investment.

The spokesperson for Chevron in Venezuela, Mariano Vela, said: “We are prepared to continue contributing with our operational expertise, technological innovation, and hard work to help build a more competitive oil and gas sector.”<sup>23</sup>

Secretary Rubio celebrated the measure, noting that Rodríguez has committed to opening Venezuela’s energy sector to American companies, giving preferential access to production and using the profits to purchase American products.<sup>24</sup>

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22 Asamblea Nacional, Poder Legislativo, Republica Bolivariana de Venezuela, “Reforma de Ley de Hidrocarburos incorpora los Contratos de Participación Productiva”, Desiree Renjifo, 27 de enero de 2026, <https://www.asambleanacional.gob.ve/noticias/reforma-de-ley-de-hidrocarburos-incorpora-los-contratos-de-participacion-productiva>

23 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gr3mkR06ZR8>

24 U.S. Department of State, Secretary of State Marco Rubio Before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on U.S. Policy Towards Venezuela, January 28, 2026, <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2026/01/secretary-of-state-marco-rubio-before-the-senate-committee-on-foreign-relations-on-u-s-policy-towards-venezuela/>

However, analysts warn that recovery does not depend solely on legal reforms<sup>25</sup> but on rebuilding institutional credibility. Even so, the United States views these changes positively, and Venezuelans have perceived improvements. In January, the parallel-market dollar rate fell by half<sup>26</sup> —a fragile but significant sign of recovery.

### *Autocracies, Opposition, and Civil Society*

Only Cuba, Russia, Iran, and China sent diplomats to Rodríguez's inauguration<sup>27</sup>. Their presence underscores that alliances with global autocracies persist, even if they are conditioned.

As for the opposition, Rodríguez has avoided any dialogue with leader María Corina Machado. Her “peace commission”<sup>28</sup> excludes democratic forces, while political parties remain banned and many leaders are still imprisoned or in exile.

She has also attacked civil society organizations that defend human rights,<sup>29</sup> accusing them of profiteering. Thus, repression

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25 Americas Quarterly, “Without Institutional Change, Venezuela’s Oil Bonanza Remains Unviable”, Francisco Monaldi, January 26, 2026, <https://americasquarterly.org/article/without-institutional-change-venezuelas-oil-bonanza-remains-unviable/>

26 El Caribe, “Precio Dólar Paralelo y Dólar BCV en Venezuela 25 de enero de 2026”, Andrés Tovar, 25 de enero de 2026, <https://www.elcaribe.com.do/panorama/internacionales/dolar-paralelo-dolar-bcv-venezuela-25-enero-2026/>

27 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGs203iwse4>

28 El Mundo, “Delcy impone un consejo de paz con chavistas, falsos opositores y «extorsionadores»”, Daniel Lozano, 25 de enero de 2026, <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2026/01/25/6975068ae4d4d8d4418b457e.html>

29 Infobae, “Delcy Rodríguez dijo que pedirá a la ONU verificar la lista de presos políticos excarcelados en Venezuela”, 23 de enero de 2026, <https://www.infobae.com/venezuela/2026/01/24/delcy-rodriguez-dijo-que->

and verbal attacks continue to define the regime's relationship with the opposition and civil society. No substantive change has yet occurred.

### **Final Considerations: A Strategy Put to the Test**

Venezuela has entered a politically unique moment. Nicolás Maduro's departure altered the country's power structure, but it did not resolve the deeper problem of authoritarianism. What exists today is neither a democracy nor a simple continuation of the previous regime, but an open political situation with a direction that is still contested.

The United States' decision to adopt a state-coaching or tutelage strategy reflects an attempt to avoid the risks of an abrupt regime collapse –state disintegration, security vacuums, and uncontrolled violence.

By prioritizing stability, monitored cooperation, and conditioned compliance, Washington has chosen a gradual approach aimed at modifying political behavior while preserving the basic functionality of the state. This strategy is not a democratic shortcut, but it is also not incompatible with a democratic outcome.

Managing an autocrat is inherently risky. However, it acknowledges a central feature of contemporary authoritarian systems: in regimes deeply embedded in the state, transitions rarely begin with reformers. They begin with restrictions. If sustained and carefully calibrated, external pressure can reduce repression, reopen institutional channels, and create incentives for incremental changes. In this sense, state-coaching operates as

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a pre-democratic strategy rather than an alternative to democratization.

Whether this approach contributes to democratic reconstruction will depend on its evolution. Coercion must remain conditional and tied to verifiable political changes, and cooperation should not translate into premature international legitimization. The line between stabilization and authoritarian consolidation will be thin and decisive.

Ultimately, Venezuela's trajectory will not be determined solely by external actors. Democratic outcomes depend on internal agency: the ability of political leaders, civil society, and citizens to reclaim space and prepare for institutional reconstruction when conditions allow. State-coaching may open the political arena, but it will be Venezuelans who determine what emerges within it.

The coming months will reveal whether this experiment produces managed obedience or significant transformation. For the first time in years, Venezuela's future is no longer structurally closed –and how that opening is used will define the country's political fate.