

Venezuela's Transition to Democracy in Suspense

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In 2019 the President of the United States turned to a small diaspora to amplify his anti-socialist messaging. The humanitarian catastrophe in Venezuela was provoking one of the largest migrant displacements in the region in recent history, and he took to the campaign trail during that tragedy to make the case for his reelection. The 2020 presidential election featured Venezuela prominently as a cautionary tale against communists and socialists. It made Venezuelans feel seen, garnering Trump enough support to have electoral implications.ⁱ

While Trump lost the 2020 election, he made historic gains in Miami, signaling a change that could have long term political effects. The Biden presidency only solidified Trump's influence among the Venezuelan American community with few exceptions. The support for the negotiations brokered by the Norwegian government only fueled criticism toward the Democratic Party, increasing the distrust and making the lifting of sanctions, once floated in 2022, akin to betrayal, following the footsteps of the Cuban American diaspora.ⁱⁱ

When Trump decided to run again in 2024, the hopes among Venezuelans, at home and abroad, were renewed. However, on this occasion there was no uplifting messaging coming from the campaign. This time, Venezuelans in the US, legally present and undocumented, were labeled and in some cases, treated as criminals. On the campaign trail the theme was crime and Venezuelans were the culprit.ⁱⁱⁱ In a pronounced shift the cause went from a commitment to fight against the socialist regime to persecute Venezuelans in the US and on boats in the Caribbean.

Since hope is never scant, Venezuelans in the United States once again threw their support behind the former president with the confidence this time he would succeed in bringing down the Maduro regime. The expectation was not limited to public opinion or influencers. Exiled journalists and politicians in the United States and Venezuela constantly asked President Trump to 'finish the

job'.^{iv} Despite the poor treatment of Venezuelans, many including the most prominent leader of the opposition, Maria Corina Machado, dismissed the immigration enforcement directed at Venezuelan immigrants arguing that they should return to their homeland where they were most needed.

Following the successful military operation conducted by the United States to extract Nicolas Maduro on January 3rd of 2026, the expectations, not only from Machado and her base, but from Venezuelans in the US and at home, was that the decapitation of the regime was the start of a political transition. However, once the White House started to praise Delcy Rodriguez after she stepped in as interim president, there were concerns among many who rightfully pointed to Rodriguez as a prominent member of Maduro's governing autocratic coalition, and as the mastermind behind most of his policies.^v

To Venezuelan's dismay, including some of his most devoted supporters in the US, the Trump administration started to lay out a plan that relied on Rodriguez in a role as the operator in the proposed plan to stabilize the country and its economy, leaving the political transition in a distant third place. The dissonance was striking, not only because the Trump administration was elevating Rodriguez as a reliable partner, but because the right to elect a new government was downgraded as a priority.^{vi}

This became clear once the requirements coming from the Trump administration were met with swift responses, with the exception of the current more than 300 political prisoners who still remain in jail, despite the Trump administration's request to set free all political prisoners.

The National Assembly, the country's legislative branch, passed a new law governing the oil industry, which was an urgent request from the White House. While other equally urgent matters, like the renewal of the CNE (the election administration agency) and the Supreme Court, remained as a goal without a concrete timeline.

Then the twin earthquakes hit the country on June 24th, and the natural disaster left thousands of homeless, disappearances and fatalities, changing the priorities, providing an argument to delay furthermore the political transition. The botched response from the interim government represented a challenge for the Trump administration, given its support of Rodriguez, becoming partially -if not fully- responsible of the ineffectiveness of Rodriguez and her regime to aid the victims. The Trump administration understood that the entanglement with the new Venezuelan regime transferred them the accountability, so they had to act before the social unrest could take shape in a country where people have no legitimate or legal government.

That was the scenario when in August the announced round of new conversations between the Opposition, led by Dinorah Figuera and the regime, by Jorge Rodriguez, finally started after some

delay.^{vii} The agenda contemplated a series of priorities for each camp, mainly to outline where to begin to set the path for a renewal of the government. That was the initial approach, with the usual caveats from the Opposition regarding the use of these conversations by the Chavista regime to delay, stall and manipulate the Opposition to finally avert any commitment to change the regime.^{viii}

While the conversations appeared encouraging, the announcement of an oil agreement at the end of August, increased the distrust in the White House's plan for Venezuela.^{ix} It is sufficiently clear now that the priority for the Trump administration is the financial exploitation of Venezuela's oil wealth (on paper), not its transition to democracy. This new agreement has sparked criticism from Venezuelans, even those aligned with President Trump. The support for Rodriguez's power grab as the price to pay for Maduro's removal is one thing, but to compromise a share of Venezuela's oil reserves is akin to ceding sovereignty based on Venezuela's historical standards.

This agreement seems to further complicate the plans to move on to the political transition phase, considering the statement of the Secretary of Energy, Chris Wright, during his appearance on *This Week* with Martha Raddatz (ABC, September 6th, 2026)^x:

RADDATZ: *And, Mr. Secretary, just finally, you negotiated this Venezuelan deal with Delcy Rodriguez, who was vice president under the Maduro regime, the regime that the Trump administration attacked as a socialist dictatorship. Why do you trust her?*

WRIGHT: *Well, I wasn't the negotiator on the deal, but she -- we have a lot of leverage over Venezuela. We control the sale of oil outside of their country.*

So right now, they are forced to work in partnership with us, and they are working in partnership with us. It's drawing billions of dollars in investment and it's transforming that region from a region of conflict to a region of commerce. I think the momentum going that direction, whoever is ruling Venezuela, is quite strong, very, very positive for the hemis -- for the Western Hemisphere.

The current administration seems to be prioritizing the oil deals, and the arrangement with the interim regime in Venezuela is seen as more practical than engaging with a political transition led by Machado that could potentially bring civil unrest. However, rather than the alleged disorder under Machado's presence (who has been blocked from returning to Venezuela), it is probably more likely that she would not be so diligent to satisfy the White House's demands, sacrificing the Venezuelan people's demand for the return of democracy after 27 years of *chavismo* in power.

There was hope that a reset was possible after Maduro's ousting. Nine months later, the economic ties are visible, and while the advances in the oil industry are evident, there is plenty of skepticism that not only a new administration in the United States would hesitate to continue with this arrangement, but that a future democratic government in Venezuela is unlikely to uphold the terms of this oil agreement.^{xi}

Finally, in the United States, Venezuelans and Latin America experts warn that sacrificing the transition for domestic politics goals could indefinitely prevent any path to restoring democracy in Venezuela, especially if the elections are not held before Trump leaves office. The legality of the agreements and the postponing of elections are creating an environment of distrust in this policy approach that only allows Rodriguez to buy time, and once more, ensures that the regime remains in power.^{xii}

ⁱ Magazuelans: How Venezuelan Americans Embraced Trump as Their Savior

<https://nacla.org/venezuelan-american-trump-voters>

ⁱⁱ *The Venezuelan Diaspora and Maduro's Authoritarian Consolidation*. Chapter of the book: *Authoritarian Consolidation in Times of Crisis: Venezuela under Nicolás Maduro*, Abingdon: Routledge (John Polga-Hecimovich and Raúl Sánchez Urribarrí, Editors).

ⁱⁱⁱ Is Donald Trump Blowing It with Venezuelan American Voters?

<https://washingtonmonthly.com/2024/09/27/is-donald-trump-blowing-it-with-venezuelan-american-voters/>

^{iv} The Exiles Who Sold Trump's Wars

<https://washingtonmonthly.com/2026/06/17/iran-venezuela-trumps-useful-exiles/>

^v *Venezuela's Interim Leader Balances Maduro's Script With Trump's Demands*

<https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/15/world/americas/venezuela-rodriguez-maduro-trump.html?smid=url-share>

^{vi} Trump says Venezuela 'not ready yet' for elections as U.S. deepens ties with interim government through oil deal

<https://www.nbcmiami.com/news/local/trump-says-venezuela-not-ready-yet-for-elections-as-u-s-deepens-ties-with-interim-government-through-oil-deal/3854028/>

^{vii} US-backed democracy talks start in Venezuela without Nobel laureate Machado

<https://www.cnn.com/2026/08/06/americas/venezuela-democracy-talks-opposition-latam-intl>

^{viii} The Real Negotiation Venezuela Needs <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/the-real-negotiation-venezuela-needs/>

^{ix} U.S. to Take Control of Much of Venezuela's Proven Oil Reserves

<https://www.wsj.com/business/energy-oil/trump-administration-in-advanced-talks-for-stake-in-venezuelan-oil-fields-819546d3>

^x 'This Week' Transcript 9-6-26: Energy Secretary Chris Wright

<https://abcnews.com/Politics/week-transcript-9-6-26-energy-secretary-chris/story?id=136225571>

^{xi} Venezuela-US oil deal risks violating local law, say experts

<https://giftarticle.ft.com/giftarticle/actions/redeem/7d9ebe92-0e57-48f3-a9bf-b4152b36fe09>

^{xii} America has laid claim to a fifth of Venezuela's oil [https://www.economist.com/the-](https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2026/08/29/america-has-laid-claim-to-a-fifth-of-venezuelas-oil?giftId=ZDJjMTE1YjMtN2FkNS00YTFmLTlhNWItYWM2NWRiZTljODI5&utm_campaign=gifted_article)

[americas/2026/08/29/america-has-laid-claim-to-a-fifth-of-venezuelas-oil?giftId=ZDJjMTE1YjMtN2FkNS00YTFmLTlhNWItYWM2NWRiZTljODI5&utm_campaign=gifted_article](https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2026/08/29/america-has-laid-claim-to-a-fifth-of-venezuelas-oil?giftId=ZDJjMTE1YjMtN2FkNS00YTFmLTlhNWItYWM2NWRiZTljODI5&utm_campaign=gifted_article)