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Delcy Rodríguez: A Tutored Dictator

Delcy Rodríguez was sworn in as Acting President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela¹ on January 5, 2026. The ceremony was presided over by the president of the National Assembly, Jorge Rodríguez,² who is also her older brother. In this way, the Rodríguez Gómez siblings came to control both the Executive and Legislative branches of the Venezuelan State, forming a seemingly powerful political duo.

Her rise to power was formalized forty-eight hours after an unprecedented event in Venezuela's history. In the early hours of January 3, 2026, the United States carried out a military operation³ and forcibly removed Nicolás Maduro and Cilia Flores from the

1 Runrunes, "Delcy Rodríguez se juramenta como presidenta encargada ante la AN", January 5, 2026, <https://runrun.es/noticias/596456/delcy-rodriguez-se-juramenta-como-presidenta-encargada-ante-la-an/>

2 <https://www.cnn.com/2026/01/06/world/video/who-is-jorge-rodriguez-digvid-vrt>

3 CNN World, "The US has captured Venezuelan leader Maduro. Here's what to know", Stefano Pozzebon, Simone McCarthy, Adam Cancryn, January 3, 2026, <https://www.cnn.com/2026/01/03/americas/venezuela-explosions-intl-hnk>

country. They were immediately transferred to New York, where they now face charges related to drug trafficking.⁴

Just hours after the operation, President Trump held a press conference from Mar-a-Lago, offering early signs of what was to come. He announced that the United States would “run” Venezuela and stated that he was in contact with the vice president –Delcy Rodríguez– whom he described as “essentially willing to do what we think is necessary to make Venezuela great again.”⁵

That announcement came as a cold shock over Venezuelans who, for decades, have fought to defend democracy in their country. Venezuela has a robust civil society that resisted Nicolás Maduro’s authoritarian turn and even succeeded in defeating him in the presidential election of July 28, 2024 –results he refused to recognize, triggering the current crisis⁶.

Until January 3, Delcy Rodríguez was widely perceived as a loyal revolutionary committed to twenty-first-century socialism. Her political trajectory reflects an existential commitment to the project launched by Hugo Chávez Frías more than three decades ago. Until that day, there were no signs suggesting a willingness to reinvent herself as a tutored dictator.

4 AP, “What’s next in deposed Venezuela leader Nicolás Maduro’s criminal case”, by Michael R. Sisak, Larry Neumeister, January 6, 2026, <https://apnews.com/article/maduro-venezuela-criminal-case-whats-next-5aebeae4392b4f24b816da0f2ee893f2>

5 CBS News, “Trump says U.S. is «in charge» of Venezuela, Maduro jailed in New York after U.S. military operation”, Jennifer Jacobs, Joe Walsh, James LaPorta, Tucker Reals, January 5, 2026, <https://www.cbsnews.com/live-updates/venezuela-us-military-strikes-maduro-trump/>

6 Journal of Democracy, “How Maduro Stole Venezuela’s Vote”, Javier Corrales, Dorothy Kronick, January 2025, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/how-maduro-stole-venezuelas-vote/>

This raises several questions: Who is Delcy Rodríguez? Why was she chosen by the United States for this role? And what challenges will she face as she governs under U.S. tutelage?

Profile

Monday, January 5, 2026. Shortly after 2:00 p.m. Delcy Rodríguez placed her left hand on the Venezuelan Constitution and raised her right. Looking directly at her brother, she took the oath as Acting President of the Republic.⁷ After invoking Simón Bolívar and Hugo Chávez, she mentioned her father: Jorge Antonio Rodríguez.⁸

That reference reveals a central element of her psychology. It shows that her motivations run deep and are shaped by a lifelong family trauma: the death of her father.

Delcy Rodríguez was born in Caracas on May 18, 1969. Her father, Jorge Antonio Rodríguez, was a left-wing political leader and a member of Venezuela's Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR). When democracy was restored in Venezuela in 1958, he chose not to participate in it and instead became an early advocate of armed struggle. He founded the Liga Socialista and later created its armed wing, the Organización Revolucionaria.

Rodríguez's father was a Marxist guerrillero who participated in violent operations intended to destabilize Venezuela's democratic system, and his life ended tragically. On February 27, 1976,

7 Fox News Channel, "Venezuela's new interim leader Delcy Rodríguez 'hates the West,' ex official warns", Emma Bussey, January 5, 2026, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/venezuelas-new-interim-leader-delcy-rodriguez-hates-west-former-official-warns>

8 Diccionario de Historia de Venezuela, <https://bibliofep.fundacionempresaspoliar.org/dhv/entradas/r/rodriguez-jorge-antonio/>

he kidnapped William Frank Niehous,⁹ president of the American company Owens-Illinois. Three months later, he was arrested by the Directorate of Intelligence and Prevention Services (DISIP). During interrogation, he was subjected to cruel and inhuman treatment that caused his death. He died while in the custody of the Venezuelan State.

His death remains a deep wound in the history of Venezuelan democracy and within the Rodríguez family. Shortly thereafter, the Attorney General at the time filed charges in court, and President Carlos Andrés Pérez dismissed Arístides Lander, who was serving as director of DISIP.

On numerous occasions, Delcy Rodríguez has publicly stated that this injustice shaped both her political and personal trajectory. In 2018, she said on a television program that she was “happy to be part of the Bolivarian Revolution, because this is our personal revenge.”¹⁰

That wound, inflicted when she was only seven years old, appears never to have healed and continues to shape the way she approaches politics.

She studied law at the Central University of Venezuela and graduated in 1993. Shortly thereafter, she received a state scholarship and pursued a specialization in labor and trade union law at the University of Paris X Nanterre. Paradoxically, the democracy her father rejected offered her extraordinary educational opportunities.

9 Opinion y Noticias, “Jorge Rodríguez padre no era un «angelito»”, Gerónimo Figueroa F., August 27, 2016, <https://www.opinionynoticias.com/opinionpolitica/27353-jorge-rodriguez-padre-no-era-un-angelito>

10 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjZn6upVcCc>

After France, she moved to England, where she earned a master's degree in social policy at Birkbeck College, University of London. Those who knew her at the time recall her as a solitary figure with firm left-wing convictions. A former classmate recalls that she rarely attended social gatherings and vaguely remembers her mentioning her father on one occasion.¹¹

By then, Hugo Chávez had won his first presidential election, and Rodríguez decided to return to Venezuela to join the Bolivarian Revolution. She was a single woman in her early thirties, with a strong academic résumé and a leftist lineage well suited to the new political project.

Between 2001 and 2005, she held several appointed positions in the public administration. She first joined the political team of Foreign Minister Roy Chaderton and, in 2003, became general coordinator of the Vice Presidency.

In 2006, she left Venezuela again and, until 2010, served as an adviser to Venezuela's Permanent Mission to the United Nations in Geneva. That diplomatic posting allowed her to strengthen political and personal ties with progressive and leftist movements around the world.

She returned to Caracas in 2011, and the death of Hugo Chávez marked her definitive rise within the power structure. Nicolás Maduro's arrival to the presidency opened the door to key decision-making roles.

11 La Gazeta de la Iberosfera, "Un excompañero de Delcy Rodríguez en la Universidad de Londres la define: «Su fuerte no era la economía»", January 8, 2026, <https://gaceta.es/iberosfera/un-excompanero-de-delcy-rodriguez-en-la-universidad-de-londres-la-define-su-fuerte-no-era-la-economia-20260108-1525/>

In 2013, she was appointed Minister of Communication; a year later, Minister of Foreign Affairs; and in 2017, Executive Vice President. From that position, she assumed control over the regime's repressive apparatus.

Since then, the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN) and the General Directorate of Military Counterintelligence (DGCIM) have operated under her coordination. Her name appears among those implicated in crimes against humanity documented by the United Nations Independent International Fact-Finding Mission.¹²

She also forged close personal and institutional ties with Venezuela's business elite.¹³ In fact, she was the keynote speaker at the 2021 annual assembly of Fedecámaras.¹⁴ Deeply intertwined with the central government, that sector found in Rodríguez an ally who prioritized elite economic interests under an ostensibly Marxist discourse.

In August 2024, following the presidential fraud of July 28 and while Maduro's dictatorship sustained itself through terror,¹⁵ she assumed the Ministry of Petroleum. Simultaneously holding the

12 ONU, Consejo de Derechos Humanos, September 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/hrbodies/hrcouncil/ffmv/a-hrc-60-crp-4-annex-eng.pdf>

13 El País, "El chavismo y los empresarios venezolanos estrechan su relación", Alonso Moleiro, July 21, 2021, <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-07-21/el-chavismo-y-los-empresarios-venezolanos-estrechan-su-relacion.html>

14 Caracas Chronicles, "Delcy Rodríguez at Fedecámaras: A Regrettable Episode", Diego Bautista Urbaneja, July 28, 2021, <https://www.caracaschronicles.com/2021/07/28/delcy-rodriguez-at-fedecamaras-a-regrettable-episode/>

15 Journal of Democracy, "Maduro Can Only Rule Through Fear and Terror", Paola Bautista de Alemán, August 2024, <https://www.journalof>

vice presidency and the oil portfolio allowed her to coordinate the regime's coercive machinery and its formal sources of revenue.

Venezuela's new president is part of the autocratic structure initiated by Hugo Chávez and consolidated by Nicolás Maduro. She has actively participated in actions that resulted in massive human rights violations condemned by the international community. As a result, she has been sanctioned by the European Union, Canada, Switzerland, and the United States.¹⁶

Delcy, a Tutored Dictator

Delcy Rodríguez temporarily assumed the presidency after the United States bombed Caracas and removed her predecessor. The manner of her ascent conditions the way she exercises power.

President Trump's first press conference following the operation confirmed contact with Rodríguez and emphasized her willingness to comply. He reiterated U.S. involvement in Venezuela's reconstruction, stating from Mar-a-Lago that the United States would "run" the country. It was a claim he repeated aboard Air Force One: "We're going to run it and fix it."¹⁷

democracy.org/online-exclusive/maduro-can-only-rule-through-fear-and-terror/

16 U.S. Department of States, Global Public Affairs, "Estados Unidos aplica sanciones a personas físicas y jurídicas venezolanas", September 25, 2018, <https://2017-2021-translations.state.gov/2018/09/25/estados-unidos-aplica-sanciones-a-personas-fisicas-y-juridicas-venezolanas/>

17 CBS News, "Trump says the U.S. will «run» Venezuela for now. What do we know about the plans?", Melissa Quinn, January 4, 2026, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-says-us-will-run-venezuela-for-now-what-do-we-know-about-the-plans/>

Senator Marco Rubio echoed these statements. In an interview with ABC on January 4, he said that Maduro was an “illegitimate president”¹⁸ and that legitimacy would be measured by what the current authorities did or failed to do. He added that Rodríguez’s government lacked electoral legitimacy, a view shared by other countries, including the European Union.

Rubio made the tutelary 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.”¹⁹

On January 7, Rubio outlined the Trump administration’s three-phase plan for Venezuela: stabilization, recovery, and transition. Stabilization would involve U.S. control over oil revenues; recovery would guarantee access for U.S. and Western companies and initiate reconciliation; and the final phase would be political transition.

Thus, the U.S. government has made clear that its relationship with Rodríguez’s interim government is one of subordination. Rodríguez has gone from being a fierce anti-imperialist revolutionary to a dictator under the tutelage of the very power she once denounced.

We are already seeing signs of that external tutelage. Rodríguez has softened her rhetoric. The confrontational anti-imperialist language has given way to calls for peace, reconciliation, and cooperation with the United States. In her inauguration address,

18 ABC News, “Rubio: Maduro ouster is ‘not about securing the oil fields’”, <https://abcnews.com/video/128886956/>

19 The Atlantic, “Trump Threatens Venezuela’s New Leader With a Fate Worse Than Maduro’s”, January 4, 2026, Michael Scherer, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national-security/2026/01/trump-venezuela-maduro-delcy-rodriguez/685497/>

she invited the U.S. government to work jointly on a cooperation agenda.²⁰ Shortly thereafter, PDVSA confirmed talks with Washington,²¹ another concrete expression of foreign tutelage.

Challenges and Risks

Rodríguez must now appease two historically antagonistic forces: the Trump administration and the authoritarian system she has served for more than two decades. Failing either could prove fatal. Yet successfully managing both simultaneously poses a different, more structural risk for Venezuela's democratic future.

Her government is fragile and lacks popular legitimacy. As Rubio noted, her authority does not derive from the ballot box, but from an external force and conditional obedience. This dependence threatens to deepen internal fractures within chavismo, particularly among sectors for whom anti-imperialism remains a core element of political identity rather than merely a rhetorical device.

But if Rodríguez manages to frame obedience to U.S. tutelage as a tactical concession —rather than an ideological surrender— while preserving revolutionary symbols, discourse, and control over the party-state apparatus, she could reconstitute chavismo as an electorally competitive force. In that scenario, chavismo would appear “reformed” without being transformed, allowing Rodríguez to channel popular fatigue with conflict into support for a controlled political opening.

20 BBC News Mundo, “Delcy Rodríguez invita a Trump y a EE.UU. a trabajar conjuntamente «en una agenda de cooperación»”, Leire Ventas, January 5, 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/cx2lw9pe2k8o>

21 https://www.instagram.com/p/DTOxw_sj_Ka/?img_index=2

This outcome entails significant risks. A transition administered by Rodríguez could produce elections without full democratization: competitive in form, but restricted in substance. Control over institutions, security forces, electoral authorities, and economic rents could allow chavismo to retain decisive advantages while claiming renewed legitimacy both domestically and abroad. The result would not be democratic consolidation, but a hybrid regime stabilized through selective reforms.

Moreover, sustained U.S. tutelage risks creating a perverse incentive structure. Rodríguez's survival would depend less on internal consent than on the continued fulfillment of external demands. This could weaken accountability to Venezuelan citizens and reinforce a model of governance driven by external validation rather than popular sovereignty.

For chavismo, the contradiction is existential. A tutelary relationship with the United States undermines one of its most enduring foundational pillars: anti-imperialism. No propaganda can fully reconcile revolutionary identity with foreign supervision. Over time, this tension could erode ideological cohesion, provoke elite defections, or generate splinter or radical factions unwilling to accept the new arrangement.

At the same time, the opposition faces its own risks. A government led by Rodríguez and internationally tolerated could sideline democratic actors, fragment opposition coalitions, and dissipate international pressure for deeper reforms. The promise of "stability" could gradually replace demands for justice, accountability, and institutional reconstruction.

The future remains uncertain. What is clear is that Venezuelans continue, to a large extent, to be excluded from the decisions shaping their country's political trajectory. The greatest

risk is the consolidation of a tutored authoritarianism –less violent, more pragmatic, electorally adaptable– yet no closer to genuine democracy.