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A Transition, The Venezuelan Way

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Editorial Board

Introduction

A Transition, The Venezuelan Way

January 3, 2026 marked a turning point in Venezuela's contemporary history. The extraction of Nicolás Maduro by U.S. forces abruptly altered the regime's power structure, but it did not bring about its collapse. What followed was the opening of an unprecedented political scenario: the continuity of the autocratic apparatus under the leadership of the Rodríguez siblings —Delcy in the Executive and Jorge in the Legislative— and the establishment of a relationship of political tutelage by the United States over the ongoing process.

This unique situation explains the title of this edition: a transition, the Venezuelan way. It is neither a classic democratization nor a fully consummated regime change. It is an uncertain, ambiguous, and still unfolding process in which external pressures, authoritarian remnants, and the democratic aspirations of a people seeking to participate in defining their future coexist.

In these pages we bring together political actors, analysts, and experts to examine the multiple dimensions of this historical moment. The constitutional implications of a political authority that still lacks full legitimacy are analyzed, along with the need

to restore the legitimacy of public institutions as an indispensable step toward institutional reconstruction. The economic dimensions of the transition are also explored —including the debate over productive recovery and the role of the energy sector— as well as the new geopolitical environment shaping the Venezuelan process.

Everything changes second by second. For that reason, this issue seeks to offer a snapshot of the moment: an attempt to understand an exceptional juncture in which the country moves between authoritarian persistence and the possibility of democratic opening. Yet this transition is still far from being called democratization or a political shift toward justice. The wounds remain open. Political prisoners and their families remember every day the atrocities committed by the dictatorship.

The challenge remains to transform this uncertain juncture into a genuine sovereign exercise of the will for change: free elections, the full restoration of rights, and the democratic reconstruction of the Republic.

The transition —the Venezuelan way— is, in reality, a historical work unfolding chapter by chapter. What we attempt to understand today is only a scene within a longer process whose outcome has yet to be written. For that reason, we will likely need to return to these events in future issues of *Democratization*: to continue explaining Venezuela's changing reality and, at the same time, to leave a documentary record of this moment for future generations.

Guillermo Ramos Flamerich

January 3, 2026: There Are Days That Define Eras

I write these lines exactly one month after the capture of Nicolás Maduro and Cilia Flores by the United States. It is a historic event whose still unfolding consequences we still see in everyday life, make it difficult to see clearly where it is leading. And although it was a cinematic episode, open to multiple interpretations, the fact is that its outcome depended on foreign intervention, which constitutes, above all, a collective failure as a society and reveals the extent of control imposed on the country as a whole. Yet it also opens up a possibility. Maduro is, at once, a figure of the past and a reminder: the impunity of those who cling to power is not infinite.

January 3, 2026 opened a small window for democratization of the Venezuelan system. It is an opportunity that will not be given to us from the outside and that is not guaranteed, but for which we do have the necessary historical foundation to build the strength capable of transforming wounds into scars, and these into marks of collective learning.

Those of us Venezuelans born in the 1990s —as well as those born in the 1980s and 2000s, both abroad and in the country— have known only an uninterrupted succession of historic events shaped by crisis. From the collapse of democracy to the emergence

of a new political system that, under the banner of popular participation, gradually eroded pluralism until it became closed and brutal, a system that, even in its collapse, has not yet fully disappeared.

A Bit of History

Political systems in Venezuela have tended to last between two and four decades. In the twentieth century, democracy was the great promise, the great achievement, and also the great surprise: it managed to consolidate itself in a country marked by a *caudillo*, strongman tradition and civil wars, doing so by imposing a representative democratic model with a strong social orientation. However, that system collapsed when it forgot its foundational values and failed to reinvent itself and remain true to its essence. Although the country did not return exactly to the past, a convergence of several of our historical ills began to take shape, now intensified and entangled in the geopolitical dilemmas of the twenty-first century.

We had faced international pressure and historical setbacks before. The blockade imposed by European powers between 1902 and 1903, in an effort to collect unpaid debts, offered the *caudillo* Cipriano Castro the opportunity to stir national sentiment, while at the same time granting the United States a key role in deterring, monitoring, and mediating European involvement in what became known as the "Roosevelt Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine. That same Castro would be displaced by his *compadre* Juan Vicente Gómez at the end of 1908, with the aim of reaching a better understanding with the Americans and handling their investments and interests with kid gloves —investments and interests that would mark the beginning of the oil industry in Venezuela. Meanwhile, with iron fists, Gómez repressed dissent

and imposed peace in the graveyards, in forced labor on the roads, and in the prison of *La Rotunda*.

The Past as Present Heritage

After Gómez's death and the beginning of 1936, the continuity of the system in the hands of a military officer he trusted, General Eleazar López Contreras, posed a central dilemma between transition and continuity. Although there was, from within the presidency, a willingness to modernize the State and introduce gradual concessions, it was the student mobilizations, citizen organization, and public debate in the press —a true wellspring of ideas— that drove the consolidation of democracy as a collective struggle.

As the historian Manuel Caballero recalled, the protests in Caracas on February 14, 1936 may perhaps be considered the birth of democracy in modern Venezuela. However, the nearly five and a half years of López Contreras's government were marked by a zigzag course: the episode of February 14 —when the people took to the streets despite repression to reject the imposition of new censorship, resulting in both injuries and deaths— was followed by the oil strike and the expulsion of opposition leaders in 1937. The aspirations for universal suffrage and for political participation with broader rights would only begin to materialize a decade later and would consolidate with the 1958 governability pacts.

Another historical landmark is 1968 —a year of international turbulence— when Venezuela held its third consecutive presidential election under democracy. The opposition won, represented by the Social Christians of COPEI, against Acción Democrática, who had governed for a decade. Despite heightened tensions, the government conceded defeat. It lost by a narrow margin —but it lost. It was the first time something like that had

happened in the country. One must imagine what all of that meant for a country that in three decades had taken an extraordinary leap and aspired to even more. Later, it became customary. We must make that happen again, and it will be an event to which we must give its proper dimension and appreciation.

In democracy, majorities change and there is dynamism. In a dictatorship, they impose upon you —as if life did not move forward— a one-dimensional moment, an infinite trap. Chavismo has been the imposition and capture of a particular social moment, of temporary majorities, in order to turn political and economic power into private property.

The Threads that Run Through our History

We can identify at least two guiding threads with which Venezuelan reality has been woven: the authoritarian militarist and the democratic civilian. Both weigh on this present moment in which we must envision a better model of society and a democracy that understands the country. One that offers lasting solutions and includes mechanisms for renewal in difficult times.

The authoritarian tradition is associated with order and the top-down authority of the *caudillo* or of those who capture power. Within that imaginary stand Gómez and Marcos Pérez Jiménez, one as pacifier and the other as builder of order and of "spectacular modernity," as Lisa Blackmore titled her study. They are also linked to torture and political imprisonment, a recurring trail in Venezuelan history that we frequently tend to minimize, perhaps because other forms of political violence —such as assassinations of heads of state or other more public killings— are perceived as alien to our experience.

Chávez reinforced the imaginary of order during his initial phase —through his anti-corruption campaign and his promise to overhaul the system. The first few years of the 20th century brought a loss of a rare opportunity: a demographic dividend, a democracy capable of improvement and reform, an international economic context favorable to commodities, and a country rich in talent in all its forms. The inherited failures were severe and the challenges enormous, but there remained the capacity to overcome them.

The other tradition, the civilian one, is the one we must invoke now in this fragile, yet captivating space because of its possibilities. We have numerous examples at hand: men and women from different generations and commitments who, throughout nearly two hundred years of republican history, have envisioned a better country. I am thinking about Cecilio Acosta and his aversion to political hatred; of Rómulo Gallegos and the "patriotic sorrow" he bequeathed as both a lesson and a sentiment to all those he educated and to those of us who have read him; of Augusto Mijares, Mario Briceño Iragorry, and Mariano Picón Salas, who, from different ideological positions, shared a firm defense of civilian life and —as the latter put it— the conviction of sharing the condition of being Venezuelan, "that is, of acting and thinking within a country in a turbulent and contradictory process of growth."

Added to this are the pioneering women who fought for their rights, for suffrage, and for the building of a progressive society: Carmen Clemente Travieso, Cecilia Pimentel, and María Teresa Castillo; the cultural excellence of Sofía Ímber and Virginia Betancourt; as well as the tenacity of Mercedes Pulido. The names are countless —and even more so are those of the women and men who today work for Venezuela, within or beyond its borders, perhaps with nostalgia for what has been lost, but with the

conviction to rebuild and to achieve democracy as both a system of government and a way of life.

The Political Game and the Conclusion

There are months that last weeks and years that define decades. The current political moment, in its fragility and with the addendum of the "interim government," can generate an almost schizophrenic landscape: at times it seems that progress is being made; at others, that everything remains the same.

The political game, however, cannot be reduced to a competition to please the interests of the United States. We have, unfortunately, found ourselves in a kind of telematic protectorate. But this must be temporary. The pursuit of independence in freedom is the nonnegotiable purpose.

For that reason, all sectors committed to democracy must be brought together, inside and outside the country, in order to reach essential agreements. We must acknowledge past defeats, but also the baggage of our fights and the successes that are part of our shared heritage. We must unite to secure the full release of all political prisoners, bring an end to censorship, and open a truly plural debate. We must begin the reconstruction of democracy through free general elections, which should serve as the foundation for what comes next.

It is a critical and delicate moment, but we certainly possess the strength to transform it into something fruitful. May this crisis, which today appears as conclusive, become an opportunity.

Paola Bautista de Alemán

How to Manage an Autocrat

On January 3, 2026,[1] the United States removed Nicolás Maduro and Cilia Flores from Venezuela. Two days later, the former dictator and his wife appeared before federal Judge[2] Alvin Hellerstein in the Southern District of New York, facing charges[3] 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

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"[4] the country —an assertion he repeated aboard Air Force One: "We are going to run it, fix it."[5]

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

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."[7] 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."[8] 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[9] 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 Luhnow, 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."[10]

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."[11]

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

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.[12]

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.

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,[13] 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."[14]

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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."[15] 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.[16] 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[17] 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,[18] only 266 political prisoners had been released as of January 26. The Democratic Unitary Platform[19] reports 277 releases and maintains that 835 remain imprisoned. These figures contrast sharply with Rodríguez's claim that 808 detainees have been released[20] —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[21] 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[22] 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."[23]

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.[24]

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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. Deparment 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[25] 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[26] —a fragile but significant sign of recovery.

Autocracies, Opposition, and Civil Society

Only Cuba, Russia, Iran, and China sent diplomats to Rodríguez's inauguration[27]. 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"[28] 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,[29] 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.

Paola Bautista de Alemán

When Force Opens the Door: Dilemmas of the Venezuelan Transition.Interview with Miguel Ángel Martínez Meucci

Miguel Ángel Martínez Meucci is Venezuelan. He was born, raised, and educated in Caracas. In 1999, when Hugo Chávez came to power, he was studying Political Science at the Central University of Venezuela.

He recognized early on the authoritarian drift of chavismo and, shortly thereafter, left for Madrid to pursue doctoral studies at the Complutense University, where he specialized in negotiation processes and conflict resolution.

After earning his Ph.D., he returned to Venezuela. He came back to a country that was beginning to grow more accustomed to saying goodbye than to welcoming people home. He joined the academic life of Simón Bolívar University, where he served as professor and coordinator of the Master's and Doctoral programs in Political Science.

Around that time, he published the book *Apaciguamiento: El Referéndum Revocatorio y la consolidación de la Revolución Bolivariana*. In its pages, he describes with particular acuity the political instrumentalization of negotiating

arenas. More than an academic text, the book functions as a manual for understanding contemporary authoritarian practices.

In 2016, he emigrated. Like so many university professors, he was forced to seek opportunities elsewhere. Chavismo hollowed out our institutions of higher education: a silent tragedy, rarely spoken of, but one that occurred.

The destruction of the country in which he was born pushed him to participate in politics. Today, he devotes much of his time to the fight for democracy, having also become a political advisor. He works together with *Vente Venezuela*, María Corina Machado, and Edmundo González, and has played a significant role in the liberation process that began with the 2023 primary election.

He speaks calmly, does not become irritated, and keeps his Caracas accent. He is careful with his words, avoids superlatives, and keeps his emphasis grounded in reality. Moderate in his manner and in his judgments, he does not see himself as a politician, even though he has been engaged in politics in recent times.

In this conversation, we delve into the removal of Nicolás Maduro, the complex process currently underway, and the future that lies ahead for Venezuela.

January 3: An Act of Force

–To begin, let's go to the essentials: what exactly happened on January 3?

It was the extraction of an individual. It was a use-of-force action that undoubtedly constitutes a turning point and opens the possibility of a transition.

–That action by the United States triggered significant international controversy.

Yes, there is enormous controversy regarding its nature as a violation of international law. But when did international law begin to be violated in Venezuela? What did international law do when the regime violated human rights and destroyed the country? On January 3, it became evident that we are in the midst of a raw and unmistakable geopolitical confrontation.

–From your perspective, how does this operation fit within U.S. foreign policy?

Within its new national security approach and its new foreign policy, the United States considers fostering change in Venezuela a key objective. It is a cornerstone for consolidating its hemispheric control. For that reason, I believe that what occurred on January 3 was not an improvised action. There was considerable planning, and all of this responds to a long-term vision.

–Part of the debate has centered on how to name and characterize what occurred. Why is that so difficult?

Part of the difficulty in characterizing what happened on January 3 lies in the very complexity of the chavista regime. The

dictatorship under chavismo is not a conventional autocracy. It is not a military autocracy. It is a regime that combines totalitarian and kleptocratic elements.

–So, are we facing a process that is exceptional even by the standards of political transitions?

January 3 and the process we are experiencing are as *sui generis* as the dictatorship they seek to depose.

Changing the Regime Without Collapsing the State

–You have pointed out that the nature of the chavista regime is particularly complex. In that reality, the deep entanglement between the regime and the State stands out. What prevents the dismantling of chavismo from resulting in even greater state weakness?

That is precisely another of the particularities of this case. For example, in Venezuela (1958), Spain (1978), and Chile (1988), there were States with relatively strong institutional capacity. In those three cases, the autocratic regime relinquished control of a State with significant institutional strength.

In the current Venezuelan case, we are dealing with state institutions that are deeply corroded, weakened, and permeated by criminal dynamics. In addition, there has been a deliberate attempt to create para-state organizations.

One piece of evidence of this is the clear differentiation between the Bolivarian National Armed Forces and the repressive structure of the para-state colectivos. The creation of the social "Missions," operating parallel to the conventional public administration system, responded to that objective.

Chavista governance —if one can call it that— generates enormous corruption within the State. For that reason, this is not a matter of merely transferring those state institutions to the democrats; it is a matter of undertaking their democratic reconstruction

–From the perspective of the United States, what is the main risk it seeks to avoid in this process?

The Trump administration's main concern is preventing chaos. In the absence of a moderate faction within Chavismo willing to open the door, they decided to apply direct pressure to create that possibility.

–When you speak of pressure, are you referring to the direct use of military force?

Yes, the use of force. This is being done under pressure. You just cooperate. Period. What was sought was someone who would open the door from the inside, to use an expression I have been employing in recent days. The United States wanted someone to open the door from within, instead of bringing the whole structure down. And Delcy Rodríguez emerged as someone willing to do so.

–An inevitable question follows after that: do you believe Delcy Rodríguez can be considered a reformer?

Delcy is carrying out the assigned task with greater or lesser willingness. She is certainly doing so incompletely, with many doubts. But she is moving. It remains to be seen how far she would be willing to go, given her past and the responsibilities that stem from it.

–If the driving force behind change is coercion and not democratic conviction, what guarantees exist that the process will truly move toward democracy?

This process of handing over the state in a relatively orderly fashion is subject to very strong, significant, and personalized external pressure. I believe that can be quite effective. Targeted pressure on the heads of the regime may succeed in compelling them to relinquish what remains.

Now, what lies ahead will not be simple. It is a gigantic challenge. I do not see it is feasible, in order to rebuild the country, to simply receive and manage what exists. The level of destruction makes it necessary to rebuild things from the ground up. And that is not easy. There is no playbook for this. What does exist, however, are very clear ideas within the democratic leadership about the new order that should be put in place

–Coming back to Delcy Rodríguez, the one who "opens the door" today: what distinguishes her from historical cases such as Adolfo Suárez or Mikhail Gorbachev?

The first difference between the Venezuelan case and the Spanish case is that Franco died in bed; no foreign force took him away. Likewise, no foreign power removed Gorbachev in a commando operation.

In both those historical cases —Suárez in Spain and Gorbachev in the Soviet Union— there was some personal reflection about the need for political reform. For that reason, both leaders directed and embraced them. They were essentially voluntary and deliberate political decisions.

In Delcy Rodríguez's case, what we have seen so far is that she opens the door from within under coercion. That is why doubts about the true degree of voluntariness of those executing the plan to dismantle the dictatorship are grounded in reality

–Are there comparable precedents to this type of process in other countries or historical moments?

There aren't many precedents for something of these characteristics. It is very particular. And it is interesting because the characteristics of the chavista regime are also very particular.

So, although at first glance reformist traits are not visible in Delcy Rodríguez, it is difficult to say they don't exist at all, or that, for example, this crisis couldn't allow reformists to emerge.

What is happening is being forced, but that does not rule out the possibility that, given time, someone could emerge who genuinely wanted reform but lacked the opportunity while Maduro was in power. I do not see that as likely at this stage, but we also do not know what will happen

–In that sense, could it be said that coercion might eventually give birth to a reformer?

In politics, nothing is impossible. For that reason, I tend to think in terms of probabilities rather than possibilities. And although it is not likely that Delcy Rodríguez is doing this *motu proprio*, pressure can produce unexpected results.

That is what transitions are about: they are processes in which people are compelled to modify their points of view, their psychological attitudes. They force all of us to recalibrate

expectations, feelings, and attitudes. In that way, coexistence is restored

–I understand the logic of coercion as a trigger, but looking at the long term: what is the limit of force as a driver of political change?

Force is the trigger. Now, if the reasons motivating the remnants of chavismo to change are reduced solely to the threat of the use of force, it will be an extremely precarious political process. Ideally, chavista actors with a genuine political will for change would emerge, but so far that remains to be seen.

–And if those actors do not appear?

Everything will be precarious. That is why the issue of timing concerns me. The Rodríguez siblings have demonstrated that they are skilled at buying time. They have been Maduro's political operators tasked with exerting pressure on social and international actors of various kinds in order to gain time.

There is an important time horizon in the case of the Trump administration. I am referring to this year's midterm elections in the United States and, afterward, the presidential elections.

Democracies do not have much time. Democrats answer to the general interest, must deliver results, and are subject to public scrutiny. But autocrats are not. Autocrats usually have time at their disposal. They entrench themselves in power and buy time.

For me, that time horizon is key. If the Trump administration does not finalize the transition —or at least secure the conditions to ensure that the transition takes place— we will enter very dangerous territory.

We could find ourselves at a moment in which that administration loses room for maneuver and the entire process is put at risk.

Alongside this real risk, I identify important opportunities. The actors involved —fundamentally President Trump and Marco Rubio— have a great deal at stake in the success of this initiative. For that reason, I think they must be considering everything necessary so that, within the course of this year, the process is "all tied-up and well tied-up."

Opening the Door from Within

So far, we have spoken about the United States and Delcy Rodríguez. I would now like to move on to analyzing the authoritarian system that lies at the center of this process.

–When people speak of "dismantling through reforms," the doubt is inevitable: can this system withstand that path without collapsing, as happened in the Soviet Union?

The Soviet Union was rigid. It was an autocratic regime that operated under parameters of the last century. Chavista autocracy exercises domination in a more fluid manner. It is not a conventional hierarchical structure.

It is, rather, a conjunction of dynamics of control and plunder that mutates continuously. In that sense, I believe that direct pressure on the regime leaders may —possibly— be an effective way to induce relatively accelerated mechanisms of change.

It is also important to understand that the economy is at play and is a relevant variable. In the Russian case, the state oil

monopolies ended up controlling the intelligence apparatus. In the Venezuelan case, it would appear that this will not be so.

The United States is controlling the two primary sources of financing for the system —oil on one hand, and drug trafficking on the other. It is a strategy aimed at undermining the system from its economic foundations and disabling its functionality. By altering the regime's political economy, the United States is forcing it to change.

–So, rather than a reform, are we facing a process of systemic dismantling aimed at paving the way for a new democratic state structure?

Yes, and it is very complex. This is not about handing over the keys to a ministry and replacing personnel. It will be a demanding process that will take time, and it seems to me that the design of the political change roadmap proposed by the United States responds to that reality.

The Voice That Preceded January 3

–I would now like to talk about Venezuelans. It seems to me that there has been a democratic deficit in the political process that began on January 3. It appears that the voice of Venezuelans is still not present, and I would like to hear your opinion on this idea.

You were speaking about the moment when the process began and the absence of a popular voice. If we are talking about the immediate circumstances of January 3, I might perhaps agree with your assessment. But I believe the picture is broader and that this path began earlier. And it began, precisely, with enormous popular protagonism.

I think it is very important to see it that way. This began with the participation of Venezuelans. It began when people found a mechanism through which their voice could truly be heard. The regime had been very skillful in ensuring that voice was not heard.

I am not referring only to censorship and fear, but also to this idea of generating a communicational fabric, a political fabric that worked to its advantage. That functional, regime-aligned opposition faction, better known as the "alacrana," has been one of the fundamental pillars of the regime's stability over an extended period.

Only when citizens found a way to organize themselves —and a leadership that said, "Let's go to elections, but only if the votes are actually counted"— did people understand and say, "Now it is worth participating."

Without this civic decision, we would not have had a January 3. The United States does not enter a country with a legitimate president. The popular and sovereign will was essential for this to occur.

That said, I must add that, after the mechanism of force, we must see the return of citizen participation, of organized political forces, of civil society, of the social fabric. Citizen participation is therefore an obligation.

Venezuela can only rise again as a consequence of the free initiative of organized citizens. Within organized civil society lies what is needed to move forward. I believe we are moving toward a reconfiguration of the State: a much smaller, leaner State.

In that sense, the program of María Corina Machado and Edmundo González seeks a subsidiary State —a State in which

everything that citizens are capable of doing, they should do, and which provides support wherever assistance is needed

> I agree with the importance of citizen participation. That's why I'd like us to talk now about political parties.
>
> –Venezuela has a strong political party tradition that remains strong. More than two decades of dictatorship have not managed to make it disappear. But parties are not what they once were, and they are going through a crisis of representation. Perhaps the breathing room this process brings will help us recover... perhaps not. What role do you think political parties will play during this period?

All political systems are grounded in a political economy. In the twentieth century, Venezuela was a petrostate, and the democratic system grew closely tied to the management of oil revenues. For that reason, parties in Venezuela were born from the top down.

It worked like this: someone would come to occupy an important position within the State and would generate a structure that became a political party. But the history of political parties in other societies is the opposite: they are forms of organization that emerge from the bottom up.

So, I believe that, in some way, as the State is reconfigured, public institutions must also be reconfigured. And political parties will be compelled to reconfigure their own operating logics. We will need parties that are much more capable of articulating popular demands and less focused on managing revenue.

We are already seeing that change. It is what happened in the primary election of October 22, 2023, and in the presidential

election of July 28, 2024: movements of highly motivated people who, without being formally linked to political parties, played a fundamental role at those moments. And that speaks to civic awareness.

The party system will have to adapt to the new circumstances. The logic of distribution has come to an end because the state that made it possible no longer exists.

Anxiety and Hope: The Emotions of Transition

–It is time to close this conversation, and it is inevitable to look ahead. In light of the challenges we have identified, how do you see the future?

I see, at the same time, anxiety and hope. Anxiety, because every transition is an uncertain path between two situations of relative certainty. It is a passage from one system of rules to another, yet the process itself is defined by a lack of clear rules.

So that lack of clear rules generates anxiety and concern. That is normal. These are complex processes. Hence the need for them to be navigated with composure and with strong popular support.

I believe it is very important that every step we take opens the door to people's participation. That is what will gradually pave the way: knowing that whatever happens is supported by the people.

It cannot be a negotiation among small groups. There cannot be an agreement reached behind the country's back. People must be included so that this has legitimacy, grounding, and deep roots.

I believe that is something we cannot lose sight of. People felt they won on July 28. Venezuelans organized, took risks, worked in an almost clandestine manner, and it worked.

That experience of victory through popular organization is something we cannot forget or pretend did not happen. For me, the transition began at that moment, not with Maduro's extraction.

For that reason, hope comes accompanied by anxiety, but it is also sustained by the path already traveled. Everything we have achieved is very important and is a reason for hope.

Citizens' sense of self-worth is fundamental. It is the awareness that Venezuelans want something different. We set this process in motion so that it could happen, and we are the ones who will bring it to completion

–In the future you describe, there will have to be a reckoning with what we have lived through. What have these years of suffering and democratic struggle left us? What have we learned?

All these very hard years have generated deep personal and collective traumas that will have to be addressed, but they have also sown an attitude that I value greatly: a wisdom born of the harshest experience; a learning process, a renewed appreciation for freedom, solidarity, order, integrity, truth, responsibility, and the courage to defend all of the above.

We have come to know and feel, in our own skin, that these things are not secondary or ornamental, but the very core of any society that truly seeks to prosper. That is why I find it admirable to see young people who have never lived under democracy, yet are working to achieve it and still dream of freedom.

–So, could we say that we have a great opportunity ahead of us?

Yes. We have an extraordinary opportunity to change the model of the State. We will be able to make it functional, small, agile, and strong. It can be tremendously efficient, highly effective, and a model at the global level. If we do not set these challenges for ourselves in this way, then the tragedy will remain only a tragedy.

Tragedy cannot be meaningless suffering; it must become the source of learning and improvement. We must find meaning in what we have lived through. And that meaning is being able to say, with maturity: "This has made us better; this makes us stronger."

From now on, I believe we will be in a position to value much more what truly matters, and we will have a great opportunity to do things very well.

Paola Bautista de Alemán

Delcy Rodríguez: A Tutored Dictator

Delcy Rodríguez was sworn in as Acting President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela[1] 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 operation[3] 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 crisis[6].

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.

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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,

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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.fundacionempresaspolar.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.

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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.

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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]

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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,

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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.

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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.

Alejandro G. Motta Nicolicchia

The Show Is Called "Maduro and January 3"

The spectacularization of political fact is an inescapable phenomenon in today's communication landscape. Drawing on authors such as Debord, Sartori, Castells, and Bourdieu, we can describe this communicational manifestation based on five main characteristics. First, the primacy of the image; second, the intensive use of social media; third, the personalization of power; fourth, the simplification of complex problems; and, finally, emotional polarization. All of these explain the communicational event embodied on January 3, 2026, following the capture of Nicolás Maduro by the government of the United States.

1. Primacy of the Image and the Expectation of Evidence

The photo, a video. That was what everyone expected once Donald Trump's message was posted on his social network Truth Social, announcing that Maduro and his wife had been captured and taken out of Venezuela to the United States. Both the government and the opposition wanted evidence. The former, to draw a communicational line and define strategy; the latter, above all, to mitigate the thirst for justice. With the exception of the poorly-pronounced "Happy New Year" by the captured man, the communication derived from those images —of a Maduro dressed

in gray athletic clothing, with a blindfold and handcuffs— shook the international public opinion, but especially Venezuelans.

The meaning of the image unfolds into a differentiated analysis between the domestic and the international. For foreign public opinion, the image awakens the morbid interest of seeing a powerful man captured by a "foreign power," even, for some, by "North American imperialism." This interpretation was especially common in European media, where the refrain that U.S. action was a "violation of sovereignty" was repeated frequently. Europe —resentful toward the American president— took the opportunity to criticize Trump.

In this sense, it is worth raising the problem of post-truth, understood as the comprehension and description of reality based on subjective evidence (emotional process) rather than objective evidence (rational process). The concept of "sovereignty," even though it exists within legal frameworks and international rules, becomes relativized and confusing in Venezuela's case when interpreted emotionally rather than rationally. Sovereignty? The kind that Venezuelans lost when Hugo Chávez handed it over to Cuba, China, Russia, and Iran. Chávez was the one who eroded any rational or legal sense of sovereignty, transforming it into political rhetoric, revolutionary narratives, and utopian myths that did not solve but deepened Venezuela's problems. Maduro, in turn, leveraged the consequences of that distortion. As a result, linking the image of Maduro to the abstract idea of sovereignty loses objective and rational meaning. The balm produced by justice turns sovereignty into a variable subject to debate and shaped by emotional stimuli.

2. Intensive Use of Social Media: Ordinary Citizens' Networks Anticipate Official News

The image —the trigger for the emotional reaction— quickly found a home and momentum on social media. Ultimately, the feeling is given legitimacy by the online sphere.

"People are uploading these videos online —does anyone know what's going on?" Around 2 a.m., messages like this flooded WhatsApp groups among people in Venezuela and those living abroad. Social networks and websites —as has become routine— beat traditional media to the story, they get there well before news broadcasts announce urgent information, before the "breaking news." They beat the radio and, of course, the printed newspaper to the scoop. Today, every citizen can function as a reporter, and traditional outlets have come to treat street witnesses —often the very people who filmed the events— as valid sources.

That anticipation, in itself, is more powerful than the information transmitted by a traditional media outlet. Why? Because there are no filters, and the middleman holding a microphone —who might easily be serving a pre-set media agenda— is removed from the equation.

A special mention goes to memes, which emerge organically on social media and often with the help of artificial intelligence. Their power comes from depicting reality in simplified, mostly satirical, but highly suggestive ways. Once again, memes paradoxically feed the emotional appetite that began with the image in question. In this way, memes contribute to the —certainly risky— insatiability of the news event. The hunger to keep watching and keep digging is unlikely to find a limit.

3. Personalization of Power: It's Not the Government, Not Chavismo, and Not Even the PSUV that Makes the News –It's Maduro

And the news centers above all on Maduro. In this sense, the personalization of politics —a phenomenon born from political disengagement, the discrediting of political parties, and rejection of an establishment that fails to address people's problems— also finds purchase in extraordinary situations like what happened on January 3. The communicational impact generated by an individual who is already highly newsworthy is stronger than that caused by events involving a government, a political party, or a power structure.

Whether due to dissociation or questionable marketing strategy, Maduro decided to take advantage of the moment: to make himself the main character of the story. He knew that "the world's eyes" would be on him, and with a certain audacity —and to the surprise of many— he smiled, joked, waved, and posed for photos with his guards giving thumbs-up signals of reassurance. For fleeting moments, Chávez's protégé tried to position himself as the hero of the plot rather than the villain. He chose not to elicit pity, but to project the image of a man who seemed to be saying: "This is temporary, I'll be out soon." In those brief moments, Maduro managed to capture attention and take over the news cycle, even displacing the White House and its hawks from the media spotlight.

4. Simplification of Complex Problems: Maduro's Fall Has Not Brought Freedom to Venezuela

"We are finally free."

A hasty and recurring conclusion once Trump confirms the capture. However, what happened —framed in the spectacular— pushes us toward and feeds a false conclusion. The image represents a dream fulfilled, but insufficient. As the days passed, Venezuelans confirmed that the problem of Chavismo is as deep as it is complex —something already known. Yet the news uproar stoked a natural feeling of temporary liberation and assumptions about future scenarios involving the reconquest of democracy, a process that, by its very complexity, requires time and patience.

The appearance of Diosdado Cabello with a group of armed civilians behind him; Delcy Rodríguez's statement on the state channel *Venezolana de Televisión*; and the strange, singular presentation by the Minister of Defense, Vladimir Padrino López, condemning what happened all made it clear that the end of the kleptocracy was not consummated. It was proven that the power structure was always larger than Maduro. With that media response, born of fear and entrenchment, Chavismo demonstrated that its structure had captured an entire state. January 3 confirmed that institutionality does not exist, because they are the institutions. That day made clear that the Venezuelan problem is unprecedented in many ways, dispelling conclusions that might seem logical or by drawing supposed truths from other countries' experiences.

5. Emotional Polarization: From Libertarian Euphoria to the Fear of the Oppressor

Walter Lippmann argues that people react to the images conveyed by the media: symbols, narratives, and visual or narrative representations. For that reason, a representation translated into an image or symbol may exert more influence than a rational explanation. In this sense, the image of Maduro carries a meaning for Venezuelans that surpasses the crime of which he is accused; in other words, the legal axis centered on drug trafficking, in this case, is secondary. The emotion expressed as euphoria does not stem from celebrating justice for the harm that will cease to be inflicted by a politician accused of drug trafficking by the American justice system. The joyful outburst occurs because a new opportunity seems to open for Venezuela to return to normality, to finally be free, and because, on the horizon, there appears to be some glimpse of reunion for the Venezuelan family in a country that today urgently needs to be rebuilt.

The other emotional side is summarized, ironically, in fear. Precisely one of the most powerful weapons Chavismo has used to entrench itself in power is what they now suffer most. In this context, social media widely display the hesitant faces and speeches, as well as measured words by the most important figures in the government. Fear invaded the system like a destructive virus. What they themselves built ultimately fed a Frankenstein that is difficult to control. The fear of losing privilege, the anxiety of being betrayed, the panic of being exposed and paying the consequences are untamable elements of the regime's own making.

This emotional polarization will thaw when the country recovers democracy and freedom. A hyper-volatile pendulum does not build a nation, does not make a country, and makes it impossible to lay the foundations for an institutional system.

"Stability," as a prelude to transition, must also include stability in the social mood, in relationships among those who differ, in understanding between adversaries; in other words, Venezuela also needs "stability" in its social structures: family, social classes, roles, and norms. The country needs "stability" in shared values and patterns of behavior that do not change abruptly. Venezuela needs a "stability" grounded in social cohesion in which rational discourse prevails naturally.

Caine's Storytelling

For ten minutes, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Dan Caine transformed the January 3 press conference into a crafted piece of storytelling. How is it composed? Of a hero, a villain, a narrative frame, a solution or guide, and a call to action. All of this to achieve a concrete objective: in this case, the capture of Maduro.

His account is an idea turned spectacle, constructed as though for a Hollywood script. In that format, the audience's attention is secured through tension, suspense, threat, or danger, and through what appears to be an inevitable, extraordinary outcome. In emotional terms, the description that gradually unveils the plot and its sequence seeks the very elements of spectacularization: nervousness, anxiety, intrigue, adrenaline, and a curiosity that feeds itself and grows like a snowball as information and details.

In other words, Caine's speech amounted to the artistic blueprint of a future thriller.

The Challenge of Moving Beyond Justice as a Sentiment

For Saint John Paul II, peace is the work of justice. The two are inseparable. The image of Maduro captured serves as a

reminder of what the Polish pope affirmed with precision. And it is not about the momentary peace that followed the event —that uneasy, temporary calm that reigned in the country in the days afterward. It is about a real peace, grounded precisely in a legal framework that protects citizens' rights and provides justice to every Venezuelan. For now, peace is not possible because what occurred with Maduro is merely a sign —certainly a hopeful one— that justice is attainable; nothing more than that. Fully achieving it will remain a pending task in the years ahead.

The impact generated on January 3 must serve to reaffirm that the free Venezuela we all long for is a project that must go beyond the photograph and the emotion derived from that date. The fleeting spectacle should function as a wake-up call. The photograph turned into history must serve as a reminder, immortalizing the belief that democracy is a value that must be cultivated and nurtured. In this way, the ordinary rather than the spectacle, rationality rather than sentiment, will become the predominant forces in rebuilding the nation.

Adriana Boersner-Herrera

The Legacy of January 3: Repercussions for the Americas

In the early hours of January 3, 2026, not only did Venezuela experience a change in leadership with the capture of Nicolás Maduro and Cilia Flores, but a transformation within the inter-American system was set in motion. What was officially designated as Operation Absolute Resolve was not merely an isolated episode of leadership change, but rather the most forceful manifestation of a radical shift in United States foreign policy under the second administration of Donald J. Trump. This event represents the practical application of the "Trump Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine —a strategic framework that redefines national sovereignty under the logic of U.S. national interest, transnational security, and, critically, control over the strategic resources of the Western Hemisphere.

Maduro's arrest and his subsequent transfer to New York to face charges of narco-terrorism have upended the regional geopolitical balance in many ways, compelling every nation in the Americas to recalculate its position vis-à-vis a Washington that has abandoned the language (and practice) of multilateral diplomacy in favor of a pragmatic and force-driven realism. This operation, carried out with a precision that demonstrated tactical and strategic superiority, also functioned as a display of capabilities that reshapes perceptions of deterrence in the region,

including the confidence that several countries have placed in extra-hemispheric security and defense providers such as China and Russia. The message was unequivocal: the era of the "zone of peace" in Latin America —already eroded by criminal violence— is now in direct tension with an open logic of coercion and competing spheres of influence.

In this context, this article examines the systemic repercussions for the Americas, with particular emphasis on Latin America. Maduro's downfall is the symptom of a deeper sickness in the previous international order: the collapse of Latin American autonomy in the face of the renewed urgency of the United States to secure its role in the West in a world of competition with China and other powers.

I. Before January 3, 2026: Chronicle of a Breakdown Foretold

The intervention in Venezuela did not emerge from a strategic vacuum or an improvised decision. It was the consequence of behind-the-scenes negotiations, constant communications, but above all a political framework built by a particular group of individuals within the administration of Donald Trump, including, in a vital way, Secretary of State Marco Rubio. The guiding document of this new foreign policy, the November 2025 National Security Strategy, already outlined a fundamental paradigm shift in the way the United States conceives its role in the world and, in particular, in the West. This document would be reinforced by the subsequent National Defense Strategy published in January 2026, aligning with the idea that the post–Cold War approach of previous administrations —including Trump's first— was being explicitly abandoned. Those earlier policies often got lost in wish lists and a globalism that, according to this second

Trump administration, had weakened the industrial base, social cohesion, sovereignty, and U.S. security.

The new doctrine centers on a stricter and more pragmatic definition of the national interest, under the slogan "America First." For the Western Hemisphere, this translates into the formulation of the Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine —an update of that 19th-century principle that sought to warn European powers against any interference in the Americas. The 2025 National Security Strategy expresses, in essence, three goals: preserving regional stability to discourage mass migration toward the United States, ensuring cooperation against transnational criminal organizations, and preventing external actors from acquiring or controlling strategic assets. Read retrospectively, that logic contained the seed not only of the January 3 operation, but also of the repertoire of pressure that may follow.

It remains to be seen in practice what it will mean to ensure that the "Western Hemisphere remains reasonably stable." This stability could entail more military operations, greater economic coercion, or simple coexistence with non-democratic leaders, as long as they are functional to the security and resource agenda —given that democracy is not the ultimate objective of this entire operation.

II. Immediate Repercussions: Between Shock and Controversy

News of the January 3 operation hit the global geopolitical board like a bomb, generating an immediate and deep fracture in Latin America that revealed pre-existing leadership and government differences across the region. Reactions polarized almost instantly, reflecting the political divisions that have characterized Latin America in recent decades.

On one side, a group of countries led by Argentina, El Salvador, and Paraguay praised the operation as a decisive blow against "narco-terrorism" and tyranny. Argentine President Javier Milei termed it a decisive step forward that could open the space for freedom to advance in Venezuela. They were joined by Ecuador under President Daniel Noboa, who expressed his support for the fight against "narco-Chavistas," as well as Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago, which saw in Maduro's fall an opportunity to restore democracy and regional security. Guyanese President Irfaan Ali even announced the deployment of troops to the border with Venezuela as a preventive measure. Similarly, Venezuelan opposition leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner María Corina Machado thanked the United States government for its "firmness and determination in upholding the law," promising that Venezuela would be "the principal ally of the United States on security, energy, democracy, and human rights."

On the opposite end, the left-leaning governments in the region condemned the intervention unanimously, invoking the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention enshrined in international law and in Latin America's diplomatic tradition. Colombian President Gustavo Petro was among the first to react, rejecting "any unilateral military action that could worsen the situation or put civilians at risk" and deploying troops to the Colombia-Venezuela border. Brazilian President Lula da Silva adopted an even firmer tone, warning that "airstrikes on Venezuelan territory and the capture of its president cross an unacceptable line" that could represent "the first step toward a world of violence, chaos, and instability, where the law of the strongest prevails over multilateralism." Mexico, through its president Claudia Sheinbaum, issued a more nuanced but equally firm condemnation, reminding that "the continent belongs to the peoples of each of its countries" and not to any one doctrine or power. Finally, the authoritarian government of Cuba, Maduro's

closest ally, labeled the operation an "act of terrorism" and reported the deaths of 32 of its military personnel in the bombings that accompanied the extraction.

A third group of countries, including Guatemala, Peru, Bolivia, the Dominican Republic, and Canada, adopted a more cautious and ambiguous stance. While they did not explicitly condemn the U.S. action, they called for respect for international law and emphasized the need for a peaceful democratic transition led by Venezuelans themselves. This division was replicated in multilateral forums such as the OAS, whose Secretary General Albert Ramdin acknowledged the "divergent perspectives in the hemisphere," and the United Nations Security Council, which was convened in an emergency session at Colombia's request with the support of China and Russia. During that session, the Chinese and Russian representatives condemned the United States' "unilateral aggression," while Washington's European allies, although uncomfortable with the unilateral nature of the action, shared the urgency of combating transnational organized crime and limited themselves to calling for "calm and restraint."

At the same time, the operation sparked intense controversy within the United States over the president's war powers and the constitutional limits of executive action. The Trump administration argued that the president has constitutional authority to use military force without congressional authorization, provided it is not expected to result in "prolonged and substantial military engagements." Secretary Rubio defended the legality of the action before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, stating that "this was not an invasion, we did not occupy a country... It was an operation to assist law enforcement," implicitly suggesting that broader operations would indeed require congressional approval. Americans remain divided over the role the United States should

play in the Venezuelan context and regarding the supposed subsequent stages following the January 3 military operation.

III. Future Repercussions: A New Paradigm for the Americas

The most enduring legacy of the January 3 operation will be measured by the structural changes it provokes in the inter-American system. Although it is impossible to predict the future with certainty, the sequence of narratives and actions from the Trump administration, as well as the strategic framework that the government itself has established in its official documents, allow several long-term repercussion axes to be outlined: the precedent regarding sovereignty and the use of force, the reconfiguration of strategic alignments, and the new focus on transnational security.

1. Sovereignty and the Use of Force

The intervention in Venezuela has set a dangerous precedent that erodes the principle of sovereignty and the prohibition on the use of force, which until now have stood as pillars of international law and peaceful coexistence in a region historically sensitive to both direct and indirect intervention by great powers and other international actors. By justifying the operation on the grounds of combating narco-terrorism and applying U.S. justice to a foreign leader accused of drug trafficking, Washington has established a flexible justification that could be applied to multiple contexts. As outgoing Chilean President Gabriel Boric warned at a press conference on January 3, "today it is Venezuela, with the pretext of narco-terrorism and a declared intention to control its resources; tomorrow, it could be anywhere else, with some other pretext." Brazilian President Lula da Silva made a similar statement, calling attention to the dangerous precedent for all countries of the Global South.

This new situation encourages mirror responses and greater distrust toward the United States. Countries that feel vulnerable could seek to strengthen their capabilities, accelerate unconventional armament programs, or tighten ties with extra-hemispheric powers to obtain diplomatic and military counterweights —something many already have been doing, including Venezuela, to counter perceived threats from the United States. The idea of Latin America and the Caribbean as a "zone of peace," promoted in joint statements by several governments in the region, becomes seriously compromised. United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres described the action as "a dangerous precedent," a warning that, while not surprising, resonates beyond the hemisphere. Observers in Taiwan, for example, have expressed fear that the operation could embolden China to act in a similar manner. The same could happen in other regions and contexts.

2. *Strategic Alignments: The Logic of the Sphere of Influence*

The operation in Venezuela appears to be a central piece of a broader strategy to reconfigure alignments in the hemisphere under an explicit logic of sphere of influence. The 2025 National Security Strategy document envisions a more transactional international order where alliances are conditioned on strategic alignment and shared responsibilities —not by shared values or multilateral institutions. For Latin America, this implies a return to a dynamic that many believed had been overcome. Countries in the region may obtain benefits from their geographic proximity, such as preferential investment, access to the U.S. market, and security cooperation, but the cost could be accepting conditions that marginalize their relations with extra-hemispheric actors, principally China, whose commercial and financial presence in the region has grown exponentially over the past two decades.

The first steps have already been taken with the recent ministerial meeting in Washington, D.C., on Critical Minerals, in which nine delegations from the Americas participated. Beyond the rhetoric of cooperation, the meeting aims to consolidate a framework of supply, standards, and investment in strategic minerals with the United States as the central node, with the objective —though not explicitly stated— of reducing the region's dependence on China. The implication for Latin America is that critical minerals cease to be a commercial issue and become a political alignment variable.

In general terms, the reactions of China and Russia to the January 3 operation were rhetorically condemnatory but also notably operationally cautious —something that is not surprising given that both countries lack effective capacity and presence in the Western Hemisphere and have other priorities outside the western hemisphere. The United States' show of force and, particularly, the failure of the Russian and Chinese area defense systems deployed in Venezuela to detect or repel the operation, force these powers to recalculate the cost-benefit of challenging Washington in the West. It is likely that, in the short term, they will moderate their more provocative actions in the region, although they will maintain and defend their most important economic and diplomatic ties in the region.

3. *Transnational Security: The War Against the Cartels*

Finally, the operation in Venezuela has elevated the fight against transnational organized crime and drug trafficking to the level of a national security priority for the United States, comparable in its rhetoric and operational implications to the fight against terrorism that defined U.S. foreign policy after September 11, 2001. The 2026 National Defense Strategy is clear in identifying drug trafficking as a "direct threat to the security" of the national territory and states that while cooperation with regional partners

will be sought, the United States is "prepared to act decisively and unilaterally if necessary." The operation in Venezuela was the first demonstration of this willingness.

President Trump's comments about the need to "do something with respect to Mexico," where the cartels supposedly "run the country," and his promise to "start hitting land with respect to the cartels," indicate that pressure will intensify on other countries in the region. Although a unilateral military intervention in Mexico is considerably less likely due to the enormous political, economic, and security costs it would entail, Washington will use all of its diplomatic and economic coercive capacity to demand tangible results in the fight against the cartels.

The message from the United States is clear: either they integrate into the preferential bloc with the United States, or they will face tariff barriers that could sink their economies. Maduro's removal from power did not bring a transition, but rather an outbreak of controlled acephaly. Although Delcy Rodríguez assumed the de facto interim presidency, her scope for action is limited. Several actions already speak for themselves: the amnesty law, the hydrocarbons law, changes in the cabinet, among others. Likewise, in Latin America, Gustavo Petro has maintained a relationship marked by conflict and hostility with Trump, positioning his leadership in extreme vulnerability ahead of the May 2026 presidential elections. Claudia Sheinbaum in Mexico has received an escalation of rhetoric from the United States that culminated in the handover to the United States of at least 37 prisoners charged with drug trafficking. Díaz-Canel's Cuba says it is willing to engage in dialogue with the United States while pressure in the Caribbean continues and the United States threatens countries that supply oil to the island. These actions show that, for several governments not aligned with Washington, political stability is becoming conditional: it depends on offering

early signs of cooperation with the U.S. agenda, despite rhetoric about sovereignty. The transfer of detainees, the acceleration of extraditions, or visits to the White House operate as gestures aimed at easing diplomatic, economic, and security pressure and to avoid a more direct escalation. At the same time, positions openly aligned toward Washington, such as Javier Milei's Argentina, show that this realignment also advances through ideological and electoral affinities, not only through geopolitical calculation.

The January 3, 2026 operation has inaugurated a new era in inter-American relations, one whose contours we are only beginning to discern. Rather than an isolated event or an ad hoc response to the Venezuelan crisis, it was the culmination of a profound doctrinal shift in Washington that revives the Monroe Doctrine under a new pragmatic corollary and appears to be advancing with full force. The immediate repercussions have been a deep diplomatic fracture in the region, which has exposed —beyond the region's own Latin American leaderships— the underlying ideological divisions, as well as an intense debate over the limits of presidential power within the United States.

In the long term, the legacy of this operation will be a redefinition of the concepts of sovereignty and non-intervention, a reconfiguration of strategic alignments under the logic of an explicit sphere of influence, and an intensification of the fight against transnational crime using tools that were previously reserved for counterterrorism. The Americas now face, over the next three years, a new reality in which the rules of the game that governed for decades have changed in ways that may well be irreversible. It remains to be seen whether this shift will be consolidated as a lasting doctrine of American power or whether it will be moderated, corrected, or reversed by the priorities of future administrations and by the capacity of regional countries to resist or negotiate new terms.

Pedro Pablo Peñaloza

"The student movement is proposing coordinated street actions with a clear strategy aimed at restoring rights and guarantees"

Student leader Miguelángel Suárez, president of the University Student Councils Federation at the Central University of Venezuela (FCU-UCV), and Martías Silveira, student representative to the University Council of Andrés Bello Catholic University (UCAB), analyze the impact of the events of January 3 and reaffirm their commitment to peaceful protest for the recovery of democracy.

On January 27, Miguelángel Suárez came face to face with power. "It was a moment of tremendous tension —power personified," admits the president of the FCU-UCV.

That day, Suárez approached Acting President Delcy Rodríguez during her surprise walk through the UCV campus. The visit was surprising because, according to the University Council led by rector Víctor Rago Albujas, the university authorities "were at no time officially informed" of the visit.

Standing before the interim head of state and her entourage —which included Army General Gustavo González López, now in charge of the Presidential Honor Guard and the Military Counterintelligence Directorate (DGCIM)— the student advocated for the release of all political prisoners.

"I believe it was also a representation of the irreverence and gallantry inherent to the student movement. It wasn't just me; there were at least 25 students who decided to take this action to raise our voices for our political prisoners, for those who are suffering today, and perhaps to serve as a representative of a broader outcry that belongs not only to the families, but to an entire country," summarizes the FCU spokesperson.

Could Suárez have acted differently? Could he have handed Rodríguez a document, used different words, or formally requested a meeting? In hindsight and with cooler judgment, everyone knows what should have been done.

"There was tension because of what it means to do this in Venezuela, but with the clear conviction that we must fight to broaden the public sphere and ensure that this kind of action is not a taboo, but rather that a public servant can be questioned at any moment by a citizen," the student leader responds.

A New Moment

It can well be said that Venezuela's history is divided into before and after January 3, 2026. Although the arrival of the new year was celebrated with the twelve chimes on December 31, it was in fact 72 hours later that the Republic woke up in a new phase.

The impact shook the student movement. "January 3 changes the political landscape; the country is different; the cracks in a system that presented itself as impenetrable were exposed, and by changing that political paradigm, an opportunity has opened up —one that we want to seize in order to once again have an impact on the public space," Suárez explains.

In this scenario, the FCU president observes that "perhaps the costs of repression have increased, and we can serve as the driving force in reclaiming the public sphere so that Venezuelans can move forward in restoring political and civil guarantees, in view of a possible process of transition to democracy."

Matías Silveira, university council representative at Andrés Bello Catholic University (UCAB), emphasizes that January 3 has reignited the spirit of the student movement, increasing young people's willingness to participate.

"A month ago this was unthinkable —that people would call for a demonstration, that different universities would gather much more frequently to talk. Given the circumstances, a window of opportunity has opened in which we have been able to sit not only among the different actors of the student movement, but also with other sectors of civil society," Silveira acknowledges.

Mobilized

Suárez emphasizes that "the student movement is proposing street actions, but coordinated ones, with a clear strategy aimed at restoring the civil and political rights and guarantees that we, as young people and students, need." On the list, he highlights the demands that directly concern them: respect for university autonomy, adequate funding for higher education institutions, and "the current impossibility, after graduation, of securing decent employment."

"We need to build enough muscle to truly reclaim the streets," Silveira observes. "What is the substance and purpose of people taking to the streets? If tomorrow all political prisoners are released, what happens to the student movement's agenda?

That's what must be worked out before launching large-scale mobilizations," he adds.

The UCAB student representative considers it necessary "to arrive at those mobilizations with proposals —not only to express discontent and make demands, but also to contribute, by bringing solutions to the table that reflect the judgment and perspective of civil society."

Danger

Some sectors warn about the risk that protest could degenerate into violence, potentially leading to another cycle of repression and affecting progress toward an eventual transition. Do student leaders share that concern?

"I think that perspective is quite far removed from the organizational and educational capacities that can emerge from the student movement and from prior experience, which shows that in a scenario of confrontation the only winner is the State, given the resources and capacities it possesses. We believe in peaceful, organized protest with clear objectives," Suárez responds.

Silveira reaffirms the commitment to peaceful protest, emphasizing that the students aspire to set an example and speak through their actions. "We want to demand a democratic and peaceful transition, because Venezuela has already endured more than two decades of violence, aggression, and censorship. We must demonstrate that freedom must be accompanied by a civic, peaceful, and democratic component."

Moving forward

Young people are rising again and marching toward the promise of a better future. "The student movement's short-term goal is to organize itself. We recognize that there is an opportunity; repression appears to have eased somewhat. We know we are still within the same system, but under different conditions," Suárez notes.

"In the medium term, the goal is to unify an agenda demanding the restoration of civil and political rights inherent to the youth and university sphere. In the medium and long term, the objective is to become an influential actor in decision-making related to those policies," adds the FCU president, identifying the steps they seek to take at this stage.

Silveira stresses the importance of endurance and continuity. "We don't want the student movement to be like a wave that builds momentum and then fades away. It must become a process in which different sectors of civil society join over time so that it gains strength."

The UCAB spokesperson believes the time has come "to build a student movement with an enriched and sufficiently mature perspective, capable of taking action in pursuit of Venezuela's freedom."

Juan Miguel Matheus

The Constitution After Nicolás Maduro

The Path to Democratization After the Extraction of Nicolás Maduro

After January 3,[1] Venezuela did not enter a democratic transition in the classic sense of the term. There is no clear pact among elites, no electoral calendar accepted by all, nor restored institutions capable of guaranteeing that political competition will be resolved without coercion. And yet, the country is already in another stage: Nicolás Maduro has exited the scene and will not return. It is a partial rupture, brought about by foreign military action. Delcy Rodríguez knows this and moves accordingly. But it is important to state it plainly, because this is the premise that many insist on treating as provisional. Maduro's departure is not a historical accident. He is out of the equation. Politically, he does not exist. Legally, even acknowledging the *de facto* circumstances, his absence opens a vacuum that cannot be filled with rhetoric or with arrangements of convenience by those in power.

1 La Gran Aldea, "¿Qué pasó el 03 de enero de 2026?", Paola Bautista de Alemán, January 3, 2026, https://lagranaldea.com/2026/01/03/que-paso-el-03-de-enero-de-2026/

One of the most persistent mistakes in Venezuelan political analysis may be the tendency to confuse the departure of a man with the fall of a system. Authoritarian power does not tend to disappear; it tends to readjust. It changes its face, lowers its tone, attempts normalization, seeks external interlocution, and presents as transition what is, in reality, continuity. That is exactly what is happening in Venezuela after January 3.

Public debate, moreover, has been displaced toward the economic sphere. The international conversation has focused on incentives, stability, and oil. Meanwhile, the decisive question —he architecture of legitimacy, the votes— is postponed, as if it could be resolved later, *sine die*. But when a regime attempts to freeze time, it is because it no longer rules as it once did. As I have warned before, that "tactical" displacement is not innocent: it is a classic strategy of political survival.

Here, it is worth recalling a political insight that serves as a compass. Felipe González (former Spanish prime minister) acknowledged, although somewhat late, that if those in opposition to Francoism had known how weak Franco's regime truly was, they would have been more audacious in challenging it. This remark is not just a historical curiosity; it is a warning for present-day Venezuela. When we treat power as if it were invincible, we begin to accept as inevitable what is actually contingent and fragile. At this point, Venezuelans must avoid at all costs allowing fear to become a method of action and a lack of boldness to masquerade as (supposed) political realism.

The thesis of this text rests on a diagnosis and on an aspirational decision by democratic actors. The diagnosis is that the Venezuelan dictatorship is weak —not because it has acquired democratic virtues, but because its internal legitimacy is nonexistent and because its survival depends increasingly on

external pecuniary calculation. The decision of the democrats, for their part, is strategic and realistic: democratization must be anchored in the 1999 Constitution, not as dead letter, but as an instrument of legitimacy ratified by the Venezuelan people.

In my view, the Constitution is not —and can never be— a poem or a rhetorical gesture. In Venezuela's transitional jungle, it is a mechanism for ordering uncertainty, imposing limits on *de facto* power, and reopening political competition on the only terrain where it can be legitimate: popular sovereignty.[2] I will now explain why the 1999 Constitution is the appropriate framework and how it resolves the juridical-political problems of the present moment.

Before doing so, I note that I will write in an essayistic style, and that what is stated in these pages runs the risk of aging quickly given the vertiginous pace of events unfolding in the Venezuelan process. Nevertheless, this is my constitutional and political reading as of (that ill-fated and anti-republican day) February 4, 2026, when I write this piece.

Why the 1999 Constitution? Reasons to Reject Experiments, Mutations, and Constituent Adventures

Democratization is not a single institutional event. It is a process. And within that process, constitutional law plays a key role, though not always in the way impatient democratizers imagine. In early stages —when power is contested, when the State is degraded, when authoritarian incentives persist— the main

2 Ver RedFORMA, "Why the United States Shouldn't Run Venezuela", January 19, 2026, Juan Miguel Matheus, https://redforma.org/investigacion/why-the-united-states-shouldnt-run-venezuela/

function of a constitution is not to reinvent the order, *but to provide certainty to contain disorder, prevent new violations of human dignity, and restrain arbitrariness*.[3] But above all, it is to open an electoral path as the channel through which democratic legitimacy is first established.

I will not refrain from arguing that this distinction is crucial for Venezuela. To pretend —like Platonic idealists— that the constitutional text can function from the outset as a lever for the total redesign of the political system often produces the opposite effect: more instability, more polarization, and more opportunities for those whose agenda is to delay genuine political change. Comparative experience is clear on this point, though it is often ignored out of political anxiety: the legal and constitutional framework of democratization must be minimalist but effective, not maximalist but unrealistic.

This warning becomes especially relevant in contexts of entrenched authoritarianism. There, where legality was used as a weapon, the temptation of constitutional rupture arises: refoundations, constituent assemblies, accelerated mutations —juridical purisms, so to speak. In fragile transitions, that temptation is often counterproductive because constitutional experimentation amplifies uncertainty and weakens state capacity, as well as consensus, precisely when they are most needed.

Moreover, Venezuela has already traveled that road. The plebiscitary use of so-called constituent power did not produce democratization, but rather a concentration of power. Instrumentalized procedures. Legality turned into an autocratic

3 Idem.

alibi. For that reason, the word "refoundation"[4] is not neutral in our country: it carries the weight of authoritarian memory.

Anchoring the democratization process in the 1999 Constitution does not mean renouncing future reforms. What it does mean is respecting a sequence: first, restoration of legality,[5] restitution of rights, basic institutional reconstruction, and electoral opening; then —with a minimum democratic consensus and social pacification— reforms can be discussed in a calm democratic setting, not amid the turbulence of transition.

At this point, I feel compelled to state it plainly: attempting to reform the Constitution in the midst of fragility and smoldering tensions is equivalent to turning it into a battlefield, dragging the country into a debate over historical, present, and future accounts of constitutional design. And a nascent democracy cannot afford that luxury. Constitutional continuity does not block reformist ambition; it disciplines it. It postpones it until it can be sustained without aborting or breaking the system, in the midst of the necessary republican concord.

The Constitution in the Face of the Dictatorship Entrusted to Delcy Rodríguez

After Maduro's extraction, autocratic power reorganized itself around a figure who does not embody democratic change, but continuity: Delcy Rodríguez.[6] Her role, as the vice president who stole the July 28, 2024 presidential election, is not to open doors

4 Idem.

5 Red FORMA, "Primera fase: Estabilización para la democracia", Paola Bautista de Alemán, January 14, 2026, https://red-forma.com/2026/01/14/primera-fase-estabilizacion-para-la-democracia/

6 Red FORMA, "La transición venezolana solo puede legitimarse en el pueblo", Juan Miguel Matheus, January 19, 2026, https://redforma.org/

to democracy, but to sustain the apparatus while negotiating its survival. History teaches that such figures appear when regimes lose their center of gravity —they are weakened, yet unwilling to reform, and still retain their instruments of domination and coercion.

The strategy is well known: lower the tone, speak of coexistence, offer stability outwardly —that is, give President Trump[7] everything he demands— and ask for time. Not to change, but to survive. On the institutional level, what is presented as normalization is, in reality, the extension of rule without popular mandate and without legitimacy. And on the political plane, the aim is to deactivate electoral urgency.

Here the Constitution fulfills an uncomfortable function: to separate autocratic inheritance from legitimacy. A power may operate *de facto* for a time, but it cannot claim constitutional authority without popular sovereignty. Governing is not equivalent to remaining in office by inertia, as Rodríguez does. And this distinction between autocratic inheritance and legitimacy is the boundary between a democratic transition and a frozen —or an autocratic— one.

The acting dictatorship seeks precisely that: to freeze time. To prevent deadlines from running. To dilute the electoral clock. To present minor concessions as genuine openings. The Constitution, by contrast, compels the question that *de facto* power wants to avoid: what is the constitutional basis of this exercise of power, and for how long?

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7 Idem.

In this sense, the conclusion is straightforward: Articles 233 and 234[8] of the Constitution, irrespective of the distortions declared by the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Tribunal of Justice, require that the *de facto* dictatorship have an expiration date and that presidential elections be held within the seventh month following Delcy Rodríguez's purported swearing-in before the illegitimate National Assembly of 2026.

The Constitution in the Face of U.S. Foreign Tutelage

The Venezuelan transition to come does not occur in a vacuum. The United States is a determining actor: it extracted Nicolás Maduro and is threatening Delcy Rodríguez. Its incentives push toward seeking a functional interlocutor in order to avoid greater disorder in Venezuela. The risk arises, however, when that external recognition begins, in practice, to substitute for the internal legitimacy that can only emerge from the Venezuelan people.

When international endorsement replaces citizen consent, popular sovereignty is displaced, substituted, and even violated. The result in such cases is rarely democratic stability, but rather hybrid, dependent, and fragile regimes. The experience of twenty-first-century autocracies is eloquent on this point.

But the 1999 Constitution is unequivocal: sovereignty resides inalienably in the Venezuelan people. It is neither delegated nor outsourced.[9] International cooperation is, of course, necessary: without the United States, without the United States we would not have an opening —a breach— toward democracy. However, there

8 Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela. Gaceta Oficial N° 36.860, 30 de diciembre de 1999.

9 Idem.

is a line that cannot be crossed without degrading the process: that the foreign power become the arbiter of postponing the calendar and defining the scope of the transition. That is, quite simply, immoral.

The Constitution in the Restoration of Human Rights

There can be no democratization without the effective restoration of human rights.[10] This is not a moral complement, but an operational condition of freedom. Without public liberties there is no competition. Without judicial guarantees there are no authentic elections. And without respect for human dignity there is no moral climate for democratization. Venezuela must morally heal the wounds inflicted by systematic human-rights violation apparatus created by chavismo-madurismo, which committed abuses for more than two decades.

The 1999 Constitution provides the framework for that restoration.[11] Rights were violated in practice; they were never repealed. This allows us to speak of enforceability, not concession. Political prisoners do not require humanitarian gestures; they require release as a constitutional imperative. Disqualifications are not to be "reviewed"; they are to be lifted. Political parties have the right to exist.

At the same time, the transition must avoid two destructive extremes: total impunity and revenge without rules. The Constitution allows for justice with guarantees and reparation

10 Red FORMA, "Why the United States Shouldn't Run Venezuela", January 19, 2026, Juan Miguel Matheus, https://redforma.org/investigacion/why-the-united-states-shouldnt-run-venezuela/

11 Red FORMA, "Primera fase: Estabilización para la democracia", Paola Bautista de Alemán, January 14, 2026, https://red-forma.com/2026/01/14/primera-fase-estabilizacion-para-la-democracia/

without arbitrariness. That moderation is not weakness; it is the prevention of an authoritarian relapse in the opposite direction. It is about achieving the balance of reconciliation: forgetting enough so that there is no desire for revenge, but remembering enough so that the autocratic atrocities of which we Venezuelans have been capable are not repeated.[12] Venezuela will never be the same, and the balance of reconciliation will be a cultural reminder of that...

The Constitution and the Renewal of Public Powers

The renewal of the public powers is the point at which it will be decided whether the country returns to the rule of law or whether a hybrid arrangement is reconsolidated within the Venezuelan political system. The Constitution imposes sequence, method, and legality. To bypass procedures in the name of urgency is equivalent to reproducing the authoritarian principle under a different discourse. Democratic transition requires rebuilding the electoral arbiter, judicial independence, and oversight mechanisms with legitimacy, not arbitrariness. And in all of this, the key lies in the election of a new National Assembly,[13] one that receives popular legitimacy and exercises its constitutional powers to provide the Republic with new public powers. It is also urgent to hold elections for governors and mayors in order to bring democracy to the federal entities of the republic and begin the territorial democratization[14] of the process of freedom.

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12 Red FORMA, "Why the United States Shouldn't Run Venezuela", January 19, 2026, Juan Miguel Matheus, https://redforma.org/investigacion/why-the-united-states-shouldnt-run-venezuela/

13 Red FORMA, "Segunda fase: Recuperación integral", Paola Bautista de Alemán, January 22, 2026, https://redforma.org/investigacion/segunda-fase-recuperacion-integral/

14 Red FORMA, "Why the United States Shouldn't Run Venezuela", January 19, 2026, Juan Miguel Matheus, https://redforma.org/investigacion/why-the-united-states-shouldnt-run-venezuela/

Conclusion: Elections Under the Constitution and the Spirit of July 28

All roads lead to a constitutional Rome: elections, elections, elections. July 28[15] was a civic eruption —an unequivocal affirmation of popular sovereignty. That spirit remains alive and constitutes the country's principal political capital. The transition cannot be constructed apart from that reality without betraying its meaning of justice and freedom.

The only source of legitimacy for the Venezuelan transition is the Venezuelan people. Not foreign governments. Not arrangements of convenience. Not apparent stability. The vote.

Thus, the conclusion must be clear and operational: elections as a moral imperative; elections as a clock; elections as a boundary against foreign tutelage. Elections to close the cycle of continuity and finally open a genuine democratic beginning. Elections for the National Assembly, for governors and mayors, and for president of the republic. All of them —we need them all, and as soon as possible.

To achieve this, we must activate the constitutional clock, restore civil and political rights, renew the minimum conditions for fair competition, and mobilize the country civically around the constitutional right to protest.[16] From all of this will emerge a new Venezuela —one in which a sovereign people decides its destiny in freedom.

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

16 La Gran Aldea, "Primera fase: Estabilización para la democracia", Paola Bautista de Alemán, 14 de enero de 2026, https://lagranaldea.com/2026/01/14/primera-fase-estabilizacion-para-la-democracia/

Armando Chaguaceda

Cuban Influence in Venezuela: A Model Case of Autocratic Cooperation

The relationship between Cuba and Venezuela, since Hugo Chávez came to power in 1999, constitutes one of the closest and most significant political ties in Latin America in recent decades. Cuba's conduct in Venezuela cannot be explained solely by personal affinities between leaders, but rather by a combination of *ideological factors and pragmatic considerations* that have guided deep cooperation in medical, political, institutional, security, propaganda, and economic spheres. This relationship has had structural effects on the Venezuelan state and has been key to the survival of the Cuban regime in the post–Cold War era. To understand this issue, it is worth asking: what are the concrete mechanisms through which Cuba projects its influence in Venezuela?

The Cuba–Venezuela nexus constitutes a perfect example of autocratic cooperation. Beyond the exchange of oil for services, a political-institutional symbiosis was consolidated: Cuba provided know-how in security and intelligence; Venezuela supplied material resources. This case illustrates how an asymmetric actor can amplify its influence by embedding itself within the state structures of an ally with greater resources, thereby shaping the democratic trajectory of an entire subregion

Shared Ideologies, Converging Interests

From an ideological perspective, the alliance between Cuba and Venezuela is grounded in a shared vision of socialism, anti-imperialism, and rejection of the Western liberal-democratic model. For Cuba, Hugo Chávez's arrival represented a strategic opportunity to revitalize the revolutionary project and break out of the international isolation that followed the Soviet collapse. Chavismo adopted central elements of Cuban political discourse, such as the exaltation of national sovereignty, the construction of an external enemy —primarily the United States— and the legitimization of political power concentrated in the Executive. This ideological convergence facilitated acceptance of Cuban influence in sensitive areas of the Venezuelan state and enabled the international projection of the Cuban political model in Latin America.

Beyond ideological affinity, Cuba's conduct in Venezuela has been deeply shaped by pragmatic interests. After the economic crisis of the "Special Period," Cuba faced a severe shortage of energy and financial resources. Venezuela, as an oil-producing country, became a strategically fundamental partner for the Cuban regime's economic survival. Bilateral agreements allowed Cuba to receive oil on preferential terms in exchange for professional services and technical advice. This exchange was highly beneficial for Cuba and allowed it to sustain its economic and political model for more than a decade. At the same time, Venezuela obtained support in areas where the state lacked solid institutional capacity.

One of the most visible examples of Cuban influence is medical cooperation, particularly through *Mission Barrio Adentro*. Through this program, thousands of Cuban doctors and other health professionals were assigned to provide primary health care across Venezuela, significantly expanding access to medical services in

historically underserved communities. However, various studies indicate that this cooperation also served political functions. Cuban professionals operated under strict hierarchical control and, in many cases, took part in community activities linked to political mobilization and social surveillance. In this way, medical cooperation combined humanitarian objectives with strategies of control and political legitimization.

The development of Venezuelan political cadres under the Cuban model has been another central component of the bilateral relationship. Militants of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) and public officials received training in Cuba in areas such as party organization, ideological training, political communication, and power management. Likewise, the Cuban experience influenced the institutional transformation of the Venezuelan state, promoting greater centralization of power, the subordination of public branches of government to the Executive, and the weakening of accountability mechanisms. These reforms reflect the transfer of a state model oriented toward remaining in power.

Regarding security and intelligence, Cuba has provided technical and strategic advice to Venezuelan intelligence services. The reorganization of these agencies was aimed at identifying and neutralizing political dissent, following patterns developed in Cuba over decades. Cuban influence is also visible in the systematic use of political propaganda, characterized by control of state media, the construction of polarizing narratives, and the delegitimization of the opposition as an internal threat or foreign instrument. These practices have been central to the consolidation of Chavista power.

Comparing the international behavior of the Cuban regime with that of contemporary authoritarian powers such as Russia,

China, or, to a lesser extent, Iran may seem, at first glance, like a disproportionate exercise. However, from a strategic perspective, what is relevant is not the magnitude of material power, but rather the *coherence between ends, means, and context*. Cuba shares three fundamental traits with these regimes:

a) *An instrumental conception of democracy*, understood not as a set of universal rules, but as a label adaptable to political convenience;
b) *The use of indirect influence*, prioritizing cultural, informational, and organizational penetration over direct coercion; and
c) *The exploitation of the internal vulnerabilities of democracies*, particularly polarization, inequality, and the discrediting of political elites.

The central difference lies in scale. While Russia and China deploy significant financial, technological, and military resources, Cuba operates as a *low-cost normative entrepreneur*, specializing in political advisory work, cadre training, and discursive coordination. Its comparative advantage lies precisely in its material modesty: its influence is less visible, less confrontational, and therefore more difficult to counter. In cases such as Venezuela, Cuba's role has demonstrated the distinctive capabilities of its asymmetric influence.

Venezuela is an example and setting of a *functional complementarity among autocracies* —which reduces the costs of authoritarian governance for the Venezuelan regime— where Cuba acts as the key provider of know-how and personnel for internal control, exerting the deepest influence on surveillance, repression, intelligence, propaganda, and cadre training, serving as a model of authoritarian survival. Iran acts as a tactical and opportunistic partner, with emphasis on cooperation to circumvent sanctions and the transfer of certain military technologies (e.g.,

drones). Russia functions as a guarantor of strategic deterrence and military backing, with influence in security, defense, and geopolitical support, but with less penetration into the day-to-day administration of the state. China concentrates on the economic, technological, and institutional-technical dimension, promoting a pragmatic authoritarianism based on investments, credit, and control of cyberspace technologies.

Cuba's role in Venezuela is explained, in summary, by the convergence of ideological and pragmatic factors. Cuba found in Venezuela a key ally for projecting its political model and securing its economic survival, while Chavismo benefited from Cuban experience in state control, political mobilization, and resistance to international isolation. Medical cooperation, cadre training, institutional advisory support, security, propaganda, and economic ties reveal a deep relationship that has shaped the Venezuelan political system and has had lasting consequences for democracy and governance in the region.

Conclusion

From a long-term perspective, the Cuban strategy has been notably effective in some areas but limited in others. It has succeeded in influencing discourses and agendas within regional institutions such as CLACSO, protecting authoritarian allies such as Chavismo, and surviving adverse systemic changes such as the end of the USSR. However, it also faces structural limits: ideological erosion, loss of economic attractiveness, and growing international scrutiny. As I have repeatedly warned, the persistence of this influence depends both on Cuban action and on the internal weaknesses of Latin American democracies.

Within the global authoritarian ecosystem, Cuba performs a specific function: it acts as a *facilitator* and *legitimizer* of illiberal and

anti-liberal projects in Latin America. It does not impose models, but rather offers a set of governance practices, narratives, and techniques that other actors adapt to their national realities. This makes Cuba a particularly influential actor in contexts of failed democratic transition or crises of political representation. Where institutions are fragile and democracy is perceived as incapable of responding to social demands, the Cuban experience appears —paradoxically— as an example of stability and resilience.

Paúl Elguezabal

Venezuelan Migrants Post-Maduro

1. Introduction

Venezuela was historically a recipient of migrants during the last 60 years of the twentieth century. Today, the reality stands in stark contrast: even using conservative estimates, one out of every five Venezuelans lives abroad. Migration became the escape valve for many who lost hope in the future, but also for those who no longer saw viability in their present. The first group began this path almost 25 years ago and has not stopped; we will refer to them as skilled migrants. The second group began migrating in 2015, when the consequences of nationalizations, compounded by falling oil prices, exposed the corruption and incapacity of a government that sought to control everything; we will refer to them as vulnerable migrants.

Venezuela is a country that has almost everything to rebuild, with an economy whose real GDP per capita in 2024 was 32.3% of what it had been in 2012. The role of a potential return is more than relevant, especially when we observe that Venezuelans integrated into the economies of neighboring countries are credited with increasing the GDP of Peru, Colombia, Chile, and Ecuador by up to 4.5%, more than offsetting the social costs of their integration.

And this is occurring in countries where their qualifications are not fully utilized.

These Venezuelans abroad have been able to learn from other cultures, which will undoubtedly enrich our own, just as the migrants who arrived in the last century did. However, something of great importance is that these Venezuelans, despite the hardships inherent in migration, have lived in societies that —even amid their political crises— have maintained stronger democratic institutions than Venezuela has had over the past 25 years. And, above all, they have avoided —or at least reduced— the moral erosion that comes with living under an oppressive regime like the chavista one, which through lies, disinformation, the absence of freedom of expression, and fear, has rendered a significant segment of Venezuelans submissive and controlled. Venezuelans who emigrated have been exposed to a smaller dose of the hatred and falsehood that have permeated the country. In the process of transition and reconstruction, this may serve as a fundamental moral asset in laying solid foundations for the future. I must clarify that this is an assessment of the potential relevance of those who migrated and in no way diminishes the relevance of those who stayed and resisted.

In short, this paper offers an assessment of Venezuelan migration and the post-Maduro scenarios following his removal from power and from the country on January 3, 2026. The aim is to reflect on the role of Venezuelan migrants in the transition and, above all, on their potential contribution to the country's reconstruction, along with proposals to maximize that potential.

2. Venezuelan Migration

a Causes

It is clear that the collapse of the Venezuelan economy is the main reason explaining the massive migration of vulnerable migrants beginning in 2015, but the expectation of this collapse explains the earlier migration of skilled migrants. The battered economy limited opportunities to build a future, especially for those in their most productive years. The absence of legal certainty and personal security was also an important cause.

Finally, each political episode —such as the massive protests and temporary power vacuum followed by Chávez's return to power in 2002; the 2003 oil strike and the dismissal of 18,000 workers from the state oil industry; the 2008 constitutional reform allowing indefinite presidential reelection; the massive citizen protests of 2014, 2017, and 2019; Maduro's obstruction of the opposition-controlled National Assembly in 2016; his blocking of the recall referendum that same year; the prohibition on registering an opposition presidential candidate in 2018; the failed interim presidency of the opposition National Assembly leader in 2019–2020; and the imposition of the constituent assembly in 2019, to name just a few —constituted political defeats that, at each moment, generated the despair that saw migration as the only solution.

b. Differences Between Migration Waves

Venezuelan migration follows a common pattern described in the literature on the subject. Migrants typically exhibit "positive selection," meaning they are more educated than the average in their country of origin and are not among the poorest or those with the greatest needs, since migration is costly. Indeed,

migration routes were opened by those most capable of adapting. In the Venezuelan case, between 2000 and 2015 nearly 400,000 Venezuelans emigrated, mostly highly educated —the skilled migrants. Eighty-five percent of them migrated to high-income countries: the United States, Spain, Chile, Italy, Canada, Australia, and Germany, in that order.

Beginning in 2016, "positive selection" persisted, though it became progressively less pronounced. That is, many skilled migrants continued to leave, but the proportion of vulnerable migrants in this wave became massive. The second wave has been shaped more by necessity than by opportunity. Nevertheless, in Peru and Ecuador the percentage of migrants holding university degrees is more than double the national average (18%), with the exception of migrants in Colombia, where the percentage matches that figure. Finally, this wave has, on average, been less prosperous than the first —as reflected in the images of migrants walking along Latin American highways.

3. Post–January 3 Migration Scenarios

a Same Dictatorship

Venezuela faces significant uncertainty. The post-Maduro future is unclear because the rest of the governing structure remains in control of the country, and there is no certainty that a democratic transition will take place. In general, uncertainty does not encourage Venezuelans to return. However, in the short term, it may slow emigration.

If the status quo continues, bidirectional flows can be expected. The trend of family reunification will persist, whereby families with stable legal and economic status finance the migration of immediate relatives, though to a lesser extent. Likewise, migrants

—both skilled and vulnerable— who have been preparing their departure for some time will proceed if no significant changes occur.

On the other hand, announcements of potential investments, particularly in the oil sector, could generate an important pull effect, especially for vulnerable migrants with experience in the sector who are underemployed in their destination countries. More broadly, even without political change, other economic sectors may become attractive and draw in vulnerable migrants who are working informally or are underemployed and paying rent that either is unnecessary in Venezuela or is less burdensome there. In any case, the net flow is unlikely to be pronounced in either direction, at least in 2026.

However, in the medium term, economic expectations are unlikely to materialize under the status quo. As a result, despair may resurface, along with annual migration flows resembling those of the final period of Maduro's rule. These exceeded 150,000 Venezuelans annually in 2024 and 2025, counting only those migrating to Latin America and the Caribbean.

b. Transition

If a transition toward democracy, the rule of law, and political, civil, and economic freedoms becomes tangible, it will produce different migratory consequences. Compared with the status quo, fewer Venezuelans would be expected to emigrate and more Venezuelans would choose to return, given credible economic expectations. This would generate a clear positive net flow into the country.

It should be clarified that this assumes a peaceful, minimally traumatic, and complete transition —one that entails respect for

human rights, social guarantees, and political and economic freedoms. If any of these characteristics are not fulfilled, the return process would slow. The timeliness and speed of the transition will influence both the magnitude and timing of this positive net return flow.

Two points regarding migrants are worth clarifying. First, there will be new Venezuelan emigrants (both skilled and vulnerable) in the future under any scenario. One important determinant of migration is the network of fellow nationals —family members and friends— who have already opened pathways and life alternatives abroad, working as a magnet for further migration. Additionally, economic recovery will not be instantaneous, so other countries will continue to be attractive.

The second point is that a significant number of Venezuelan migrants will not return; it is possible that this could even represent a majority of the eight million, particularly among skilled professionals. The stability they have achieved will be difficult to match in the medium term. They have already gone through the trauma of migration, and returning would certainly require adapting to a country different from the one they left. The future with a diaspora must be assumed as part of the nation. It did not exist 25 years ago and must be incorporated into the new national project. Moreover, those who return will, on average, be those who have spent less time abroad and likely have, on average, lower educational attainment and less capital to bring —that is, proportionally more of the vulnerable migrants.

4. The Role of the Diaspora in the Transition

Venezuela is on the international map, especially since Maduro's capture. Politicians, media outlets, and public opinion around the world are paying attention to our case. The diaspora

can play an important role during this period —by influencing these actors. It may be valuable for Venezuelans abroad to encourage those countries and their governments to insist on a genuine transition to democracy, with elections in August, 210 days after the temporary absence of the officeholder (Maduro), as established by constitutional timelines. This is a role that those inside the country cannot fulfill in the first stage of the transition. They do not have to become full-time ambassadors; it can mean requesting a meeting with their congressperson, submitting an article to the local press, or participating in political actions organized in their host countries in support of Venezuela. Now is when such efforts are most timely.

Likewise, the diaspora can provide economic and moral support to the political and social movements that will, sooner rather than later, carry forward the struggle within the country for the restoration of democracy. The political leader from one's city of origin or neighborhood will likely need financial support to organize political actions. The diaspora can assist directly or indirectly in this regard.

5. Reconstruction Opportunities Created by Migration

Assuming an orderly and complete transition, we assess the role of those who migrated in rebuilding the country through several channels. We have already discussed studies confirming the economic impact of Venezuelan migrants in their host countries and how the effect of returnees may be even greater than in those countries.

a. Human Capital

Many returnees completed studies during their time abroad, which will represent an important contribution. Moreover, as

previously noted, a significant proportion of those who migrated are professionals. But human capital is not limited to formal education; it also includes acquired experience. And Venezuelan migrants gained a great deal of this —learning trades and skills they previously did not possess and that they can now apply in Venezuela. They also assimilated aspects of the cultures that received them, and they will bring those contributions back as well. We hope this can increase productivity.

This is to be expected even assuming that return migration exhibits "negative selection." That is, returnees may have a lower level of formal education than the average Venezuelan in the destination country. Even so, these returnees will likely have an equal or higher level of education than the average within Venezuela. Therefore, a country that increases its human capital in both quantity and quality undoubtedly has a greater opportunity to prosper.

b. Remittances

Remittances play an important role in the economies of many countries; globally, they exceed in volume the aid provided by wealthy countries to promote development. The literature on development economics and migration has confirmed that remittances reduce poverty among recipient households and increase their investment in education, among other benefits.

Understanding that skilled and more prosperous Venezuelan migrants are likely to return in smaller proportions, there is, in theory, significant potential for migrants to continue playing this role. However, those more firmly established in their host countries will very likely reunify their families there, meaning that potential remittance recipients within those groups may no longer reside in Venezuela. Despite this limitation, remittances

will continue to arrive —probably to a lesser extent— but they will help sustain domestic consumption and, therefore, business opportunities.

c. Direct Investment

Returnees and those who remain in the diaspora have significant potential to increase working capital in Venezuela. This economic capital will arrive at all scales —from the vulnerable migrant who returns with savings to start a small business, to the skilled migrant who partners to develop a factory or an innovative startup, whether or not physically present in the country.

These investments will generate stable employment independent of the government. Additionally, such quality employment will contribute to the formation of free citizens capable of demanding a promising and fair reconstruction. Investment also brings higher tax revenues (leading to better public services), as well as greater variety and quality of goods and services consumed in the country. In short, it brings greater well-being for society.

d. International Trade

Finally, the diaspora will help boost the export of products made in Venezuela. This channel has been well studied in the migration and trade literature. In addition, the relationships that returnees maintain with the countries where they lived will allow them to leverage those connections to foster commercial ties.

Essentially, these relationships significantly reduce the information costs that are so relevant to establishing trade relationships.

6. What Policies Should Be Implemented in Reconstruction?

a. Facilitating Return

Venezuela's greatest asset lies in its citizens, more than in its natural resources. Losing millions of people of productive age entails demographic, social, and economic problems. For this reason, it is imperative not to leave the return of our national wealth to chance. This means facilitating the recognition of credentials obtained abroad. For those returning with experience in trades but without formal certifications to validate, institutions such as INCE should evaluate and certify their skills.

It also requires opening online employment offices and establishing them in countries with the largest Venezuelan populations, so that those unable to secure job opportunities on their own have this alternative to reduce the uncertainty of yet another migration (which may be their third or fourth), since uncertainty can be paralyzing. Likewise, qualified migrants should be allowed to reintegrate into public service positions, especially teachers, nurses, physicians, and those most urgently needed.

I speak of facilitating, not planning. The state must avoid becoming an obstacle —or the sole channel for return— and much less a vehicle for political clientelism.

b. Formalizing and Reducing the Cost of Remittances

Given that only an unknown fraction of the millions of migrants will return, it is essential to discourage the use of informal mechanisms for sending remittances — such as unregulated currency brokers or digital platforms that charge

high fees and/or offer unfavorable exchange rates, often through slow and cumbersome transactions. It is important that sending remittances be easy, affordable, and fair.

The remittance literature confirms that lowering transaction costs increases remittance flows, and we have already discussed the benefits of this —especially for the families of vulnerable migrants. It is essential to carefully evaluate the design of this system through the local financial sector so that it meets expectations.

In addition to the benefits for recipient households and, indirectly, for the broader economy, the formalization of remittances would contribute to strengthening the central bank's foreign currency reserves, thereby supporting a healthier foreign exchange market. It should be clarified that such formalization must result from favorable conditions for the sender, not from government-imposed controls.

c. Facilitating Investment and Trade

Last but not least, it is essential that the rule of law and legal certainty apply not only to large foreign investors. The rules of the game and guarantees must be clear and solid so that small and medium-sized investors can invest in Venezuela. This is not exclusive to the investment of returnees and the diaspora, but it is necessary in order to take advantage of that potential. Another requirement is to have well-connected, functional, and accessible ports —for which significant investment will be needed.

Many state-owned enterprises, including ports, require substantial investment that will come from the national and foreign private sectors, as well as from the public sector. It is important to emphasize that mechanisms should be created —such as stock

exchange operations— that allow individual investors, whether residents or not, nationals or not, to become shareholders in these companies.

With policies such as these, recognizing that part of the capital for reconstruction may come from the diaspora and from individuals more broadly, a channel will be strengthened —not necessarily the most important one, but one with real potential to contribute. To disregard this potential is a luxury Venezuela cannot afford in its reconstruction.

7. Conclusion

The costs are substantial for a society that has been deprived in this way. Those who left were not randomly selected. They represent essential human capital for Venezuela's better future. For this reason, returnees and the diaspora must be included in the reconstruction project in the roles described above.

There should even be formal parliamentary representation for the diaspora, as many other countries have legislators elected by their citizens abroad. This is not the time to dwell on the loss of eight million migrants, but to include them in our future with an awareness of their potential contribution to reconstruction.

Paola Bautista de Alemán

Order First, Democracy Later: Notes on the Venezuelan Transition

Introduction

The departure of Nicolás Maduro from power on January 3 opened an unprecedented political process in Venezuela, one deeply conditioned by external intervention and by the persistence of the authoritarian architecture. Far from constituting an automatic transition toward democracy, this moment initiated a complex, provisional roadmap filled with tensions.

The design announced by U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio proposes a three-stage path —stabilization, recovery, and democratic transition— which should not be understood as sealed compartments nor as a mechanical sequence, but rather as interdependent phases whose development conditions the viability of the whole.

Rubio has been explicit in noting that the immediate priority following the January 3 operation was to "avoid chaos and guarantee minimum conditions of governability," even if that required difficult short-term decisions. That statement, reiterated both in public remarks and in his testimony before the United States Senate, reveals the conceptual framework guiding the U.S. strategy: first order, then openness; first control, then politics.

This essay examines those three stages from a central premise: democracy is not a byproduct of order or economic growth, but rather a political construction that requires action, deliberation, and organized citizen pressure. Based on this conviction, it is argued that each phase of Rubio's itinerary contains authoritarian risks, but also opportunities that Venezuelans must actively contest in order to transform a process guided by force into a legitimate and sustainable transition.

Cross-Cutting Features of Rubio's Itinerary

Before examining each of the stages of Secretary Marco Rubio's proposed plan, it is worth pausing to consider the general features that permeate the process as a whole. Beyond the specific details of stabilization, recovery, and democratic transition, the design exhibits structural characteristics that condition its development and delimit the room for maneuver of Venezuelan actors. In light of what has occurred during the first weeks following the January 3 operation, at least four cross-cutting features can be identified.

The first is the centrality of U.S. political will. The process is inaugurated through an external use of force, successful in military terms, but still lacking domestic legal and constitutional anchoring. This absence of institutional grounding generates a double effect. On the one hand, it accelerates decision-making and allows rapid progress in specific areas; on the other hand, it introduces a high degree of political uncertainty. Tutelage has been effective in producing compliance, but it does not yet provide the structural stability demanded by other political and economic actors, particularly those interested in long-term commitments.

The second feature is the serious democratic deficit running through the process. The dominant logic remains one of coercion. The incentives that have modified the behavior of authoritarian

power have not been political or deliberative, but fundamentally punitive, both in their actual use and in their latent threat. This explains why the United States has resorted to implementing reforms through institutions inherited from the dictatorship, limiting changes so far to the economic sphere.

This dynamic, opaque and pragmatic, lacks defined timelines and verifiable democratizing signals for citizens. By design, Venezuelan participation remains contained and subordinated to a notion of order that privileges authoritarian predictability over the uncertainty inherent in democratic opening.

The *third feature* is the provisional nature of the process. Far from following a fixed script, the roadmap is being built as it progresses, based on general guidelines that adapt to the inputs of the moment. This flexibility should not be interpreted as improvisation.

Comparative experience shows that rigidly planned transitions often fail in volatile contexts. The capacity for adjustment is, in this sense, a strength of the design. At the same time, this provisionality opens spaces for political contestation: the course of the process is not predetermined and allows for intervention.

Finally, the *fourth feature* is the interdependent relationship between the stages. The phases do not follow one another in a linear manner nor do they respond to a strict teleological logic. The development of each stage conditions the viability of the others. Stabilization affects the possibilities for recovery; recovery affects the conditions for transition.

This simultaneity prevents a comfortable sequential reading, but it opens a meaningful field of action: in each phase, the outcomes of the others are anticipated. It is in this critical space that

the voice of Venezuelans can —and must— make itself heard. The central political responsibility consists of promoting a dynamic in which the interdependent relationship of the stages does not lead to stagnation, but rather to progressive advancement toward democracy.

I. Stabilization: Between Order and the Risk of Autocratic Rebalancing

The first phase of the plan —stabilization— has the declared objective of preventing chaos and ensuring basic economic stability, particularly to ensure the continued functioning of the so-called oil quarantine.

It is a period of control, of still undefined duration, in which the United States has chosen to rely on the remaining institutional structures of the former regime, now headed by Delcy Rodríguez. From this emerges an asymmetrical tutelage arrangement: Washington instructs, and the authoritarian apparatus executes.

This sequence —order before politics— is not unprecedented in comparative processes of political change. In Eastern Europe, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, countries such as Poland and Czechoslovakia managed to combine institutional containment with an accelerated break from the old regime. In other cases —such as Romania, Bulgaria, or Ukraine in the 1990s— prolonged control and elite continuity resulted in captured transitions and fragile democracies.

The Venezuelan case is particularly delicate because the external tutor is not operating over reformed institutions, but rather over an intact authoritarian architecture. This heightens the risk of autocratic rebalancing: a dictatorship that, once

economically stabilized and made functional to external interests, manages to politically recycle itself.

The case of Iraq after 2003 offers an illustrative counterexample. The abrupt dissolution of the state and political opening without prior order generated a power vacuum that led to violence, fragmentation, and a loss of legitimacy in the democratic process. Washington appears to have learned from that experience and has prioritized containment. However, the inverse lesson is also relevant: excessive control, without a clear roadmap toward openness, can produce stability without sovereignty and order without democracy.

For that reason, Venezuelan stabilization will be politically defensible only if it is explicitly oriented toward the creation of pre-democratic conditions. The opening of civic space, the release of political prisoners, and the initiation of institutional reforms should not be understood as premature concessions, but as mechanisms to prevent order from becoming an end in itself.

II. Recovery: From Economic Reconstruction to Reinstitutionalization

In his statements following January 3, Rubio has insisted that stabilization must give way to a phase of accelerated economic recovery, aimed at reactivating the oil industry and generating incentives for international investment. The logic is clear: without material recovery, any political transition would lack a sustainable foundation.

Comparative history partially supports this argument. In Central and Eastern Europe, countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Estonia, and Slovenia managed to combine economic reforms with simultaneous processes of democratic

reinstitutionalization. There, liberalization advanced alongside the rule of law, political competitiveness, and effective checks on power.

By contrast, experiences such as Russia, Ukraine in the 1990s, Bulgaria, and Romania show that when economic opening precedes institutional construction, the outcomes tend to be oligarchization, state capture, or authoritarian regression.

In the Venezuelan case, recovery should not rest exclusively on institutions inherited from the dictatorship —the National Assembly, the Supreme Court of Justice, and the Comptroller General's Office— which lack credibility and transparency. Their decisions may be functional in the short term, but they do not offer guarantees of stability or durability. For that reason, the reinstitutionalization of the state should not be treated as a subsequent phase, but as a constitutive component of recovery itself.

This point connects with a central concern of international actors. Without the rule of law, there is no legal certainty; without legal certainty, there is no sustainable investment. In this sense, comprehensive recovery becomes a potential space of convergence between the demands of the international economic order and domestic democratic aspirations.

The progressive reduction of the democratic deficit —the defeat of censorship, the opening of the political system, the legalization of parties, and the expansion of freedoms— is not incompatible with recovery. On the contrary, it constitutes one of its enabling conditions. The temptation to preserve oppression in the name of stability has proven, in multiple contexts, to be a short-sighted strategy with high political costs.

The provisional nature of the process, far from being a weakness, opens a political opportunity. Building in real time allows for the active intervention of Venezuelan society to contest the meaning of recovery and to prevent it from being reduced to a mere program of economic reactivation without citizenship.

III. Democratic Transition: Constitution, Representation, and Participation

During his testimony before the Senate, Rubio was particularly cautious when referring to democratic transition. He avoided presenting it as an automatic consequence of the fall of the regime and described it as a process that must be built by Venezuelans themselves once minimal political and institutional conditions are in place. That statement places the transition in the realm of collective action, not historical inertia.

The Spanish experience between 1975 and 1978 offers an essential point of reference. The transition was not the passive result of Franco's death, but rather of a complex political negotiation in which social mobilization, institutional reform, and political leadership converged to overcome the resistance of the old regime. Without organized civic pressure, the opening would have been superficial; without institutional agreements, it would have been unstable.

It is necessary, however, to introduce an essential nuance. The Venezuelan case remains far removed from the Spanish Transition scenario. The differences are neither minor nor merely circumstantial. The first is the absence, within effective power, of a reformist figure equivalent to Adolfo Suárez.

The Spanish transition benefited from an internal actor within the regime who was willing to dismantle it from within. In

Venezuela, Delcy Rodríguez does not fulfill that role: her actions respond to a logic of authoritarian survival, not to a reformist will aimed at democratizing the system.

The second difference lies in state capacity. Spain inherited from the dictatorship a functional state apparatus, with professional bureaucracies, an effective monopoly over coercion, and the capacity to implement reforms.

The current Venezuelan state, by contrast, is profoundly eroded: it lacks institutional autonomy, suffers from severe administrative deficits, and exhibits characteristics of a weak state, if not an almost failed one. This fragility severely limits the possibility of an orderly transition and heightens the risks of capture, destabilization, or prolonged tutelage.

In light of the foregoing, Venezuela's transition requires at least three interdependent dimensions.

- The first is constitutional. The roadmap demands a clear legal channel capable of incorporating the popular will in a legitimate and orderly manner. Without a constitutional framework, the transition risks devolving into a prolonged administration of the crisis.
- The second dimension is representation. The political leadership that has made it possible to reach this point, with María Corina Machado as its central figure, must be strengthened. Yet no transition can endure without political parties capable of representing, organizing, and channeling social demands. Party weakness, the result of years of persecution and fragmentation, constitutes one of the principal bottlenecks in the process.
- The third dimension is participation. Comparative experience demonstrates that transitions do not unfold in silence. Citizen mobilization —when politically guided

and strategically oriented— functions as a lever to overcome authoritarian resistance and accelerate reform. Without organized participation, Venezuela's transition risks becoming trapped between external tutelage and internal inertia.

Conclusion

Rubio's plan for Venezuela reflects a realist —and deeply pragmatic— conception of political change in collapsed authoritarian contexts. The United States has privileged order, containment, and stability as prerequisites for any democratic opening, aware of the risks that premature liberalization entails in a country institutionally devastated.

However, that realism contains a tension that cannot be resolved solely from Washington. Stabilization without civic opening risks consolidating autocratic rebalancing; recovery without reinstitutionalization can produce growth without rights; a transition without constitution, representation, and participation would result in a prolonged administration of the crisis, not in a democracy.

For that reason, the success —or failure— of this process will not depend solely on the U.S. design, but on Venezuelans' capacity to politically intervene in each phase. Stabilization must be oriented toward opening civic space; recovery toward institutional reconstruction; and transition toward the constitutional, representative, and participatory articulation of popular sovereignty.

Democracy will not arrive as an external concession nor as a byproduct of economic order. It will be the result of a conscious, sustained, and organized political struggle. That is the historic

challenge facing Venezuela today: to transform an operation of force into a legitimate transition, and a process under tutelage into a democracy of its own.

Juan Miguel Matheus

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

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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.

Omar Zambrano

Recuperación Economic Recovery and Redemocratization: The Order of the Factors Does Change the Outcome

The extraction of Nicolás Maduro by United States special forces in the early hours of last January 3 closed a political cycle that, for more than two decades, dragged Venezuela and its inhabitants into a deep degradation of their social fabric, institutions, and economy. This event has injected a necessary —and welcome— breath of optimism about our future: for the first time in many years, Venezuelans have allowed ourselves to envision the future with renewed hope. As a kind of daily anecdote, friends and acquaintances, both inside and outside the country, increasingly speak —for now in tones of pure longing— of new opportunities, projects, and investments.

However, it may be appropriate, for the purposes of these lines, to begin with the conclusion: the departure of the autocrat does not, by any means, automatically place us on the tracks of a road toward sustainable reconstruction. We face the risk of believing that the newly revealed —perhaps forced?— openness from authoritarian authorities, including some clear steps toward the liberalization of certain economic areas, will be sufficient to initiate a vigorous process of national reconstruction.

That historical confusion may become the starting point for new frustrations. Venezuela is not ready for premature celebrations or reassuring narratives; we must begin by recognizing that reversing the effects of twenty-seven years of deliberate institutional demolition, sustained concentration of power, total elimination of democratic representation, and the massive replacement of rules with discretionary decision-making will demand far more than kind gestures and superficial measures. The historical evidence of transitions is clear on this matter.

From the perspective of what we know about economic development, the central debate for Venezuela at this moment is not whether the measures being taken and the policies being implemented are "correct" in the pure sense of the term. The dilemma lies in the fact that even economic measures that may be considered beneficial will not produce the desired effects if, around them, there are no social consensuses that ensure their future stability. Economic agents will always react cautiously to measures taken arbitrarily by those in power, especially when that power does not incorporate any popular mandate or the majority sentiment of the population. I repeat: even when these measures largely coincide with what is "reasonable," the absence of majority popular endorsement will always function as a deterrent.

It is urgent to convey the idea that, for Venezuela to begin the arduous and long path toward national rehabilitation, what matters is not only what policies are implemented, but also who implements them. The fact is that, while decisions made by the authorities do not incorporate representative elements, the impact of reforms will remain limited by uncertainty and the risk of policy reversal. The inability to demonstrate that actions respond to a popular mandate will, in any case, condition the response of those on the other side of any negotiation table or investment decision.

Let us frame the discussion in terms of concrete policies: it is obvious that the country must, among other urgent areas, stabilize its economy, open its oil sector, attract foreign direct investment, and renegotiate its debt. These reform areas are part of the basic diagnoses many of us have made, and they are beyond dispute. But the decisive question is who decides, with what legitimacy, under what rules, and whom they represent. It is necessary to repeat again and again that, in our specific context, who makes the decision matters as much as the decision itself. In all the policy areas mentioned, it will be very difficult to overcome the inhibiting effects caused by questions regarding the legitimacy and representativeness of the authorities acting on behalf of the executive, legislative, and judicial institutions involved.

The discussion about the democratic legitimacy of institutions is not a conceptual luxury or a purely moral debate; rather, it has concrete effects on the type of outcomes we can expect. Contrary to those who believe that the problem of democracy can be postponed indefinitely or addressed only after economic recovery, to the extent that the credibility and legitimacy of policymakers play a role in resolving all the serious problems affecting the Venezuelan economy, to that same extent the problem of redemocratization becomes a matter of pragmatic realism and realpolitik. There is no vigorous and sustained economic recovery without democratization. Full stop.

During the last quarter century, Chavismo systematically dismantled the mechanisms that allow society to process its conflicts, establish its priorities, and formulate organized responses to the challenges of its own development —in other words, Chavismo pulverized the public policy-making process. At this moment, there is no institutional intermediary capable of deciding on which issues society is willing to accept short-term costs and sustain long-term agreements. This is where the

sustained process of eliminating checks and balances, emptying elections of substantive content, subordinating the judiciary, and turning the state into an uncontrolled political resource becomes a binding constraint on development.

The removal of Nicolás Maduro left behind a network of institutional control governed by discretion, arbitrariness, opacity, and fear. For this reason, there are more than enough grounds to argue that the proposed sequence of stabilization —recovery— democratization is not in the correct order. To assume that it is possible to rebuild the economy without rebuilding the political system is a foundational error that will generate further frustrations. Venezuela aspires to more than fragile stabilization; it needs basic consensuses that can guide public action over the coming decades. This is not simply about isolated measures, nor even about a government program —it is about a new social contract that establishes parameters without which any policy or reform initiative will be considered reversible or contested.

In this sense, the restoration of Venezuelans' rights must be at the center of any economic rehabilitation program. Restoring civil, political, and economic rights is a necessary condition for economic agents to form reasonable medium- and long-term expectations. Above all, the country's ability to attract and accumulate capital —domestic or foreign— depends critically on the credibility of the institutional framework, including public powers, regulatory agencies, and the rest of the professionalized public administration.

The Mirage of Massive Investment

A first area where the argument in favor of democratization as a vehicle and guarantee of stability appears, particularly regarding perceptions of property rights, is the oil sector. After

Maduro's departure, the idea has strongly reemerged that only a few changes to the legal framework are enough to unleash the sector's full hydrocarbon potential, that oil investment will arrive in massive volumes, and that, through a spillover effect, the path toward national rehabilitation will begin.

The truth is that all serious analyses indicate that recovering our oil sector will require tens, if not hundreds, of billions of dollars, with sustained investment flows over decades, in a global energy context that is, moreover, much more competitive and restrictive than in the past. In this context, it is virtually impossible for any major player in the oil market to commit its capital —at least in the amounts required— under a legal framework that is not endorsed by the country's majority representation. The "wait-and-see" effect is the dominant strategy for any investor who expects the legal framework could change for better or worse. In either case, the massive arrival of oil investments appears more like a wish than a certainty.

The same applies to other areas. For example, Venezuela will require massive amounts of domestic and foreign investment in the reconstruction of its public services —electricity, water, household gas, transportation, ports, airports, telecommunications, etc. Therefore, it must be understood that any program involving massive private sector participation in the provision of public goods and services —which is the case given the limited financial and managerial capacities of the Venezuelan state— faces exactly the same restrictions and constraints mentioned in the previous paragraph. Without certification of a popular mandate and with lingering doubts about the legitimacy of our institutional counterparts, it will be very difficult to mobilize capital in the required quantities.

Who Signs the Debt Renegotiation?

In perspective, one can think that perhaps the most sensitive area to the effects of uncertainty and the lack of democratic legitimacy is international financial markets. Venezuela urgently needs to undertake a comprehensive process of renegotiating its external debt and other international liabilities which, according to conservative estimates, amount to more than 160 billion dollars. Any program for stabilizing the Venezuelan economy and rehabilitating its public finances necessarily depends on overcoming the country's financial default situation, which has weighed on the Republic since 2017. Simply put, without regaining access to international credit markets, it is impossible to design a credible fiscal and monetary strategy that restores macroeconomic stability to the country. Without macroeconomic stability, it is not possible to undertake a sustained process of economic growth and development.

It is here where it appears extremely unlikely that Venezuelan debt holders would be willing to negotiate with counterparties that, due to their accidental nature, cannot offer long-term commitments. Carrying out an effective debt renegotiation process will require two parties that mutually recognize each other and that come with a clear mandate from their constituents. On one side will be creditors organized into a syndicate, and on the other must be legitimate representatives of the Venezuelan state, invested with popular representation that reflects a long-term national commitment. Beyond repayment capacity, without democracy, any agreement with creditors will be perceived as provisional and vulnerable to future challenges, which will imply lower debt discounts, the exit of speculative creditors, higher risk premiums, shorter maturities, and, in general, harsher conditions for the country.

The Latent Potential of the Diaspora

Finally, a special mention must be made of human capital. The Venezuelan diaspora is one of the greatest strategic assets available to the country's future recovery process. Venezuela counts millions of Venezuelans whose life experience is, in itself, an immense resource that will be crucial in national rehabilitation. Because of their demographic characteristics, their experiences, and their education, Venezuelan migrants today represent the country's largest stock of human capital —a stock that remains Venezuelan, yet resides abroad.

If the right conditions are in place, it is foreseeable that a fraction of the diaspora will return to the country, while another fraction will integrate into the economic dynamic from their new places of residence. Whether inside or outside Venezuela, many will undertake business initiatives, academic and/or cultural exchanges, family projects, and return for visits; all will contribute new knowledge, experiences, standards, and innovations that will be inserted into the country's renewed productive process. In any role, the diaspora as a whole will be the repository of immense productive energy that will be unleashed for reconstruction.

At this point, it is clear that the return process —whether physical or economic— of the diaspora requires concrete guarantees: personal security, civil liberties, political rights, and a real possibility of influencing the country's direction. Without progress in democratization, diaspora engagement will remain limited to remittance flows and little more, and the potential to become a long-term development vector will remain untapped and will gradually fade over time.

Without Democracy There Is No Paradise

There is no such thing as reconstruction without citizenship. A scheme in which key decisions are taken by the remnants of the political, economic, and military elites that have governed the country for the past 27 years will, at best, produce mediocre economic results. Whether in the oil sector, in attracting private investment, in managing debt, or in engaging the diaspora —to name the areas discussed in this text— attempts at deep reform without democratic representation will always generate risks of intertemporal inconsistency, which economic agents will tend to penalize and discount negatively.

Beyond political convenience, democratic legitimacy functions as the social mechanism for signaling which set of priorities, decisions, and commitments we are willing to sustain as a society over time. The uber-pragmatism that many now defend, represented so well by the mantra "first recovery, then transition," may result in fragile reforms, rent capture, and meager outcomes, fueling new frustrations and endangering the real possibility of a true democratic spring for our country. Examples of incomplete transitions that never achieved democratic consolidation abound in the former Soviet sphere. With the clear exception of Poland and a few others, the post-Soviet transition offers a clear lesson that economic liberalization decoupled from democratization risks consolidating new anti-democratic oligarchies and captured states.

Venezuela does not need a new pact among elites. The only certain path to long-term prosperity and economic development lies in opening real democratic channels, allowing the voice of the population to be expressed so that the structure of the state reflects a new social pact. Venezuela needs the consensus and aspirations of its people to be reflected in the leadership of the

nation. The order of factors does change the outcome; it is not economic improvement that will open the doors to democracy — it is precisely the opposite. Venezuela has no room left to repeat past mistakes. We have already waited too long.

Rafael Uzcátegui

An Architecture Without Force: Venezuela and the Exhaustion of Multilateralism in Human Rights

In the early hours of January 3, as F-22 Raptor and F-35 Lightning II fighter jets bombed seven locations across Venezuelan territory and Chinook helicopters took positions over Fuerte Tiuna, it was not only the power of Nicolás Maduro and Cilia Flores that collapsed. At that same moment, another, less visible but deeper defeat was exposed: that of the international human rights protection system, incapable of preventing an authoritarian regime from advancing for years until its containment required armed intervention.

Beyond the external responsibilities of U.S. authorities and the internal role of the ruling party in replacing the former trade unionist Nicolás Maduro, what occurred exposes profound limitations in the international human rights architecture conceived after the Second World War.

The Foundations

After the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust and the Soviet gulags, the approval in 1948 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights constituted an unprecedented historic effort to

universalize the protection of human dignity. From that moment on, a global framework began to take shape, based not only on the individual responsibility of states but also on the commitment of states to monitor one another's compliance.

That framework developed through a complex institutional and normative structure promoted within the United Nations (UN), combining declarations, binding international treaties, and specialized oversight bodies. Over the following decades, fundamental covenants were adopted —civil, political, economic, social, and cultural— and permanent monitoring mechanisms were created, including expert committees, special rapporteurships, complaint procedures, observation missions, and later the Universal Periodic Review, under the coordination of the Human Rights Council and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

In its original design, this architecture aspired to replace international indifference toward state abuses with a logic of collective scrutiny, diplomatic pressure, and the gradual internalization of shared human rights standards by states. At the regional level, the counterpart was the creation, in 1959, of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and, in 1979, of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, both linked to the Organization of American States (OAS).

This system operated largely on a core diplomatic premise: the "good faith" of states. The commitments undertaken through the signing and ratification of human rights treaties were not conceived as obligations subject to strong coercive enforcement mechanisms, but rather as voluntary expressions of adherence to a shared moral and legal consensus. Compliance was expected to arise from cooperation, dialogue, and political pressure among peers. Accordingly, states would accept international

scrutiny, respond to the observations of supervisory bodies, and progressively adopt their recommendations —not out of fear of immediate sanctions, but because of the normative and reputational value of belonging to an international community committed to protecting human dignity.

Design Flaws

Normative advances in human rights were reflected in concrete improvements across the region, enhancing the quality of life of its populations. To compile a full inventory, in fairness, would exceed the scope of this text. Yet alongside these gains, the international human rights protection system began to develop internal weaknesses that, in the face of growing societal demands, increasingly limited its reach and effectiveness. In the text "Failing to Protect: The UN and the Politicisation of Human Rights," the scholar Rosa Freedman summarizes these shortcomings.

- **Structural deficit in protection**: The system is designed to promote and develop norms, but not to effectively protect individuals from grave and immediate violations, especially when states refuse to cooperate.

- **Absence of coercive power**: The Human Rights Council and other human rights bodies lack enforcement mechanisms. They can debate, condemn, and recommend, but they cannot compel states to comply, unlike the Security Council or international financial institutions.

- **Promotion vs. protection**: The system functioned relatively well in tasks of promotion, dialogue, cooperation, technical assistance, and normative development, which operate in the medium and long term. However, it fails

in the short term, when urgent intervention is required to halt ongoing abuses.

— **Dependence on state "good faith"**: The system's effectiveness presupposes that states will act in good faith and accept scrutiny. When this does not occur, the mechanisms are rendered largely ineffective.

— **Politicization as a weakness**: The protection of human rights is severely affected by politicization, particularly within United Nations mechanisms: geopolitical alliances, double standards, selective condemnations, and strategic silences regarding powerful or allied states.

— **Bureaucratization**: The expansion of procedures, review cycles, periodic reports, and technical formats strengthened the administrative dimension of the system, but not its protective effectiveness. Bureaucratic timelines proved incompatible with the urgency imposed by repressive contexts and distanced the system from victims, who required intermediary actors —such as NGOs and specialized lawyers— to access it.

The Latin American Experience

In Latin America, the government of Alberto Fujimori (1990–2000) was one of the earliest and clearest warning signs of the crisis of multilateral mechanisms for protecting democracy and human rights. It inaugurated a phenomenon that would later become recurrent: authoritarianism that comes to power through elections and, from there, dismantles the democratic order. The 1992 self-coup exposed a gap: existing tools had been designed to respond to classic military coups, not to elected leaders who eroded democracy from within.

That normative and political vacuum was one of the direct antecedents that, years later, led to the adoption of the Inter-American Democratic Charter (IDC) by the OAS. The Charter sought precisely to respond to the "Fujimori lesson": that democracy is not exhausted by elections, and that its breakdown can be gradual, legalistic, and legitimized by majorities, without tanks in the streets. In this sense, Fujimori was not only a national case but a regional turning point that revealed the fragility of the international protection system in the face of new forms of authoritarianism.

The Venezuelan case dramatically reinforced the limitations of the international system when confronting new authoritarianisms. Hugo Chávez came to power at the end of 1998 with a discourse that claimed to address various social and political demands of the population, generating broad expectations both domestically and abroad. Nine months after being sworn in as president, Chávez ratified his supposed commitment to human rights by becoming the first head of state to visit the headquarters of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in Washington. In December 1999, a new Constitution —widely protective in human rights matters— was approved through a popular referendum.

In 2002, when Hugo Chávez himself became the victim of a coup d'état, OAS mechanisms reacted swiftly. For the first time, its Permanent Council activated the Inter-American Democratic Charter, and its secretary general at the time, César Gaviria, visited the country on multiple occasions to support mediation and dialogue initiatives that ultimately led to the presidential recall referendum in 2004. For its part, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights visited Venezuela a few days after the events, in May, at the invitation of the authorities themselves.

Although the international community was dazzled by the Bolivarian experiment, most national organizations had condemned the interruption of constitutional order. These organizations documented and denounced the authoritarian traits of Hugo Chávez's government. They did so before a regional audience that was skeptical of these early warnings. Here we introduce an additional element: the international protection system can be understood as an ecosystem. It is formed not only by its institutions and normative mechanisms, but also by its regular users, such as specialized NGOs. If we adopt this broader understanding, we can affirm that the system, taken as a whole, was ineffective. It failed to contain and deter Chavismo's authoritarian drift and its grave human rights violations.

Identity Over Principles

The Venezuelan government denounced the American Convention —the regional treaty that establishes fundamental rights and the obligations of its member states to guarantee them, creating a supervisory system— in September 2012. This denunciation was the formal procedure for withdrawing from the contentious jurisdiction of the Inter-American Court, a withdrawal that took effect one year later, in September 2013. Previously, only Trinidad and Tobago had taken a similar step. Although Fujimori's Peru attempted to withdraw from the Court's jurisdiction, it did not formally renounce the Convention, underscoring the exceptional and extreme character of Venezuela's decision.

However, denunciation of the Convention carried minimal political cost for Hugo Chávez, who, despite the advance of increasingly authoritarian practices, continued to enjoy broad support from both progressive governments and social movements across the region. That support even included historic figures of the Latin American human rights movement. An emblematic case

was the public backing of Hebe de Bonafini, longtime president of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, an organization founded in 1977 and considered one of the first experiences of public, sustained, and transnational human rights advocacy in Latin America. But the blank check granted by Bonafini was not an isolated incident: other regional leaders and organizations also chose to downplay or justify the rupture of international oversight mechanisms in the name of political and ideological affinities. Identity ties were placed above the principle of universality that the movement —and officials within both OAS and UN bodies —claimed to uphold.

Over the years, Venezuela's democratic political and social leadership activated virtually every known international mechanism for supervision, monitoring, and pressure in the fields of human rights and democracy. Beginning in 2017 —when images of the repression of massive protests and the forced exodus of millions, who became known as "walkers," spread across the continent— multiple bodies began operating simultaneously and cumulatively regarding the country. These included the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the International Labour Organization's Commission of Inquiry, the Mercosur Ushuaia Protocol, the Inter-American Democratic Charter, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission, and the Special Monitoring Mechanism for Venezuela (MESEVE) of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

Yet despite the accumulation of diplomatic efforts, public statements, technical visits, and exhaustive reports, none of these initiatives succeeded in effectively deterring the advance of authoritarianism or in altering the systematic abusive conduct of the Venezuelan state.

An unprecedented milestone was even reached in the region: the opening of a formal investigation by the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court into the alleged commission of crimes against humanity. As the only international mechanism with potentially binding legal decisions, it generated expectations that its working and cooperation agreement with the authorities in Miraflores might serve as a containment wall against the repressive drift. However, that expectation was also frustrated. On December 1, 2025, just one month before the U.S. armed incursion, the Prosecutor's Office announced the closure of its technical office in Caracas, citing the "lack of real progress" in its cooperative relationship with the Venezuelan authorities.

In Venezuela, the situation seen in other authoritarian contexts was repeated: international organizations operating on the ground subordinated their discourse and activities to the goal of remaining in the country. Various UN mechanisms in Caracas prioritized technical cooperation with the authorities over the protection of individuals, separating the humanitarian dimension from the human rights dimension and avoiding any public expression that might upset the authorities. When the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights signed a working agreement with the authorities, it accepted the condition that the agreement not be made public.

In this way, the structural weakness of the system was compounded by field operations that privileged institutional survival over effective protection. Without the capacity to exert pressure and without the will to confront, the international community became part of the everyday landscape of Venezuelan authoritarianism: present, visible, and formally active, yet politically innocuous. When the regime ultimately collapsed through armed means, it became evident that this presence had

not functioned as containment, but rather as a silent backdrop to the unfolding catastrophe.

Confronting the Challenges

Far from closing the horizon of collective action, the Venezuelan experience offers valuable lessons for renewing the role of civil society *vis-à-vis* the international human rights protection system. The structural limits of these mechanisms do not render them irrelevant, but they do require a more conscious and strategic use, without delegating to them responsibilities that ultimately belong to societies themselves.

The accumulated capital of knowledge, networks, and technical capacities developed by Venezuelan civil society over more than two decades now enables a less naïve and more strategically articulated form of advocacy. This advocacy operates across local, regional, and global levels. It is capable of translating the documentation of violations into concrete outcomes. These include judicial proceedings, targeted sanctions, and political debates. It also feeds into memory and truth agendas. In doing so, it expands the field of protection beyond the system's formal channels.

At the same time, the Venezuelan experience challenges the international community to critically reassess its tools in the face of emerging authoritarianisms. A system designed to operate under the assumption of state good faith proves insufficient when confronted with regimes that instrumentalize cooperation, dialogue, and international presence as devices of legitimation.

Strengthening the system's capacity for impact requires innovation in early pressure mechanisms. It also demands tighter coordination across international regimes, including human

rights, anti-corruption, finance, labor, and criminal justice. At the same time, it requires greater coherence between mandate and practice.

In this reform process, civil society is not merely a user of the system, but a key actor in pushing it to fulfill its original promise: that human dignity should not depend on the will of states, but on collective vigilance capable of transforming silence into accountability and formal presence into effective protection.

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