CIPR Working Paper

Series: Venezuela Conflict and Peacebuilding Research Network
No. 1 I May 2026
DOI: 10.25833/8e6z-f158

Venezuela's Critical Juncture:

Pushing for a Democratic Transition

Contributions from the Academy

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The authors of this report worked on one or more sections and read and commented on the entire document. Even though individual authors do not necessarily agree with every statement in the text, they all endorse the report's overall content and tone as well as its principal findings and recommendations.

Acknowledgements: The authors would like to thank Andrés García, Michael Penfold, and Geoff Ramsey for their comments on a previous version. We would like to thank Ludovico Feoli and Sefira Fialkoff at the Center for Inter-American Policy and Research, and Anthony Pereira, Hannah Palmer and Ashley Ortiz Chico of the Stone Center for Latin American Studies at Tulane University, and President of the Latin American Studies Association Max Cameron for their support.

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I. Cultivating Venezuela's Transition

On January 3, 2026, the United States military carried out Operation Absolute Resolve which, in less than three hours, neutralized Venezuelan air defenses and captured and renditioned Nicolás Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores to a U.S. warship off the coast. That same morning, U.S. President Donald Trump held a press conference in which he told reporters the U.S. was to "going to run" Venezuela, and that his administration would be working with Maduro's vice president Delcy Rodriguez who was cooperating fully. In responding to reporters who immediately asked about opposition leader, María Corina Machado, Trump said "I think it would be very tough for her to be the leader. She doesn't have the support within or the respect within the country. She's a very nice woman, but she doesn't have the respect." In his comments he made no reference to regime change or democratization. Trump's statement was such a shock that many Venezuelans thought he had misspoken and had accidentally switched the names Delcy Rodríguez and María Corina Machado.

But in the coming hours it would become clear that he had not misspoken and that they would indeed be working with Delcy Rodríguez. Days later, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio would describe a three-step plan for Venezuela amounting to: stabilization, recovery and transition.[1] Since then significant regulatory and economic changes have been taken on by the Rodríguez government, including changes to the hydro-carbons regime and a new mining law. The U.S. has issued licenses to U.S. sanctions to permit foreign investment, and it is exercising control over the commercialization of Venezuela oil. While this process has been opaque, it has led to expectations of economic growth. There has also been an amnesty process leading to the release of over 500 political prisoners, while hundreds more remain. In addition, the Rodriguez government has

[1] Marco Rubio, "Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Secretary of War Pete Hegseth Remarks to the Press," U.S. Department of State, January 7, 2026, https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2026/01/secretary-of-state-marco-rubio-and-secretary-of-war-pete-hegseth-remarks-to-the-press.

incorporated a number of moderate opposition figures into its government and created the "Commission for Democratic Coexistence and Peace" including some moderate opposition activists.

The transition literature describes one possible path to democratization being through military defeat in an international conflict and occupation by a democratic foreign power.[2] But, that is not what we are witnessing in Venezuela. The U.S. has not occupied Venezuela. Its special forces came and went; it used military power to pursue ships carrying sanctioned oil; and Trump has threatened that if Venezuela did not collaborate "we are ready to stage a second and much larger attack if we need to do so." However, there are no U.S. troops or administrators on the ground, other than the U.S. Chargé d'Affaires representing the U.S. in Venezuela. The U.S. is not working with Venezuela's democratic opposition led by Machado or others, but directly with the Delcy Rodríguez government. Furthermore, Trump himself has not mentioned democracy in Venezuela and more broadly, does not seem to have it as an important criterion in international relations and diplomatic engagements.[3]

The Rodriguez government is definitely a weakened authoritarian government, and these are the regimes most typically open to transitions to democracy. In the classic literature on transitions to democracy the most viable way for a democratic transition to occur is through opposition moderates engaging regime soft-liners[4] to forge relationships and agreements that provide democratic openings and eventually elections.[5] In the current context, however, prospects for such engagement seem remote. The Trump administration appears mainly interested in economic issues, and the Rodríguez government has slow-walked the release of political prisoners and other

[2] Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).
[3] Steven Levitsky, Lucan A. Way, and Daniel Ziblatt, "The Price of American Authoritarianism: What Can Reverse Democratic Decline?" *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2026).
[4] Soft-liners are members of an authoritarian regime who are not necessarily moderates, but who think the best way to keep power is by some degree of liberalization.
[5] Alfred Stepan, "Democratic Opposition and Democratization Theory," *Government and Opposition* 32, no. 4 (1997): 657–673.

easy steps that could be taken, such as removing internet censorship of independent media. Civil society is indeed activating, but it still does not have much space in which to operate, and most people are still struggling to meet their basic needs. There are moderate opposition leaders within Venezuela who have seats in the National Assembly and are able to engage the government. However, they have little public support in the population, which perceives them as unable to produce the significant change people want. Furthermore, they are at odds with the dominant faction of the opposition led by María Corina Machado. These latter opposition leaders are outside of the country and are dominated by maximalists who see little purpose in engaging the Rodríguez government and actively berate those opposition figures who do.

Some important leaders from the Machado-led opposition are reactivating inside Venezuela, organizing meetings and rallies and speaking in the limited media ecosystem available. And Machado has done whatever she can to win Donald Trump's favor—including giving him the medal from her Nobel Peace Prize. Thus far, however, the Trump administration has discouraged Machado from returning to Venezuela and seems to be content to work with the Rodríguez government. The Trump administration points to Venezuela as a model for U.S. military and political engagement with rogue regimes and so far has seemed reluctant to alter the trajectory in Venezuela by opening a transition process[6]--although Secretary of State Marco Rubio frequently suggests U.S. tutelage will eventually lead to democratic elections.[7]

This is the context within which we have written this text. While some important changes have occurred, the current configuration of decisions being made by the Trump administration and the Delcy Rodríguez government–with an opposition that has been marginalized and most other stakeholders in suspense–does not seem promising for

[6] David Smilde, "Trump usará Venezuela tres años más, pero solo en su propio beneficio," *La Silla Vacía*, March 5, 2026, https://www.lasillavacia.com/red-de-expertos/red-de-venezuela/trump-redefinira-su-tutela-sobre-venezuela-tras-2026/.
7 Kanishka Singh and Ismail Shakil, "Rubio Says Venezuela Will Ultimately Need Transition Phase, Free Elections," *Reuters*, March 31, 2026, https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/rubio-says-venezuela-will-ultimately-need-transition-phase-free-elections-2026-04-01/.

democratization. What we have seen so far suggests that we are transitioning to a new stage of electoral authoritarianism.[8]

We seek to expand current thinking regarding what needs to happen for Venezuela to return to democracy. The classic "transitology" literature focused attention on the agency of political elites negotiating and reaching agreements that lead to procedural minimum for competitive elections. This focus had considerable virtue as it pushed aside mid-20th-century perspectives that focused on supposed cultural, social and economic pre-conditions for democracy which, in turn, were often used to justify authoritarianism.[9] However, in recent years, scholarship and experience have shown how much more complicated transitions are. In many cases, countries that transition away from authoritarianism and hold elections actually enter not into democratic consolidation but a gray zone of semi-democratic existence–for example "feckless democracies" that fail to provide meaningful forms or representation; or "dominant-power regimes" in which one political group ends up controlling the state despite apparently open electoral institutions. Other democratic transitions just fall back into new forms of authoritarianism–for example, of the six "Arab Spring" countries that saw transitions from or serious challenges to authoritarianism starting in 2011, only one now has a semblance of democracy.[10] It has become clear that: transitioning from authoritarianism does not necessarily lead to a breakthrough to well-functioning democracy; that elections are important but can be limited in their impact; and that underlying political, economic, social and institutional configurations actually do matter.[11] The upshot is that our focus should not so much be on elite negotiations and the electoral event by themselves, but on the extent and character of democratization

[8] Orlando J. Pérez, "Venezuela Is Consolidating Its Hybrid Regime—With Washington's Blessing," *World Politics Review*, April 27, 2026.
[9] Gerardo L. Munck, "Democratic Transitions in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Politics* 26, no. 3 (April 1994): 355–75.
[10] Asef Bayat, *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).
[11] Thomas Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 1 (January 2002): 5–21.

as well as its ongoing development, including the observation and analysis of persisting practices of authoritarian governance.

We are not putting forward preconditions for elections—we think robust political negotiations to setting the stage for elections should begin immediately. But we do think that moving to a sustainable and desirable democratic regime will require progress on multiple fronts that can make democratization processes and institutional consolidation in different spaces of governance and politics, mutually reinforcing. In the days after the July 28, 2024, presidential election, the world was able to witness the fact that elections by themselves do not make for democracy. In that instance, the government's willingness and ability to engage in electoral fraud, the lack of high-level negotiation and agreements prior to the presidential election, as well as a regime-controlled electoral authority and high court, ensured that elections would not be honored, and Venezuela would become even more repressive than before.

In this report we look at multiple issues that need to be addressed to maximize the possibilities for Venezuela to develop and sustain a healthy democracy in which people have the social and economic well-being to be informed, active citizens, with options for political leadership that actually represent their interests and whom they can hold accountable, and live in a context of security and justice.[12]

The decisions made in and about Venezuela in the coming months and years will likely shape the direction of its development for decades to come. Here we provide recommendations regarding the major challenges that must be met in order to channel

[12] The report builds on previous efforts such as Armin von Bogdandy, Clara Sandoval, Mariela Morales Antoniazzi, and Eduardo Trujillo Ariza, eds., *Caminos y estándares para la transición en Venezuela* (Valencia: Tirant lo Blanch, 2024); Michael A. Penfold, *Democratization in Venezuela: Thoughts on a New Path* (Washington, DC: Wilson Center, Latin America Program, 2021), https://diplomacy21-adelphi.wilsoncenter.org/publication/democratization-venezuela-thoughts-new-path; Abraham F. Lowenthal, *Venezuela in 2023 and Beyond: Charting a New Course* (Washington, DC: Wilson Center, Latin America Program, January 2023), https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/venezuela-2023-and-beyond-charting-new-course. Benigno Alarcón Deza, *El nuevo desafío venezolano* (Caracas: Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, ABediciones, 2023), https://cepyg.ucab.edu.ve/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/WEB-EL-NUEVO-DESAFIO-VENEZOLANO.pdf.

Venezuela's current political transition into a democratic transition. Our guiding assumption is that a transition to democracy consists of more than economic stabilization and elections. It requires a much broader process of economic, social, and political transformation. We aim to contribute to the discussion by bringing to bear some of the leading ideas on democratization to Venezuela's current political process. Without a clear plan for a democratic transition, or pressure from other stakeholders, the Trump administration and the interim government of Delcy Rodríguez could well fall into an ongoing tutelary relationship between a superpower and a friendly but authoritarian petrostate.

While many of the standard issues of democratic transitions apply to the current context, Venezuela also presents some unique characteristics and challenges. As mentioned above, while scholars argue that leverage for returns to democracy come from thick relationships with Western powers, Venezuela's tutelary relationship is now with a Trump administration which has vigorously turned the U.S. towards nationalist-realist goals. In the process it has largely marginalized from this transition another source of leverage– the political opposition and diaspora.[13] In addition, as a petrostate, Venezuela draws disproportionate interest from other world powers, potentially providing linkage and leverage. But this interest is oriented towards a resource that satisfies global market demands, and its supply does not require democracy. Finally, Venezuela's years of economic and institutional erosion, and a maze of import duties, price controls, and economic sanctions, have led to a broad development of illicit economies.[14] Many of these have penetrated the state and shaped its operation and performance. While the threats from criminal organizations were wildly exaggerated in 2025, they are now scarcely mentioned. Yet there is a reality of multiple and competing armed actors involved in illicit networks and markets, trading not just in drugs but food,

[13] Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way. *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010).
[14] Bull, Benedicte, and Antulio Rosales. "Into the Shadows: Sanctions, Rentierism, and Economic Informalization in Venezuela." *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies / Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y Del Caribe*, no. 109, 2020, pp. 107–33. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26936905. Accessed 14 May 2026.

gold and other minerals, human trafficking, and extortion. These actors have a significant entrée to the state and armed forces, and they will seek to prevent that from changing.

The authors of this report are an international group of Venezuela scholars specializing in the analysis of social, economic, and political processes, with a focus on explaining causal dynamics, evaluating institutional performance, and informing evidence-based policy design. While we have differing political positions, we share a broad normative framework that emphasizes state sovereignty, pluralist democracy, rule of law and a full set of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. We are writing this report to provide recommendations for *democratizers*, in other words, those stakeholders and actors who seek a return to pluralist democracy in Venezuela. What is more, we know there are democratizers on all sides of the current political configuration. Our goal here is to provide inputs that can generate discussion and provide ideas that strengthen the hand of actors pursuing substantive democratization. This broad normative framework leaves room for variation in public policy. None of the twenty-one authors of this report agree with every detail. However, we do agree with its general orientation and main points.

A couple of comments on what we are *not* doing are also appropriate. First, scholarship on politics often navigates the line between the normative and the descriptive, leading to confusion and positions that talk past each other. We see this text as a contribution to normative description of what needs to happen for a robust return to democracy. We are not arguing that these are the things that will happen but rather the reforms we believe should happen–a stance one leading transitions scholar called "thoughtful wishing."[15] Second, we do not see this report as a definitive roadmap. We see ourselves providing something closer to a topography of the Venezuelan conflict, highlighting the geographical features whose understanding is essential for those political actors

[15] Abraham F. Lowenthal, foreword to *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies*, by Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

constructing a roadmap. At the end we do provide some insights on sequencing and potential dilemmas. However, we understand that political change tends to be disorderly and non-linear and the result of battles over interests and power. We aim to contribute to a robust discussion of the changes and reforms that are needed to develop stable and inclusive democratic governance in Venezuela. This report also cannot be taken as definitive insofar as there are a number of important topics we were not able to include. Higher education, the health system, justice reform and the role of the Venezuelan diaspora could have merited individual chapters, for example, but we were unable to dedicate necessary attention to them.

Begun in the weeks after January 3, we are publishing this report as a working paper while still developing it, precisely because we think the need for debate is urgent. We seek to expand the discussion by examining a broad selection of issues. We seek to expand the universe of interlocutors engaging Venezuela's current political process, with scholarship on events as they unfold, rather than years afterwards as is more typically the case in academic writing and publishing. This is an exercise in publicly-engaged scholarship that seeks to contribute to Venezuela's transition and the likelihood it becomes democratic.

II. Summary of Recommendations

The return to democracy in Venezuela will require more than just elections, as became evident through the July 2024 electoral fraud. A broad set of transformations need to happen for the country to return to a stable democracy, including sustainable economic growth and well-being, institutional rules of the game that direct political contestation in constructive ways, political parties that engage and represent the population, non-partisan forms of participation in which citizens can innovate and hold the state accountable, and a robust and independent media context. All of this, in turn, will require a peaceful context in which the military remains in its barracks to protect the nation, civilian police forces control crime and criminal actors, and processes of transitional justice and judicial reform heal wounds and provide security and confidence in the future. Finally, to be a self-determining nation, Venezuela will need to carve out a space for itself in international relations that allows it to regain its sovereignty and autonomy. More concretely, in the text below, we recommend the following.

Sustainable economic recovery will require more than just foreign investment. Venezuela will need to reach durable agreements among its political elites including a relative consensus around a national project. These agreements must be as inclusive as possible, with stakeholders ranging from the current regime to the diversity of opposition actors. Some basic agreements will be necessary, such as a commitment to upholding the rule of law, commitment to long-term investment in human capital and infrastructure, the provision of social protection, and the securing of property rights and macroeconomic stability. Equitable and sustained economic growth is thus possible if democracy and a pluralist political framework are fostered.

Equitable growth will require economic development that promotes the strengthening of the capacities of the Venezuelan population. Any increase in state fiscal revenues should be subject to accountability and transparency mechanisms that ensure investment in high-quality public services for the population, and the implementation of policies through which the state facilitates everyday life. This includes restoring the real value of wages, recovering people's economic capacities and autonomy, and restructuring the social security system. It is also necessary to guarantee households' ability to access food and health services, including the national vaccination system and access to sexual and reproductive health services aimed at reducing high rates of infant and maternal mortality. It is also urgent to invest in basic public services that improve living conditions and facilitate participation in the labor market and access to credit.

More than any other country in the region, Venezuela's politics are strongly framed by the United States' aspiration to be preeminent in the region. To strengthen–some would say regain–its sovereignty, Venezuela needs to **carve out a position in international relations** that will broaden its allies, reducing its dependency on any one. In the short term the Delcy Rodriguez government will most likely follow the dictates of the Trump administration regarding actions and allies. But the Trump administration has left the opposition off balance regarding who else they can and should engage. Both sides would do well to engage more broadly to de-risk themselves from exclusive reliance on a U.S. government that could well lose interest in the coming months and years. Democratic "middle powers" in Europe and the region could see Venezuela as an opportunity to strengthen the recovery and reconfiguration of the rules-based order, and global democracies.

The **Democratic rules of the game** need to be reconfigured to confront two interdependent structural challenges. First, excessive concentration of power in the executive branch has undermined the autonomy and effectiveness of other state institutions. Second, the electoral arena is characterized by a persistent and systematic advantage for the incumbent, which distorts political competition and limits meaningful alternation in power. These dynamics are mutually reinforcing and must be addressed

simultaneously. At its core, the challenge is not only institutional but also relational. Democratic reconstruction requires the reestablishment of equilibrium in the formal regulations governing access to, distribution of, and exercise of political power, alongside the reconfiguration of interactions among political actors within those regulations. To meet these challenges, there needs to be a rebalance of power between the presidency and the legislature, reestablishment of public financing for parties, judicial autonomy and a commitment to uphold the rule of law, reform of the electoral branch, and reconstruction of the citizen's branch. A sustainable transition also depends on the establishment of shared expectations, credible commitments, and enforcement mechanisms that shape how actors behave within and beyond formal institutions.

As a political force, **chavismo needs to be reconstructed** from its default self-definition as a majoritarian movement, synonymous with "the people" to one political movement among others, competing for power. It needs to adapt to an institutional environment capable of accommodating those factions, collectives, and leaders within the movement that display a stronger democratic and pluralist orientation. To move chavismo away from its current monopoly of state power and authoritarian practices, Venezuela needs the institutional changes described above. These will allow for political alternation, depersonalized rules, and citizen participation as a tool of democratic social oversight and territorial governance. They also need an internal democratization as years of being in power has created stakeholders preventing change.

The **opposition coalition also needs reform** as it remains fragmented. The opposition sector led by María Corina Machado maintains a maximalist view in which a transition would have little space not only for Chavismo but for opposition actors with differing strategic preferences. Another sector, inside the country, has long favored a negotiated solution with those currently in power and has a vocation for building bridges, and they have brokered some small institutional changes in the past. But it has little political support among the population who either see them as collaborators or question their ability to bring about change. To date, the Machado-led opposition has not managed to develop a vision of how it might form part of the plan the Trump administration has,

beyond waiting in the wings and participating in a possible election. The opposition needs to develop institutional methods for aggregating and sorting diverse preferences, as well as for resolve internal conflict. The current reliance on social media unnecessarily deepens divisions.

Citizen participation has been essential to counteracting the process of democratic erosion in the past twenty-five years, and it needs to be liberated to fulfill its role in pushing innovation and channeling democratic accountability. Venezuela's non-governmental organizations have the same problems of representativity and accountability that NGOs everywhere do. However, they serve a vital function, and repressive laws having to do with their funding and freedom of movement and speech need to be eliminated. Reports that the pro-government popular organizations that were organized over by Chavismo have disappeared are exaggerated. Many are still active and influential. They have seen their autonomy restricted and need legal reforms to strengthen their independence. There is a place for both traditional civil society and movements that were organized by the government in power. Institutional and legal changes are necessary to help this sector thrive and facilitate change.

Over the past two decades, Venezuela has seen the closure of private media outlets, systematic censorship, persecution of journalists and critical citizens, and state journalism with a propagandistic orientation. This situation has diminished the media's role in democratic discussion. We propose a **reconfiguration of the communications landscape** in three phases. First, there needs to be a full liberation of jailed journalists, a pluralistic opening of state media, the unblocking of independent websites and channels, and the effective guarantee of the right to inform. Second, there needs to be a repeal of gag laws, recognition of victims, the resizing of state media, and the reconstruction of the National Telecommunications Council (CONATEL). Third, there needs to be legal reform allowing the establishment of independent public radio and television service, improved internet access, and progress toward digital television.

Rebuilding civil-military relations is a necessary and complex task. In the short term, the challenge is to keep the coercive apparatus intact enough to govern while reducing the risk of coups and fragmentation. Given the post-January 3, 2026 context, with an interim presidency managing relationships with security-faction leaders who still control significant coercive assets, the priority is to manage the existing coalition rather than remake the military overnight. Once the immediate risks of fragmentation and coups have been managed, the reform agenda shifts to restructuring. This phase addresses three interconnected problems: political disengagement, economic divestiture, and the reform of the coercive apparatus itself. The long-term goal is to lock in democratic civilian control so that it survives changes of government. This requires constitutional entrenchment of civilian supremacy, parliamentary oversight of defense budgets and senior promotions, and limitation of military jurisdiction to military offenses, with civilian courts handling abuses against civilians.

Reforming State Security Forces will be key to providing the security necessary for a return to democracy. Police and other security forces have become semi-autonomous forces controlling territories and markets. We argue that many elements of the 2008 security reform that were abandoned by Maduro from 2014 on could be recovered, while the use of militarized policing practices needs to be abandoned completely. Demands for “tough on crime” policies could be reduced by **addressing the violence of non-state actors**. This will require professionalizing the police and corrections, and implementing some of the anti-violence strategies that have worked in other countries. Strategies for reincorporation of former members of illicit armed groups also need to be developed.

Research on durable transitions shows that **processes of transitional justice** and in particular truth commissions are essential for creating the accountability and reconciliation needed for lasting reform. Some of these processes can start immediately, for example the search for justice for victims. This can actually generate processes of judicial reform that help depoliticize and professionalize the judiciary, in order to anchor and help develop a democratic transition. These efforts need to be

anchored in a rebuilding of judicial autonomy and the professional capacity of the justice system. Just as important as the search for justice will be the creation of an independent and professional truth commission that can research and recount the experiences of victims and the officials and institutions that victimized them. A regime of reparations will need to be created to help victims recover. As well, reforms to prevent recurrence need to be put in place. Finally, memorialization can help create new narratives of reconciliation that can serve as a foundation for a new stage of coexistence.

Our goal with this report is to broaden the discussion of what is needed for a sustainable democratic transition. However, we understand that democratizers have limited bandwidth and finite resources; they need to prioritize what they work on. What is more, some changes build upon or require previous reforms. In a last section we provide **recommendations for sequencing** that aims to take on the urgent but logistically easiest changes first, and works towards more significant institutional changes and those that might generate the greatest pushback from “veto players.”

III. Necessary Background

In this section we are going to lay out some of the background information that is necessary for understanding the three main sociopolitical actors in the current context: the Trump administration, the Decly Rodríguez government, and the different blocs of the Venezuelan opposition; as well as the history of international efforts at mediation and peacemaking in Venezuela. The goal here is not to give a comprehensive history of this period–that can be found elsewhere–but rather information that can serve as a primer and background for the rest of the text. Readers who already have a solid base in Venezuela's recent history can safely skip over this section and start reading the substantive chapters that follow.

Trump administration

The U.S. has had varying degrees of conflict with Venezuela during twenty-seven years of Chavismo, using a variety of diplomatic and more aggressive strategies. However, this conflict has taken center stage during the two administrations of Donald Trump.[16] During the first six months of the first Trump administration, Trump largely ignored Venezuela, leaving it to the State Department which followed a diplomatic path of not substantially intervening and letting other countries in the region lead engagements. However, in the month after the Maduro government held a vote to elect members of a constituent assembly in July 2017, the Trump administration took a decidedly harder line–first suggesting the U.S. had a "military option," then instituting financial sanctions preventing Venezuela from taking on new debt or renegotiating existing debt. In 2018 the Trump administration's foreign policy went in a neoconservative direction with the

[16] This section builds off of David Smilde, "Trump and Venezuela: Reaffirming the Monroe Doctrine," in *The Future of U.S. Empire in the Americas: The Trump Administration and Beyond*, ed. Timothy Gill (London: Routledge, 2020); and David Smilde and Isabel Rowan Scarpino, "U.S. Foreign Policy, the Opposition, and the Maduro Government: Venezuela's Authoritarian Slide in Ten Episodes," in *Authoritarian Consolidation in Times of Crisis: Venezuela under Nicolás Maduro*, ed. John Polga-Hecimovich and Raúl Sánchez Urribarí (London: Routledge, 2025).

naming of Mike Pompeo as the new Secretary of State and John Bolton as the National Security Director. In January 2019 in close collaboration with the Trump administration, the Venezuelan opposition refused to recognize Nicolás Maduro's second term as president due to the flawed nature of the May 2018 elections, and put forward President of the National Assembly Juan Guaidó as the interim president. The U.S. quickly followed by recognizing him, as did 50 plus other nations. More importantly, they levied sanctions on Venezuelan oil.

By May 2019 an effort at negotiation had emerged, facilitated by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and supported by an ad hoc group of European and Latin American countries called the International Contact Group. These negotiations fell apart by September of 2019 in large part because U.S. National Security advisor John Bolton announced secondary sanctions just before a key meeting leading the Maduro government team to cancel their participation in an August meeting. The opposition in turn cancelled theirs in September, in part because they aimed to invoke the "Rio Treaty" that they thought might lead to regional intervention. This stalemate continued through the end of the Trump administration and into the Biden administration as the latter opted to continue its support of Juan Guaidó as interim president. In 2023 the Biden administration shifted gears and supported negotiations hosted by Barbados and Mexico and facilitated by Norway that led to a pair of agreements that would provide sanctions relief in exchange for fair presidential elections. Of course the Venezuelan opposition led by María Corina Machado stormed to a landslide victory on July 28/ 2024, which was denied by the Maduro government. The Biden administration responded with sharp criticism but little action, basically doubling the reward for Nicolas Maduro to $50 million.

In contrast, candidate Donald Trump put Venezuela at the center of his campaign from August on, but concentrating not on the political conflict so much as Venezuelan migrants. Trump began to repeat false claims that Nicolás Maduro had emptied out prisons to send migrants to the United States, and focused on the criminal gang Tren de Aragua as a grave criminal threat to the United States. When Trump was elected, it

understandably raised anticipation among many that there would be a return to a maximum pressure campaign. Nevertheless, in the first six months all of the focus was on Venezuelan migrants as Trump used the Alien Enemies Act to send 238 Venezuelans to the Center for Terrorist Confinement in El Salvador. By August, however, the Trump administration began its military build-up off of the coast, suggesting it was aimed at drug-trafficking. However, given the administration's rhetoric that Nicolás Maduro was the head of the "Cartel of the Suns," which the administration claimed was a narco-terrorist group seeking to flood the United States with drugs, it was clear that this was simultaneously about regime change in Venezuela. These bombings continued through the end of 2026 with 36 boats bombed killing 123 people. However, in early December a new rationale for U.S. intervention emerged with President Trump saying that the U.S. was going to start blockading Venezuelan oil shipments since the oil and oil industry actually "belonged" to the United States. This pivot happened shortly after the Trump administration released its National Security Strategy (NSS) which would exercise preeminence in the Western Hemisphere. The NSS positively affirmed the "Monroe Doctrine" as saying the U.S. would not allow competitors to control strategically vital assets in the hemisphere. And it added the "Trump Corollary" essentially saying that it would focus on curbing mass migration, drug trafficking and hostile foreign ownership of key assets.

In the hours following the January 3 military intervention, instead of installing Venezuela's opposition leader María Corina Machado, Trump announced they would be working with Maduro's Vice President Delcy Rodríguez, suggesting that Machado did not have the support or respect within the country to effectively rule. He said that the United States would be "running" the country under the threat of a second military operation. U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio suggested they had in mind three stages: stabilization, recovery and transition.[17] However, the length of these stages has

[17] **U.S. Department of State**, "Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Secretary of War Pete Hegseth Remarks to the Press," Office of the Spokesperson, Washington, DC, January 7, 2026, https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2026/01/secretary-of-state-marco-rubio-and-secretary-of-war-pete-hegseth-remarks-to-the-press.

never been specified, most particularly when there might be elections. The Trump administration dedicated significant attention to economic stabilization and recovery. But it has paid much less attention to the democratic opening. There have been some achievements, such as the passing of a new Amnesty Law, and some tepid loosening of controls over the media. But progress has been slow and few significant reforms are currently being discussed. María Corina Machado's overtures to Trump and attempts to be a key player in the transition have largely been rebuffed, and the Trump administration has urged her to delay her return. What is more, Machado was not invited to the State of Union Address in February and instead Trump gave a shout out to Enrique Marquez, a long time moderate politician. Furthermore, there is concern that a Trump administration which considers the Venezuela intervention a success, will have little interest in spending its political capital on changing course.

Delcy Rodríguez government

Much of the attention given to the Delcy Rodríguez government in the months since the U.S. military operation has been about change from the Maduro period, including an economic opening and small steps towards political liberalization. However, it is also important to understand how her government fits into the trajectory and internal tensions of Chavismo. The latter emerged as a political project marked by a foundational multivalence, encompassing not only tensions between representative democracy and participatory sovereignty, but also strands of political culture oriented toward centralized authority, militarized imaginaries of redemption, and a conflict-driven populist rupture.

We can think of the history of Chavismo as a governing project, in three parts: participatory populism, Twenty-first Century Socialism, and the slide into authoritarianism and crisis.[18] From his emergence as a viable presidential candidate in 1998, Hugo Chávez was a populist, meaning he used a mobilizing discourse identifying

[18] David Smilde, *"From Populist to Socialist to Authoritarian Chavismo: Obstacles and Opportunities for Democratic Change,"* Latin America Program, Wilson Center, September 27, 2021, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/populist-socialist-authoritarian-chavismo-obstacles-and-opportunities-democratic-change.

himself as the embodiment of the good found in an authentic “people,” and leading a fight against an evil, conspiring elite. Populist movements and governments aim at systematic change and deemphasize pluralism and liberal democratic institutions. From the time of his release from jail in 1994, two years after his failed military uprising, Hugo Chávez mobilized his followers using a discourse that portrayed himself as the representative of “el pueblo,” and railed against what he portrayed as a neoliberal, technocratic political elite that dominated Venezuelan politics, in pursuit of its own interests. The complement to this was the idea of participatory democracy in which “el pueblo” would be incorporated into the functioning of the democratic state. This openly presented as a contrast to "liberal democracy” which in this context meant the relatively restricted democracy Venezuela had up until that moment.[19]

The 1999 rewrite of the Venezuelan constitution preserved representative institutions at the same time that it concentrated power in the executive and created numerous participatory institutions. This would be followed with even more efforts including the effort to fund cooperatives to carry out government-sponsored work and then communal councils that sought to spur local participation among neighbors who would propose and carry out local public works projects with government funding, as well as be local organs of social accountability. However, one result of the extended conflict Venezuela experienced from 2002-2004 was an increasing desire by President Chávez to exercise greater control of citizen and political participation to ensure it complemented his political project rather than opposing it.[20]

When he was reelected in 2006 by a substantial margin he quickly announced a “transition to socialism” that sought to reorganize the state into a corporatist model centered on the executive branch. The guiding framework was referred to as “21st Century Socialism,” a never fully worked out vision of state and society that would seek

[19] Margarita López Maya, Democracia participativa en Venezuela (1999-2010). Orígenes, leyes, percepciones y desafíos, serie Temas de Formación Sociopolítica, no. 50 (Centro Gumilla, citado como 2011).
[20] David Smilde, “Four Stages in the Chávez Government’s Approach to Participation” (Wilson Center, PDF), accessed April 25, 2026, Wilson Center PDF.

to expand the state's role in the economy as well as the "social economy." It also sought to centralize participatory instruments using the idea of "communes." While for some in the Chavista movement and government 21st Century Socialism meant a hard turn to the left and search for a different kind of democracy, for much of the population "socialism" simply meant a government that used Venezuela's oil resources for the people's benefit and sought to include them in its activities. This project maintained significant popularity through Chávez's reelection in 2012.

Hugo Chávez would die from cancer six months after his reelection, but not before designating Nicolás Maduro as his successor. It was the turn towards socialism that increased the fortunes of Maduro within Chávez's circle, given his history of leftist organizing and having been trained in Cuba. Chávez left Maduro with the impossible task of running a country with significant economic distortions—including an overvalued currency, growing inflation and scarcities, declining oil production, and growing debt—while leading a political coalition Chávez had made in his own image—all without Chávez's charisma. It would soon become clear that under Maduro, chavismo's unique combination of a leftist revolutionary project, vibrant capitalistic private sector, and broadly democratic elections would not last.[21] In December 2015, in large part because of discontent about the economy, Venezuela's opposition coalition would win the National Assembly elections in a landslide. Facing the possibility of a 2/3rds majority that could have impeached Maduro and then a sustained effort at a recall referendum in 2016, the Maduro government openly manipulated institutions to prevent that from happening. In 2017 they confronted a sustained protest drive by calling for the election of a constituent assembly, without following the constitutional requirement for a referendum to do so. This election resulted in the installation of a Constituent Assembly that acted as a government-controlled body sitting above the other branches of power.

[21] David Smilde, "The End of Chavismo?" *Current History: A Journal of Contemporary World Affairs* 114, no.769 (February 2015).

This period marked Venezuela's move from electoral authoritarianism, in which there is still significant electoral competition despite the government using state institutions to tilt the playing field, to hegemonic authoritarianism in which the government exercises much more far reaching control in marginalizing, harassing and repressing its political opposition. In this period it went to negotiations several times, usually as a dilatory strategy to relieve pressure from protest and conflict on the streets. It also continued to go to elections having found the recipe to do so and win, despite low popularity. While the early Strategy eighteen years of Chavismo had been to strengthen electoral institutions as much as possible, assuming they would always be a majority, after losing by a landslide in 2015 they changed strategies. By obnoxiously violating electoral laws, Chavismo could split the opposition between those who promoted electoral participation no matter what, and those who promoted abstention. Opposition abstention allowed an unpopular Chavismo to win the elections at every level from 2017 to 2021.

In 2023 Chavismo would negotiate with the opposition and the United States to hold free and fair presidential elections the following year. They of course violated many of the agreements but broadly continued on the electoral path, hoping they could get the opposition to boycott or a significant part of the opposition to abstain, win the election and get sanctions relief and increased international recognition. This strategy was largely led by the Rodríguez siblings, Jorge and Delcy, but was not favored by other hardliners such as Diosdado Cabello, who saw significant danger in a transition. When the opposition stayed on the electoral path and won in a landslide, Chavismo was caught flat-footed and carried out an electoral fraud that convinced virtually no one. For many within Chavismo, the prospect of a María Corina Machado government would be an unacceptable risk and they were able to largely stick together with few defections.

Still within Chavismo at this point are tensions between what can be seen as the modernizers led by the Rodriguez siblings, and hardliners such as Diosdado Cabello. Calling the Rodriguez siblings "moderates" is not quite right as they were integral parts of the Maduro government's repressive apparatus and have largely kept it intact. But they are more comfortable with an open economy and relatively more open spaces for

civil society and the political opposition. However, as happened throughout the Maduro government, these tensions have been kept in check by the main players' recognition that their survival requires their unity.

Venezuelan opposition

The Machado bloc within the Venezuelan opposition to Chavismo finds itself in the bizarre situation of having campaigned for foreign intervention to remove Nicolás Maduro, having achieved it, but being entirely marginalized from power. Indeed the biggest surprise on the morning of January 3 was not the U.S. military intervention of Venezuela, nor the capture of Nicolás Maduro, but Donald Trump's announcement that the U.S. would be working with Vice President Delcy Rodriguez instead of María Corina Machado. Journalistic reports and Trump's own statements, have suggested they thought it would be too difficult to impose Machado on existing institutions controlled by Chavismo and apparently were frustrated by the vagueness of her plans and her resistance to collaborating with other segments of the opposition.[22]

The current dilemmas of the Venezuelan opposition are the product of a long history of oscillating between maximalist and moderate strategies.[23] Maximalists have supported insurrectional strategies–some of them constitutional, some of them not–to get Chavismo out of power quickly. The logic has been to remove an illegitimate government before it can do further damage and the tools have been protest drives demanding the president's resignation, recall referenda, coups and efforts to generate foreign intervention either through diplomatic pressure, sanctions or military action. Moderates have aimed at participating in elections and other elements of the

[22] Anatoly Kurmanaev, "Why Trump Refused to Back Venezuela's Machado: Fears of Chaos, and Fraying Ties," *New York Times*, January 5, 2026, https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/05/us/venezuela-machado-trump.html.

[23] Laura Gamboa, *Resisting Backsliding: Opposition Strategies against the Erosion of Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2022); Maryhen Jiménez, "Contesting Autocracy: Repression and Opposition Coordination in Venezuela," *Political Studies* 71, no. 1 (2023): 47–68, https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321721999975; Capriles, C. 2017. The Venezuelan Opposition: An Anatomy. Paper read at the conference *Venezuela at a Crossroads: An Academic Perspective*, held on March, 5th 2017 by the Venezuelan Students Association of Stanford University and Professor Larry Diamond from the Center for Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law (CDDRL).

government process (such as nominations committees), even when conditions are unfair, arguing that giving up spaces of governance and boycotting the political process only facilitates authoritarian consolidation, while negotiating agreements and building upon them could lead to liberalization and democratic opening.

The first maximalist cycle, between 2001 and 2004, led by the Democratic Coordinator, aimed to overthrow Chávez by mobilizing heterogeneous civil actors, without granting a relevant role to the political parties that still survived.[24] After its failure, an institutional cycle for the opposition opened between 2006 and 2015, reaching a consensus around a strategy of electoral participation as the preferred method for political change. The Democratic Unity Roundtable (Mesa de la Unidad Democrática) managed to generate internal decision-making rules for the distribution of candidacies and spaces of influence for the different political forces.

This cycle achieved very important electoral successes, from the defeat of the constitutional reform proposed by Chávez (2007) to the unexpected supermajority in the 2015 legislative elections. It also experienced failures that revealed the progressive deterioration of electoral conditions and of the opposition's capacity to counteract them (the 2013–2014 electoral cycle), opening the door to an internal contradiction between the strategy of extra-institutional pressure and the institutional path. Anticipating that the 2015 elections would not be capable of displacing chavismo from power, part of the opposition leadership, including María Corina Machado, Leopoldo López and Antonio Ledezma took to the streets in February 2014, in a movement called *La Salida* (which in Venezuelan Spanish translates to both "the exit" and "the solution").

The failure of the insurrectionary tactic in 2014, which facilitated internal cohesion within the Maduro government and the formation of a new threshold of repressive capacities, led to a reassessment of the opportunity for victory in the 2015 legislative elections. The hyper-majoritarian electoral system worked in favor of the opposition: with 56% of the

[24] Draege, Jonas B., & Maryhen Jiménez, "Divided Opposition: Resource Asymmetry, Elections, and Protests in Electoral Autocracies", *Political Studies* (2025).

vote it obtained 66% of the seats–a qualified two-thirds majority of deputies that made it possible to activate constitutional mechanisms to shorten the presidential term, such as a recall referendum, to propose constitutional reforms, and to intervene in the rest of the public branches of government.

The Maduro government quickly gathered itself to prevent the opposition from actually seating its 2/3rds majority. It also proceeded to block all of its legislative initiatives, counting with the support of the government-controlled Supreme Tribunal.[25] During 2016 the opposition pushed forward with an effort at a recall referendum with government authorities putting a kafkaesque series of obstacles in the way. In October when it looked like the opposition had enough signatures to trigger the referendum, regional courts controlled by the Maduro administration stopped the process entirely. As the first electoral process simply cancelled during the 18 years of Chavismo, this was a turning point. In 2017 the government tried to appropriate the National Assembly's powers completely via the Supreme Tribunal, then repressed the protest movement that emerged. The opposition boycotted the government's effort to elect a Constituent Assembly, then went to governors and local elections later that and presidential elections in 2018 divided over whether to participate. This led to significant abstention and government victories and consolidation of power.

In 2019, the president of the National Assembly proclaimed an "interim government" led by National Assembly president Juan Guaidó, based on the absence of a legitimate president. This received the explicit support of the U.S. government and recognition from more than 50 countries. However, without control of major institutions in the country and largely operating abroad, they were unable to do much. Furthermore, US sanctions further complicated Venezuela's economy with the result that a mass exodus ensued, including many opposition activists and supporters.

[25] "Authoritarian Judicial Activism: A Look at the Venezuelan Case Under Chavismo". In Judicial Activism and Restraint in Comparative Perspective. Edited by Lori Hausegger and Raul Sanchez Urribarri. 2024. Peter Lang, 187-214

This cycle dominated opposition strategy until the interim government was ended in December 2022. That gave more space for the negotiation process and in 2023 a series of agreements were made that would lead to the 2024 elections. In 2024 there was a configuration that provided unity to the opposition movement. María Corina Machado, who had led electoral boycotts based on distrust towards the automated electoral system or promoted abstention in previous elections such as in the 2005 legislative elections and later in the regional elections of 2017 (prompting Vente Venezuela's exit from the Mesa de la Unidad Democrática),[26] fully embraced the electoral process. At the same time, she continued with a maximalist message regarding Chavismo and what a future government would look like.

In the current context, despite being repeatedly marginalized by the Trump administration, the Machado-led opposition has stayed the course with a non-conciliatory message both with Chavismo and other actors within the opposition who promote alternative ways of dealing with the government. Within Venezuela, there are opposition politicians in the National Assembly with a vocation for seeking a democratic transition. However, they have scarce public support and are actively stigmatized by Machado and members of her team for having different strategic preferences.

It is common for there to be infighting and rivalries within oppositions, regarding the best strategy to confront authoritarian governments.[27] In the Venezuelan case, the destruction of the media environment has pushed political discussion onto social media, with the usual results. Influencers, many of them supported by competing political factions, thrive on salacious messaging and personal attacks. As a result core political issues–many of which have a long, documented history in other contexts and which

[26] BBC Mundo (2017). La opositora María Corina Machado anuncia que su movimiento Vente Venezuela se separa de la MUD. https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-40895671

[27] Ora John Reuter and David Szakonyi (contextualized via coordination literature), see also Ludger Helms, "Political Oppositions in Democratic and Authoritarian Regimes: A State-of-the-Field(s) Review," *Government and Opposition* 58, no. 2 (2023): 391–414, https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2022.25,Maryhen Jiménez, "Contesting Autocracy: Repression and Opposition Coordination in Venezuela," *Political Studies* 71, no. 1 (2023): 47–68.

merit debate–do not get discussed, leading to continual flow of strategic errors and missed opportunities.

International peacemaking efforts

Over more than twenty years there have been efforts at mediation and diplomatic engagement by international stakeholders. The first started after the 2002 coup that removed Hugo Chávez for 48 hours. At that point the Organization of American States along with the Carter Center began a mediation effort that would last close to two years.[28] The goal of this effort was to channel the conflict into a constitutional, electoral mechanism instead of the zero-sum battle that had been taking place. This mediation effort would last two years, including multiple stages of the process for collecting and verifying the signature necessary to call the referendum, and which culminated in the 2004 recall referendum that Hugo Chávez won handily. Critics would argue that the Chávez government had used the negotiation process to delay the referendum for two years until they had a more favorable context and this would significantly mark opposition views of negotiations for the next twenty years.[29]

After several months of violence during the "la salida" protest drive of 2014, the Union of Southern Nations (UNASUR) and the Vatican sponsored public, direct talks. These talks started with much fanfare and a nationally televised, six-hour first meeting. There followed an agreement to then move into three working groups. However, these talks would break down after a month with no concrete results. In May 2014, the opposition said it would not meet again until the government gave "concrete demonstration" of willingness to make progress. This was a reaction to continued government repression against student protesters as well as apparent government reneging on preliminary agreements. As well there was conflict internal to the opposition regarding participation in these negotiations and whether the leadership had asked the United States not to

[28] Jennifer L. McCoy and Francisco Diez, *International Mediation in Venezuela* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2011).
[29] Miguel Ángel Martínez Meucci, *Apaciguamiento: El referéndum revocatorio y la consolidación de la Revolución Bolivariana.* (Caracas: Editorial Alfa, 2012).

pursue sanctions. There was also a perception among the opposition that UNASUR was not a neutral mediator but favored the government.[30]

In October 2016, after regional courts invalidated the signature gathering for a recall referendum against Maduro and the CNE suspended the procedure, there were protests and calls for a massive march on the presidential palace, with a high likelihood of violence. The sides met on October 23 and then again on November 11-12 in a dialogue and negotiation in which the Vatican squarely involved its name and reputation. On November 12 a joint declaration was released which included four main points. Over the following months the process would deteriorate as the government repeatedly changed its demands, as did the Vatican negotiators. By January 2017 the Vatican representative Claudio María Celli returned to Rome in January signalling the symbolic end of the Vatican's involvement.[31] This was a more robust effort at mediation but there was a certain level of inexperience in the Vatican approach as the agreement was vague in details which effectively allowed the Maduro government to repeatedly move the goal posts on regularization of the National Assembly. The Vatican then unilaterally imposed new demands as conditions to continue its involvement, understandably irritating the Maduro government.

In December 2017, with the government announcing elections for the first half of 2018 and the opposition already announcing they would not participate, there was another effort at brokering an agreement. This time international actors played a more central role, proposing an initial agreement that served as a guide to the discussion. The talks were hosted in the Dominican Republic under president Danilo Medina, and Spain's ex-president Rodríguez Zapatero played an important role as facilitator. They started with a pre-agreement on the six points that would be discussed. In mid-December, after two rounds of talks, mediators announced there had been advances but more meetings were necessary. Dominican president Medina even mentioned that an agreement might

[30] David Smilde and Geoff Ramsey, "International Peace-Making in Venezuela's Intractable Conflict," *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies / Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe*, no. 109 (January–June 2020): 157–179,
[31] Smilde and Ramsey 2020, op cit.

be signed in January. However, these talks also deteriorated when the government took several actions regarding the elections that would muddy the waters, and the opposition refused to sign a final agreement. Compared to the two previous efforts this negotiation was distinguished by the degree of international involvement, as well as the detailed discussion of a well-developed proposal. However, the very public nature of the participation – while the sessions themselves were behind closed doors all of the participants made continual declarations before and after – created a media spectacle and did not provide a confidential space for interests to be reorganized and a common narrative to be developed.

In 2019 with Venezuela's conflict on the edge of significant violence several initiatives began. One of the most significant was the International Contact Group, which brought together countries from Latin America (Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Uruguay – in addition to Panama, which joined in September 2019) as well as a representative of the European Union and one from each of eight European Union members (France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom). The ICG was "not to be a mediator," but instead sought to build trust and create the necessary conditions for a constitutional solution to be found. This was followed by an effort by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It built upon three months of back channel, shuttle diplomacy by Norwegian diplomats and resulted in face-to-face talks that started in Oslo but subsequently moved to the Caribbean island nation of Barbados. These talks ended in September 2020. In August Nicolás Maduro's negotiators cancelled a meeting in Barbados after the United States announced it was tightening sanctions. This was followed in September by the opposition saying it would no longer participate.[32]

However, the Norwegian diplomats would continue to try to facilitate negotiation and in August 2021 were able to relaunch negotiations with a memorandum of understanding. Negotiations would start and stop over the next two years, eventually leading to the

[32] Smilde and Ramsey 2020, op cit.

October 2023 Barbados Accords providing an agreement for a path to presidential elections and relief from U.S. sanctions.[33] While several of the provisions of this agreement were not fulfilled by the Maduro government nor, arguably, by the U.S. government, this agreement did provide the framework that led to the 2024 presidential elections.

[33] International Crisis Group, “Pacto en Barbados: la ruta sinuosa de Venezuela hacia comicios competitivos,” ecoi.net, Document no. 2100858, October 20, 2023, https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2100858.html.

IV. Chapters

1. Economy: What is the best path forward for a sustainable recovery?

Challenge:

- Poor economic performance risks unmet social needs, political conflict, instability and authoritarian retrenchment. Sustainable economic recovery will require a wide and inclusive agreement among diverse actors, institutions and interests.

Priorities:

- Commit to a stable rules-based framework for attracting foreign and domestic investment.
- Enforce a transparent framework for oil sales made by the United States, with broad participation of political and civil society actors and National Assembly oversight.
- Create an independent fiscal entity responsive to parliament tasked with setting ceilings of fiscal financing.
- Manage oil-fueled recovery to avoid repeating past mistakes in use of rents and environmental destruction.
- Stabilize the macroeconomy and redesign the monetary and fiscal policy frameworks for long-term stability and resilience to external shocks
- Address social needs, invest in human capital, and reintegrate returning migrants.

Between 2012 and 2020, per capita GDP declined by 71.5% - the equivalent of more than three consecutive Great Depressions.[34] Income poverty rates tripled, undernourishment rose to more than a quarter of the population, and around one-

[34]Francisco Rodríguez, *The Collapse of Venezuela: Scorched Earth Politics and Economic Decline, 2012-2020*, Kellogg Institute Series on Democracy and Development (University of Notre Dame Press, 2025).

quarter of the population left the country. The decline in GDP is the fifth largest documented in the world since 1950, and the largest documented peacetime collapse in the Common Era. This crisis is the result of several causes, including unsustainable government policies, the mismanagement of the oil industry, and the imposition of sectoral sanctions by the United States.

Venezuela's economic crisis is also closely linked with the drastic process of autocratization in its political system.[35] Autocratization consolidated a winner-take-all political system that generated incentives for the country's political actors to target the economy in their struggle for control of the Venezuelan state. Economic policies became subordinated to a political imperative, with the pursuit of efficiency or macroeconomic sustainability taking a back seat to political expediency. Government policies of price and currency controls contributed to the proliferation of informal markets. The suppression of data collection and publication contributed to an environment of uncertainty and lack of trust.

The effects of this crisis are varied, and several of them represent roadblocks for a potential recovery. First, Venezuela's infrastructure is in frank decay, with serious problems in energy generation and distribution, old roads, fragile telecommunications and internet, and antiquated ports and airports.[36] Second, a significant portion of the country's skilled labor force migrated. The absence of skilled workers in healthcare, education and the oil industry has ripple effects for other sectors in the economy. Third, informality has become widespread as a routine form of economic management and

[35]Antulio Rosales and Maryhen Jiménez, "Venezuela: Autocratic Consolidation and Splintered Economic Liberalization", *Revista de Ciencia Política* (Santiago) 41, n.º2 (2021): 425-447 and W. Schreiner Parker, "Change in Caracas – but will it be enough to revive ailing oil industry?", Rystad Energy, January 28, 2026, https://www.rystadenergy.com/insights/change-in-caracas-but-will-it-be-enough-to-revive-ailing-oil-industry.

[36] E. Abuelafia and J. L. Saboin, A Look to the Future for Venezuela, Discussion Paper No. IDB-DP-798 (Washington, DC: Inter-American Development Bank, 2020), 12 https://publications.iadb.org/publications/english/document/A-Look-to-the-Future-for-Venezuela.pdf; José Pineda and Francisco Rodríguez, "Public Investment and Productivity Growth in the Venezuelan Manufacturing Industry", in *Venezuela: Anatomy of a Collapse*, ed. Francisco R. Rodríguez and Ricardo Hausmann (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2015).

operation, from bookkeeping to state-business relations.[37] Rules are purposefully complicated, authorities overlap and tend to apply arbitrary punishments and rewards, usually linked to political loyalty.

Oil, energy and mineral extraction

Most political actors and analysts agree that Venezuela's economic recovery needs to start with the oil industry. This has been at the center of the agenda imposed by the Trump administration in its tutelary relation with the interim government of Delcy Rodríguez.[38] While we agree that oil is a key sector to facilitate economic growth and inclusion in Venezuela, some basic issues have not been included in the current discussions. For example, there are broad considerations about a decarbonizing world economy that companies are factoring into their decision-making processes and which do not depend on the desires of political actors both in Washington and Caracas. In this case, decision-makers must come to terms with the viability of the recovery and the extent of growth that the industry can possibly achieve given the current trends in the global economy. This is particularly relevant at a moment of global realignment of trading blocs and a considerable increase in global policy-induced volatility.[39]

Existing estimates suggest that Venezuela would need to invest around $10 billion a year for a decade to achieve and sustain a recovery of oil production to pre-crisis levels.[40] The problem with this figure is not so much in its economics: the figure amounts to less than one-fifth of the annual foreign-currency earnings that the country could expect to earn if that target is achieved and is in line with the resources that the country has historically committed to oil investment prior to the post-2015 output

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[37] Omar Bello and Adriana Bermúdez, "The Incidence of Labor Market Reforms on Employment in the Venezuelan Manufacturing Sector," in Venezuela: Anatomy of a Collapse, ed. Francisco R. Rodríguez and Ricardo Hausmann (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2015).
[38] A. Kurmanaev et al., "How Trump Fixed On a Maduro Loyalist as Venezuela's New Leader," The New York Times, January 4, 2026.
[39] International Monetary Fund. World Economic Outlook, April 2026. Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, 2026. https://www.imf.org/-/media/files/publications/weo/2026/april/english/text.pdf.
[40] Adam Isacson, "Oil and the Rule of Law in Venezuela," Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), March 11, 2026, https://www.wola.org/multimedia/oil-and-the-rule-of-law-in-venezuela/. https://www.wola.org/multimedia/oil-and-the-rule-of-law-in-venezuela/.

decline. Rather, the problem with securing such investment lies in the credibility of the commitment to respect the property rights of those who are being asked to put forward the money.

In this context, the Venezuelan government swiftly pushed through a reform to the Hydrocarbons Law using its legislative super-majority.[41] This was the first major legislative change after the January 3, 2026, military intervention led by the US. The reform intends to improve conditions for private investment—allowing the state-owned oil company to contract foreign companies to take charge of production, offering a lower royalty rate for investors, and allowing contracts to be subject to international arbitration.[42] However, these changes may be subject to future contention by another administration, which could just as easily revert these contracts (much in the same way in which Chávez reverted a similar set of contracts in 2007). The changes may be tenuous in other ways if there is no broad political agreement supporting these changes. The Supreme Tribunal, for example, could in the future rule that these laws went against the constitutional provision that oil production be carried out by the Venezuelan state. Even international arbitration tribunals may be inclined to consider that contracts signed by a government facing a threat of removal by military force were entered into under duress and thus invalid.

The new system of oversight imposed by the Trump administration has been associated with a deterioration in the transparency of the already highly opaque management of oil resources. The proceeds from Venezuelan oil sales are now deposited in US-controlled accounts, and are only disbursed to the Venezuelan government upon approval of a budget proposed to US authorities. This budget is not public knowledge, nor has public information been provided regarding the amount of funds disbursed to the Venezuelan government. Nor is it clear in what sense, if any, this procedure is consistent with the constitutional requirements that budget authorizations be approved by the National

[41] Venezuela, Ley de Reforma Parcial de la Ley Orgánica de Hidrocarburos, Gaceta Oficial de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela Extraordinario No. 6.978, January 29, 2026.
[42]Marianna Párraga. "Sweeping oil reform in Venezuela approved, operators expected to gain autonomy.," Reuters, January 29, 2026.

Assembly. While there has been some improvement in the publication of basic macroeconomic data, with the central bank releasing balance of payments and national accounts series which had not been consistently updated since 2019, the country still lacks basic statistics for key topics such as poverty, fiscal accounts or public debt.

One key aspect of the reformed hydrocarbons law is that oversight and approval of contracts has been delegated exclusively to the Executive power, effectively taking away jurisdiction from the Venezuelan legislature.[43] A return to mechanisms of accountability of elected authorities to deliberative institutions and the public is imperative in an inclusive and democratic pathway to recovery. To the extent that the new arrangement is motivated by the need for external oversight, the goal should be to build sufficient domestic oversight capacity so that this function can eventually be internalized. A starting point could be an oil-for-essentials–type agreement where the use of oil proceeds is limited to spending in priority sectors and where a diversity of actors exercise oversight and functions of accountability.[44] Venezuela needs an oversight body capable not only of supervising spending of oil revenues, but also of overseeing contract allocation, in a way that would allow external actors—such as the US government—to devolve these functions to domestic institutions, namely its parliament and others such as the Comptroller General's office.

Yet also missing in these conversations is the question of how a recovery in the oil industry can avoid repeating past mistakes –both in the management of the sector itself, including environmental destruction and its human impacts, and in the broader

[43]Venezuela, Ley de Reforma Parcial de la Ley Orgánica de Hidrocarburos [Partial Reform of the Organic Hydrocarbons Law], Gaceta Oficial de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela Extraordinario No. 6.978, January 29, 2026, art. 33.

[44] See Noelia Daguinot and Michael J. Camilleri, *Exploring Humanitarian Frameworks for Venezuela* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2022) https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Exploring_humanitarian_frameworks_for_Venezuela.pdf; Francisco Rodríguez, Guillermo Guerrero, and Giancarlo Bravo, Cooperative Responses to Venezuela's Crisis (New York: Oil for Venezuela, 2023). These two works contain a discussion of how an Oil for Essentials program could be so as to avoid the risks of the corruption that characterized the Iraqi Oil for Food program. We note that the oil-for-food scandal corruption occurred through side payments associated with the discretionary allocation of oil trading contracts; this makes it paramount that oversight be conducted not only at the level of the use of oil proceeds but also at the level of generation of those proceeds.

economic management of the oil rents it generates. For example, it is key to carry out thorough environmental assessment impact studies of oil spills and infrastructure decay in the Lake Maracaibo basin and other mature camps and develop a plan of environmental reparations with community inputs for remediation, restoration, and compensation. The Lake Maracaibo basin has become a site of ecological disaster and sacrifice zone leading to massive displacement, health impacts and irreparable ecological damage that has not been properly accounted for.[45]

Reigniting Venezuela's oil industry would be insufficient to spearhead equitable economic growth if it is merely focused on re-establishing the country's old position as a primary commodity exporter without creating productive linkages domestically. There is a wealth of empirical evidence on what countries can do to avoid both the economic and institutional resource curses. Doing so requires developing an industrial policy strategy that facilitates the discovery and emergence of new sectors that offset the tendency for exchange rate appreciation to erode non-oil competitiveness. It also requires setting up a stabilization fund that ensures that fluctuations in oil revenues do not exacerbate domestic macroeconomic volatility.[46] Similarly, an influx of oil revenues could fuel corruption and institutional deterioration unless appropriate oversight over their use and rules limiting discretion in the allocation of those resources are in place.[47]

It is important to secure investments into energy infrastructure geared toward improving the reliability of the grid and satisfying productive and residential demand. This could be achieved through political agreements to channel sovereign funds from new oil revenues (see also the following chapter on "Equitable Development"). Increasing power generation and improving distribution must include a plan to de-carbonize the energy grid, increase generation through investment in new renewable projects to tap

[45] ODEVIDA and PROVEA, *Especial | ODEVIDA: La hecatombe ambiental que está generando el gobierno de Maduro en Venezuela*.(Caracas: Programa Venezolano de Educación-Acción en Derechos Humanos [PROVEA], 2025).
[46] Réka Juhász, Nathan Lane, and Dani Rodrik. "The New Economics of Industrial Policy," Annual Review of Economics 16, no. 1 (2024): 213-242.
[47]Xavier Sala-i-Martin and Arvind Subramanian, "Addressing the Natural Resource Curse: An Illustration from Nigeria," Journal of African Economies 22, no. 4 (2013): 575.

into solar, wind and biomass potential to better prepare the country for a carbon net-zero future.

The February 2026 meeting between interim authorities and the US Secretary of the Interior, Doug Burgum, focused on expanding mining activities in Venezuela's Orinoco Mining Arc to allow the US to secure strategic minerals.[48] The two governments reached an agreement that led to new licenses for US companies to invest in Venezuela's critical minerals.[49] These conversations have been rather rushed. For investments to come into the area with the idea of serving mutual interests of the Venezuelan people and foreign actors, Venezuelan state institutions must first reestablish control over mining areas (see section on armed forces and armed groups). Similar to the case of the Lake Maracaibo basin, there must be thorough environmental assessment impact reports on the damage caused by illegal, artisanal and informal mining in Bolívar, Amazonas and Delta Amacuro states, within and beyond the Orinoco Mining Arc (OMA) over the past 15 years.[50] The legal framework of environmental protection must be strengthened and indigenous collective land rights and free, prior and informed consent for approval of any mining project with proper legislative oversight and international monitoring agencies must be guaranteed.[51] No further extraction should begin without proper strategies and mechanisms of environmental reparation, oversight of labour rights of miners and adjacent activities, from gold trade, to sex work, to be in place.

Legislative oversight is fundamental for there to be public accountability of oil and mining projects. On the one hand, Venezuela's constitutional framework, as interpreted

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[48] "U.S. Secretary Burgum Meets Venezuelan Interim Officials to Discuss Strategic Minerals," *Bloomberg*, February 2026.

[49] "US issues new Venezuela-related general licenses for critical minerals, says US Treasury Department," *Reuters*, March 27, 2026. https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/us-issues-new-venezuela-related-general-licenses-critical-minerals-says-us-2026-03-27/

[50] Antulio Rosales, "Statization and Denationalization Dynamics in Venezuela's Artisanal and Small Scale-Large-Scale Mining Interface," *Resources Policy* (Kidlington) 63 (2019): 101422-, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resourpol.2019.101422.

[51] Bram Ebus and Thomas Martinelli, "Venezuela's Gold Heist: The Symbiotic Relationship between the State, Criminal Networks and Resource Extraction," Bulletin of Latin American Research 41, no. 1 (2022): 108. https://doi.org/10.1111/blar.13246.

by the Supreme Tribunal, has deprived the National Assembly of its oversight capabilities by adopting an unduly restrictive interpretation in which contracts of national public interest with foreign entities—which Article 150 of the Constitution requires be approved by the National Assembly—do not include contracts entered into by state-owned corporations.[52] This allows the government to elude constitutional oversight by having state-owned firms enter into these contracts. On the other hand, an excessively expansive application of Article 150 would also be misguided. Subjecting any contract with foreign entities entered into by state-owned firms to approval by the National Assembly could push the whole state-owned enterprise sector into paralysis. What is needed is for the National Assembly to approve an organic law that sets out the correct interpretation of Article 150 and makes precise the criteria through which prospective contracts would be considered of sufficiently large economic or human impact to be subject to the approval requirement.

Macroeconomic stability and social protection

Sustained and equitable growth will only be attainable if the country can provide a stable policy framework capable of credibly committing to maintaining the rule of law, investing in human capital and infrastructure, providing social protection and securing property rights and macroeconomic stability. This holds across several of the dimensions that must be addressed in a program of economic stabilization and recovery.

According to recent data from the Central Bank, the annual inflation rate reached 649% in March 2026.[53] Inflation will only be tamed if the country can restore faith in its currency and monetary arrangements. Infrastructure can only be repaired with involvement of the private sector and multilateral banks from the World Bank to the CAF and IADB. However, international financial markets will only be accessible once the country's external debt—which we estimate at $164 billion at the end of 2025— can be

[52] República Bolivariana de Venezuela. Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. 1999.
[53] Central Bank of Venezuela (BCV). Consumer Price Index (CPI) Report - March 2026. Caracas: Central Bank of Venezuela, 2026.

restructured. These tasks will require a government able to credibly commit to maintaining fiscal discipline and respecting international agreements. In turn, these commitments will be considered tenuous unless a broad agreement among political actors is upheld and considered credible. The beginning of conversations between the government and the IMF is a positive step, but it requires ample input from a diversity of actors and institutional capacity at the Central Bank.

To begin to build a consensus of this sort, the opposition must gain a role in the design of policies and oversight over their implementation. Building inclusive institutions with enforcement power is key. This requires overcoming the government's practice of imposing key reforms through its control of the legislative and executive branches, and the government's control and potential use of the judiciary to prevent reform. While an internal democratization of chavismo would be helpful in this case (see section on chavismo), inclusion of opposition actors without fear of persecution and retaliation is also necessary. A case in point: rather than approving a deep reform of the hydrocarbons law unilaterally in the National Assembly, the government should have proposed a reform jointly with opposition legislators, and engaged opposition groups not currently represented in the National Assembly in its discussion.

The idea of seeking broad consultations in the design of legal processes goes beyond the intrinsic value of inclusiveness. It also has concrete practical effects. To the extent that there are organized opposition movements with broad support among the population that do not subscribe to nor accept the legality of decisions of the current National Assembly, the risk of future invalidation of those decisions will weigh heavily on the minds of investors.

In May 2026, the government announced that it was initiating a restructuring of the country's external debt after having been granted a license to obtain advisory services for this purpose by the United States. Restructuring the country's debt is intrinsically connected with the reinsertion of the Venezuelan economy into global financial and goods markets. In contrast to other countries, the priority of restructuring does not come

from resumption of financing. Given its prolonged default and crisis, it is likely that Venezuela will not be able to tap relevant amounts of new financing from international credit markets in the near to medium term, and will have to rely mostly on bilateral and multilateral lending. However, the unresolved defaults on the nation's debt generate substantial risks of attachment of exports and proceeds associated with oil sales by PDVSA joint-ventures, and even by any investments made through dealings with the Venezuelan state. Venezuela faces $26 billion in attachment claims issued under a Delaware ruling that allows creditors to go after PDVSA assets to repay debts of the sovereign under the so-called "alter ego" doctrine. Resolving these risks is key to clearing the ground for the re-entry of investment into the sectors that can provide dynamism to the Venezuelan economy.

For broad macro-economic stabilization, the government should continue to reverse the near-total blackout on economic and social data: it is hard to ask society to support legal reforms that put more money into the hands of the state if there is no transparency to assess the impact of government spending. The disclosure of data amid initial conversations with the IMF is important, but further work is required at the National Institute of Statistics to increase its capacity and ensure continued and permanent transparency. One way to integrate other actors into the decision-making process is by creating an oversight board, with representatives from the government, the opposition, and civil society, tasked with overseeing the management of the resources derived from the resumption of oil exports. International and multilateral agencies can serve as observers and provide technical support and accompaniment.

Venezuela's budget law needs to recover a semblance of credibility, while institutions and civil society must be able to trace funds, investments and government policy commitments. On fiscal policy, Venezuela clearly needs to reintroduce fiscal rules into its framework and find ways to make them enforceable. The macroeconomic stabilization fund—which in fact has constitutional rank— needs to be reactivated while phasing out the discretionary funds that the current regime has used for corruption and undermining oversight. One proposal would be to create an independent fiscal entity,

autonomous from the government but responsive to the Venezuelan parliament, tasked with setting ceilings on deficit financing. The idea would not be to hard-code debt limits in the law—which can become problematic as sustainability changes over time—but instead to delegate this authority to an independent body, somewhat analogous to an independent central bank. This entity would not run fiscal policy, but would set limits on allowable deficit financing based on periodic debt sustainability analyses that it would publish and update. By law, this oversight body should account for social and environmental costs as part of its debt sustainability estimations.

Financial, energy and mining policy should be consistent with the social needs of the country. New sources of revenue, including but not limited to those from oil and mineral extraction, need to be directed efficiently to address the country's protracted humanitarian crisis. Currently, most public resources are channeled through highly politicized means and are often limited as a reward and punishment tool to secure political loyalty. The parliament should discuss and approve a law barring any form of political conditionality in access to social benefits and establish clear and transparent mechanisms of means-testing for eligibility when applicable.[54] More broadly, Venezuela needs to reestablish a professionalized civil service capable of allocating government effort and resources toward meeting society's needs rather than serving the interests of a political party.[55] Social policy must be designed and implemented based on the needs of the population, with awareness of geographical conditions, gender inequalities, household structures, needs based on age and demographic changes due to migration flows (see section on Equitable Development).

Beyond social policy provision, the Venezuelan state must re-establish mechanisms that allow the improvement of workers' living conditions, including protecting salaries,

[54] Francisco Rodríguez and Giancarlo Bravo, "Social Policy in Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution: From Universalism to Politicized Targeting," in Handbook of Social Policy in Latin America, ed. Raymundo Campos Vásquez, Ludovico Feoli, Nora Lustig, and Sergei Soares (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, forthcoming)..

[55] Masaya Llavaneras Blanco and Antulio Rosales, "Embodying the Cost of a Predatory State: Depletion via Social Reproduction in Venezuela's Crisis (2013–2021)," Social Politics (advance online publication, 2025), https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxaf053.

union rights and bargaining. It is important to re-establish a tri-partite commission that includes labour organizations, business and government for regular consultation around minimum wage and strategic sectoral policies, with the buy-in from the various stakeholders (see section on Equitable Development).

The international community should throw the full weight of its support behind a program of economic and social reforms by committing to back it with a major economic assistance package. The International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and other multilateral banks should mobilize a substantial program of financing to help jump-start the Venezuelan economy. This program should be targeted at resolving key bottlenecks, such as rebuilding the electricity infrastructure and opening clean energy investment opportunities in the country, spearheading a major anti-hunger initiative, and rebuilding the stock of international reserves needed to sustain credible monetary arrangements.

The reintegration of Venezuelans who have left the country and wish to return—especially those able to contribute their human capital to the revitalization of key industries—should also be an important focus of this effort. Special efforts to recruit skilled workers are important, from health care professionals, university professors and technical schools' instructors, teachers, to oil workers.

2. Equitable Development: Infrastructure, Social Security, and Care

Challenge:

- For democratization to take hold and be sustained through time, it needs to provide tangible improvements in the population's conditions of living through deliberate social policy. A vision of development that incorporates economic and social rights at its core is fundamental for the economic stabilization processes to avoid exacerbating deep-seated inequalities and impoverishment, and instead create the conditions for overcoming them.

Recommendations:

- Macroeconomic stabilization processes (i.e. debt restructuring, and inflation control) and any increase in fiscal revenue must be subject to accountability and transparency mechanisms that ensure investment in social policies and quality public services for the population.
- Recovering the value of wages needs to be a short term priority, so that households can rely on their labour to sustain everyday necessities.
- Access to reliable and quality nutrition is essential. In the short term, this can be facilitated through a system of cash transfers that is completely independent of party affiliations and patronage relationships.
- The social security system requires substantial reforms to secure its sustainability.
- It is vital to make significant investment in public services and infrastructure, especially access to cooking gas, clean water and electricity.
- In the long term, the integration of social policy and services into an Integrated Care System has the potential to solidify social cohesion and improve living conditions in the democratization process.

Inequality and crisis: current conditions

Over the past decade, Venezuela has experienced not only a sharp economic contraction but also the deepening of socioeconomic inequality, marked by the impoverishment of the population and the significant deterioration of labor rights, public

services, and access to food. The depreciation of wages, reliance on cash transfer policies ("*bonos*") and food programs based on clientelist relationships, and the deep decline of public services have undermined living conditions across the country. By the end of 2025, general income poverty is estimated at an average of 78.4%, and extreme poverty at 56.8% nationwide, with states such as Monagas reaching 90.4% and 80.7%, respectively.[56]

In addition, it is estimated that around 25% of the population has emigrated, including a significant share of the working-age population. The effects of migration include major demographic gaps in the labor sector as well as in care for the elderly population, and therefore in the sustainability of the social security system. Inequality, combined with emigration and the severe deterioration of infrastructure and public services, has generated a profound care crisis among the population. This crisis has had major gender- and life-cycle-related effects, overburdening women and girls with unpaid labor and undermining the rights of children and adolescents and elderly people.

In the current context of reactivation of the oil industry and the possible increase in overall economic activity, public policies must prioritize an approach that promotes the strengthening of Venezuelans' capacities, which have been severely eroded after a prolonged crisis that included economic recession, high inflation, and deterioration of basic public services.

Although a modest recovery in growth has been recorded since 2021, the absence of social policies has intensified pre-existing inequalities in Venezuela, given low wages and differences among the country's regions. Promoting inclusive and sustainable development must prioritize wage recovery, respect for trade union autonomy and the right to free association; the restructuring of direct transfer policies by decoupling them from partisan affiliations and political cooptation; as well as investment in public services

[56] *Reporte de Diagnósticos Comunitarios*, Assessment (HUMVEnezuela, 2025), https://reliefweb.int/report/venezuela-bolivarian-republic/reporte-de-diagnosticos-comunitarios-2025.

and infrastructure that prioritizes access for the population, with the aim of developing a comprehensive medium-term care policy.

Social policies and the right to food

The main social policy currently in place to guarantee access to food for the most vulnerable population is the Local Committees for Supply and Production (CLAP), an initiative launched in 2016 during a period of acute food shortages.[57] However, since its inception, the program has been criticized for failing to provide sufficient nutrients to meet beneficiaries' needs. In addition, benefits are not received regularly and the distribution mechanism is discretionary and has been used as a tool of political and social control. Likewise, access to CLAP has declined sharply since 2021, when 58% of the population benefited from the program, compared to 39.6% in 2025.[58]

Guaranteeing access to food for the most vulnerable population should be a priority. According to monitoring carried out by Cáritas in 2025, this year saw a resurgence in child malnutrition and in critical household survival strategies: 76% liquidate their savings to purchase food, 59% reduce both the quantity and quality of food consumption, and 54% resort to debt,[59] despite the recovery in food availability in the country reported by the FAO.[60] A large share of the population relies on credit, monetary loans, and food loans; that is, despite modest economic growth and greater

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[57] *Con la comida no se juega: Graves violaciones al derecho humano a la alimentación en Venezuela*, no. 790e (FIDH, PROVEA, 2022), https://provea.org/wp-ontent/uploads/2022/03/FIDH_Rapport_VENEZUELA_es.pdf.

[58] *Reporte de Diagnósticos Comunitarios*, Assessment (HUMVEnezuela, 2025), https://reliefweb.int/report/venezuela-bolivarian-republic/reporte-de-diagnosticos-comunitarios-2025.

[59] El Nacional, "Cáritas alerta sobre aumento de desnutrición infantil en Venezuela – Correo del Caroní", *Correo del Caroní*, 25 de noviembre de 2025, https://correodelcaroni.com/sociedad/caritas-alerta-sobre-aumento-de-desnutricion-infantil-en-venezuela/.

[60] FAO, FIDA, OMS, PMA y UNICEF. (2025). El estado de la seguridad alimentaria y la nutrición en el mundo 2025: Hacer frente a la inflación alta de los precios de los alimentos en aras de la seguridad alimentaria y la nutrición. Roma. Disponible en: https://doi.org/10.4060/cd6008es

FAO et al., *El estado de la seguridad alimentaria y la nutrición en el mundo 2025*, Flagship, El estado de la seguridad alimentaria y la nutrición en el mundo 2025 (FAO ; FIDA ; OMS ; PMA ; UNICEF ;, 2025), 252, https://doi.org/10.4060/cd6008es.

food availability, most of the population cannot meet its food needs through its own labor.

This demonstrates that even in a scenario of economic recovery, broad sectors of Venezuelan society would still face difficulties in meeting their basic needs. For this reason, the design of development policies in the country must include as a central pillar the goal of restoring the population's capacity to achieve an adequate standard of living through its own means. However, while the effects of economic recovery reach the most vulnerable population, it will be necessary to design direct transfer programs that guarantee access to food, reforming the current "Carnet de la Patria" bonuses, which are currently delivered with little transparency and without targeting criteria. The amount of the single-family bonus created in June 2025 is $15 per month,[61] an amount clearly insufficient to meet basic food needs.

In parallel to addressing the current emergency, it is essential not only to restore wages and the social security system but also access to services that enable a dignified life, such as electricity, drinking water, cooking gas, and public transportation. These factors facilitate access to the labor market for the most vulnerable population.

Labor market and social security

Regarding workers' income, the minimum wage was last increased in March 2022.[62] It was set at 130 Bs per month, which at the time was equivalent to $30. After four years without increases, the minimum wage currently amounts to $0.28 at the official exchange rate as of March 30, 2026. In May 2023, the government increased the food allowance to $40, paid in bolívares at the official exchange rate, and the "economic war" bonus announced in March 2026 for public sector workers was $150.[63] The interim government of Delcy Rodríguez announced a "general monthly income" increase to

[61] PROVEA: Derecho a la Seguridad Social, Informe Anual 2025 (en prensa).
[62] Publicado en la Gaceta Oficial Extraordinaria N° 6.691 del 16 de marzo de 2022.
[63]Carlos Batatin, "A 150 dólares aumentaron bono Contra Guerra Económica", *DiarioVea*, 14 de marzo de 2026, https://diariovea.com.ve/a-150-dolares-aumentaron-bono-contra-la-guerra-economica/.

approximately $240 per month for May 2026. This announcement goes in line with similar dynamics in recent years, where the minimum wage remains stagnant, while a series of non-wage bonuses compound workers' monthly income.[64] Under this policy, nearly all workers' income is non-wage income; therefore, these amounts do not count toward vacation pay, year-end bonuses, or severance benefits.

The retroactive nature of severance benefit calculations is the main obstacle to a significant wage increase,[65] due to the burden that labor liabilities would represent, especially for the public sector. Therefore, any recovery in fiscal revenues should progressively adjust the wage conditions of the working class. It is important to note that minimum wage increases have been decreed unilaterally by the Venezuelan state since the early years of Hugo Chávez's government. However, Venezuela once had a relatively robust history of tripartite discussions among the government, unions, and business chambers during its democratic-representative era. And although in recent years the International Labour Organization (ILO) has promoted a Social Dialogue Forum in which the Venezuelan state participates alongside representatives of workers and employers, no significant agreements have been reached in this space, neither regarding a method for calculating the minimum wage nor to end the criminalization of trade union leaders.[66]

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[64] Singer, Florantonia. El aumento del salario en Venezuela vuelve a quedarse en un bono. *El País.* May 1, 2026. https://elpais.com/america/2026-05-01/el-aumento-del-salario-en-venezuela-vuelve-a-quedarse-en-un-bono.html

[65] Las prestaciones sociales son un derecho establecido en la legislación laboral venezolana; constituyen un mecanismo de previsión social que protege al trabajador en caso de desempleo. El empleador debe depositar en un fideicomiso 15 días de salario cada trimestre. Al momento de finalizar la relación laboral, el empleador debe pagar al trabajador un mes por año de trabajo basados en el último salario integral o lo que se había depositado en garantía, lo que resulte más favorable al trabajador. Ver: Heiberg Andrés C., José Miguel R., & Eli Saúl R. "Alcance de la retroactividad de las prestaciones sociales." Visión Gerencial , no. 2 (2014):231-248. Redalyc, https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=465545897008

[66] Deisy Martínez, "5 claves del cuarto diálogo social tripartito con asistencia de la OIT", *Efecto Cocuyo*, 8 de febrero de 2024, https://witsseo.com.ve/politica/cinco-claves-cuarto-dialogo-social-tripartito-asistencia-oit/.

Venezuela's labor market faces not only the problem of low wages, but also a high rate of informality among the employed population[67] and one of the lowest female labor participation rates in Latin America.[68] However, when combining paid and unpaid work hours, Venezuelan women carry a total workload that, although greater than men's, does not generate equivalent income or economic autonomy.[69] Therefore, the labor issue in Venezuela does not only require an increase in the minimum wage, but also the repeal of the job stability decree (*inamovilidad laboral*), which has been in effect since 2002 and is scheduled to remain until December 2026,[70] as well as a reform of the Labor Law that not only enables higher worker incomes but also promotes greater work–family balance and a reorganization of care responsibilities in a way that incentivizes women's labor market inclusion.

The situation of social security in the country is especially concerning. The population has aged rapidly.[71] As a consequence of the emigration of a significant share of the reproductive-age and economically active population, population aging has accelerated and household structures have changed. According to ENCOVI data, by 2025 it is estimated that 35% of households consist of an elderly couple or an elderly person living alone.[72] More than 40% of this population group lives in households experiencing

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[67]Richard K. Obuchi M et al., «Pequeña, envejecida e informal: la transformación de la fuerza laboral en Venezuela», *debatesIESA* (Venezuela), 1 de abril de 2025, https://www.debatesiesa.com/pequena-envejecida-e-informal-la-transformacion-de-la-fuerza-laboral-en-venezuela/.

[68]Llavaneras Blanco y Rosales, "Embodying the Cost of a Predatory State".

[69]Zarah Dominguez et al., "Trabajo no remunerado y desigualdades de género en Venezuela", *IDB Publications* (Venezuela),Inter-American Development Bank, 31 de octubre de 2024, Venezuela, https://doi.org/10.18235/0013230.

[70] "Inamovilidad Laboral por dos años (2025-2026) para trabajadores de los sectores público y privado | Acceso a la Justicia", Monitoreo, *Acceso a la Justicia*, 2 de enero de 2025, https://accesoalajusticia.org/inamovilidad-laboral-por-dos-2-anos-2025-2026-para-trabajadorases-de-los-sectores-publico-y-privado/.

[71] La población alcanzó índices de envejecimiento moderadamente avanzados en 2020, con poblaciones aún más envejecidas en el Distrito Capital, y los estados Miranda y Aragua. https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S2214-109X%2823%2900520-X

[72] Banca y Negocios. 2025. Venezuela envejece aceleradamente: 35% de los hogares está integrado por adultos mayores que viven solos. Disponible en: https://www.bancaynegocios.com/venezuela-envejece-aceleradamente-35-de-los-hogares-esta-integrado-por-adultos-mayores-que-viven-solos/

severe food insecurity, and 87% have no health insurance.[73] The transformation of household structures has meant that dependency relationships and family care practices have changed, and the unpaid family care that the elderly population would traditionally have accessed through their descendants is no longer available, as much of the population that would normally provide it has emigrated. Although remittances from family members living abroad have contributed to Venezuelan household income, the amount received from remittances decreased by 13.9% between 2024 and 2025.[74] Therefore, it is not feasible to assume that the existing care deficit could be financed through this income from Venezuelans living abroad.

The Constitution establishes that old-age pensions are equal to the minimum wage. Therefore, the stagnation of the official minimum wage affects not only the working population but also those in retirement or disability. This population does not receive the food allowance and receives a smaller amount in the economic war bonus: $58[75] instead of the $150 received by public sector workers in March of 2026. Given this panorama of income precariousness and limitations in care for this population, it is imperative to formulate a policy to support the elderly that includes health care, access to food, and support and accompaniment networks.

Access to health care

Access to health care is one of the main concerns of the Venezuelan population. Most people (75.9%) use public services including hospitals, Comprehensive Diagnostic Centers, Popular Clinics, and Barrio Adentro modules.[76] Between 45% and 72% of those who seek care in these services do not receive attention for reasons related to

[73]Circuito Exitos, “Venezuela Envejece Rápido: ¡Alerta Social!”, Instagram, de diciembre, de de 2025, https://www.instagram.com/circuitoexitos/reel/DRxhYqXESH-/.
[74] *Reporte de Diagnósticos Comunitarios*, Assessment (HUMVEnezuela, 2025), https://reliefweb.int/report/venezuela-bolivarian-republic/reporte-de-diagnosticos-comunitarios-2025.
[75]Yonaski Moreno, «¡Pensionadas y pensionados! Bono contra la guerra económica de marzo llegó con aumento», *DiarioVea*, 21 de marzo de 2026, https://diariovea.com.ve/pensionadas-y-pensionados-bono-contra-la-guerra-economica-de-marzo-llego-con-aumento/.
[76] HUM Venezuela 2025
Reporte de Diagnósticos Comunitarios.

operating hours and service capacity. The deterioration of these services has multiple implications related to life cycle and gender.

From the perspective of childhood, Venezuela accounts for 10% of all children and adolescents in Latin America who lack vaccine coverage.[77] Although coverage levels have increased, the country reports coverage rates of 67% and 62% for DPT 1 and DPT 3 vaccines respectively, which are markers of access and capacity within national vaccination systems, and in other cases coverage has even reached 0%. Among the main challenges in this regard is a debt owed by the Venezuelan state to the Pan American Health Organization's Revolving Fund for Vaccines, estimated at between $15 and $17 million.[78] The opacity of health information systems makes it impossible to identify the origin or number of vaccines that have arrived in the country, nor the mechanisms through which they are accessed—for example, there is no public information on whether they are acquired through purchase or donation. Updating the national vaccination system requires reincorporating the country into the Pan American Health Organization's Revolving Fund and establishing transparent mechanisms for monitoring expenditures and health sector supplies.

Continuing with the intersections of gender and life cycle in access to health care, it is necessary to highlight the country's high maternal and infant mortality rates. According to the United Nations Population Fund, Venezuela's maternal mortality rate is more than one hundred percent higher than other rates in Latin America and the Caribbean (with the exception of Haiti).[79] This is compounded by infant mortality estimated between 22 and 23.2 deaths per 1,000 live births, placing Venezuela among the five highest in the region. Multiple factors contribute to this phenomenon.[80] For example, food shortages

[77] UNICEF OMS, 2025 Venezuela WUENIC 2024 revision, Published 15 July 2025
FAO et al., *El estado de la seguridad alimentaria y la nutrición en el mundo 2025*.
[78]"La baja cobertura de vacunación sigue poniendo en riesgo vidas en Venezuela", *Runrun.es: En defensa de tus derechos humanos*, 9 de septiembre de 2025, https://runrun.es/inicio/589399/la-baja-cobertura-de-vacunacion-sigue-poniendo-en-riesgo-vidas-en-venezuela/.
[79]Ian McFarlane, Estado de La Población Mundial 2023 (UNFPA, s. f.), accedido 24 de abril de 2026, https://www.unfpa.org/publications/state-world-population-2023-8-billion-lives-infinite-possibilities.
[80] World Bank Data. 2026. Mortality rate, infant (per 1,000 live births) - Venezuela, RB, Latin America & Caribbean. Disponible en: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.IMRT.IN?locations=VE-ZJ

and malnutrition affect women and children simultaneously: by 2022, 30% of children under six months assisted by Cáritas were malnourished, reflecting nutritional deficits among mothers during pregnancy.[81]

High maternal mortality rates cannot be viewed in isolation from the shortage of contraceptive methods that has been recorded for more than a decade.[82] By 2025, the most widely used contraceptive method was female sterilization (29% of respondents), followed by 22% using oral contraceptive pills. The prevalence of sterilization, together with high maternal mortality, reflects limited access to modern contraceptive methods. Likewise, women carry out 76.4% of unpaid indirect care work in households (such as cleaning, food preparation, and laundry) in a context where basic public services have deteriorated significantly, contributing to conditions of exploitation and exhaustion.[83]

Public services

The condition of public services in Venezuela is deplorable, because of a sharp decline in the state's capacity to provide them.[84] This deterioration is an obstacle for the most vulnerable populations in the enjoyment of rights and access to the formal labor market. Basic services such as drinking water, electricity, and cooking gas are irregular and in some areas of the country are completely absent (particularly water and gas services). According to a recent report, 62.9% of the population reports restricted access to drinking water and 42% report signs of water contamination in their households.[85] Meanwhile, 73% of the population faces severe restrictions in waste collection services,

[81] *Con la comida no se juega: Graves violaciones al derecho humano a la alimentación en Venezuela*.
[82] AVESA, Mujeres en Línea, CEPAS, FREYA. *Mujeres al Límite*: El peso de la emergencia humanitaria: vulneración de derechos humanos de las mujeres en Venezuela (2017). https://avesa.blog/informes-sobre-derechos-humanos-de-las-mujeres/mujeres-al-limite-2017/
[83] Llavaneras Blanco, M., & Rosales, A. (2025). Embodying the Cost of a Predatory State: Depletion via Social Reproduction in Venezuela's Crisis (2013–2021). *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, jxaf053.
[84] Rosales, A., Bull, B., & Sutherland, M. (2023). Depredación y ausencia de burocracia: la situación de los empleados públicos en Venezuela desde la mirada de la capacidad estatal. *América Latina Hoy*, *93*, 1-24; Jiménez, M. (2022). La democratización en Venezuela pasa también por la reconstrucción del Estado. *Nueva Sociedad*, (299), 120-133.
[85] *Reporte de Diagnósticos Comunitarios*.

17% experiences weekly power outages, and 22% faces severe transportation limitations.

Urban populations and those in the capital region tend to receive these services more regularly, but deficiencies remain constant. Higher-income populations can shift the costs of service provision to the market, for example through private generators or water tanker trucks. However, in low-income areas, the most vulnerable populations spend hours that could otherwise be invested in productive activities to obtain these basic services, which is reflected in the total workload (paid and unpaid) mentioned in the previous section.

Natural gas deserves special attention due to its connection with other aspects of the Venezuelan economy. It is estimated that only 7% of households have access to direct gas connections, while the rest depend on propane gas cylinders,[86] and 78% face severe limitations in accessing them.[87] The precarious state of Venezuela's oil industry has caused major shortages of gas for domestic consumption, increasing the cost of available cylinders distributed through informal market mechanisms. The shortage of cooking gas affects the poorest population, which in many cases has had to resort to logging and burning wood.

Although Venezuela is no longer among the world's main oil producers, it remains among the top nine countries responsible for gas flaring and is one of the main contributors to greenhouse gas emissions globally.[88] Natural gas, especially in oil-producing areas such as Monagas, is wasted and not used for local consumption.[89] The

[86] Nataly Carvajal et al., *El declive de los servicios públicos en Venezuela: Crónica de un colapso anunciado* (Caleidoscopio Humano, monitorDESCAVE, 2024). https://caleidohumano.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Informe-de-Servicios-Publicos-Caleidoscopio-Humano.pdf
[87] HUM Venezuela. Ob. Cit.
[88] World Bank.Global Gas Flaring Tracker Report (2024). Disponible en https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/bd2432bbb0e514986f382f61b14b2608-0400072025/original/Global-Gas-Flaring-Tracker-Report-July-2025.pdf
[89] France 24. Venezuela: 'At night, the east of the country is brighter than Caracas because of gas flaring' (2026). Disponible en: https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/the-observers/20260309-venezuela-night-east-brighter-caracas-gas-flaring

recovery of Venezuela's oil industry must be linked to investment aimed at capturing flared gas in production fields for local consumption. As mentioned in the previous section on the economy, sustained investments are needed to recover electricity generation and distribution infrastructure, emphasizing hydroelectric generation capacity and reducing the use of fossil fuels for thermoelectric plants.

The condition of public services has significant effects on other social and productive activities in the country.[90] For example, many households report school absenteeism among children due to the lack of services in schools, which not only has clear consequences for education but also reduces labor force participation among caregivers, most of whom are women.

Final recommendations

Sustained economic growth must contribute to efforts to decarbonize the electricity matrix, aligning with regional and global efforts, with the goal of meeting the country's productive and social needs. Any economic recovery will require basic infrastructure that supports increases in production while also sustaining the population's quality of life and Venezuela's domestic market. Increased fiscal revenues for the state must be subject to accountability and transparency mechanisms that ensure investment in quality public services for the population. International cooperation can play a role, not only through the humanitarian architecture of the United Nations currently present in the country, but also through development cooperation mechanisms from institutions such as the IDB, which could provide technical and financial assistance for the implementation of infrastructure recovery projects in sectors such as electricity, drinking water and sanitation, health services, and education, revitalizing public service delivery. In the same vein, access to loans and other forms of financing must prioritize transparency as well as repayment terms that strengthen state capacity and do not

[90] Encuesta Nacional sobre Condiciones Vida (ENCOVI). 2024. Disponible en: https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/5d14c6a5c4ad42a4e794d0f7/6803aeed2dfc5c19a4ac96cd_ENCOVI%202024_presentacio%CC%81n_integrada.pdf

weaken the social fabric, which has already been deeply affected by the multidimensional crisis the country is experiencing (see the chapter “Economy: What is the best path forward for a sustainable recovery?” for a more detailed discussion of financing and macroeconomic stability).

A plural and democratic system requires consensus and guarantees of the economic, social, and environmental rights of the Venezuelan population. As described throughout this chapter, deficits in public services and social protection programs have a direct impact on the country’s growth potential and the population’s quality of life. There will be no economic recovery without a working population capable of entering the labor market. The progressive creation of an integrated care system could begin with the implementation of direct transfer programs that guarantee access to food, reforming existing bonuses, eliminating clientelist distribution mechanisms, ensuring access based on need, and updating the amounts provided. This system must also address specific needs by life cycle and gender, in areas of health and social protection, including for example the recovery of the Expanded Program on Immunization and the mass distribution of modern contraceptive methods. Over the longer term, an integrated care system must restore public education from early childhood, which would benefit both children and adolescents and the economic activation of the population through increased female labor participation. Technical cooperation with organizations such as UN Women, the World Health Organization, and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) will make it possible to learn from the knowledge on care systems generated in the region over the past two decades.

3. International Relations: Constructing a Space of Autonomy

Challenge:

The United States' commitment to democracy in Venezuela is not clear. Thus, having it as Venezuela's exclusive international partner is risky.

Priorities:

- Both the Delcy Rodríguez government and the Machado led opposition need to strengthen ties with democratic "middle powers" in Latin America and Europe, pursuing a de-risking strategy to diversify support from democratizing partners.
- Middle powers in Latin American and Europe need to reach out and engage both the Rodríguez government and the Machado led opposition.
- In agreement with broad political actors, the Venezuelan state should progressively return to multilateral organizations of human rights as well as international financial institutions.
- The Venezuelan state should foster diverse alliances with traditional and emerging powers to leverage support for infrastructure lending, broad productive investment as well as macroeconomic stability.

Since its beginning, the Bolivarian revolution was framed by its protagonists, as part of a global shift towards a "multipolar world" that would allow for the autonomous development of countries in the Global South.[91] Throughout the ensuing political, economic and social crisis, ties with allies in this struggle, including Cuba, Russia, China and Iran, strengthened, in part due to ideological preferences, and in part as a necessity as sanctions and exclusion mechanisms cut ties to the US, Europe and other allies.[92] Developments in Venezuela since Chávez's election in 1998 have thus both

[91] Bull, B. (2025). Does the Rise of the Global South Weaken Democracy? The Pivotal Case of the 2024 Presidential Elections in Venezuela. *Forum for Development Studies*, *52*(2), 361–382. https://doi.org/10.1080/08039410.2024.2424582; Briceño-Ruiz, J. (2017). Venezuela and South–South Cooperation: Solidarity or Realpolitik?. In *South-South Cooperation Beyond the Myths: Rising Donors, New Aid Practices?* (pp. 173-195). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

[92] Mijares, V. M. (2017). Soft Balancing the Titans: Venezuelan Foreign-Policy Strategy Toward the United States, China, and Russia. *Latin American Policy*, *8*(2), 201–231. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/lamp.12128; Rosales, A. (2016). Deepening extractivism and

reflected and contributed to a broader transition towards a multipolar order.[93] They also contributed strongly to the regional divisions that weakened inter-American institutions, including their democratic clauses.[94] Similar populist international relations strategies as those pioneered by Chávez fostered polarization, delegitimation and the weakening of international regimes in support of democracy and human rights.[95]

These Venezuelan dynamics unfolded in parallel with a wider crisis of the liberal, rules-based international order. With the US under the Trump administration distancing itself from multilateralism and the overall rules-based international order, and even actively undermining them, and with the strengthening of ultra-right forces in the US and Europe more broadly, the fragmentation of a democratic international community has accelerated.[96] The relatively weak, often uncoordinated and contradictory responses to the accelerating democratic crisis in Venezuela by European and Latin American governments are in part a result of this global crisis of institutions and coordination.[97] Moreover, the Venezuelan controversy itself contributed to the fracturing of multilateral institutions, such as in the case of paralysis within the Organization of American States in trying to invoke the democratic charter in 2017 and when dealing with the 2018 elections and the branching out of the Lima Group to support the Interim Government

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rentierism: China's role in Venezuela's Bolivarian developmental model. *Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue canadienne d'études du développement*, *37*(4), 560–577. https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2016.1208605; Bull, B., & Rosales, A. (2026). Chinese impact on development in Venezuela: the dynamics of structural stagnation. *New Political Economy*, *31*(1), 125-144;
Serbin, A., & Serbin Pont, A. (2017). The foreign policy of the Bolivarian republic of Venezuela: The role and legacy of Hugo Chávez. *Latin American Policy*, *8*(2), 232-248.

[93] Somer, M., & McCoy, J. (2018). Déjà vu? Polarization and Endangered Democracies in the 21st Century. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *62*(1), 3-15.

[94] Legler, T. (2020). A story within a story. *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies/Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe*, (109), 135-156.

[95] Destradi, S., Cadier, D., & Plagemann, J. (2021). Populism and foreign policy: a research agenda (Introduction). *Comparative European Politics*, *19*(6), 663.

[96] Cooley, A., & Nexon, D. H. (2022). The real crisis of global order: Illiberalism on the rise. *Foreign Aff.*, *101*, 103; Ikenberry, G. J. (2018). The end of liberal international order?. *International affairs*, *94*(1), 7-23;
Colgan, J. D., & Keohane, R. O. (2017). The liberal order is rigged: Fix it now or watch it wither. *Foreign Affairs*, *96*(3), 36-44.

[97] Gratius, S., & Pozo, A. A. (2020). Sanciones como instrumento de coerción:¿ Cuán similares son las políticas de Estados Unidos y la Unión Europea hacia Venezuela?. *América Latina, Hoy*, *85*, 31-53; Bull, B. (2025). Does the Rise of the Global South Weaken Democracy?

led by Juan Guaidó. Currently, therefore, there is no strong international community or institutional framework in support of democracy to call upon.

One consequence of this shifting world order is the weakening of international support as a key factor in democratic transitions.[98] Compared to the environment twenty years ago, Venezuela's democratic actors now operate in a far less favorable international context: a multipolar and more illiberal world, with weaker democratic institutions, and diminished Western leverage. In other words, we are in the process of a tectonic shift in the world order and an interregnum in global institutions, where relations and principles are being rethought.[99]

Within this shifting international context, the most important determining force for Venezuela's transition at present is the United States' tutelary control over the government of Delcy Rodríguez, and its sidelining of the opposition led by María Corina Machado. The threat of further military strikes remains latent and is explicitly maintained to sustain US influence over the Venezuelan government. Despite this sidelining, the opposition led by Machado relies entirely on the continued US presence and support for a transition. Secretary of State and National Security Advisor, Marco Rubio, has described a three-stage plan: stabilization, consolidation, and transition. Yet no details have been given as to the character, content or timing of the transition plan. Whatismore, given the Trump administration's short attention span, its declining popularity and current satisfaction with the cooperation with the Rodríguez government, relying solely on the US as a strategic partner in the transition carries significant risk.

This raises the question: How to establish foreign relations that may contribute to the process of democratic transition and consolidation? To work for a democratic transition, Venezuelan actors should diversify their alliances to include global "middle powers" and institutions that promote the increasingly fragile rules-based international order.

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[98] Levitsky, S., & Way, L. A.. *Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge University Press (2010).

[99] Sanahuja, J. A. (2026). La Unión Europea y América Latina en tiempos de «vasallización». *Nueva Sociedad*, *321*(Enero-Febrero).

Managing US Tutelage

The first thing to consider is how current US tutelage is conditioning Venezuela's foreign relations. The US strategy could accurately be interpreted in the framework of the National Security Strategy's call to "enroll and expand" as a means to control the Western hemisphere. It points to the need to incorporate governments in the region, including non-ideological allies, in its plans to exclude external actors, ensure access to critical resources, and stop migration and what they call "narcoterrorist organizations". The current US policy thus moves beyond a traditional "sphere of influence" thinking that has combined control over the Western Hemisphere with the allusion to common goals such as democracy, peace and unity.[100]

Since January 3, 2026, the United States has focused on controlling oil production and trade, through direct financial oversight, operational management via licenses and the monitoring and seizing tankers suspected of smuggling oil outside of the approved U.S. framework. Through this, the United States is obliging Venezuela to reduce its ties to Russia, China, Iran and Cuba. While not only US companies have been given licenses, a "monopolistic" trade relationship is being constructed through financial control, strict restrictions on shipments to Cuba and China, and an imposition of a 25 percent tariff on countries purchasing Venezuelan oil outside the US controlled framework (although this tariff is yet to be enforced). The U.S. is also using the partial, sequenced and strategic lifting of sanctions to favor U.S. companies.

One result of US pressure has been that the Venezuelan government swiftly promoted a comprehensive reform to the Hydrocarbons Law that was approved by the national assembly, with a more welcoming framework for foreign investors (see more in the section on the economy). The explicit purpose is to unwind relations between Venezuela and US adversaries. The new Organic Law on Mines, adopted by the National Assembly on April 9th, will have a similar result. The goal would be to ensure U.S. access to Venezuelan gold and critical minerals instead of its adversaries. This

[100]Grandin, G. (2025). *America, América: A new history of the New World*. Random House.

control includes the reestablishment of diplomatic relations which will soon lead to the official naming of ambassadors.

It is yet unclear how the current Venezuelan government will use its limited space for action in international relations under US tutelage. It has so far responded to US pressure with a mix of criticism and compliance with US policy. For example Minister of Foreign Affairs Yvan Gil criticized US hardening of policies towards Cuba.[101] Yet, Delcy Rodríguez has balanced her critique of US-Israeli attacks on Iran with expressions of solidarity with Qatar, and critique of counterattacks,[102] in a clear deviation from Venezuelan political line prior to the January 3rd intervention.

The situation facing the majoritarian opposition in Venezuela is equally complex. It has understandably prioritized relations with the US given its demonstrated willingness to act and current tutelary control. However, resting solely on the relationship with the US involves major risks. While pressure was initially raised on the Venezuelan government to release political prisoners, around 500 prisoners remain, and there are at present few indicators that human rights improvements are a priority for the US administration. Moreover, the Trump administration's ideas for a transition remain vague, with no fixed date for elections, in clear violation of the constitution.

The majoritarian opposition runs two major risks by placing all the eggs in the US basket. The first, is that the U.S. attention may move elsewhere. The current U.S. war with Iran, a broad decline in Trump's popularity and looming midterm elections make it ever less likely Trump will spend his political capital on Venezuela. The second, is he and his official's general lack of interest in democracy. It is also unclear whether the various changes in the government's cabinet and broader state institutions such as the Attorney General and Ombudsman were the result of negotiated concessions to the US

[101]Globovisión. (2026). Venezuela rechaza orden ejecutiva de EE. UU. que impone "medidas punitivas" contra países que comercian con Cuba, Available at: https://www.globovision.com/nacional/51170/gobierno-nacional-rechaza-medidas-de-eeuu-contra-paises-que-mantengan-comercio-con-cuba

[102] Fahmy, G. 2026.Venezuela condemns US strikes on Iran — while criticizing 'undue' retaliatory attacks. *The New York Post.* Available at: https://nypost.com/2026/02/28/world-news/venezuela-condemns-us-strikes-on-iran-while-criticizing-undue-retaliatory-attacks/

or if they respond to internal maneuvers to secure a new elite in power. What Venezuela has experienced so far is not a democratic transition. We are in an uncertain process of subordination of an authoritarian regime to a neocolonial, tutelary domination by a foreign power with connivance from the remaining apparatus of the Maduro regime.

The US is making it increasingly clear that neither international law nor democratic norms will be respected or pursued as goals in its foreign policy and geopolitical struggles. Already on January 3, President Donald Trump bypassed any semblance of democratic norms, not only in violating international law, but by simply sidelining Venezuela's most popular opposition leader and subsequently marginalizing the leading opposition coalition from stabilization efforts. The decision may have been understandable. However, it should have been accompanied by more concrete discussion of plans for a democratic transition that would acknowledge the democratic aspirations of Venezuelan citizens. Machado's subsequent efforts to reach out to Trump–including giving him her Nobel Prize medal–seem to have had limited impact.[103] The Trump administration is actively undermining both international law and norms of diplomacy in its actions against adversaries and communication with allies. The attack on Iran is the latest example.

Both Trump and Rubio have argued that there needs to be a process of reconciliation in Venezuela, indeed now Rubio speaks of the three stage plan as: stabilization, recovery and reconciliation, transition. This preference reached clear public expression when Trump made a shout out to Venezuelan politician and former political prisoner Enrique Márquez during his State of the Union address last February 24. Márquez is a moderate politician who competed against Machado in the 2024 election with support from former chavista parties and is seen as someone who can be a bridge between opposition and chavismo. The Trump administration's motivation seems to be to promote an economic

[103] Matza, Max. (2026). Venezuelan Nobel Peace Prize winner presents her medal to Trump. *BBC News.* Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2w94wp4p1o

transition and process of reconciliation with stability as a priority, hence a transition that will not require extensive political capital or resources. Venezuela's mainstream opposition risks being marginalized permanently if it does not change its strategies. Showing itself to be gregarious, inclusive and conciliatory would likely improve its fortunes and better prepare it for a role in Venezuela's transition. The Venezuelan diaspora in the United States could be an important source of pressure on the United States to push for democratization.

Derisking with Middle Power Support

In the current context, it would be prudent for the Delcy Rodríguez government as well as the opposition to take the opportunity to deepen their ties to other countries beyond the U.S., China and Russia. There are voices seeking to unite "middle powers" in Europe with a stronger defense of a rules-based, democratic order,[104] and even some, such as the Finnish president Alexander Stubb, recognizing that the trajectory and viability of the rules-based order depend on alliances with the Global South. If the middle-powers interested in preservation of human rights and the rules-based order can develop alliances with countries of the global South they can reach a critical mass that can compete with the U.S., Russia and China. Such thinking is clearly behind the recent signing of the trade agreement between the European Union and Mercosur that has been almost 25 years in the making, as well as intents to reach out to India and China. While responses to the aggressive speeches made my J.D. Vance in 2025 and Marco Rubio in 2026 at the Münich security conferences, were rather meek, European leaders, such as Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, as well as Canadian Mark Carney have expressed interest in becoming the leaders of the rules-based liberal order as the U.S. withdraws its support. With the Nordic countries, Canada is now seeking to de-risk from

[104] Mark Carney, "Davos 2026: Special address by Mark Carney, Prime Minister of Canada." Speech delivered at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting, Davos, Switzerland, January 20, 2026. See also Andrew Hurrell, *On Global Order: Power, Values, and the Constitution of International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

the U.S. allowing for increased autonomy.[105] Attention to reform and strengthening of economic and diplomatic agreements could provide a new architecture that could diversify Venezuela's insertion in international relations.

So far, however, Machado seems to be aligning herself with an increasingly articulated Euro-Latin American alliance of the far right. This was seen clearly in her agenda of meetings in Latin America as well as in Europe since she left Venezuela in late 2025 to receive her Nobel Prize. This includes drawing support from Argentina's government of Javier Milei, as well as that of Nayib Bukele in El Salvador, infamous for its support in the capturing and imprisonment of Venezuelan migrants to be detained in the high security prison CECOT without due process. On her agenda has also been meeting with Flavio Bolsonaro, son of Jair now imprisoned for attempted coup-d-etat and murder plots, as well as the ultra right with Colombian presidential candidate Abelardo de la Espirella. In Europe, she has formed close ties to Spanish ultra right wing Vox, and participated in forums organized by Euro Patriots including parties like Fidesz in Hungary and National Front in France. These are parties and leaders that are deeply critical of governmental institutions in general, including democratic institutions, and many have a dubious human rights and democracy record. While Machado and her team may justify these alliances as they may strengthen the relationship with Trump, that could be a misreading given that Trump and Rubio seem to be prioritizing stability in Venezuela and seem willing to work with left leaders or moderates to achieve that goal. Machado's agenda of meetings could also weaken the prestige that Machado gained particularly with the Nobel Peace Prize and alienate more moderate governments in Latin America, Europe and elsewhere.

The Venezuelan opposition should work with the EU and European countries supporting democratic norms and international law and institutions, rather than limiting it to authoritarian forces that share their anti-socialist agenda. This would be a way for the

[105] Government of Norway. (2026) Nordic countries and Canada to strengthen cooperation. Available at: https://www.regjeringen.no/en/whats-new/nordic-countries-and-canada-to-strengthen-cooperation/id3152294/

Venezuelan opposition to move beyond support from an imaginary "international democratic community" that is currently fragmented. Moreover, it would be a part in the important formation of alliances across political dividing lines. To retain its legitimacy as a democratic force, the opposition should refrain from close relations with autocratic forces among the far-right movements in Europe. Being too closely associated with them would risk weakening Machado's position as a leader of all forces opposing the regime - a position she largely gained through the 2023 primary - and throw her back to the more marginal position she held in previous years. In hindsight, the goals of the Venezuelan opposition to focus all efforts to depose Maduro by any means may have been less than optimal for the goal of a sustainable democratic transition. Now, the opposition needs to re-organize around principles and global forces that privilege human rights protection, the rule of law and democracy, beyond deposing a specific leader. The Venezuelan diaspora in Europe could provide key support for European governments to get into the mix and push for democracy in Venezuela.

However, this will require consistent work on all sides. European countries and the E.U. played important roles in facilitating negotiations and the forging of an electoral path from 2018 to 2024.[106] Since then they have not significantly responded to the Trump administration's militarized focus on Venezuela. However, various European countries are now reestablishing relations with Venezuela. Europe is also seeking to strengthen the relationship to Latin America as a democratic ally to fight the deterioration of multilateralism and international democratic norms. While there are no current initiatives towards Venezuela, a democratic transition in Venezuela is clearly in the interest of the EU and individual European countries. Spain is in a particular position. Given the large Venezuelan diaspora, the Venezuela issue has become a part of Spanish domestic politics. The Rodríguez government is understandably focused on appeasing the Trump administration which is requiring it to reduce its ties to U.S. rivals such as China,

[106] Smilde, D., & Ramsey, G. (2020). International peace-making in Venezuela's intractable conflict. *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies/Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y Del Caribe*, (109), 157-179; Meucci, M. Á. M. (2025). Circular Talks: Political Dialogue, Foreign Facilitation, and Authoritarian Learning in Venezuela. In *Authoritarian Consolidation in Times of Crisis* (pp. 216-235). Routledge.

Russia, Iran and Cuba. However its oil relationships with European producers such as Repsol and ENI provide conduits for developing ties.

Latin American Relations

This also goes for alliances with actors in the region. Latin American neighbors have failed to significantly impact the Venezuelan crisis, despite various bilateral and multilateral initiatives. The failure was particularly stark in the wake of the 2024 electoral crisis.[107] This is in part a remarkable failure by regional institutions. Institutions that should have protected democracy have in fact mostly protected incumbents. Currently, they are too weak to have any significance, positively or negatively. While it is difficult to imagine institutions such as CELAC or the OAS becoming functional in the short term, it is important to form alliances, not only with governments, but also with political parties and civil society groups across the region, in protection of democratic norms through international institutions. All parties must seek Venezuela's gradual re-integration into the regional bodies of human rights protection including the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and facilitating the work of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. A broad opening to various actors supporting a democratic transition is more likely to strengthen civil society spaces that can in turn push for increased oversight and accountability while also expanding Venezuelans' exercise of rights.

There is a risk that the current tutelary relationship between the US and Venezuela leads Venezuela to becoming marginalized from Latin American relations. The Rodríguez government is not likely to join the coalition of countries loyal to the United States, that the Trump-government currently tries to strengthen and consolidate. Yet, it might also avoid collaborating with countries such as Mexico and Brazil, as this could generate negative responses from the US. Should 2026 bring right wing electoral victories in Brazil and Colombia, Venezuela might end up increasingly isolated. The other scenario is that we will simply face a fragmented region, composed of authoritarian capitalist countries, with few real joint political agendas and weak or non-

[107] Bull, B. (2025). Does the Rise of the Global South Weaken Democracy?

existing institutions beyond stand-alone summits. This will be clearly negative for democratic forces in Venezuela. It will also weaken migrant rights and the international protection regime, and be a risk to Venezuelan migrants in the region. Similarly, a timid attempt by the Venezuelan opposition to reach out to bi-partisan members of Congress in the US can yield positive results in the event of the Democratic Party taking control of at least one Chamber of Congress. A return of the Venezuelan cause as a bipartisan consensus in the US can also unlock productive pathways toward democratization.

Any long-term project of economic recovery, political stability and democratization requires both bilateral and multilateral support and investments. This is, in turn, an opportunity for the institutionalization of Venezuela through pluralist institutions that must have oversight over resources and secure transparency of new commitments and debt (see more in section on the economy). Multilateral support, through global and hemispheric institutions, from the IADB, CAF to the IMF and World Bank, can help to establish an institutional architecture that supports a transition away from tutelage to increasing autonomy. Venezuela should continue collaborating with China on issues such as infrastructure, industry investment and technology transfer, acknowledging that it must depend on more than the United States to embark on a viable development path. However, it will need a clear institutional architecture to ensure transparency and sustainability of these collaborations. It also places high demands in terms of governing skills to navigate US pressure and the country's need for diversified foreign relations. Venezuelan political actors must agree on inclusive institutions that could legitimately seek loans, secure repayment and ensure oversight and horizontal and vertical accountability, in other words, to not only lenders and foreign allies, but Venezuelan communities and constituencies.

4. Democratic Institutions: What formal and informal rules of the game must be established to facilitate a pluralist democracy?

Challenge:

- Venezuela's current constitutional rules raise the stakes for losing power and thereby reduce actors' willingness to submit to and abide by democratic elections.

Recommendations:

- There need to be negotiated agreements between the participants regarding the framework governing competition and the distribution of power.
    - These agreements must establish the limits of presidential powers and the representation of political parties in the legislature.
    - These agreements must seek to achieve an effective balance and establish a system of checks and balances among the executive, legislative, judicial, electoral, and citizen branches. The ruling party should not obtain a majority capable of unilaterally imposing any unelected authority such as judges, electoral authorities, the attorney general, or the ombudsman).
    - There need to be agreements that guarantee the genuine and influential participation of independent civil society in these appointments.

The democratization of Venezuela requires confronting two interdependent structural challenges. First, the excessive concentration of power in the executive branch has undermined the autonomy and effectiveness of other state institutions. Second, the electoral arena is characterized by a persistent and systematic advantage for the incumbent, which distorts political competition and limits meaningful alternation in power. These dynamics are mutually reinforcing and must be addressed simultaneously. At its core, the challenge is not only institutional but also relational.

Democratic reconstruction requires the reestablishment of equilibrium in the formal regulations governing access to, distribution of, and exercise of political power, alongside the reconfiguration of interactions among political actors within those regulations. Some of these reforms—particularly those affecting constitutional design—will necessarily unfold over the medium to long term. Others, however, can and should be implemented in the short term through legislative action and negotiated political agreements. In this section we describe the changes that need to be made: rebalance power between the presidency and the legislature, reestablishment of public financing for parties, judicial autonomy, reform of the electoral branch, and reconstruction of the citizen's branch. Moreover, while formal institutional reforms are necessary to rebalance power and restore electoral integrity, they are insufficient on their own. A sustainable transition also depends on the establishment of shared expectations, credible commitments, and enforcement mechanisms that shape how actors behave within and beyond formal institutions. Twenty-five years of partisan recruitment, clientelist routines inside line ministries, judicial deference to the executive, and the involvement of military officers in civilian agencies have produced organizational cultures that will outlast any new rulebook. Reform must therefore proceed on several tracks: changing the rules, reforming the incentive structure and reforming the practices through which they are run.

The institutional framework that emerged from the 1999 Constitution expanded executive authority while significantly weakening legislative oversight. This dynamic facilitates the sequential capture of other branches, such as the judiciary,the electoral branch (National Electoral Council), and the citizens' branch (comprising the Attorney General, the Ombudsman, and the Comptroller General), all independent powers in the 1999 Constitution.

Although the 1999 Constitution[108] grants civil society a role in the appointment of these non-elected authorities, these guardrails were eroded through organic-law reforms and

[108] The 1999 institutional baseline has been modified several times. The 2007 constitutional reform package was rejected by referendum. The 2009 amendment removed presidential term limits and

political practice rather than formal constitutional amendment. The 1999 text on Articles 264, 279, and 295–296 was not amended; instead, the Ley Orgánica del Poder Electoral (2002), the Ley Orgánica del TSJ (2004, 2010, and 2022), and the operational practice of the Comités de Postulaciones produced de facto capture of the appointment procedures. The formal appointment of these authorities is initiated by a Nominations Committee (electoral, judicial, or citizen power), depending on the specific branch that is being renewed, but in practice it includes a prior committee that decides which civil society organizations and deputies are part of the Nominations Committee. Thus, a composition in which 50% are members of the National Assembly has eroded the autonomy of parliamentary committees. Furthermore, the selection of the civil society slots has been captured by civil society organizations aligned with the parties, simulating plurality while ensuring the majority in the committees.

Consequently, this equation includes the political party system as a crucial variable, which any political reform toward a democratization process must address. While institutional reform might mitigate the risk of over-empowering an incumbent, we must address the structural conditions under which Venezuelan parties have operated since the 1999 Constitution's ban on public financing. Following that ban, the survival of party organizations became dependent on their ability to capture subnational offices. This shift created and increased two perverse incentives: first, parties became primarily office-seeking organizations, in which public positions are essential to party infrastructure and organizational survival. Second, when a single party or coalition controls the majority of subnational offices, it gains a disproportionate and asymmetric advantage over its competitors, tilting the electoral field ahead of the next voting process. However, for the opposition parties, winning subnational offices enabled them to employ grassroots leaders in administrative roles, which functioned as an alternative

extended indefinite reelection to all elected offices. The 2017 Constituent Assembly operated outside Article 347 procedures, assuming legislative functions and appointing the Republican Moral Council. The Organic Law of the TSJ was reformed in 2004, 2010, and 2022, each time reshaping appointment, removal, and composition rules. Any reform agenda must therefore engage not only the original constitutional text but the layered statutory and political modifications that have accumulated since.

mechanism of sustaining local party infrastructure, creating perverse incentives within the opposition parties that seek to survive economically instead

These two processes, institutional capture and electoral asymmetry, result in a self-reinforcing cycle in which the winner ends up taking all, including the ability to elude the rule of law. Additionally, these processes allowed the incumbent party to modify fundamental legislation. The two processes are operationalized into six mechanisms that result in hollowing out democracy: authoritarian legalism, in which the law is designed and enforced to reduce opposition while excluding the ruling party; Constitutional tinkering, changing the constitution to elude power limits and expand power control. Legislative dodging, circumventing legislative accountability. Judicial capture, which means ending the independence of the judiciary from the executive branch. Accountability sabotage, reducing information sources, and increasing secrecy from the government. Centralizing power by subordinating subnational levels to the executive or by creating parallel bodies bound to the executive reduces opposition to regional political influence.[109]

These six mechanisms enhance presidential power while minimizing the opposition's ability not only to compete in a fair election but also to exercise power effectively when assuming any public office.

Rebalancing Presidential Powers

Reducing the hyper-presidentialism in Venezuela requires understanding how the 1999 Constitution enhanced the executive branch's power. The most visible change was the extension of the presidential term from five to six years. A longer mandate reduces how often the people hold the executive accountable electorally. A second issue is the nature of the enabling laws. The 1999 Constitution allows the president to govern by decree across any policy domain. When the president has a majority, enabling laws transform the president into a powerful legislator. The enabling law has been used not

[109] Javier Corrales, "The Authoritarian Resurgence: Autocratic Legalism in Venezuela," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 2 (April 2015): 37–51.

only to govern but also to preempt legislative oversight. Emergency powers operate along the same logic. They allow the president to bypass legislative control for thirty days, when the National Assembly must approve or reject the decree. Moreover, when the executive controls the judiciary, the president does not have any constraints on its extension. Article 203 admits a more restrictive interpretation than current practice has applied: It requires the Assembly to authorize delegated executive lawmaking on the basis of guidelines, scope, and duration. Reform should make this restrictive reading explicit by enumerating domains excluded from delegated lawmaking, including organic laws on fundamental rights, electoral processes, and the structure of the judiciary. Authorizations should be non-renewable and prohibit retroactive application.[110]

A third issue is the misalignment of the executive and legislative branches' terms. A five-year National Assembly term and a six-year presidential term do not align with accountability logic because the mismatch in mandates and the shorter term weaken the legislative branch's ability to function as an effective check-and-balance institution. In Mexico, the lower chamber of the legislative branch is elected every three years, allowing citizens to reward or punish the incumbent party during the six-year term of the executive branch. Similarly, in Colombia, where legislative and executive elections occur the same year but on different dates, the distribution of congressional seats signals the likely presidential outcome and defines the eventual winner's capacity to control the political agenda.

On bicameralism, our position is conditional: returning to a two-chamber legislature is worth pursuing only if the second chamber operates under representative criteria distinct from the lower house, such as territorial representation, staggered terms, or a different electoral formula. A Senate elected under the same rules and calendar would add procedural complexity without adding a meaningful veto point. The diagnostic case for revisiting the 1999 elimination of the Senate is straightforward: the move to a

[110] For a good summary of the abuse of executive legislation, see, Julio César Díaz Valdez, "De lo extraordinario a lo habitual: el uso progresivo de la habilitación legislativa y el estado de excepción en la política venezolana (1999-2025)," *Guayana Moderna*, no. 17 (enero-junio 2026): 135–53.

unicameral legislature removed a veto point whose representative logic differed from that of the lower chamber, reducing the structural possibility of divided government at exactly the moment when presidential powers were being expanded.[111] Unicameralism alone does not determine democratic vulnerability; Costa Rica has operated a stable democracy with a single chamber for decades, while bicameral systems in Argentina and Mexico failed to prevent prolonged executive dominance. Several Latin American constituent assemblies in the 1990s and 2000s moved toward unicameralism or weakened upper chambers because second chambers were considered obstacles to popular sovereignty, though the democratic motivations behind such reforms varied considerably.[112] What mattered in Venezuela was the combination: a single chamber elected on the same date as the president, under a mixed-member system that amplified ruling-party advantages, with no institutional redundancy to slow the concentration of power once a single coalition achieved majority control.

An additional issue is the executive branch's power to subordinate other branches of government to its will through the threat or exercise of the authority to convene elections to a constituent assembly with the power not only to draft a new constitutional text but to dissolve other branches of government. This authority effectively erases separation of powers, as it allows a popular president – as most presidents tend to be at least when they take office – to gain the acquiescence of other branches of government by initiating a process that can lead to their dissolution. This unique authority makes the Venezuelan constitutional framework incompatible with one of the key tenets of liberal democracies, and more adequately characterizable as that of an electoral autocracy.

Individually, none of these features is necessarily fatal to democratic governance. The problem is their combination. When enabling law authority, emergency powers, a misaligned legislative calendar and executive power to initiate dissolution of other branches of government converge with partisan control of the assembly, the executive

[111] Tsebelis, George. *Veto Players: How Political Institutions Work*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.
[112] Negretto, Gabriel L. *Making Constitutions: Presidents, Parties, and Institutional Choice in Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

faces no meaningful institutional constraint. Any reform that addresses presidential powers in isolation, without simultaneously tackling the conditions that allow those powers to be weaponized, will reproduce the same vulnerability under a different government.

Rebuilding Judicial Independence and Restoring the Rule of Law

The judiciary has been the primary instrument of autocratic legalism in Venezuela.[113] The 2004 Organic Law of the TSJ expanded the court from 20 to 32 justices and permitted appointment by simple majority, eliminating the constitutional requirement of broad consensus.[114] A thorough examination of more than 20,000 Constitutional Chamber rulings from 2005 to 2013 revealed that none successfully limited governmental authority.[115] These structural conditions persisted throughout the Maduro years and remain embedded in the institutional architecture inherited by the current interim government. The 2022 reform of the Organic Law cut the number of justices on the court to 20 and gave the legislature the power to nominate them. It also allowed current justices to be reappointed, which violates the constitution's rule against consecutive terms. By April 2022, 60% of the justices had already served previous terms.[116] Following the disputed July 2024 presidential election, the TSJ certified results that multiple international bodies rejected, with the UN Fact-Finding Mission, the OHCHR, the IACHR, and Freedom House all concluding that the court functions as an

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[113] See, Sanchez Urribarri, Raul A. "Courts between Democracy and Hybrid Authoritarianism: Evidence from the Venezuelan Supreme Court." *Law & Social Inquiry* 36, no. 4 (2011): 854–884; Sanchez Urribarri, Raul A. "Authoritarian Judicial Activism: A Look at the Venezuelan Case Under Chavismo." In *Judicial Activism in Comparative Perspective*, edited by Laura Hausegger and Raul Sanchez Urribarri. Peter Lang, 2024; Sanchez Urribarri, Raul, and Victoria Capriles. "Venezuela's (Un)Rule of Law under Nicolás Maduro." In *Authoritarian Consolidation in Times of Crisis: Venezuela under Nicolás Maduro*, edited by John Polga-Hecimovich and Raul Sánchez Urribarrí. Routledge, 2025.

[114] Brewer-Carías, A. R. (2010). *Dismantling democracy in Venezuela: The Chávez authoritarian experiment*. Cambridge University Press.

[115] Canova González, A., Herrera Orellana, L. A., Rodríguez Ortega, R. E., & Graterol Stefanelli, G. (2014). *El TSJ al servicio de la revolución: La toma, los números y los criterios del TSJ venezolano (2004–2013)*. Editorial Galipán.

[116] International Commission of Jurists. (2022, May 9). *Venezuela: The authorities must stop undermining judicial independence*. https://www.icj.org/venezuela-the-authorities-must-stop-undermining-judicial-independence/

instrument of executive power rather than a constitutional check on it.[117] The provisional judge problem is equally persistent. As of 2024, more than 80% of Venezuelan judges and justice operators continue to hold provisional or temporary appointments with no tenure protections, leaving them structurally dependent on the TSJ's Judicial Commission.[118] Rebuilding judicial independence requires reconstituting the Judicial Nominations Committee with genuine civil society participation, restoring the two-thirds supermajority for appointments, and implementing merit-based selection with security of tenure for lower courts, among other measures directed towards strengthening judicial independence and restoring the professionalization of the judiciary

Constitutional reform should also address the TSJ's structural overreach, seeking to enhance judicial independence whilst reinforcing judicial accountability. Striking the right balance requires reconsidering the extensive constitutional/judicial review prerogatives currently assigned to the Supreme Tribunal, especially to its Constitutional Chamber. On top of a rather generous catalog of formal review powers in the Constitution, the Constitutional Chamber interpreted these prerogatives quite liberally, seeking to expand its formal powers to support the executive's (and the ruling party's) agenda. The judicialization of politics in Venezuela led to the further politicization of the judiciary, as the stakes of controlling the TSJ became even greater over time. Scholars have documented multiple ways in which the TSJ ended up acting as an 'activist court' on the regime's behalf, going as far as declaring legislative acts unconstitutional *sua sponte* (of its own accord), authorizing emergency decrees without meaningful review, or, more recently, 'certifying' the results of the 2024 presidential election announced by the CNE.

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[117] United Nations Human Rights Council. (2020). *Report of the independent international fact-finding mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela*, A/HRC/45/33. United Nations; Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. (2022, February 17). *IACHR expresses concern over reform of organic law of Supreme Court of Justice of Venezuela*. OAS. https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/jsForm/?File=/en/iachr/media_center/preleases/2022/034.asp; Freedom House. (2025). *Freedom in the World 2025: Venezuela*. https://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela/freedom-world/2025.

[118] Human Rights Watch. (2004, June 16). *Rigging the rule of law: Judicial independence under siege in Venezuela*. https://www.hrw.org/report/2004/06/16/rigging-rule-law/judicial-independence-under-siege-venezuela; Transparencia Venezuela & Iniciativa para la Recuperación de los Activos Venezolanos (INRAV). (2024). *Civil society parallel report on Venezuela*. UNCAC Coalition. https://uncaccoalition.org/uncacparallelreportvenezuela/.

Moreover, the constitutional and legal framework for judicial governance also needs to be reconsidered. The elimination of the *Consejo de la Judicatura*, the establishment of the *Direccion Ejecutiva de la Magistratura* (DEM) under a politicized Supreme Tribunal, and the creation of the 'Judicial Commission' were all decisions that also contributed to the decline of both external and internal judicial independence and created new opportunities for corruption and clientelism (thus also contributing to the de-professionalization of the court system).

Concrete reform measures mayinclude: (a) abolishing the Judicial Commission's discretionary authority to appoint and dismiss provisional judges, replaced by a tenure-track appointment process for the lower courts; (b) reconstituting the Inspectoría General de Tribunales with structural autonomy from the TSJ; (c) restoring the two-thirds supermajority for high-court appointments and prohibiting consecutive reappointment, in line with Article 264; (d) capping the Sala Constitucional's size and curtailing its *sua sponte* review power; and (e) establishing a transitional vetting body, with civil society participation and a fixed sunset, to evaluate sitting judges against criteria of independence, professional competence, and conduct during the period of democratic erosion. The first four measures can proceed through organic law reform; the fifth requires either an enabling statute or a transitional constitutional provision.

On constitutional reform specifically, the 1999 Constitution provides three pathways under Title IX (Articles 340–349): amendment (Articles 340–341), which permits adding to or modifying articles without altering the fundamental structure and proceeds under ordinary lawmaking rules followed by referendum ratification; reform (Articles 342–346), which permits partial revision of multiple provisions without changing the fundamental structure, requires approval by two-thirds of those present in the National Assembly in two discussions, and is then submitted to referendum; and a National Constituent Assembly (Articles 347–349), which exercises original constituent power and may be convoked at the initiative of the president in council of ministers. two-thirds of the National Assembly, two-thirds of municipal councils, or 15 percent of registered voters.

The constituent route is technically available but politically risky. Given that the 1999 constituent process was used to consolidate executive power rather than constrain it, it is possible that a new process could go down the same route. An open-ended constitutional reform could also open up spaces of confrontation over highly contentious themes, such as labor protections, privatization of the oil sector or the scope of economic and social rights which could easily derail the reform effort. One possible path, therefore, is amendment-by-amendment, sequenced over multiple legislative cycles, beginning with statutory reforms that do not require constitutional change. Ideally, any proposal for constitutional reform would emerge from a broad and inclusive negotiation and thus count with support of key political and civil society stakeholders before being presented to the electorate.

Addressing Party Powers

The electoral system produces the party system, but the party system is not limited to it. Party interactions are contingent on the political conditions in which they can deploy their activity. Thus, political parties cannot survive without resources. Since the 1999 Constitution banned public financing of political parties, Venezuelan parties have been structurally dependent on their capacity to capture public office — not as a means to govern, but as the primary mechanism of organizational reproduction. This created a perverse equilibrium: parties that win subnational offices gain the material infrastructure to compete in the next electoral cycle, while those that lose face organizational atrophy. The imbalance gets worse over time. When one party or coalition controls most of the subnational offices, the playing field is already tilted in its favor before the next election, no matter what voters want.

Restoring competitive conditions, therefore, requires directly addressing party financing. A mixed scheme—combining proportional public financing tied to electoral performance with strict controls by an independent electoral body management over private contributions and campaign spending—would reduce parties' organizational dependence on office-holding without requiring immediate constitutional reform. This could be advanced through legislative agreement as part of a broader democratization

package. What cannot wait is the enforcement of existing prohibitions on the use of state resources, social programs, and public employees for partisan purposes. The normalization of these abuses has been one of the most corrosive features of Venezuelan electoral politics since 1999, and reversing it is a precondition for any minimally credible election.

Electoral Branch Reform

The National Electoral Council (CNE) sits at the intersection of executive hyper-empowerment and electoral asymmetry. The 1999 Constitution established appointment mechanisms that formally involve civil society, but these guardrails were systematically hollowed out once the ruling party secured control over the National Assembly and, subsequently, the Supreme Tribunal. A captured judiciary made appointments that should have followed constitutional procedure, explicitly insulating the electoral authority from accountability. The result is an institution that ceased to function as a neutral arbiter and became an instrument for the management of electoral outcomes in favor of the incumbent.

Reforming the CNE is therefore not primarily a technical problem. The legal framework — the Constitution and the Organic Law of Electoral Processes — contains sufficient provisions to conduct a credible election if applied in good faith. Likewise, the automated voting process is solid and auditable—it was key to detecting the July 2024 electoral fraud. Moving to manual voting with paper ballots would make the system less secure, not more. The problem lies elsewhere: institutional compliance cannot be assumed and must be structurally guaranteed. This means, first, that any transitional arrangement must prioritize the reconstitution of the CNE through legitimate appointment procedures, with genuine civil society participation—such as members of political and human rights organizations, academia, and electoral experts—and without the legislative or judicial shortcuts that have characterized the last two decades. Second, the partisan capture of subnational electoral offices must be reversed. The regional and municipal offices of the CNE were systematically staffed with party

loyalists, which means that depoliticizing the electoral apparatus requires changes that go well below the level of the five board members.

A recent Chatham House paper similarly argues that the institutional, legal, and technical groundwork for credible elections must begin immediately, given the degradation of the electoral, judicial, and security institutions inherited from the Chávez and Maduro governments.[119]

Beyond the CNE's composition, several additional reforms are necessary to restore the minimum conditions of electoral integrity. The rehabilitation of political parties and candidates arbitrarily disqualified between 2016 and 2024 — many through administrative procedures that contradict the constitutional requirement of a firm judicial sentence — is a critically important precondition for pluralist competition, though the scope and sequencing of such rehabilitation will ultimately depend on negotiated agreements among political actors. So is the reopening of voter registration, particularly for the Venezuelan diaspora, whose political exclusion has been systematic and deliberate. The neutrality of the public media system, the elimination of coercive practices at voting centers, and the reduction of the military's role in electoral logistics are reforms that do not require constitutional amendment; they require political will and legislative follow-through. The May 2025 parliamentary elections, in which the ruling coalition won over 82 percent of seats amid roughly 43 percent turnout, illustrate the compounding effects of unreformed electoral conditions: a fragmented opposition, with some sectors participating and others boycotting, could not translate whatever real support it holds into legislative representation under rules that systematically favor incumbents.

Taken together, these reforms define the short-term horizon of electoral democratization: changes achievable through legal compliance and legislative action, without waiting for the longer constitutional reform cycle. The medium- and long-term

[119] Christopher Sabatini, *Democratic Elections in Venezuela Won't Happen Overnight: Here's the Groundwork That's Needed First*, Chatham House Research Paper (London: Chatham House, April 2026), https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784136826.

agenda—revisiting the electoral system's disproportionality, reforming enabling law authorities, and rebalancing executive-legislative relations—rests on first stabilizing the electoral arena. A CNE that parties and citizens cannot trust undermines every institutional reform downstream; without a credible electoral authority, the broader changes outlined in this chapter risk repeating a familiar pattern in which negotiated arrangements survive only until the next electoral winner dismantles them. Successful reform also will require judicial reform, most particularly with the electoral commission of the Supreme Tribunal. A clear framework for international observation that goes beyond "accompaniment" is also necessary. Observers need to have independence of movement and access to electoral institutions to be credible.

Restoring the electoral arena requires more than reforming the CNE. The Sala Electoral of the TSJ has been the institutional bottleneck for adjudicating electoral disputes, and its current composition lacks the independence required to function as a credible adjudicator. Reform should establish appointment criteria for the Sala Electoral distinct from those of the rest of the TSJ, mandate the publication of fully reasoned rulings, recognize standing for candidates and parties to challenge CNE decisions, and impose binding timelines for adjudication. Scholars have argued, electoral integrity depends on the conjunction of competent electoral administration and independent electoral justice; reform of one without the other reproduces the asymmetry.[120]

Citizen's Branch

The Citizen's Branch, composed of the Attorney General, the Ombudsman, and the Comptroller General, acting collectively as the "Republican Moral Council," were designed as an accountability mechanism independent of the executive. Each office has been captured. The Attorney General's office under Tarek William Saab (2017-2016)

[120] Benigno Alarcón Deza, Juan Manuel Trak, Miguel Ángel Torrealba Sánchez, and Daniela Urosa Maggi, *Propuestas para una reforma electoral: Buscando la integridad electoral en Venezuela* (Caracas: Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, 2016); Daniela Urosa Maggi, "Recuperando la integridad electoral en Venezuela: Condiciones electorales necesarias para garantizar elecciones presidenciales libres y transparentes," *IACL-AIDC Blog*, May 20, 2019, https://blog-iacl-aidc.org/crisis-in-venezuela/2019/5/20/recuperando-la-integridad-electoral-en-venezuela-condiciones-electorales-necesarias-para-garantizar-elecciones-presidenciales-libres-y-transparentes.

operated as an instrument of political persecution, and the April 2026 confirmation of Larry Devoe, formerly head of the National Council of Human Rights and a close ally of interim President Delcy Rodríguez, was approved through a procedure that more than 60 civil society organizations, the UN human rights experts, and the OHCHR publicly questioned for failing to meet merit-based standards. The Ombudsman's Office under Alfredo Ruiz worked in close collaboration with the Maduro government; the April 2026 designation of Eglée González Lobato did not address the underlying independence problem and was likewise criticized for lacking the human rights experience required by Article 280.[121] The Comptroller General, Gustavo Vizcaíno (in office since 2024), wielded the power of administrative disqualification (*inhabilitación*) to bar opposition candidates without judicial rulings, as required by Article 65 of the Constitution, producing several candidacy bans between 2008 and 2024.[122] Reconstituting these offices requires restoring the civil society evaluation committees the Constitution mandates. Equally, the Comptroller's disqualification power—the capacity to ban citizens from running as a candidate through an administrative rather than a judicial decision—must be legislatively constrained; administrative disqualification without judicial process is one of the most effective mechanisms of electoral manipulation in Venezuela, and its continued availability would undermine any reform of the electoral branch. Notice also that the existence and/or abuse of these prerogatives is also the consequence of the lack of an effective judicial remedy against breaches of fundamental rights, reinforcing the need for effective judicial reform and a restoration of the constitutional order and the democratic rule of law.

[121] New Attorney General, Ombudsman Appointments in Venezuela Draw Criticism," *Latin America Reports*, April 10, 2026, https://latinamericareports.com/new-attorney-general-ombudsman-appointments-in-venezuela-draw-criticism/14197/; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Venezuela: Appointments of Attorney General and Ombudsperson Must Be Merit-Based, Say UN Experts," press release, March 26, 2026, https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2026/03/venezuela-appointments-attorney-general-and-ombudsperson-must-be-merit-based.

[122] For an analysis of how candidate disqualifications were used to consolidate authoritarian rule, see Javier Corrales, *Autocracy Rising: How Venezuela Transitioned to Authoritarianism*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2022.

5. Reforming Chavismo: How can it become fully adapted to a pluralist democracy?

Challenge:

- Some sectors of Chavismo think of their movement in revolutionary terms as synonymous with the interests of the people. Others are embedded in power and are not interested in change or are fearful of giving up power.

Recommendations

- Restoration of effective electoral competition and reduction of winner-take-all terms can reduce fear of a transition.
- Guarantees of the continuing persistence of Chavismo are essential.
- Moderate, pluralist elements of Chavismo need to come to the fore.

Ideological reconfiguration: solving the divide between revolution and democracy

The central challenge for Chavismo lies in reconfiguring itself as a leftist political project compatible with democratic pluralism. This requires confronting a fundamental ideological tension: although Chavismo has historically drawn on principles of social justice, participation, and popular sovereignty, its exercise of power has been characterized by the rejection of political alternation and the fusion of party and state. This tension can also be understood as the reflection of a tension between the durability

of the Revolutionary project versus its capacity to maintain its Democratic characteristics. A durable democratic adaptation would therefore require reconciling these traditions by decoupling emancipatory ambitions from hegemonic and authoritarian practices.

Such a transformation implies recognizing that political competition, alternation in power, and institutional constraints are not external impositions but conditions that can ensure the long-term viability of chavismo itself. The governing coalition faced an existential threat on January 3rd, and although the Rodríguez interim administration has demonstrated a significant capacity for adaptation, it continues to confront both internal and external pressures. These include factional tensions within the ruling bloc, potential shifts in U.S. policy that could favor the traditional opposition, and the prospect of competitive elections in the future[123]. In this context, the current administration appears engaged in a race against the unraveling of the current system—seeking either to secure its stay in power or to reduce the costs associated with a potential loss of office.

Against this backdrop, opportunities for democratization should not be dismissed. Previous political junctures have already illustrated the consequences of rejecting negotiated transitions. When the Maduro administration was given the opportunity - by progressive international actors such as Lula, Petro and AMLO- to an organized alternation of power in July 2024, its refusal contributed to a conflict escalation that eventually became a military intervention. While the present context differs, the urgency of a democratic reorientation remains evident.

In this sense, rethinking the meaning of the left in power also requires repositioning Chavismo within broader left-wing debates-both domestically, in dialogue with actors demanding democratic, labor, and civil liberties- and internationally, where its trajectory has become a point of contention and redefinition for progressive forces. However, this would require operating under conditions of uncertainty and acknowledging the

[123] https://www.recordedfuture.com/research/understanding-and-anticipating-venezuelan-government-actions

legitimacy of political adversaries. Such a shift would mark a transition from a model grounded in permanent political predominance to one based on coexistence, contestation, and negotiated governance.

Considering the heterogeneity of Chavismo

In order to envisage a reform of Chavismo, it is first necessary to characterize its nature and composition. In this regard, we propose referring to "Chavismos" in the plural, insofar as the movement has brought together diverse strands of Venezuelan political actors that have both collaborated and conflicted over the definition of the Bolivarian Revolution and its strategic orientations. Indeed, internal struggles within the governing coalition have been managed through purges and other processes of reorganization, which have also given rise to forms of chavismo no longer tied to the party-state system and, in some cases, positioning themselves in opposition to the ruling elites.

Following January 3rd, 2026, the different strands of chavismo have engaged in intense debates to assess the political conjuncture and determine their respective positions within an unprecedented crisis. *Governing chavismo* has demonstrated a significant capacity for adaptation, responding to the demands of the White House while consolidating its hold on power. In particular, the Rodríguez administration has pursued rapprochement with the Trump administration, including opening Venezuela's oil and mining sectors to foreign investment as part of a broader "stabilization" strategy[124].

Communal chavismo, increasingly integrated into the Party-State apparatus since 2024—particularly with the appointment of Ángel Prado to the Ministry of Communes—has helped reinforce the government's legitimacy by promoting the image of a grassroots-oriented project. This narrative has resonated with segments of international

[124] See, for instance, Associated Press, "Venezuela's new leader calls for opening oil industry to foreign investment and warmer U.S. ties," January 15, 2026, and Reuters, "Venezuela legislature approves mining law meant to open sector to foreign investment," April 9, 2026.

left-wing solidarity movements, especially in Latin America[125], which have been more critical of U.S. tutelage.

Finally, *critical chavismo* has developed analytical frameworks around notions such as the "protectorate" and *gobierno cipayo*[126] to interpret the emerging political configuration. At the same time, it has sought to build alliances with other opposition actors, including trade unions, human rights organizations, and collectives advocating for political prisoners, with the aim of strengthening popular mobilization in the struggle for democratic transformation.

One result of the heterogeneity of Chavismos is that the objective of adapting to a pluralist democratic society is embraced by some actors while explicitly rejected by others. The tension between revolution and democracy has run through the Chavista coalition since the outset of the Bolivarian process, evolving rather than disappearing. Historically, Interactions among the various Chavismos have been complex, yet they also constitute an opportunity. Efforts to articulate a democratic Chavista identity already exist and can be further encouraged both internally and externally.

Proposals for the Pluralist Adaptation of Chavismo

Chavismo as a political identity is not incompatible with a project of democratic transition in Venezuela; rather, it is its authoritarian consolidation that constitutes the principal obstacle. Ruling elites have constructed a governing system in which fragmentation and the patrimonialization of the state have become normalized[127]. Such an institutional configuration enables the preservation of hegemonic control while facilitating the erosion of electoral competition,[128] the partisan subordination and

[125] https://www.sinpermiso.info/textos/i-conferencia-antifascista-de-porto-alegre-balance-y-declaracion-dossier.

[126] The term "cipayo" originally referred to native Indian soldiers (sepoys) who served in the British colonial army. In Latin America, it is used pejoratively to describe a government perceived as subservient to foreign interests at the expense of national sovereignty.

[127] Yoletty Bracho and Fabrice Andréani (2023). "Pour une sociologie politique des rapports ordinaires à la violence d'État. Productions, résistances et (dé)légitimations dans le Venezuela contemporain", *Cahiers des Amériques latines*,103,

[128] Levitsky, S. and Lucan Way (2010). *Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

instrumentalization of participatory mechanisms [129], and the restriction and repression of political and social dissent directed at governing elites.

Although institutional changes have been introduced since January 3rd, these cannot not be interpreted as guarantees of a democratic transition. Reforms affecting key sectors—such as the hydrocarbons law opening the oil industry to foreign investment, the restructuring of central state institutions such as the Ministry of Defense, and the adoption of an amnesty law—remain limited in scope and contested in their implementation. Rather than signaling a substantive democratization process, these measures can be understood as adaptive strategies deployed by the Rodríguez administration to stabilize and maintain its hold on power.

In this context, the internal diversity of chavismo, combined with its historical trajectory from participatory experimentation to centralized control and authoritarianism (Lander, 2007; García-Guadilla, 2007; Antillano, 2005)[130], creates both constraints and opportunities for democratic transformation. The persistence of multiple chavismos suggests that the movement's future is not predetermined, but contingent on how its internal tensions are resolved.

Excluding chavismo as a legitimate political option in Venezuela could undermine incentives for the democratic adaptation of its internal factions. Moreover, it is

[129]García-Guadilla, M. P. (2007). "Ciudadanía y autonomía en las organizaciones sociales bolivarianas: los Comités de Tierra Urbana como movimientos sociales". Cuadernos del CENDES, 24(66), 47-73. Antillano, A. (2005). "La lucha por el reconocimiento y la inclusión en los barrios populares: la experiencia de los Comités de Tierras Urbanas". Revista Venezolana de Economía y Ciencias Sociales, 11(3), 205-218. Cariola, C. and Lacabana, M. (2005). "Los bordes de la esperanza: nuevas formas de participación popular y gobiernos locales en la periferia de Caracas". Revista Venezolana de Economía y Ciencias Sociales, 11(1), 21-41. Jungemann, B. (2008). "Organizaciones sociales y anclaje territorial Escenarios y componentes de la transformación socioterritorial y local en Venezuela". Cuadernos del CENDES, 25(67), 3-34.

[130] Lander, E. (2007) "El Estado y las tensiones de la participación popular en Venezuela". OSAL, 8(22). García-Guadilla, M. P. (2007). "Ciudadanía y autonomía en las organizaciones sociales bolivarianas: los Comités de Tierra Urbana como movimientos sociales". Cuadernos del CENDES, 24(66), 47-73. Antillano, A. (2005). "La lucha por el reconocimiento y la inclusión en los barrios populares: la experiencia de los Comités de Tierras Urbanas". Revista Venezolana de Economía y Ciencias Sociales, 11(3), 205-218.

necessary to call on chavismo's participatory tradition[131] to be rearticulated within a pluralist framework. The July 28 elections gave us an example of the democratic aspirations within chavismos as some rank-and-file chavistas serving as electoral witnesses shared their tallies with opposition actors to help verify the results. While such episodes should not be overstated, they nonetheless demonstrate that pluralist orientations are present within chavismos, and in particular within its grassroots base. Under credible guarantees and fair competition, segments of chavismo will be receptive to a more pluralist, rule-bound form of participation. A democratic transition could therefore benefit from creating incentives for chavismo to operate within an institutional redesign that restores the participatory dimension of democracy alongside its representative dimension. In fact, the 1999 Constitution exhibits, side by side, institutions, mechanisms, and guarantees for each one of these dimensions.

The proposals outlined below are therefore organized around the need to shift the balance between the democratic and the hegemonic inspirations of chavismo. Rather than prescribing a fixed institutional design, they seek to identify pathways through which pluralist adaptation can become a viable and attractive option for different sectors within chavismo. This involves lowering the costs of political openness, enabling internal differentiation, and, in the longer term, rearticulating chavismo as a non-hegemonic leftist project capable of operating within democratic rules.

Reducing the risk of abandoning power

It is important to recognize that chavismo's authoritarian trajectory rests on institutional dynamics, specific actors, and organizational configurations that function as potential spoilers of pluralization. As Section 9 will show, a cohesive political-military elite concentrates power, with civilian leaders and military actors deeply intertwined, blurring the boundaries between party, state, and the coercive apparatus. Figures associated

[131] Azzellini, D. (2008). "La revolución bolivariana: o inventamos o erramos. Llaves para leer el proceso de transformación social venezolano". Bajo el Volcán, 7(12), 11-28. Velasco, A. (2011) "We Are Still Rebels: The Challenge of Popular History in Bolivarian Venezuela." In Smilde, D. and Hellinger, D. Eds. Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy: Participation, Politics, and Culture under Chávez. Durham: Duke U Press.

with hardline sectors of the PSUV—such as Diosdado Cabello—have consistently opposed negotiated openings and framed potential transitions as existential threats, reinforcing incentives to preserve hegemonic control. This configuration builds on a broader structure in which the armed forces operate simultaneously as a security institution and as a political and economic actor, with officers holding key positions in government and state-owned enterprises while participating in rent-generating networks. More fundamentally, chavismo's discourse has historically advanced a majoritarian conception of democracy alongside a conflictive and militarized political imaginary that privileges unity, discipline, and loyalty over pluralism.

In this sense, for chavismo to become a conventional political option that accepts alternation in power, reducing the perceived and actual risks associated with relinquishing hegemonic control, should be a priority. Indeed, for many actors within chavismo, whether governing elites or grassroots, the prospect of political opening is closely associated with exclusion, loss of power, protection and economic privileges, or political irrelevance. Compared to this, preserving centralized control seems like an acceptable and safe strategy. In other words, the feasibility of a democratic transition is constrained by high polarization and prevailing zero-sum dynamics, which reduce incentives for cooperation and increase the perceived risks of political opening.

Shifting this perception requires lowering the costs of pluralism while generating credible signals that chavismo can continue to exist as a legitimate political actor within a democratic framework, capable of competing, organizing, and participating without facing existential threats. Such openings can resonate within chavismo and open space for actors to consider alternatives to hegemonic control.

In order to develop this opening, several actions can be undertaken within a broader transitional process that guarantees representation of chavista diversity in the bodies created to oversee this process.

a) Explicit commitments by both government and opposition leaders that grassroots chavistas and mid-level actors who engage in pluralist practices will not face political exclusion, loss of benefits, or legal persecution.

b) Discursive reframing of democratization not as the defeat or elimination of chavismo, but as its normalization as a legitimate political actor within a competitive system;

c) Enabling and protecting local-level arenas where chavista and opposition actors can collaborate without immediate high political costs or disciplinary pressures;

d) Commitment of all political actors to ensure recovery of the constitution and state institutions.

These are the minimum conditions under which internal recalibration within chavismo would become possible. This includes avoiding political and discursive strategies that frame democratization as the eradication of chavismo, while reinforcing expectations of fair competition and inclusion.

Evidence of the capacity of grassroots and mid-level chavismo to adapt to new political frameworks has already emerged on the ground. In particular, the shift toward relatively recent humanitarian forms of provision—which both complement and, in some cases, replace traditional mechanisms of public goods distribution—highlights the strong commitment of local leaders and organizations to sustaining everyday life in working-class neighborhoods. While this role was once structurally embedded in participatory institutions later instrumentalized by chavista elites, it is also rooted in a longer historical tradition of mediation between the working classes and the state[132]).

[132] Machado, J. E. (2009). "Participación social y consejos comunales en Venezuela". *Revista Venezolana de Economía y Ciencias Sociales*, 15(1), 173-185. Velasco, A. (2011) "We Are Still Rebels: The Challenge of Popular History in Bolivarian Venezuela." In Smilde, D. and Hellinger, D. Eds. *Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy: Participation, Politics, and Culture under Chávez*. Durham: Duke U Press.

In this sense, an opportunity exists to reconfigure these intermediary practices by strengthening the autonomy of organized working-class actors and fostering collaboration with public and non-profit institutions, thereby articulating redistributive policies with democratic forms of everyday governance.

Enable internal differentiation within chavismo

The consolidation of hegemonic control has depended on suppressing internal pluralism and subordinating diverse currents to a unified leadership. Reversing this dynamic requires creating conditions under which different strands of chavismo can emerge and operate within a broader political field.

Chavismo, as a governing coalition, has been structured through multiple layers of intermediation between political elites and territorial bases[133]. While these mediations were historically shaped by a diverse range of actors, the progressive concentration of power within a dominant party framework and a highly restrictive civil–military coalition has narrowed the definition of Chavista identity, effectively turning it into the preserve of a limited elite.

Reopening these channels of intermediation to a broader plurality of actors is therefore essential if chavismo is to reintegrate democratic practices. This process must also entail a clear reestablishment of the separation between civilian and military institutions, ensuring the subordination of the latter to the former in the exercise of political power.

With this in mind, several key dimensions of the current Chavista configuration require transformation, such as:

a) Party diversification: The United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) was originally conceived as a mechanism to unify the diverse political forces supporting chavista governments, particularly in the context of electoral competition. Party unity was framed as a strategic imperative, and the PSUV emerged from the merger of multiple pro-

[133] Torrealba, C. (2023). "Con y contra el Estado: revisitando los mecanismos de coerción y respuestas comunales en Venezuela" *Cahiers des Amériques latines*, 103.

Chávez organizations with the aim of consolidating the revolutionary process under a single political structure.

However, the party rapidly centralized and marginalized dissenting voices, compelling the diverse currents within Chavismo to align with a unified political discourse. This dynamic extended beyond the political sphere into the administrative domain, where access to state positions increasingly functioned as a form of reward for party loyalty.

Nevertheless, alternative and incipient party formations have emerged in recent years from dissident strands of Chavismo. As well, historically allied organizations—such as the Communist Party of Venezuela—have taken more critical stances toward the government, reflecting fractures within the Chavista coalition. Supporting these emerging organizations—both politically and materially—constitutes a key avenue for fostering the organizational pluralism necessary to enable a more democratic expression of Chavista identity in Venezuela's future political landscape.

b) Participatory institutions: evidence from participatory governance suggests that processes of differentiation are possible within participatory practices, as well as grounded in prior experience[134]. Participatory institutions in Venezuela have functioned as pluralist arenas when not subordinated to partisan control.[135] Local experiences such as participatory processes in the Sucre municipality under Carlos Ocariz (where chavista and opposition actors were incorporated into shared deliberative spaces) demonstrate that coexistence across political divides is feasible under conditions of relatively clear rules and effective implementation.

c) Non-governmental expressions of chavismo: the question of how Chavismo pluralizes inevitably raises the issue of who drives that pluralization: whether it emerges from governing elites, grassroots actors, or intermediate sectors across the different Chavismos identified. Given this indeterminacy, it is difficult to prescribe a clear

[134] Lander, E. (2007) "El Estado y las tensiones de la participación popular en Venezuela". *OSAL*, 8(22).
[135] Hetland, G. (2023). *Democracy on the Ground: Local Politics in Latin America's Left Turn*. Columbia University Press.

pathway, which is reflected in the chapter's cautious use of passive formulations. Nonetheless, there are a set of organizations and experiences that may act as catalysts and provide an enabling environment. In fact, in recent years, grassroots leaders, activists, intellectuals, and former government officials have articulated alternative visions of Chavismo beyond the boundaries of the state-party system. Several illustrative initiatives can be identified.

The *Platform for the Defense of the Constitution*[136] brings together civil society actors and former public officials around a shared commitment to restoring the democratic mechanisms enshrined in the 1999 Constitution. It seeks both to consolidate cooperation among its members and to open channels of dialogue with governing elites as well as sectors of the traditional opposition.

The *Unión Comunera*[137] emerged as a chavista but non-partisan expression of organized popular power, initially aiming to challenge the implementation of the communal project (Torrealba, 2023)[138]. Although this group has, over time, moved closer to the PSUV, it illustrates the capacity of governing elites to reabsorb dissent in the absence of alternative institutional and political outlets.

The human rights organization *Surgentes*[139] explicitly claims a chavista identity as a source of legitimacy in its engagement with working-class sectors, while denouncing political and police violence and providing support to victims of repression.

The *Comunes*[140] movement reflects a longer trajectory of chavista dissidence, evolving through various self-definitions—such as *chavismo bravío*, *chavismo original*, and *chavismo popular*. Situated at the intersection of intellectual and activist spheres, its members often possess prior governing experience and have developed both national

[136] https://www.aporrea.org/autores/plataforma.defensa.constitucion.
[137]https://progressive.international/blueprint/f22d35c7-3c28-4a38-a08c-820e56f29947-unin-comunera-bases-programticas-y-estatutos-2022/es/
[138] Torrealba, C. (2023). "Con y contra el Estado: revisitando los mecanismos de coerción y respuestas comunales en Venezuela" *Cahiers des Amériques latines*, 103.
[139] https://surgentes.org.ve/
[140] https://corrientecomunes.org/

and international solidarity networks, enabling them to articulate critical positions across multiple arenas.

More broadly, feminist, ecological, and artistic collectives have also claimed—or continue to claim—a chavista identity, even as many have been subject to political repression and have sought avenues for a more expansive democratic expression.

Enabling these actors to organize, deliberate, and participate without disciplinary constraints is essential for transforming chavismo from a vertically integrated structure into a more heterogeneous political coalition. The objective is not fragmentation but diversification—that is, allowing plurality to acquire meaningful political expression. The groups described above provide a foundation for envisioning a more internally differentiated and pluralist chavismo, one that may also find its counterpart in an opposition increasingly aware of its own internal diversity and the necessity of pluralism.

Conclusion

Reforming chavismo entails its normalization as one political option among others. A non-hegemonic chavismo would retain its capacity to represent important sectors of Venezuelan society and to advance redistributive and participatory agendas, but within a framework in which power is not monopolized and democratic rules are respected.

A final caveat is warranted. The proposals advanced here rest on the assumption that chavismo retains some responsiveness to institutional reconfigurations. This premise will be met with skepticism by those who view its adaptations as purely strategic, leaving intact a fundamentally hegemonic conception of power. Without dismissing such concerns, we argue that institutional reconfiguration may nonetheless render pluralizing tendencies politically viable. These proposals should thus be understood as contingent pathways, not guarantees, whose plausibility depends on the interplay between political will, internal differentiation, and democratic constraints.

6. Reforming the Opposition: How to manage internal diversity and coexist with Chavismo

Challenge:

- The opposition's enduring internal conflicts between maximalists and moderates have led it to underperform over the past two decades. Now, both political blocs need to cooperate in order to define their roles and goals in the current dynamic and in a path for institutional and political transition.

Recommendations:

- The different opposition groups need to develop an agreed-upon structure with which it can aggregate preferences and manage conflicting ideological views, maintaining a degree of sustained coordination to push for key reforms.

- The "hoja de ruta" issued by the Plataforma Unitaria Democrática is a starting point, but must translate into concrete action rather than remain a list of demands.

The failure to bring about a change of government in 2024 left the opposition's domestic capacities once again diminished, with María Corina Machado and her team turning to an international strategy to dislodge Nicolás Maduro from the presidency. However, Delcy Rodríguez's ascension to the presidency under the tutelage of the Trump administration cast doubt on the opposition's actual ability to shape any eventual democratic transition. Beyond its immediate effects, this episode reopens a deeper question about whether — and how — the opposition could help build a political order capable of managing pluralism and sustaining democratic competition.

In this context, the opposition remains divided over strategies for political change. In recent statements, Machado has affirmed her alignment with the U.S. plan that envisions the current stabilization phase followed by one of 'recovery and reconciliation,'

into which she fits an offer of non-retaliation and of “respecting the rights and freedoms even of those who denied them to us.”[141] This would mean recognizing chavismo as a legitimate political movement and as a party to a 'national agreement' on institutional issues that, she argues, Venezuelans are eager to address: pluralism, subsidiarity, military subordination to civilian power, indefinite re-election, and bicameralism.

Nevertheless, this comes after Machado and the leaders around her have consistently put forward elements of a maximalist narrative[142] that suggests democratization would be possible only after pushing aside chavismo, which they characterize not as a political actor but as a criminal bloc. This perspective does not align *prima facie* with the three-stage plan of indeterminate duration announced by the Trump administration. In practice, Machado's agenda has focused on two goals: preventing Delcy Rodríguez's government from claiming political credit for economic stabilization, and pressing for early elections that her sector could win decisively — over both Chavista candidates and rival opposition contenders. This lack of alignment with Trump policy has likely been a factor reducing Machado’s influence over the development of the Trump administration’s plan. It is possible we may see a convergence of the sort suggested by Machado’s most recent statements.[143]

By contrast, the weakened parties and leaders that make up the parliamentary caucus known as ‘Fracción Libertad,’ along with other groupings, have opted to participate in initiatives associated with the U.S.-driven stabilization plan and eventual transition. Their premise is that the gradual restoration of institutions and basic state capacity are

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[141] Boris Muñoz, “María Corina Machado: ‘La posición de Estados Unidos y otros aliados pesa en mi decisión de volver, hay que buscar el momento correcto’,” *El País* (América), May 10, 2026, El País article.

[142] Abraham Lowenthal, *Venezuela’s Elusive Transition: Toward a New Path,* Washington, DC: Wilson Center, Latin America Program, August 2021, p. 15 y ss.

[143] However, shortly after Machado’s declarations, Juan Pablo Guanipa, one of her closest collaborators currently in Venezuela defied Trump, demanding elections immediately. Ariana Moreno Pineda, “Guanipa desata polémica al llamar ‘pelucón’ a Trump para exigir elecciones en Venezuela,” *El Cooperante*, May 16, 2026, El Cooperante article.

necessary preconditions for a sustainable path to democracy which culminates in elections that all actors recognize as legitimate. This strategic path faces resistance within opposition public opinion, which has little confidence in moderate leaders because of their prior perceived lack of effectiveness, and supports Machado by a clear majority, according to different opinion studies. In a context of (self-)censorship and unequal access to dissemination channels, it is worth asking how these opinion trends might shift if there were more balanced conditions of visibility, coverage, and debate among the different opposition currents in an ecosystem without restrictions on public opinion.

Indeed, since the dissolution of the Mesa de la Unidad Democrática in 2015, the different opposition groups and parties have lacked a formal space of strategic coordination and that has prevented their development of a shared roadmap for democratization—one not limited to replacing the actors who exercise power, but aimed at transforming the rules that structure political competition.[144] In other words, their debates have centered on who holds power, rather than on the rules governing how power is competed for and exercised.[145]

Moreover, different sectors of the opposition face another strategic challenge: how to recognize and represent the population's demands. This will require rebuilding links that have eroded as parties and civic organizations have weakened, and as the population has grown politically disengaged — a consequence of state failure and the collapse of public welfare and protection policies discussed above.

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[144] Jiménez, M. "Contesting Autocracy: Opposition Coordination and Repression in Venezuela", Political Studies (2021).

[145] Rodríguez, F."Venezuela's Long Road to Recovery: An Economic Revival Can't Happen Without Political Transformation." *Foreign Affairs, February 23, 2026*. International Crisis Group (2018). *Fuego amigo: el caos de la oposición venezolana*. Informe sobre América Latina N°71. In December 2012, experts commissioned by the Unitary Democratic Table (MUD) provided a report with a review of the opposition coalition and strategic recommendations revealing these issues. see *Informe Hospedales (https://es.slideshare.net/slideshow/informe-hospedales-2012-comisin-para-la-estrategia-de-la-mesa-de-la-unidad-democrtica/70841759)*, lo que posteriormente aparecería como la tensión estratégica que se describe en esta sección.

Strategic Decisions of the Opposition

The democratization process cannot simply be conceived as the beginning of a new cycle grounded in the exclusion of chavismo as a political movement. In broader terms, the challenge is to rebuild a political system capable of sustaining competitive pluralism in which diverse political identities can coexist within shared institutional frameworks.

As argued in section 5, a fundamental starting point is that opposition political actors—and Venezuelan society as a whole—need to recognize that, despite the authoritarian process it underwent, the political identity of chavismo contains components compatible with liberal democracy. It needs to be assumed that this movement can be institutionally channeled under rules that allow alternation in power and reduce incentives for hegemonic rule.

Moreover, as described in section 4, the institutional design resulting from the 1999 Constitution led to the preeminence of presidential power over the other public powers and to the construction of a hyper-majoritarian electoral system that systematically advantaged the *incumbent*, blocking possibilities for the alternation of power. This means that, both in electoral confrontation and in political dynamics more generally, the winner really does take all –and the loser runs the risk of disappearing as a political actor.

In this way, incentives were configured for part of the opposition to adopt a maximalist strategy that could resort to extra-system tactics to try to fracture the power bloc, while other, institutionalist sectors maintained that political change required a progressive route of mobilizing social and electoral coalitions. Although the opposition unified tactically to mobilize and win the 2024 presidential election, it failed to reach strategic agreements to prepare for the government's predictable authoritarian reaction. Faced with an existential political defeat in a 'winner-take-all' political system, the government unsurprisingly chose fraud over concession.

Comparative experience suggests that democratization processes are rarely articulated exclusively around presidential leadership or personalistic figures. More often, they

emerge from prolonged negotiations, gradual reforms, and institutional arrangements that seek to balance divergent interests.[146] These processes often entail concessions that are difficult for the citizenry to accept in the short term (and costly in political capital for those who lead them), but they are fundamental for building political agreements capable of lasting over time.

In that sense, one of Venezuela's central challenges is to shift the axis of political competition from the logic of existential confrontation toward institutional debates about the distribution of power, guarantees for minorities, and mechanisms of political cooperation. Breaking with the 'winner-takes-all' scheme implies designing institutional arrangements and political practices that allow coexistence among diverse actors without electoral defeat translating into total exclusion.

Six Urgent tasks for the opposition movement

In the following we describe changes that are needed, ordered by urgency. All are longstanding and all are necessary, but we present them in the relative order of their importance in a quickly moving political process.

1. ***Address strategic disagreements within the opposition***

The current moment requires an urgent rebuilding of channels, intermediations, and mechanisms of strategic coordination among different opposition groups. Opposition fragmentation has weakened its ability to shape the present juncture, and there is a real risk that Venezuela's political transition will evolve through decisions and agreements that completely bypass the opposition movement.

It is indispensable to move toward coordination schemes that recognize ideological diversity while also enabling joint strategic decision-making. For this, it is essential to accept political pluralism—both between government and opposition and, perhaps more urgently, within the opposition itself. Failure of mutual recognition between 'radical' and

[146] Guillermo O'Donnell and Philip Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Valerie Bunce and Sharon L. Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

‘moderate’ actors (both fluid categories in Venezuela) would amount to the continued unviability of the opposition as a democratizing actor.

This entails creating formal and informal structures for dialogue that can process internal conflicts, build trust, and establish minimum common grounds for political action. On the one hand, it is essential to generate private spaces with anonymity commitments, where leaders of different opposition groups can debate without fear of being ‘named and shamed’ in the media or on social networks. On the other hand (and as a result of these dialogue spaces), it is necessary to foster mechanisms for preference aggregation, decision-making, and conflict resolution among opposition sectors. International organizations and friendly countries can play an essential role as guarantors of agreed-upon rules and as actors that vertically articulate decisions.

2. ***Redefine the relationship with the United States and other international actors.***

The elephant in the room is the relationship with the U.S. government. To date, Machado’s team has focused—understandably—on the Trump administration. However, it is important to design a bipartisan work plan in the United States that starts from a realistic reading of the U.S. political system, understanding that support for the Venezuelan cause can vary depending on electoral cycles. It is therefore fundamental to build a nonpartisan agenda with points of convergence between Democrats and Republicans, especially on issues such as regional stability, democracy, migration, and human rights.

In addition, the agenda should translate into concrete advocacy actions, such as engagement with a broad representation of think tanks, academia, and Venezuelan diaspora organizations, which can not only keep Venezuela on the international agenda but also orient external support toward clear objectives of re-institutionalization and constitutional strengthening.

This agenda should be coordinated with other actors that maintain closer relations with the moderate sector of the opposition: the European Union and several of its member

states, and other Latin American countries such as Colombia and Brazil. Setting aside ideological and partisan differences in support of Venezuela's democratic transition would help build lasting coalitions — not merely ones of convenience— and would make democratic construction in Venezuela less dependent on the polarizing and constantly changing dynamics that many nations are experiencing.

3. ***Reconfigure the relationship with Delcy Rodríguez's interim government and the roadmap.***

Like it or not, the Trump administration has decided, for now, to work with Delcy Rodríguez's interim government. It has done so with a pragmatism and willingness to engage that the Venezuelan opposition should emulate. Because of strategic differences and the reputational costs derived from internal disputes, the opposition field has not had the presence and influence it should have within the Trump plan.

The parliamentary opposition has appeared in some important scenarios, such as the Amnesty Law and the appointment of the heads of the Prosecutor's Office and the Office of the Ombudsperson, but its negotiating capacities are limited. Meanwhile, the opposition led by Machado maintains its policy of not interacting with the interim government nor participating in the reforms it is carrying out as part of its pact with the Trump administration. Both sectors of the opposition may end up on the margins of the political process or even seen as obstacles to it, if they do not develop a strategy to support reforms that favor democratization while also rebuffing the inevitable authoritarian reflexes of the interim government.

Negotiating key appointments in strategic positions within the economic and justice apparatus is crucial, as is any other agreement that fosters short-term advances in re-institutionalization and the restoration of constitutional force. This could build social capital and would demonstrate to Venezuelan society and to the U.S. government a willingness to govern for the country and not only for a partisan option.

On April 12, 2026, the Plataforma Unitaria Democrática—which brings together the parties that support Machado—published a "Roadmap to Achieve a Democratic

Transition in Venezuela,"[147] which is limited to stating objectives or demands for conditions to hold elections, arguing that it is not possible to stabilize the economy or institutions without elections and presuming that elections will allow the current government to be replaced. The proposal appears aimed at influencing public opinion and pressuring the U.S. government, not at driving political or institutional actions to advance that agenda.

In contrast, marginal negotiated reforms in institutional composition would open the door to a realistic discussion of a roadmap in which political and social actors and experts establish the institutional changes needed for the legalization of all parties and the holding of free and fair elections. Developing such a roadmap implies setting clear priorities and viable sequences of institutional reform, including a commitment to participate—under the current circumstances of the interim government—in restoring the autonomy of public powers, reforming the electoral system, and guaranteeing equitable conditions for political competition.

4. Decouple negotiations and elections

Given the political costs of any negotiation, it may be worth considering putting forward actors without immediate political ambitions who can assume the negative externalities of negotiation without fear of electoral consequences.[148] Democratic transitions (or peace processes) are rarely popular across all sectors of society. They often involve difficult agreements that cause lasting controversies. Citizens often view these agreements with suspicion and perceive—often not without reason—the conditions or benefits offered to former leaders, military officials, or ex-combatants as unjust. The person who leads such a process would likely pay too high a political price to remain a viable electoral candidate. This is one reason why the uncompromising, maximalist stance toward chavismo is popular among opposition leaders.

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[147] "Hoja de Ruta para Alcanzar una Transición Democrática en Venezuela" https://www.threads.com/@unidadvenezuela/post/DXCr4N5mrH6/hoja-de-ruta-para-alcanzar-una-transicion-democratica-en-venezuela-unidos-por

[148] Laura Gamboa, "Difficult Compromises on the Road to Bring Democracy Back," *Current History*, Forthcoming.

One way to navigate these dilemmas is to generate prior agreements that determine who will lead a transition agreement and who will be candidates in elections in a democratic Venezuela. A division of this sort worked well in Chile, where the transition was led by Ricardo Lagos (of the Chilean Socialist Party), but the presidential candidate in 1990 was Patricio Aylwin (a Christian Democrat). Leading a transition agreement need not mean permanently abandoning a political career — Lagos himself became president in 2000 — but it may require setting one's own ambitions aside for a time

5. Redefine their political offering and the relationship with the public

The opposition has a longstanding need to redefine its relationship with Venezuelan society and adapt its political offering to the social transformations accumulated over recent decades. This implies abandoning a narrative centered exclusively on removing chavismo from power, and replacing it with a political horizon capable of articulating expectations of institutional reconstruction, social inclusion, and economic development.

It is necessary for the opposition to recognize changes in social identities, forms of community organization, and citizen demands that have emerged in the country. It is also essential to critically examine the opposition's prevailing patterns of political engagement, typically characterized by top-down relationships, co-optation, and the subordination of social actors to party leaderships.

The disconnect between political leadership and citizens has been one of the principal obstacles to building a credible alternative; a re-linking strategy is needed based on active listening, territorial presence, and the formulation of concrete proposals that respond to everyday problems.

In this approach, interaction with society should be oriented toward more horizontal forms of exchange, grounded in mutual recognition and the autonomy of actors, avoiding both the logic of subordination and the reproduction of dynamics of uncritical or personalistic allegiance.

This need is evident in the general population as well as organized civil society. Opposition parties must develop mechanisms of consultation and cooperation with civil society that resist older co-optation dynamics. Top-down approaches may have been functional in past decades, but today's civil society seeks genuine participation and not merely absorption into partisan structures.

6. Accept pluralism as a foundational principle and practice

Modern politics is grounded not in unity but in coordinated pluralism. Venezuela's opposition sector should lead in promoting the idea that the country is richer because of its diversity, and it should model how to navigate that diversity in a structured and organized way.

This requires developing a plural political marketplace with politically sustainable organizations and differentiated offerings, and strategies for articulating with the diversity of associative forms and citizen participation in public affairs—including the popular organizations created by chavismo.

It also implies recognizing that Venezuela's participation ecosystem is heterogeneous and not exhausted by political parties, which have been weakened by repression and by strategic decisions in the recent past. Opposition action must therefore adapt to a reality in which multiple forms of territorial, community, and sectoral organization coexist with different degrees of institutionalization and autonomy. Promoting cooperation based on shared objectives, programmatic negotiation, and respect for organizational autonomy is essential to building the trust and durability these alliances will require.

Moreover, respect for and inclusion of popular organizations that emerged under chavismo is particularly relevant—not only because of their mobilization capacity and territorial roots, but also because incorporating them into non-subordinate interaction dynamics can help reduce social and political fragmentation. This requires developing languages, incentives, and channels of interlocution that facilitate convergence around concrete objectives.

7. Citizen Participation: What role can civil society and popular organizations play?

Challenge:

- An actual democratic transition cannot happen without a resurrection of citizen participation. Long-term democratic consolidation requires it as well.

Recommendations:

- Legal threats and restrictions against civil society need to be eliminated.
- State control over state supported popular organizations needs to be eliminated.
- Both Chavismo and opposition need to set aside corporatist aspirations and commit to the autonomy of citizen participation

Tensions between "Civil Society" and Popular Organizations

This report aims to look at the present and future of Venezuela's political conflict rather than its history. However, the historical trajectory of citizen participation in Venezuela is not well known, yet significantly structures the limitations and potentials of this sector, so we will spend some time on it.

Civil society has traditionally defined itself in terms of independence, seeking to act as a mediating "third sector" capable of articulating demands, monitoring power, and coordinating with political actors without being subsumed by them. In contrast, "popular organizations" have been embedded in logics of co-management and territorial governance closely linked to the state. This divergence reflects not only different organizational forms but also distinct conceptions of political action: one oriented toward accountability and rights-based advocacy, the other toward direct participation and localized co-decision. These modes correspond to differentiated but potentially complementary dimensions of democratic practice; however, in the Venezuelan case, they have evolved in parallel and largely disconnected institutional arenas.

This conceptual divide has been reinforced by the empirical dynamics of the polarization of Venezuelan society. The politicization of the term “civil society” during the 2002–2004 conflict cycle contributed to the consolidation of a sociopolitical cleavage that mapped onto class and territorial divisions. Civil society became predominantly associated with middle-class, urban, and opposition-oriented actors, while popular organizations were identified with working-class sectors and the Chavista project. The result has been a structurally fragmented field of participation in which each side operates under different logics and significant constraints—civil society under conditions of legal restriction and repression, and popular organizations under conditions of political disciplining and dependency—thereby limiting their capacity to interact, build trust, and jointly sustain plural and territorially grounded democratic logics.

We work from a broader understanding of an associational field that encompasses both autonomous CSOs and popular organizations as forms of collective action oriented towards social organization, representation, and participation. Rather than treating this field as analytically pure, we recognize it as a contested arena in which both opposition and government-aligned actors—including political parties—have sought to claim representational authority over ‘organized people’ and ‘civil society’ in liberal-democratic terms. From this perspective, Venezuelan civil society can be understood as a bimodal regime of social control[149], in which distinct but interconnected forms of association coexist within a fragmented yet potentially reconfigurable associational landscape.

This section analyzes the conditions under which civil society and popular organizations can contribute to a democratic transition in Venezuela. Drawing on their historical trajectories, current constraints, and the tensions that have shaped their relationship, the objective is to identify how both can operate as autonomous and legitimate actors within a plural institutional framework. In this context, civil society can strengthen its roles in mediation, oversight, and rights defense, while popular organizations can shift

[149] Ernesto Isunza Vera, *Democratizing the State: Social Accountability and Social Control Regimes in Mexico and Brazil*, with Adrián Gurza Lavalle, Latin America in Perspective, Volume 3 (De Gruyter, 2025).

from instruments of political control to forms of territorial democratic fabric capable of sustaining democratic transition from below.

Civil Society in Venezuela: Background and Current Challenges

The trajectory of civil society in Venezuela reveals a long process of expansion, politicization, restriction, and strategic adaptation. From the post-1958 democratic period through the 1990s, Venezuela developed a dense and diversified associational field, with tens of thousands of civil society organizations operating across sectors and playing a role in public service provision, social rights advocacy, and local participation[150]. This broader landscape informed early engagement with the participatory democratic project, including civil society involvement in the 1999 constituent process[151].

However, the notion of civil society became politically contested with the rise of Chavismo. During the 2002–2004 cycle of confrontation, opposition mobilization was articulated through the *Coordinadora Democrática*, which brought together parties and civic actors but was strongly shaped by organizations such as the CTV, FEDECAMARAS, and groups linked to the oil strike. In this context, the opposition frequently identified itself as "civil society," giving the term a lasting partisan valence. For government supporters, civil society became associated with the opposition camp; for opposition actors, independent civic organizations could also generate tensions by recalling a moment in which they displaced parties in leading political mobilization[152].

The coup attempt, oil strike, and recall referendum deepened polarization, fragmented the organizational field, and pushed many CSOs into opposing camps, limiting cross-

[150] Francine Jácome, «La sociedad civil en Venezuela: tendencias actuales (1999-2006)», en *Sociedad civil y democracia en América Latina: crisis y reinvención de la política* (SciELO Books - Centro Edelstein, 2007), https://doi.org/10.7476/9788599662205.

[151] Francine Jácome, «La sociedad civil en el marco de la Revolución Bolivariana y del Socialismo del siglo XXI (1999-2009)», en *Hugo Chávez. Una década en el poder*, 1.ª ed. (Editorial Universidad del Rosario, 2010).

[152] Luis Vicente León y David Smilde, «Understanding Populism and Political Participation: The Case of Venezuela | Wilson Center», Report, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars,September, 2009.

cutting engagement and narrowing space for a plural and autonomous civil society. From 2005 onward, the government further institutionalized its participatory model through executive-driven mechanisms, increasingly channeling participation through state-centered structures even as opposition civil society evolved toward greater independence and renewed coordination efforts[153]. From 2006 onward, political parties regained prominence within the opposition, while civil society persisted in more fragmented, polarized, and increasingly specialized and networked forms.

Attempts to rebuild a broad anti-government front, such as the *Frente Amplio Venezuela Libre* (2018), reflected these tensions but struggled to remain cohesive, often reproducing top-down coordination dominated by political parties[154]. A more recent initiative, the *Foro Cívico* (2019–2021), represents a different model, combining engagement with political actors while seeking to preserve autonomy. It has functioned as a platform for articulation rather than alignment, facilitating dialogue across polarized sectors and promoting negotiated institutional responses. Its participation in the 2021 appointment of a new National Electoral Council illustrates both its relevance and its strategy of incremental engagement, though it has also faced criticism from sectors favoring party-led coordination and from more traditional civil society organizations, which have questioned its proximity to institutional actors and viewed such engagement as potentially legitimizing an authoritarian context.

Civil society actors do not necessarily seek to remain outside politics, but rather engage with parties through dialogue, mediation, and coordination without subordination. This conception, often framed as a “third sector,” has important antecedents in Catholic

[153] Margarita López Maya, *Democracia participativa en Venezuela (1999-2010): orígenes, leyes, percepciones y desafíos*, Primera edición., Temas de formación sociopolítica 50 (Fundación Centro Gumilla, 2011).;Smilde, D. (2009). Vicente León y Smilde, «Understanding Populism and Political Participation»; Matt Wilde, «Contested Spaces: The Communal Councils and Participatory Democracy in Chávez’s Venezuela», *Latin American Perspectives* (Los Angeles, CA) 44, n.º 1 (2017): 140-58, https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582X16658257.

[154] Jonas Bergan Draege y Maryhen Jiménez, «Divided Opposition: Resource Asymmetry, Elections, and Protests in Electoral Autocracies», *Political Studies*, advance online publication, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217251379684.

institutions and networks from the 1990s, including Centro Gumilla, CISOR, CESAP, Fe y Alegría, and the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello[155].

This normative view also attributes to civil society a substantive public role, as organizations articulate grievances, document rights violations, and channel social and humanitarian demands. In contexts of state erosion, they may partially compensate for declining public capacity. However, their democratic legitimacy remains partial, as they are not elected, may lack internal democratic procedures, and do not necessarily represent society as a whole[156].

The current context is marked by sustained closure of civic space. Since the late 2000s, and intensifying after 2015, civil society has faced increasing stigmatization, restrictive legislation, financial controls, and narratives portraying civic actors as internal enemies[157]. Between 2016 and 2021, these dynamics escalated into open repression, including arbitrary detentions, raids, financial blockages, digital attacks, and the criminalization of funding and humanitarian work[158]. This environment is reinforced by a restrictive legal framework that tightens control over registration, financing, and oversight, while facilitating criminalization[159].

This restrictive environment is anchored in a set of legal instruments that have progressively expanded state control over civic activity. Recent legislation includes the 2024 Law on the Oversight, Regulation, Operation and Financing of Non-Governmental and Non-Profit Organizations, which imposes stringent registration requirements, intrusive reporting obligations, and broad discretionary powers to suspend or dissolve

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155 Margarita López Maya, "Iglesia Católica y democracia participativa y protagónica en Venezuela", *Latin American research review* 49 (2014): 45-60.

156 Jon Shefner, *The Illusion of Civil Society Democratization and Community Mobilization in Low-Income Mexico*, with Inc NetLibrary (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008).

157 Marhyen Jiménez Morales y Eduardo Trujillo Ariza, *Desarrollar la resiliencia en contextos autoritarios: lecciones de Venezuela en perspectiva comparada.* (Centro de Derechos Humanos, UCAB, 2021).

158 Jiménez Morales y Trujillo Ariza, *Desarrollar la resiliencia en contextos autoritarios: lecciones de Venezuela en perspectiva comparada.*

159 Julio César Bastardo Parejo et al., «Tercer Sector, de las Primeras Huellas a la Rendición de Cuentas: Casos Brasil y Venezuela», Revista Gestão & Conexões, *Revista Gestão & Conexões* 10, n.º 3 (2021): 80-102.

organizations. These measures operate alongside earlier provisions such as the 2017 Law Against Hatred and the use of anti-terrorism and organized crime frameworks—reinforced through judicial resolutions such as Supreme Court Resolution No. 2012-0026 and its 2025 reform—to criminalize dissent and prosecute human rights defenders.

As a result, civil society operates under high risk and weak incentives for transparency. The absence of a robust accountability system, combined with fear of reprisals, contributes to opacity[160]. In this context, resilience entails not only endurance but also strategic adaptation, including institutional reconfiguration, diversification of alliances, operational decentralization, and the adoption of lower-risk repertoires such as humanitarian action and rights-based discourse[161].

Popular Organizations: from Agents of Social Democratization to Components of the Party–State Apparatus.

Venezuelan popular organizations played a central role in the early phases of chavismo, mobilizing around initiatives that sought to expand popular sovereignty and deepen democratic participation.[162] However, the transition toward Twenty-First Century Socialism and the institutional project of the Communal State gradually entailed the subordination of these organizations to the logic of the party–state.[163] Access to resources, institutional recognition, and political influence increasingly became conditional upon ideological alignment and partisan loyalty.

This transformation did not eliminate the organizational capacities accumulated over decades of grassroots mobilization. Repertoires of collective management, deliberation, and coordination persist. Nevertheless, the current institutional architecture has tended

[160] Parejo et al., «Tercer Sector, de las Primeras Huellas a la Rendición de Cuentas».
[161] Jiménez Morales y Trujillo Ariza, *Desarrollar la resiliencia en contextos autoritarios: lecciones de Venezuela en perspectiva comparada.*
[162] Edgardo Lander, «El Estado y las tensiones de la participación popular en Venezuela», *Observatorio Social de América Latina* (Buenos Aires), 2007.
[163] Dario Azzellini, «La revolución bolivariana: "o inventamos o erramos". Llaves para leer el proceso de transformación social venezolano», *Bajo el Volcán* (México) 7, n.º 12 (2008): 11-28.

to repress the most critical organizations while subordinating those more closely aligned with the governing project.[164]

As a result, popular organizations currently operate under a triple constraint: material dependence on state resources, mechanisms of partisan disciplining, and an environment marked by authoritarian governance and violence—including militarization, the presence of armed actors, and repression.[165] Their relationships with opposition parties have also been heterogeneous and often instrumental. In many cases, their demands have been incorporated into opposition agendas only episodically or opportunistically, particularly during electoral cycles.[166] thereby reinforcing their exclusion from formal arenas of political representation.

Any democratic transition must therefore recognize the plurality of popular organizations and engage them in non-instrumental ways. Even from a liberal-democratic perspective, territorial governance arrangements are increasingly considered essential instruments for sustainable development and multilevel accountability.[167]

Furthermore, the participation of popular organizations has been shaped by gendered dynamics. Much of the grassroots organizational labor has been framed as an extension of traditionally feminized roles, a phenomenon described as "revolutionary maternalism".[168] This dynamic has relied heavily on the unpaid or precarious labor of grassroots women, often at the expense of their physical well-being and labor market

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[164] Carlos G. Torrealba M., «Con y contra el Estado: revisitando los mecanismos de coerción y respuestas comunales en Venezuela», *Cahiers des amériques latines (Paris)* (Paris) 103 (2023), https://doi.org/10.4000/cal.18240.

[165] Verónica Zubillaga et al., «Criminal Governance in Times of Post-Chávez Revolution and Questioned Legitimacy: A Look at the Different Territorial Orders and Armed Actors in Caracas», *Dilemas : Revista de Estudos de Conflito e Controle Social* 15 (2022): 497-527; David Smilde et al., *The Paradox of Violence in Venezuela: Revolution, Crime, and Policing during Chavismo*, Pitt Latin American Series (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2022).

[166] Maryhen Jiménez, «La democratización en Venezuela pasa también por la reconstrucción del Estado», *Nueva sociedad* (Caracas), n.º 299 (2022): 120-33.

[167] Jan Kooiman, «Gobernar en gobernanza», en *La gobernanza hoy: 10 textos de referencia* (Instituto Nacional de Administración Pública (Estudios Goberna), 2005).

[168] Rachel Elfenbein, *Engendering Revolution: Women, Unpaid Labor, and Maternalism in Bolivarian Venezuela* (University of Texas Press, 2019).

participation, while rarely translating into meaningful inclusion in decision-making processes.[169] Reimagining the role of popular organizations in a democratic transition therefore requires the creation of institutional conditions for autonomous, plural, and non-exploitative participation.

Just as there is no single chavismo, there is no homogeneous bloc of popular organizations. Some have been deeply integrated into the hegemonic apparatus, others maintain varying degrees of autonomy, and still others survive under conditions of precarity and repression. Their potential role in a democratic transition will depend largely on the incentives and institutional guarantees available.

Transitions negotiated exclusively among political elites risk lacking social and territorial anchoring. Popular organizations can serve as crucial mediators between national-level institutional reforms and local political dynamics. If access to public resources becomes governed by plural and non-discriminatory rules, these organizations may evolve into arenas for plural deliberation capable of facilitating political coexistence in polarized territories and reducing the likelihood of local conflict.

Evidence from subnational experiences suggests that participatory institutions can successfully incorporate organizations with diverse political affiliations when they operate under clear rules and effective implementation.[170] Under such conditions, popular organizations may function as territorial laboratories of democratic coexistence.

Enabling Conditions for Civil Society and Popular Organizations in Democratic Transition

Immediate Horizon

[169] Masaya Llavaneras Blanco y Antulio Rosales, «Embodying the Cost of a Predatory State: Depletion via Social Reproduction in Venezuela's Crisis (2013–2021)», *Social Politics*, advance online publication, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxaf053.
[170] Gabriel Hetland, *Democracy on the Ground: Local Politics in Latin America's Left Turn* (Columbia University Press, 2023).

In the immediate term, the priority is to prevent further deterioration of the organizational environment while reducing the risks associated with participation for both civil society organizations (CSOs) and popular organizations. Their inclusion under plural institutional rules could allow them to function as buffers against attempts at authoritarian reversal. For popular organizations, the focus should be on guaranteeing minimum operational conditions: financial autonomy, guarantees of freedom of organization, the reduction of the costs associated with internal differentiation, discretionary political controls over access to resources and recognition. For CSOs, the emphasis should be on easing surveillance, restrictions on funding, registration, and public communication, repealing laws used to criminalize critical activists and human rights defenders[171]. These measures would be much more effective if international human rights mechanisms were to gain full access to Venezuelan territory.[172] These measures do not yet require deep institutional redesign but rather the stabilization of a minimally enabling environment in which both types of actors can operate without repression or coercion.

Short- to Medium-Term

In the short to medium term, the challenge is to institutionalize mechanisms that make organizational autonomy and plural participation viable at the territorial level. Popular organizations linked to communal councils or communes should not operate within a parallel architecture that substitutes for representative institutions, but rather be incorporated as legitimate collective actors within complementary mechanisms of

[171] Azpúrua, María Fernanda, and Iria Puyosa. *Watch the Watchers: Surveillance Technologies and Political Control in Venezuela*. Caracas: VEsinFiltro and Digital Forensic Research Lab, 2026.
[172] See 2026 statement from Venezuelan civil society organizations. Venezuelan Civil Society and International Human Rights Organizations, "Venezuelan Civil Society and International Human Rights Organizations Present Ten Urgent Demands for a Genuine Democratic Transition," *Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA)*, January 20, 2026, https://www.wola.org/2026/01/venezuelan-civil-society-and-international-human-rights-organizations-present-ten-urgent-demands-for-a-genuine-democratic-transition/.

territorial governance, open consultative and deliberative arenas, and plural mechanisms of social oversight.

Concrete instruments can build on existing legal frameworks—such as the Law on Local Public Planning Councils (CLPP) and the Organic Law of Municipal Public Power—which already provide a basis for citizen participation in the formulation, implementation, and oversight of local investment plans. The institutionalization of non-partisan participatory budgeting can promote interaction across the broader associational field—including both CSOs and popular organizations—thereby fostering engagement among actors with different political affiliations and weakening polarizing dynamics. Evidence suggests that such arrangements are grounded in prior experience: as Hetland[173]] shows, participatory institutions in Venezuela have functioned as pluralist arenas when not subordinated to partisan control, with cases such as Sucre Municipality under Carlos Ocariz demonstrating the feasibility of cross-partisan deliberation. In addition, plural territorial councils or public policy councils could be established to bring together communes, neighborhood associations, cooperatives, sectoral organizations, experts, and elected municipal authorities in deliberative processes focused on specific public policy challenges.

Long-Term

In the longer term, the objective is to consolidate an institutional environment in which both civil society and popular organizations can operate as autonomous, plural, and non-subordinated actors within a democratic system. As noted earlier, networks of Catholic institutions that emerged and consolidated in the 1990s—such as Centro Gumilla, CISOR, CESAP, Fe y Alegría, and the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello—played a key role in promoting an understanding of civil society as an autonomous sphere of research, community action, leadership formation, and participatory education. Importantly, these networks also sought to build bridges and flows between

[173] Gabriel Hetland, *Democracy on the Ground: Local Politics in Latin America's Left Turn* (Columbia University Press, 2023).

CSOs and popular organizations, contributing to a more integrated associational field. Revisiting this aspiration may be particularly valuable in a context marked by fragmentation and polarization, as rebuilding such connective capacities could support not only institutional reconstruction but also the recovery of everyday coexistence.

A democratic transition in Venezuela faces the challenge of incorporating popular organizations as legitimate actors without reproducing the hegemonic and exploitative logic that historically subordinated them to the party, while also strengthening civil society beyond its current defensive and restricted role. This requires institutionalizing local conflict-resolution mechanisms supported by independent technical actors, particularly in highly polarized contexts, as well as addressing the structural inequalities that shape participation, while also recovering the capacity to dissent without antagonizing, a core feature of liberal democratic practice.

Grassroots democratization further requires confronting the gendered dimensions of participation by recognizing and redistributing unpaid care work; institutional arrangements that provide care services within participatory forums can facilitate the inclusion of individuals with caregiving responsibilities. Some precedents illustrate the viability of such measures: participatory budgeting assemblies in Caroní Municipality (Bolívar State) incorporated childcare services that enabled women's participation, while the Territorial Care Parliaments organized in Argentina in 2020 offer a broader reference point.[174].

Finally, sustained investment in capacity building is essential. Training programs in participatory public management, social accountability, and plural civic education can strengthen the technical capacities of both CSOs and popular organizations while reducing dependence on hegemonic political structures. Under these conditions, popular inclusion may cease to function as an instrument of cooptation and instead

[174] C. Fraga et al., «Building a Care System in Argentina: Transformative Potential and Persistent Challenges», en *Pandemic Policies and Resistance: Southern Feminist Critiques in Times of Covid-19*, 1st edition. (Bloomsbury Academic, 2025), https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350513648.

become a form of territorial democratic infrastructure capable of sustaining democratic transition from the local to the national level.

8. Media: Toward Free and Plural Communication

Challenge

- Democracy is not possible without an open and plural media. A sustainable democracy will require consolidation of the media landscape.

Recommendations

- Freedom for all imprisoned journalists, pluralism in state media, and the unblocking of independent media websites.
- Repeal of gag laws and reconstruction of the National Telecommunications Commission.
- Legal reform concerning public media and improved access to the internet and digital television.

Proposals for the Communications Sector

We recommend reconfiguring the communications ecosystem in three phases detailed below, with the goal of achieving what Article 58 of the 1999 CBRV mandates: communication must be free and plural.

Venezuela has experienced a progressive deterioration of its communications landscape over the last two decades. A powerful private media industry has become a landscape of shuttered media companies. There is ongoing censorship, persecution of dissident voices, and the imprisonment of journalists and critical citizens. On the other hand, state media's credibility has been undermined by propagandistic interests. Digital journalistic initiatives still navigate constraints on their ability to report, as well as the lack of high speed internet and site blockages by the government.[175]

[175] Bisbal, M., Pasquali, A., Urribarí, R., Cañizález, A., Ferrer y Urbina, J. *La democratización genuina de las comunicaciones. Una nueva institucionalidad para las comunicaciones.* En M. Bisbal y M. González (Coordinadores) *Coordenadas para un país. Política en Comunicación, Cultura,*

Evidence regarding the role of media in democratic development has shown the interrelationship between pluralism as a condition for freedom of conscience and for democracy.[176] Pluralism, as a phenomenon linked to freedom of expression, forms an essential part of the arguments present in jurisprudence across various cases adjudicated by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. The Court has held that any government that calls itself democratic requires public scrutiny; for that, it is imperative to respect the dissemination of information and ideas—both favorable and unfavorable to the state or any other sector of the population. As the Court established, "without an effective guarantee of freedom of expression, the democratic system is weakened and pluralism and tolerance suffer; the mechanisms of citizen oversight and denunciation can become inoperative, and, ultimately, a fertile field is created for authoritarian systems to take root."[177]

Some indicators underscore the importance of restoring pluralism in Venezuela's communications environment. In the 2025 World Press Freedom Index of Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Venezuela ranks 160 out of 180, above only Nicaragua and Cuba in Latin America, making it "one of the region's worst performers, caught between generalized censorship and judicial persecution."[178] In addition, the Chapultepec Index of Freedom of Expression and Press Freedom of the Inter American Press Association—an instrument that evaluates state institutional performance regarding these fundamental democratic rights—placed Venezuela last in its 2025 edition, a position it has held in five of the six years. Since 2020, Venezuela has been alongside

Telecomunicaciones y Ciencia Tecnología e Innovación. Caracas, Venezuela: Publicaciones UCAB. (2012)

[176] Levitsky, S. y Ziblatt, D., *Cómo mueren las democracias*. Ariel. (2018) p.59.

[177] Sentencia de la CIDH, "Caso Marcel Granier y otros, *Radio Caracas Televisión*, Vs. Venezuela" (2015) p. 49.

[178] CLASIFICACIÓN RSF 2025 | AMÉRICAS: la crisis económica de los medios ahonda las fisuras democráticas https://rsf-es.org/clasificacion-rsf-2025-americas-la-crisis-economica-de-los-medios-ahonda-las-fisuras-democraticas/

Nicaragua and Cuba, countries considered to have no freedom of expression and press freedom.[179]

There is also a serious problem of repression and risk for press workers. The most recent report on Venezuela by the Press and Society Institute notes that in 2025 "at least 25 press workers were deprived of liberty, the highest figure documented in the country."[180] After the events of January 3, 2026, communicators were gradually released, although under conditional release measures. During the regime initiated by Hugo Chávez and continued by Nicolás Maduro, there was persistent noncompliance with rulings of the Inter-American Commission and Court of Human Rights regarding the protection of information professionals and the restoration of rights related to transmission equipment and frequencies.[181] In a transition to democracy, it will be essential to correct these issues and provide protection to the press so they can carry out their work and the right to freedom of expression is guaranteed.

In the first months after the removal of Nicolás Maduro in 2026, the network of state-affiliated media has seen some changes—for example, the elimination of programs that promoted pro-government propaganda on state television outlet Venezolana de Televisión—though other such programs remain. Likewise, community media controlled by the executive branch and allied private outlets, as well as private independent outlets (notably Venevisión in television, with multi-million-dollar investment commitments announced by its executives), have incorporated new discourses—some more visible than others. However, in Venezuela in 2026, a political climate that reliably guarantees the rights to plural communication and expression has not yet emerged. When it does, that will be a sign that the country is moving toward a democratic transition.

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[179]Informe General del Índice Chapultepec de Libertad de Expresión y de Prensa. https://media.sipiapa.org/adjuntos/185/documentos/001/966/0001966178.pdf

[180] IPYS Venezuela presenta su reporte anual 2025: el miedo y el silencio redefinen el periodismo en el país. http://ipysvenezuela.org/2026/03/19/ipys-venezuela-presenta-su-reporte-anual-2025-el-miedo-y-el-silencio-redefinen-el-periodismo-en-el-pais/

[181] Cañizález, Hernández y Bisbal en "Propuestas de Políticas Públicas en el sector de las comunicaciones de cara a una transición democrática". En *La Consolidación de una Transición Democrática: el Desafío Venezolano III,* Benigno Alarcón Deza, Sócrates Ramírez, coordinadores. AB Ediciones, página 380-381. (2018).

Based on prior research and reports on sectoral reform,[182] we recommend a reconstruction of the communicational fabric in three phases, described below.

Recommended Immediate Actions by the Acting Presidency

Lifting conditions imposed on social communicators who had been imprisoned
Restoring the right to inform requires dismantling fear of potential sanctions resulting from journalistic practice. Journalists detained for political reasons must enjoy full freedom, without conditions. The Venezuelan state must establish mechanisms to prevent these kinds of violations of journalists' rights.

State media must be plural

Among the first changes needing to be implemented is the main signal expected by the population: access to diverse dissident voices and their inclusion in public opinion formation. To achieve this, it is essential to restore multiple voices and perspectives in what has until now been a hegemonic communications bloc. This transformation includes plural programming and service to the public interest across outlets such as: *Venezolana de Televisión*, *Vive TV*, *ANTV*, *Ávila TV*, *Telesur*, *TVES*, *Radio Nacional de Venezuela*, *YVKE Mundial*, *Tiuna FM*, *AN Radio*, *Radio del Sur*, *Agencia Venezolana de Noticias (AVN)*, *Ven-Global News*, *Vea*, *Correo del Orinoco*, *Ciudad Caracas*.

The Ministry of Communication and Information should also be restructured to fulfill that objective, as should some 400 community radio stations and roughly one hundred newspapers of varying periodicity. In the short term, there must be genuine openness and tolerance of criticism and citizen participation, along with institutional efforts to avoid disinformation.

[182] See *La Consolidación de una Transición Democrática: el Desafío Venezolano III,* de Benigno Alarcón Deza y Sócrates Ramírez (coordinadores), editado por. AB Ediciones;

Activate a professional network for Venezuela's new state communications

A professional network of social communicators should be consolidated to participate in the leadership and management of the Ministry of Information and Communication; the National Telecommunications Commission (CONATEL); CANTV; Venezolana de Televisión; Radio Nacional de Venezuela; TVES; the Venezuelan News Agency; Telesur; and related web portals. This professional team would provide leadership to ensure continuity of operations in the public media system, while relying on staff who come from the prior administration—without persecution or punishment for editorial positions held before the change in government. The strategic spirit of the new era must be inclusion, openness, and tolerance toward all parties.

Unblock internet pages and restore licenses

Immediate steps should be taken to end blockage of certain informational websites—measures CONATEL has taken against some 60 national and foreign news portals. Likewise, through CONATEL, pay-TV systems should be notified that measures which led to the removal of various national and international television channels are lifted. Unblocking these channels should be made public and would be an unequivocal sign of change in public policy for the communications sector.

Guarantee full freedom of communication

A fundamental aspect of restoring free and plural communication is restoring access to official sources so that data can be verified, truthful information produced, and accountability ensured. Access to official sources must be accompanied by guarantees for journalistic practice, repealing decrees that violate citizen expression—such as arbitrary sanctions established in the Decree of the State of External Emergency, published in the Official Gazette on January 3. In addition to opening state information sources at all levels, the state must protect journalists' right to inform against possible aggression and restrictions, regardless of their origin.

Second Stage: Stabilization and Initial Legal Reforms

Remove judicial "gag" measures and recognize victims' rights

Beyond the executive decisions mentioned above, ensuring free and plural communication in the medium and long term will require legal and legislative reforms. It is imperative to repeal laws that contravene the right to free expression, such as the "Ley contra el Odio, por la Convivencia Pacífica y la Tolerancia"; the criminalization of "desacato" (contempt) in the penal code; and provisions that undermine freedom of expression in the Law on Social Responsibility in Radio, Television, and Electronic Media. A process that leads to a democratic transition must accompany the restoration of freedom of communication with promotion of democratic values, including transitional justice. There should be reparations for victims imprisoned for informing or expressing opinions, as well as for those who were victims of expropriation of media equipment and infrastructure during the Chávez and Maduro governments.

Processes of expropriation, violation, and deprivation of legitimate property rights, and arbitrary revocation of licenses over the last two decades in Venezuela should be reviewed. The state should publicly disclose current conditions and procedures for frequency assignment in radio and television and the grounds for revocation, ensuring affected parties have the right to appeal administrative decisions to the appropriate instances under a framework of due process.

Resize social communications media in government hands

As part of repairing previous harms, it is important to consider alternatives such as auctions, concessions to civil organizations, or closures of low strategic-value television and radio outlets in the current communications context. Resizing state-affiliated media will make it possible to revisit decisions that have been brought before bodies such as the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, including the nonrenewal of RCTV's broadcast license in 2007.

Redefine the functions of the National Telecommunications Commission (CONATEL) CONATEL should act as a technical body responsible for administering frequencies—not as a political watchdog interested in sanctioning critical voices. To accomplish this, a new Board of Directors should be appointed, composed of five members: one representative of the national executive, one of the legislative branch, one from the business community, one from academia, and one from a nongovernmental organization linked to the communications sector.

Third Stage: Communication for Full Democracy

Reform of the legal framework governing communications

Within a broader transition that includes multiple dimensions, it will be necessary to reform laws affecting communications, such as the Law on Social Responsibility in Radio, Television, and Electronic Media; the Organic Telecommunications Law; and the Law on Access to Public Information—aligning them with democratic principles such as protection of the free expression, transparency, and broad access to public information. Discussion and reform proposals should be open both to broad political sectors and to journalistic associations, private media companies, transparency-focused social organizations, and others. By this stage, the "Ley contra el Odio, por la Convivencia Pacífica y la Tolerancia" should already have been repealed.

A priority in legal changes should be the adoption of a new law on the granting and revocation of radio and television concessions in Venezuela, creating clear rules for awarding and operating concessions and reducing the space for state discretion.

Establish a public-service radio and television system

The state media network has not functioned as a public-service system but rather as propaganda outlets. Therefore, in a democratizing process, mechanisms must be established to distance state media from direct government dependence. Public-service media should be governed by a plural and independent authority. In support of a true transition to democratization, this authority—appointed by broad parliamentary

majorities—would ensure Venezuelan society has plural, autonomous, highly credible media that promotes respect for human rights.

Improve internet access

Experts propose reforming Decree 6,649 to remove internet service from classification as a "luxury expense" in public policy, and to increase the possibilities for competition among service providers. A process of redemocratization must lay the groundwork for new investments to expand the population's internet access.

Lay the foundations for digital radio and television

Under Nicolás Maduro's administration, Venezuela's move from open broadcast television to digital radio and television was left incomplete. It will be necessary to carry out the investments required to complete that process and raise the technical capacity of the open broadcast system.

Final Reflections

Pluralism, as the basis of freedom of expression, must be the foundation of Venezuela's communications landscape. Lessons learned from the loss of public freedoms in recent years should guide efforts to provide guarantees for citizens' and media's free expression. This begins with the ability to find criticism from all perspectives across the media spectrum, with decriminalization of citizen expression, and with respect for media editorial lines.

State communication must not be governed exclusively by the interests of the government. While it is true that the communications dimension of public policy can treat state-dependent media as allies, these outlets must not become platforms for excluding political and social groups or as hegemonic structures of the official message. Dismantling censorship mechanisms is required for the country's democratization, and this will require changes to the communications regulatory framework.

9. Armed Forces: Rebuilding Civil-Military Relations

Challenge:

- As currently organized, the military poses a threat to democratic transition. Civilian control must be consolidated.

Recommendations:

- Manage the existing coalition rather than trying to remake it overnight.
- Restructuring of the armed forces to disengage them from politics, divest them from economic interests, and reform the coercive apparatus.
- At the constitutional level, ensure civilian control through institutional changes.

Scholars propose different strategies depending on whether they are addressing the military as a government, as an institution with veto power, or as an economic actor. The FANB exhibits characteristics of all three. Officers occupy ministerial portfolios, governorships, and senior positions in state-owned enterprises; overlapping intelligence services monitor the ranks while colectivos and irregular armed groups repress civilian dissent and serve as a counterweight to the regular military; and the security apparatus generates its own revenue through mining, ports, food distribution, and smuggling networks.[183] This is the classic transition dilemma: the actors who can block democratic consolidation also control coercion and benefit materially from the status quo. The FANB's embeddedness in illicit markets means that civil-military reform and the dismantling of criminal armed groups are interdependent processes that cannot be

[183] John Polga-Hecimovich, "Bureaucratic Politicization, Partisan Attachments, and the Limits of Public Agency Legitimacy: The Venezuelan Armed Forces under Chavismo," *Latin American Research Review* 52, no. 2 (2017): 241-256; Brian Fonseca, John Polga-Hecimovich, and Harold Trinkunas, *Venezuelan Military Culture* (Miami: Florida International University, 2016); Orlando J. Pérez, "The Day After: What Successful Regime Change in Venezuela Would Really Take," *War on the Rocks*, November 17, 2025, https://warontherocks.com/2025/11/the-day-after-what-successful-regime-change-in-venezuela-would-really-take/.

addressed in isolation. This section treats the FANB as an institution, focusing on the political prerogatives, economic stakes, and command architecture that sustain military autonomy and obstruct civilian control. Section 9 addresses the FANB as one armed actor among many in Venezuela's fragmented criminal landscape, where officers, colectivos, sindicatos, and irregular groups occupy overlapping positions in the same illicit economies. The practical implication of this overlap is that the economic divestiture agenda outlined here, removing military control from mining, ports, and food distribution, cannot succeed if those sectors remain governed by criminal networks that include active and retired officers. Civilian reformers will need to sequence the institutional military reform agenda in Section 9 alongside the security sector and disarmament recommendations in Sections 10 and 11, treating them as parallel tracks rather than successive ones. Addressing it requires a different strategic logic. *Democratic* civilian control is rebuilt not through grand institutional overhaul but through the gradual accumulation of civilian decisions, with budget authority asserted, appointments contested, and military demands rebuffed. Each successful assertion normalizes the next.

Any credible transition strategy must treat civil-military reform as an early institutional project. The scholarly literature is clear on this point. The foundational distinction between subjective and objective civilian control remains the relevant starting point: stable democracies require armed forces that internalize professional standards and accept political neutrality as a corporate identity.[184] Professionalism alone cannot sustain subordination without monitoring, institutional design, and credible enforcement; civilian control is ultimately a principal-agent problem[185] Democratic consolidation requires the systematic reduction of military prerogatives in intelligence, internal security, justice, and the economy, because these prerogatives give officers direct

[184] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1957).
[185] Peter D. Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

leverage over civilian politics.[186] Early transition bargains can freeze reforms in place, particularly when civilians prioritize stability while leaving the coercive apparatus structurally intact.[187]The architecture of coup-proofing further complicates Venezuela's case. Regimes reduce coup risk by fragmenting command, building parallel forces, and layering intelligence services. Counterbalancing can deter coups while simultaneously raising the risk of violent escalation when coercive institutions compete.[188] The inherited coup-proofed structure is unstable during leadership transitions. It was designed to prevent coordination against the incumbent; when the apex disappears, the same architecture can trigger fragmentation and freelance violence. Reforms that ignore this dynamic risk making things worse.

The FANB is also not a single institution. It includes conventional branches (Army, Navy, Air Force, National Guard), the Bolivarian Militia (a sprawling civilian-military body under direct presidential command designed for political mobilization), and the General Directorate of Military Counterintelligence (DGCIM), which has functioned as a repressive instrument of the state. Each component requires a distinct, although interconnected, reform strategy. What follows is a phased reform agenda organized around three sequential objectives: stability, recovery, and transition.

Immediate Challenges

The immediate challenge is to keep the coercive apparatus intact enough to govern while reducing the risk of coups and fragmentation. Given the post-2026 context, with an interim presidency managing relationships with security-faction leaders who still control significant coercive assets, the priority is to manage the existing coalition rather than remake the military overnight.

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[186] Peter D. Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).
[187] Zoltan Barany, *The Soldier and the Changing State: Building Democratic Armies in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).
[188] James T. Quinlivan, "Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security* 24, no. 2 (1999): 131–165; Erica De Bruin, *How to Prevent Coups d'État: Counterbalancing and Regime Survival* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).

The first step is a formal neutrality directive: a binding constitutional or statutory order that bans partisan activity in uniform, prohibits political proselytizing in military education, and ends the use of the armed forces for electoral gatekeeping. This is important for establishing a clear legal baseline, providing commanders with a rule they can cite without improvisation. The second step is a stability pact with the senior military leadership. Comparative evidence from pacted transitions shows that outgoing military elites typically require credible guarantees to cooperate: assurances regarding institutional continuity, amnesty provisions, and protection of legitimate pension entitlements.[189] Reformers should offer temporary recognition of the existing command structure in exchange for clear red lines: no redeployments without authorization, no political arrests, and acceptance of external monitoring.

Personnel changes during this phase must be targeted. Coup-proofed systems rely on trusted loyalists in key nodes. Replacing the top command and rotating sensitive posts (capitol-area command, armories, intelligence liaison, presidential security) is necessary, but a blanket purge creates coordinated spoiler incentives. The lesson from Spain's post-Franco transition and the Central and Eastern European cases is that the selective placement of professional officers in operationally critical positions, combined with institutional guarantees for the rest, can reduce the willingness to stage a coup without provoking the very fragmentation that coup-proofing was designed to prevent.[190]

Two additional priorities require immediate action. First, the transition authority should establish a civilian-led Ministry of Defense with real capacity. This cannot be a symbolic office. Nicaragua's post-1990 experience shows that civilian defense governance depends on building actual competence: staff who can write policy, oversee budgets,

[189] Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).
[190] Narcís Serra, *La transición militar: Reflexiones en torno a la reforma democrática de las Fuerzas Armadas* (Madrid: Random House Mondadori, 2008); Anthony Cottey, Timothy Edmunds, and Anthony Forster, "The Second Generation Problematic: Rethinking Democracy and Civil-Military Relations," *Armed Forces & Society* 29, no. 1 (2002): 31–56.

and monitor compliance.[191] Second, the transition must announce clear constraints on irregular armed actors. Informal armed groups known as *colectivos* represent a distinctive threat. Research on pro-government militias shows that informal pro-government armed groups generate significantly higher rates of state-sponsored killing and disappearance than semiofficial forces. Ahram's work on proxy warriors suggests that deeply embedded parallel forces may resist formalization and require demobilization with credible reintegration pathways.[192] At a minimum, the stability phase should include registration, public timelines for disarmament, and incentives for low-level exit.

Critically, this phase should also establish a fast-start, small, protected military inspector general's office to receive complaints and investigate the worst patterns of abuse. This serves two purposes: it begins the process of accountability, and it signals to the rank and file that the new order takes human rights seriously.

Reform and Restructuring

Once the immediate risks of fragmentation and coups have been managed, the reform agenda shifts to restructuring. This phase addresses three interconnected problems: political disengagement, economic divestiture, and the reform of the coercive apparatus itself.

Political disengagement requires legal and constitutional change. The FANB's political prerogatives are structural, embedded in the 1999 Constitution's mandate that ties the armed forces to the Bolivarian revolutionary project, and sustained by a political culture that rewards military loyalty with civilian office. Reform must explicitly prohibit active-duty officers from holding civilian political office and remove the constitutional provisions that anchor the military in partisan political life. Command hierarchies should be

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[191] Roberto Cajina, *Transición política y reconversión militar en Nicaragua, 1990–1995* (Managua: CRIES, 1997); Orlando J. Pérez, *Civil-Military Relations in Post-Conflict Societies: Transforming the Role of the Military in Central America* (New York: Routledge, 2015), Ch. 5.

[192] Sabine C. Carey and Neil J. Mitchell, "Progovernment Militias," *Annual Review of Political Science* 20 (2017): 127–147; Ariel I. Ahram, *Proxy Warriors: The Rise and Fall of State-Sponsored Militias* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2011).

restructured to route military authority through the civilian defense ministry rather than directly through the executive, creating institutional buffers that displace the personal loyalty relationships sustaining political interference.

The Bolivarian Militia presents a distinct challenge within this political disengagement agenda. Though formally a state organ under presidential command, it operationally resembles a pro-government militia– an instrument used to conduct violence the regular military might refuse. Its reform depends on how reformers assess its fundamental nature. If the Militia is judged to be a reformable institution, then the appropriate path is deepening formalization: establishing statutory codes of conduct, independent disciplinary mechanisms, and explicit legal doctrine holding the state responsible for Militia conduct. Its electoral mobilization function must be severed by statute and enforced independently. If, on the other hand, the Militia is so deeply embedded in the political economy and ideology of the ruling regime that it will resist restructuring and interpret external pressure as coercive threat, then the appropriate path is demobilization, with credible reintegration pathways for rank-and-file members and gradual contraction of its economic and social functions. Either way, the current hybrid arrangement cannot be allowed to persist. The Militia should be either fully integrated into the regular armed forces —subject to the same chain of command, legal frameworks, and oversight mechanisms— or formally demobilized as a parallel military structure. Allowing it to remain in an ambiguous institutional space diffuses accountability and enables deniable regime violence against civilians. Disarmement, demobilization and reintegration logic applies to the informal armed colectivos operating in parallel, since evidence shows that informal pro-government militias generate significantly higher rates of government-sponsored killing and disappearance than semiofficial ones (see section 11).

Economic disengagement is equally important. The FANB controls or has a significant presence in mining, oil services, agriculture, food distribution, banking, ports, and construction. *Transparencia Venezuela* has documented military personnel serving on the boards of over 100 state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and is leading at least 76 of the

576 identified SOEs. Military firms operate across some twenty economic sectors. The International Crisis Group has confirmed that between 2013 and 2017 alone, roughly fourteen military enterprises were established across these sectors.[193] When officers earn income and protection through control of these rents, professionalization becomes a direct financial threat. The literature is consistent: reform must change the incentive structure.[194] The operational approach should be "compensate as you divest": as the government removes military control over lucrative sectors, it replaces them with predictable defense budgets, transparent allowances, housing and health benefits, and pension security. A defense economic transition unit should inventory and audit military-controlled enterprises and manage their transfer to civilian ministries or independent boards, with anti-corruption oversight.

Reform of the DGCIM is a priority during this phase. Military intelligence reform is among the hardest problems in any democratic transition because the agency's capabilities are needed to monitor spoilers while the agency itself has been the primary tool of internal repression. The UN independent fact-finding mission and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights have documented systematic torture, arbitrary detention, and sexual violence by DGCIM agents.[195] Following Thomas Bruneau and Kenneth Dombroski's framework, reform requires replacing the DGCIM's legal foundations with a clear statutory mandate limited to external military threat assessment, stripping it of domestic surveillance and political policing functions, and transferring any legitimate internal security role to a separate civilian agency (see

[193] Transparencia Venezuela, "El Poder Militar También Alcanzó a las Empresas Estatales," February 11, 2018; Transparencia Venezuela, *State-Owned Enterprises: Phase II* (Caracas: Transparencia Venezuela, 2021); International Crisis Group, "Venezuela's Military Enigma," Latin America Briefing no. 39 (February 14, 2019).

[194] Aurel Croissant et al., "Beyond the Fallacy of Coup-ism: Conceptualizing Civilian Control of the Military in Emerging Democracies," *Democratization* 17, no. 5 (2010): 950–975; Kristina Mani, "Militaries in Business: State-Making and Entrepreneurship in the Developing World," *Armed Forces & Society* 33, no. 4 (2007): 591–611.

[195] United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela*, A/HRC/45/33 (September 2020); Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2024: Venezuela* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2024).

chapter 9 on the pluralization of armed actors and police forces).[196] Officers credibly implicated in human rights abuses must be removed, and meaningful oversight mechanisms, including legislative committee authority and judicial review, must be built.

Transitional justice[197] must be sequenced carefully. The officers most likely to face prosecution for serious crimes are also the ones with the most coercive capacity and illicit wealth to fund spoiler activity. A tiered approach is necessary. Priority prosecution should focus on a small number of well-evidenced cases involving the most severe crimes. Conditional leniency should be offered to lower-level participants who cooperate with truth-telling and reparations. Vetting for senior command posts should remove the worst perpetrators, with retirement packages to reduce resistance. El Salvador's post-Chapultepec experience provides a cautionary lesson: the Ad Hoc Commission that purged the Salvadoran officer corps was essential for credibility, but the broader failure to build a functioning judicial system left accountability incomplete for decades.[198]

Professional military education reform should begin during this phase. Doctrine and curricula must be rewritten around constitutional subordination, human rights law, and professional ethics, replacing the internal-enemy narratives and Bolivarian revolutionary ideology that currently organize officer training.[199] A symbolic reset, including new oath language tied to the constitution and elected authorities rather than to a political project, reinforces the cultural dimension of depoliticization.

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[196] Thomas C. Bruneau and Kenneth R. Dombroski, "Reforming Intelligence: The Challenge of Control in New Democracies," in *Who Guards the Guardians and How: Democratic Civil-Military Relations*, eds. Thomas C. Bruneau and Scott D. Tollefson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 145–177.

[197] Section 12 of this report discusses the timetable and mechanism for establishing effective transitional justice processes.

[198] On El Salvador, see the Chapultepec Peace Accords (1992) and the UN-supervised Ad Hoc Commission for purging the FAES officer corps. See also Orlando J. Pérez, *Civil-Military Relations in Post-Conflict Societies: Transforming the Role of the Military in Central America* (New York: Routledge, 2015), Ch. 4.

[199] David Pion-Berlin, *Through Corridors of Power: Institutions and Civil-Military Relations in Argentina* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997); Thomas C. Bruneau and Scott D. Tollefson, eds., *Who Guards the Guardians and How* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006).

Locking in Civilian Control

The long-term goal is to lock in democratic civilian control so that it survives changes of government. This requires constitutional entrenchment of civilian supremacy, parliamentary oversight of defense budgets and senior promotions, and limitation of military jurisdiction to military offenses, with civilian courts handling abuses against civilians.[200]

Professionalization of career structures must be completed. Promotions and appointments should be led by civilian authorities, with military input, and should follow merit-based criteria with published standards and external auditing. Retirement and pension integrity should be secured to reduce coup incentives linked to the fear of losing status. The National Guard's role must be resolved: either it is civilianized and folded into a reformed police structure, or it is retained as a gendarmerie with a legally constrained mandate limited to extraordinary situations, under written civilian request. Leaving it in its current hybrid space, a military body performing routine police functions, invites continued abuses.

International anchoring can reinforce domestic reforms. Defense cooperation conditioned on democratic standards (training exchanges, logistics modernization, peacekeeping participation) raises the opportunity cost of backsliding. Regional cooperation frameworks can reorient the force toward external defense and disaster response rather than domestic politics. Janowitz's core insight remains relevant: the military internalizes the state's political order through education, norms, and institutional expectations.[201] A civilian defense expertise pipeline, including scholarships, university programs in security studies, and professional staffing of legislative defense committees, ensures that civilians can govern defense competently over the long-term.

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[200] Collin Grimes, "Defense Sector Politics," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 56, no. 4 (2021): 463–484; Hans Born, ed., *Parliamentary Oversight of the Security Sector: Principles, Mechanisms and Practices* (Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2003).
[201] Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1960).

The Role of the United States

The United States will play a significant role in Venezuela's transition, and its engagement in security sector reform requires deliberate design. The most productive U.S. contributions during the stability phase involve professional liaison teams focused on logistics, pay systems, and accountability training, avoiding overt political involvement that would stigmatize the process. Vetting for assistance eligibility is a practical lever: units and commanders implicated in abuses should be ineligible for U.S. support, and this rule should be transparent and consistent so that career advancement and institutional prestige become tied to reform compliance.

During recovery and transition, U.S. engagement can provide external benchmarks that strengthen domestic reformers. Conditional defense cooperation, training access, and equipment modernization tied to measurable progress on civilian oversight, economic divestiture, and human rights accountability raise the cost of backsliding for military elites. The Central and Eastern European experience with NATO's Partnership for Peace program demonstrates that external conditionality can accelerate civil-military reform when domestic incentives alone are weak.[202] The challenge in Venezuela is to calibrate this engagement so that it builds leverage without creating a dependency relationship that discredits the transition or serves as a nationalist rallying point for domestic opponents.

Conclusion

The goal, then, is not to return the military to the current barracks but to rebuild those barracks into something worth returning to. A credible transition strategy must reconstitute the institution around professionalism, legality, and civilian supremacy while simultaneously dismantling the broader coercive ecosystem that coup-proofing has created. Sequencing determines outcome. The reform agenda outlined here is necessary for democratic civil-military relations. Whether this proves sufficient will

[202] Anthony Cottey, Timothy Edmunds, and Anthony Forster, "The Second Generation Problematic: Rethinking Democracy and Civil-Military Relations," *Armed Forces & Society* 29, no. 1 (2002): 31-56.

depend on the broader political settlement, the credibility of external actors, and the willingness of Venezuelan civilians to build and sustain the institutions of democratic defense governance.

10. Reforming Public Security Forces

Challenge:

- Failure to successfully reform state security institutions will hamstring the consolidation of a democratic transition. The effective provision of security by the state is essential for gaining citizen buy-in for the incoming democratic government.

Recommendations in order of temporal priority:

- Create a Transitional Security Reform Commission to oversee reform
- End militarized policing initiatives and strengthen crime prevention strategies of civilian police.
- Reform police but put mechanisms in place to guard against the "revolving door" of terminated police officers moving into criminal networks.
- Eliminate the Bolivarian Service of National Intelligence (SEBIN) and create a new intelligence service.

Illicit armed groups and markets in Venezuela have expanded and diversified over the past two decades, creating a fragmented criminal landscape in which gangs, armed colectivos,[203] sindicatos,[204] guerrilla organizations, and sectors of the armed forces compete over drug trafficking, extortion, kidnapping, human trafficking, and illegal mining economies.[205] Elements of the security forces are themselves embedded in

[203] La categoría Colectivos armados es una difusa que reúne a diversas agrupaciones que van desde aquellas herederas de los grupos de izquierda radicales y de las luchas armadas de la década de 1960, 1970 y 1980´s, hasta otros grupos más recientes, que se identifican como leales al gobierno, que practican el vigilantismo, el control de las protestas y una gama de lucrativos negocios como la distribución de comida, cobro de vacunas a vendedores de comida informales. La consolidación de estos grupos y de la relación con el Estado (sobre todo el sector militar), los ha tornado en socios importantes en la distribución de comida y en las ganancias en el negocio del tráfico de alimentos.
[204] The category Sindicatos [unions] name traditionally construction union groups; when referring to armed groups it names armed groups which extort money from construction firms or are associated to gold mining.
[205] Hanson, Rebecca. 2025. Policing the revolution: The transformation of security and violence in Venezuela during Chavismo. Oxford: Oxford University Press. David Smilde, Verónica Zubillaga and

these markets, further blurring the boundary between state authority and organized crime.

This proliferation has been driven in part by state collusion with actors such as colectivos armados and sindicatos, as well as by reliance on *mano dura* and militarized policing strategies that have produced widespread human rights violations while failing to improve citizen security.[206] Effective dismantling of criminal groups will therefore require comprehensive police reform grounded in evidence-based crime-reduction strategies, alongside concrete measures to end political surveillance and repression, demilitarize public security policy, and rebuild trust in security institutions.

Security sector reform must also address the FANB not only as an institution requiring civil-military reform but also as one armed actor among many whose retreat from illicit markets is inseparable from the broader de-pluralization of coercive power. The division of labor between this section and the previous section reflects a genuine analytical distinction. The previous section deals with the military as a corporate institution with political prerogatives and vested economic interests; this section deals with the consequences of those interests for public security governance and citizen safety. Readers should note, however, that the recommendations in both sections depend on each other. The Transitional Security Reform Commission proposed here cannot effectively vet or restructure police forces if military-affiliated networks retain control of illicit economies in the same territories. Conversely, the economic divestiture agenda in

Rebecca Hanson (eds). 2022. The paradox of violence in Venezuela: Revolution, crime, and policing during Chavismo. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press. Verónica Zubillaga, Rebecca Hanson, and Francisco Sánchez. 2022. “Gobernanzas criminales en Caracas”. Dilemas: Revista de Estudos de Conflito e Controle Social 4: 529-558.

[206] Antillano, Andrés and Keymer Ávila. 2017. ¿La mano dura disminuye los homicidios? El caso de Venezuela. Revista CIDOB d’Afers Internacionals (116):77–100; Zubillaga, Verónica and Rebecca Hanson. 2018. “Del punitivismo carcelario a la matanza sistemática: El avance de los operativos militarizados en la era post-Chávez”. *REVISTA M. Estudos sobre a Morte, os Mortos e o Morrer* 3(5): 32-52. Valiñas, Marta. “Hallazgos de la Misión de Determinación de los Hechos de la ONU y retos que sugieren en materia transicional.” In *Caminos y estándares para la transición en Venezuela*, edited by Armin von Bogdandy, Clara Sandoval, Mariela Morales Antoniazzi, and Eduardo Trujillo Ariza, 731–768. Valencia: Tirant lo Blanch, 2024.

Section 9 will face resistance from officers whose income depends on precisely the criminal markets that Section 11 seeks to dismantle.

In this report, we advance a set of recommendations aimed at reforming and professionalizing state security institutions and put forward proposals specifically focused on dealing with gangs and colectivos.[207] Organized criminal groups, such as sindicatos, guerrilla groups such as ELN or FARC dissidences, will require a longer term horizon and a joint security policy with the Colombian government.

We recommend the creation of, as soon as possible, a civilian-led Transitional Security Reform Commission (TSRC), composed of academics, human rights activists, vetted security officers and representatives from both the opposition and Chavismo be established. The TSRC should represent the diversity of Venezuela's population, taking into account race, class, gender, and sexuality. This commission should work in coordination with the Truth Commission for police sector investigation of human rights violations crimes and subsequent trials (see section 10. Processes of justice and reconciliation). The TSRC should have a defined end date and be granted legal powers to implement the following recommendations. We close by considering current challenges to the implementation of these recommendations and how some of these challenges might be overcome.

Reforming state security forces

Historically Venezuela's security institutions have been used to defend the state in moments of political and economic instability and to criminalize poor and working-class neighborhoods, not to protect citizens or uphold the rule of law.[208] Under the Maduro

[207] These recommendations are grounded in a restorative justice framework. Such an approach requires that individuals who have perpetrated harm formally acknowledge their actions, accept responsibility, and participate in processes designed to repair the damage inflicted on victims and communities. By centering accountability and repair, restorative justice offers a pathway to dismantle entrenched criminal networks while fostering the social trust necessary for democratic consolidation.
[208] CONAREPOL. 2007. La policía Venezolana: Desarrollo institucional y perspectivas de reforma al inicio del tercer milenio, vols. 1 and 2, ed. Luis Gerardo Gabaldón and Andrés Antillano. Caracas: Ministerio de Cultura; Fernando Coronil and Julie Skurski, "Dismembering and Remembering the Nation: The Semantics of Political Violence in Venezuela," in *States of Violence*, ed. Fernando Coronil

government, this logic hardened into systemic surveillance and repression: national security forces such as the *Policía Nacional Bolivariana* (PNB), *Dirección General de Contrainteligencia Militar* (DGCIM), and *Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional* (SEBIN) have consistently weaponized policing against perceived threats, aided as well with sophisticated technological infrastructures which constitue a machinery of severe control and repression[209]. These abuses have targeted not only opposition figures but entire communities—especially poor and working-class neighborhoods—broadly labeled as criminal threats to the "revolution." Crime fighting strategies have been implemented, but have been based on a military logic involving mass raids, mass imprisonment, and systematic killing, does not reduce crime. Militarization of policing is also associated with increased violence across the region.[210]

We recommend the following steps be taken to build effective and democratic state security institutions and construct trust in those institutions. Legal and organizational reforms must clearly separate civilian policing and intelligence functions from military or executive political control.[211]

Disbanding the SEBIN

The SEBIN,[212] Venezuela's political police, is consistently implicated in political persecution, torture, and human rights abuses. The government should immediately halt all political policing and SEBIN intelligence operations, including its array of

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and Julie Skurski (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 83–152; Tosca Hernández. 1991. La idealización de la ley de vagos y maleantes. Revista Venezolana de Coyuntura 2(2):24–38.

[209] Azpúrua, María Fernanda, and Iria Puyosa. *Watch the Watchers: Surveillance Technologies and Political Control in Venezuela*. Caracas: VEsinFiltro and Digital Forensic Research Lab, 2026.

[210] Delehanty, Casey, Jack Mewhirter, Ryan Welch and Jason Wilks. 2017. Militarization and police violence: The case of the 1033 program. *Research and Politics* April-June. https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168017712885; Lawson, Edward. 2019. TRENDS: Police Militarization and the Use of Lethal Force. *Political Research Quarterly*, *72*(1), 177-189; Stavro, Martin, & Welch, Ryan M. (2024). Does Police Militarization Increase Repression? *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *68*(5), 964-992. Trejo, Guillermo, Tiscornia, Lucía and Albarracín, Juan. 2026. AccountabilityAccountability Shock. Why Transitional Justice Prevents Criminal Wars in New Democracies. Cambridge University Press.

[211] Fruhling, Hugo, Joseph S. Tulchin, and Heather A. Golding, eds. 2003. Crime and violence in Latin America: Citizen security, democracy, and the state. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Press.

[212] Bolivarian National Intelligence Service or Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional; previously the DISIP Dirección General Sectorial de los Servicios de Inteligencia y Prevención, DISIP

technological infrastructure of control –extensive surveillance infrastructure—including video monitoring systems, telecommunications interception, cyberpatrolling, state-sponsored digital applications, device searches and seizures, drone surveillance, and cyberattacks—[213] to avoid further political repression and violence. Over the next twelve months the SEBIN should be formally dissolved. At the same time, steps should be taken to dismantle the pipeline that feeds former police officers into criminal groups (see below).

A new civilian intelligence service must be created with a narrow mandate centered on citizen security, public safety, and law enforcement—not political surveillance or repression. This new agency must operate under clear legal constraints, judicial scrutiny, civilian oversight, and constitutional protections for free expression and assembly. Officers of this new service should undergo the same vetting procedures and training outlined below for other police forces.

Reforming the police

Venezuela's policing landscape is made up of a decentralized and uncoordinated system of municipal, state, and national police forces. Here we put forward recommendations for reforming the over 140+ forces currently operating in the country. Many of these recommendations draw from Venezuela's 2008 police reform, which attempted to standardize, demilitarize, and professionalize policing.[214] Although the reform was later politicized, unevenly applied, and ultimately undermined by both internal resistance and shifts within Chavismo, it nonetheless generated a coherent institutional blueprint for democratic, rights-respecting policing. The creation of a diverse and pluralistic TSRC that includes representation from across the political spectrum is key to avoiding these previous issues that undermined police reform. Reviving and

[213] See Azpúrua, María Fernanda, and Iria Puyosa. *Watch the Watchers: Surveillance Technologies and Political Control in Venezuela*. Caracas: VEsinFiltro and Digital Forensic Research Lab, 2026.
[214] CONAREPOL. 2007. La policía Venezolana: Desarrollo institucional y perspectivas de reforma al inicio del tercer milenio, vols. 1 and 2, ed. Luis Gerardo Gabaldón and Andrés Antillano. Caracas: Ministerio de Cultura; República Bolivariana de Venezuela. 2009. *Ley Orgánica del Servicio de Policía y del Cuerpo de Policía Nacional Bolivariana*. Gaceta Oficial Extraordinaria No. 5.940, December 7, 2009.

adapting the previous blueprint—while explicitly addressing the shortcomings that derailed the original effort—provides a viable and evidence-based starting point for rebuilding a professional, depoliticized, and accountable security sector during a democratic transition.

To facilitate reform, the TSRC should depoliticize and reestablish the Consejo General de Policía (CGP), la Universidad Nacional de la Seguridad (UNES), and the VISIPOL to take over oversight, evaluation, and coordination efforts as well as data collection when the TSRC's term ends. Both the TSRC and the CGP (after reform) should be empowered to sanction police forces that do not adhere to police reform guidelines.

Review and termination of compromised officers

Once established the TSRC should immediately begin vetting officers of police forces, beginning with national police forces, removing any officers with documented histories of inappropriate, violent, and/or illegal behavior. Only officers with documented commitment to human rights and professional standards should be eligible to serve. Those officers approved by the commission must undergo six months of retraining at the UNES (see below). State and municipal police officers will undergo the same vetting procedures, but national police forces like the PNB and CICPC should be prioritized in the first year.

Removing officers for misconduct will produce a prolonged shortage of police personnel that will be addressed in the mid and long-term as new officers are trained and working conditions improve. Still, this limitation is important to recognize and take into account as state actors work to reduce crime and improve security.

Vetting and training new applicants

Early in its mandate the TSRC should reform and depoliticize the UNES, ensuring that the university is directed by civilians, as was required by its original mandate, rather than military officers and that leadership includes a plurality of perspectives and voices. The commission should seek to re-open the UNES within six months. After re-opening, the university will strenuously vet new applicants. This vetting process should include

psychological and physical exams as well as interviews with friends, family members, and neighbors.

A one-year curriculum will be required for new recruits with modules on transparency and accountability, criminology, racial discrimination, SOGIESC training,[215] human rights, the progressive and differential use of force, and de-escalation. Police trainees who complete this one-year curriculum and are accepted into a police force should be required to complete an additional year of studies during their first year on the job. Officers are vetted and approved by the TSRC to remain on the force should undergo one year of re-training.

Reducing police violence

Measures must be taken to strictly limit police use of force and increase accountability to identify when excessive force and/or extrajudicial killings take place, and ensure that officers who engage in excessive force and/or extrajudicial killings are removed and sanctioned.

These measures should include:

- The elimination of training in urban warfare to prepare officers to engage in militarized raids. Instead, the university should adopt an education program that trains officers in rigorous police investigation, effective law enforcement, and empirically tested crime-fighting strategies.
- Restrictions on the types of weapons carried by police officers. Officers should carry regulation nine-millimeter handguns, while approved tactical units may utilize other weapons after extensive training.
- The creation of an internal affairs unit charged with investigating all incidents of police violence. The officers in this unit must be thoroughly vetted and remain autonomous from all other police units and departments.

[215] Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics

Improving the working conditions of police officers

Reform can only succeed if we improve working conditions for police officers. This includes a good salary,[216] benefits (such as health benefits for the officer and his family), a good pension, and investment in equipment, uniforms, and other materials. Incentives that institutionalize and promote professional performance and curb corruption should also be established; for example, tying generous pensions to a clean and professional record.

Effective police reform efforts must acknowledge that, in certain jurisdictions, law enforcement salaries are unlikely to match the financial gains available through illicit markets. Given this structural limitation, reform strategies should incorporate non-material incentives as part of a broader approach to reducing corruption within police forces. Such incentives may include access to subsidized higher education, affordable housing programs, and other benefits that enhance long-term professional and personal development.

Embed Accountability and Institutional Safeguards

Individual strategies such as rigorous vetting are essential to reform but must be complemented by institutional mechanisms that promote accountability. Several accountability mechanisms were established by the 2008 police reform, including the creation of police oversight committees and offices to receive and investigate reports of police misconduct. They also put bureaucratic measures into place to strengthen accountability, such as requiring documentation whenever a police officer fired their weapon. While these mechanisms were not successfully implemented they provide a blueprint for moving forward. Civilian oversight bodies, for example, empowered by law and supported by independent media and judicial institutions, play an essential role in

[216] Newburn, Tim. 1999. Understanding and Preventing Police Corruption: Lessons from the Literature. Police Research Series, Paper 110. London: Home Office; Van Rijckeghem, Caroline, and BeatriceWeder. 2001. Bureaucratic Corruption and the Rate of Temptation: Do LowWages in Civil Service Cause Corruption? Journal of Development Economics 65: 307–31; Wood, James Roland T. [Wood Commission]. 1997. Final Report of the Royal Commission into the New South Wales Police Service: Volume 1: Corruption. Commissioner, The Hon Justice JRTWood. Sydney: Government of the State of New South Wales.

preventing future cycles of abuse. Deterrence measures must also be considered and implemented; for example body cameras may successfully reduce complaints against officers and use of force encounters.[217]

Investigations into past abuses—including arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearances, and political persecution—should proceed transparently, with international monitoring where appropriate. Victims and civil society must have a voice in shaping accountability processes, ensuring that reforms are not merely cosmetic but transformative.

Guard Against the "Revolving Door" into Crime

Eliminating the SEBIN and removing officers from police and military forces creates both risks and opportunities. In Latin America disbanded security personnel have sometimes joined or formed criminal organizations during and after transition processes, worsening insecurity. To prevent this outcome, Venezuela must put in place programs for dismissed police/intelligence personnel not implicated in serious violations that incentivize lawful reintegration into civilian life:

1) **Economic incentives:** Offer grants, low-interest loans, or vocational support to help former officers start legitimate careers or small businesses.

2) **Conditional benefits:** Link generous transitional pensions to sustained lawful conduct, with clear behavioral expectations and safeguards. Conditional transitional pensions should be tied to cooperation with the National Truth Commission (see chapter X).

[217] Ariel, Barak, William A. Farrar, and Alex Sutherland. 2015. "The Effect of Police Body-Worn Cameras on Use of Force and Citizens' Complaints Against the Police: A Randomized Controlled Trial." *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 31 (3): 509–535. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10940-014-9236-3; Braga, Anthony A., James R. Coldren Jr., William Sousa, Denise Rodriguez, and Omer Alper. 2017. *The Benefits of Body-Worn Cameras: New Findings from a Randomized Controlled Trial at the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department*. Final report to the National Institute of Justice, Award No. 2013-IJ-CX-0016. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice. https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/251416.pdf.

3) **Psychological support:** Provide mandatory counseling and evaluation for all departing personnel, as well as for the select cadre retained to train the next generation.

4) **Required participation in restorative justice processes:** Former officers as well as those vetted to continue on in police and intelligence forces should be required to participate in hearings in which former victims can give voice to the harm they experienced at the hands of state security forces (see Section 12).

Crime reduction through improved police work

Venezuela is characterized by a high crime equilibrium (HCE), where illegal goods are in high demand and the state's deterrence capacity is ineffective and limited. When countries achieve a HCE tipping point there are multiple challenges to dismantling criminal markets and improving law enforcement that must be taken into consideration.[218] Moreover, any crime fighting initiatives must account for this environment, as initiatives that are successful in a low crime equilibrium context may not be appropriate for or may exacerbate crime in HCE countries.[219]

Reforming police forces and demilitarization are crucial first steps in implementing effective policing. Without thorough reform a focus on crime reduction will most likely result in more corruption and increased arrests that are based on insufficient evidence.

Police reform and training post-reform must focus on consistent and improved training for the CICPC the only police legally charged with investigating crimes. In the first year of reform, all vetted and approved CICPC officers will undergo retraining to remain on the force. Retraining should cover human rights as well as core investigative skills, including suspect interrogation, non-coercive interviewing, evidence collection, chain of custody, and the rights of accused persons. Strong accountability mechanisms will be essential to ensure officers apply this training in practice. The CICPC's activities must

[218] Bergman, Marcelo. 2018. More money, more crime: Prosperity and rising crime in Latin America. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[219] More money, more crime

be focused on investigation and their role in patrolling and the apprehension of suspects must be strictly limited.

A consistent obstacle to improving police investigations for reform is the widespread belief among officers that the criminal justice system is too weak or flawed to effectively punish criminals.[220] According to this worldview, police officers must act outside of or above the law to ensure that criminals are punished for the crimes they commit. Retraining of existing CICPC officers and new officer training must incorporate this consideration into training and supervision mechanisms.

Retraining for vetted PNB, state, and municipal police officers and training for new officers must include courses on effective patrolling and diagnostics. Deterrence and strategies to improve police effectiveness should keep the following policy recommendations in mind:[221]

- Tough on crime laws must be avoided, as these result in mass incarceration that produce a strong replacement effect and low deterrence; alternatives to incarceration should be devised to avoid mass incarceration.
- Impunity is best combatted by increasing the likelihood of detention and imprisonment, not increasing the length of sentences.
- Policies in the short term that prescribe continuous and stringent enforcement face insurmountable costs and set unrealistic goals for law enforcement in low capacity contexts. Enforcement should focus on the most commonly committed crimes and must be complemented by social interventions.
- Enforcement should prioritize ring leaders, crime entrepreneurs, and political leaders that constitute crime rackets, without falling into the kingpin strategy seen

[220] Chevigny, Paul. 1995. *The edge of the knife: Police violence in the Americas*. The New Press of New York; Hanson, Rebecca, and Dorothy Kronick. 2026. “Official Vigilantism.” *World Development* 198: 106978. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2025.106978
[221] Adapted from More money, more crime.

in other counties that produces power vacuums that further contributes to violence.

- Law enforcement must be complemented by price and tax policies to combat illegal products sold by legal businesses. For example, the impact of price controls and duties on the contraband of gasoline, food and other goods should be reviewed as they create illicit markets for licit goods.

Finally, data collection and integration is key to effective crime fighting efforts. The TSRC should reform and depoliticize the VISIPOL within the first six months of a transition. VISIPOL should create a centralized platform integrating data from municipal, state, and national police, prosecutors, forensic services, and emergency hotlines. This platform should standardize crime categories, reporting formats, and geocoding practices nationwide. The publication of these statistics is essential for police transparency, oversight, and evaluation. Crime statistics must be made available to citizens and civil society organizations. Data-driven policing should prioritize place-based predictive policing to target patrols to robbery and homicide clusters, deploy investigative teams to extortion corridors, and prioritize firearm violence prevention zones. VISIPOL should test analytics tools in 2–3 metropolitan areas (e.g., Caracas, Maracaibo, Valencia) before scaling nationally. Pilot programs should evaluate reductions in violent crime, changes in arrest patterns, community trust indicators, and bias metrics across neighborhoods.

Data-driven policing tends to enhance profiling and discrimination. To engage in bias-aware data driven policing the VISIPOL and other police forces should review past data collection to identify potential discrimination; introduce Conditional Score Recalibration (CSR) alongside the Class Balancing method to better assess risk scores for

individuals;[222] engage in digital monitoring to reduce biased reporting; and implement mechanisms to avoid feedback loops.[223]

[222] CSR adjusts risk scores using behavioral criteria rather than demographic correlations and improves fairness without reducing predictive accuracy. The Class Balancing method is a statistical technique used in machine learning and risk-prediction systems to correct problems that arise when one outcome category, such as a class, is much more common in a dataset than another.
[223] Andrew Guthrie Ferguson, *The Rise of Big Data Policing: Surveillance, Race, and the Future of Law Enforcement* (New York: New York University Press, 2017); Andrew Guthrie Ferguson, "Algorithmic Fairness in Predictive Policing," *AI and Ethics* (2024); Andrew Guthrie Ferguson "Do Digital Technologies Reduce Racially Biased Reporting? Evidence from Policing Data," *PNAS Nexus* (2024); Kristian Lum and William Isaac, "To Predict and Serve? Significance 13, no. 5 (2016): 14–19.

11. Controlling Non-State Violent Actors

Challenge:

- For democracy to be viable, the state must reclaim its monopoly on the use of force and dismantle parallel and functional armed power structures, such as armed colectivos.

Recommendations:

- Structured disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) processes for armed colectivos.
- Sustained bilateral cooperation with Colombia to address transnational guerrilla actors.

Instead of a war on crime, the achievement of a pragmatic peace

The state faces the challenge of recovering legitimacy in territories that have suffered violence and systematic killings by law enforcement forces. In this section we propose the notion of pragmatic peace, as a temporary harm reduction strategy to deal with local gangs and small-scale criminal actors.[224] Pragmatic peace a paradigm in the field of public security refers, on the one hand, to the development of policies that safeguard the common good, the rule of law, and human rights, and on the other, to the recognition of the *de facto* territorial powers of criminal groups; that is, to the co-production of governance in these territories. Within this approach, the priority is the right to life of residents and harm-reduction strategies.

[224] Achim Wennmann, "Illicit Economies Through the Lens of Urban Peace: Towards a New Policy Agenda," *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development*, 2(2), (2021), 256–266.

The latter include experiences of "tacit agreements" between public officials and criminal groups in which "the stick and the carrot" are combined:[225] in other words, persecution and intolerance toward armed and lethal violence, and tolerance toward less serious crimes such as small-scale drug trafficking that allow these groups to maintain their income and adhere to agreements regulating lethal violence. This approach is applied to less organized gangs in rural and urban sectors, composed mainly of men from lower-income communities.

Cases show that a harm-reduction approach, instead of a war on crime aimed at eliminating groups or illicit activities, can produce positive results. Benjamin Lessing has argued that policies such as conditional repression, whose primary goal is not the dismantling of drug trafficking but rather establishing a state presence in areas historically dominated by criminal groups, allow the state to credibly promise a reduction in repression if armed groups avoid lethal violence in the future.[226] The pacification of the favelas in Rio de Janeiro is a paradigmatic example of conditional repression.

Other policy alternatives to "mano dura" (hardline policies) in Latin America, such as the "Pact for Life" in Pernambuco, Brazil,[227] which are framed within this premise of pragmatic peace, have also produced positive results and are closely related to the police reforms we have proposed. This policy, which prioritized safeguarding life and reducing the most serious forms of violence, involved a shift in perspective and significant reforms in police institutions and practices. "The Pact for Life" became a state policy in Pernambuco and included notable improvements in police officers' living conditions (working conditions, salaries, health insurance, etc.) as well as training in

[225] Van den Eertwegh, Hugo, "Negotiating with Criminal Armed Groups: From Prejudice to Pragmatism," in *Urban Safety and Peacebuilding. New Perspectives on Sustaining Peace in the City,* ed. *Achim Wennmann y* Oliver Jütersonke, (London: Routledge, 2018); International Crisis Group, "Armas por doquier: Cómo frenar la amenaza de grupos violentos a Venezuela," *Informe sobre América Latina* N°78, 20 de febrero de 2020. https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/078-glut-of-arms-spanish_1.pdf.
[226] Benjamin Lessing, *Making Peace in Drug Wars: Crackdowns and Cartels in Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 354 pp.
[227] Incluir referencia J.L. Ratton

criminal investigation. This experience also included tolerance toward minor crimes such as small-scale drug trafficking so that police could focus on more violent crimes.

The implementation of this type of policy is justified as a harm-reduction strategy with the understanding that there is a commitment to a broader agenda of economic, political, and social inclusion and the creation of opportunities that reduce the conditions enabling the proliferation of criminal activity. This approach must be accompanied by policies that provide opportunities and integration into productive and cultural activities for members of these groups who wish to leave the gang. In El Salvador, one of the reasons for persistence of gangs such as the Maras was the lack of alternatives and programs to include those who wanted to leave these gangs.[228] The same can be said of Venezuela.

The implementation of a pragmatic peace framework might seem to contradict the strategies recommended above to strengthen rule of law, as the framework allows for tolerance of certain criminal activities. However, law enforcement will need to prioritize reducing some crimes over others, allowing for tolerance toward less serious crimes.

Violence reduction programs

One of the causes of the popularity of militarized security approaches across the region is the perceived incapacity of police forces to address high levels of violence. However, there have been any number of successful anti-violence programs throughout the region.[229] Programs such as Cure Violence and ceasefire programs do not depend on law enforcement--which must undergo extensive reforms--for successful implementation. A recent systematic review of Cure Violence evaluations reports that many studies find a reduction in shootings and killings when programs are implemented

[228] Cruz, José Miguel. (2010), "Central American maras: from youth street gangs to transnational protection rackets," Global Crime 11(4), 379–398; Cruz, José Miguel, & Rosen, J. D. (2020). Mara forever? Factors associated with gang disengagement in El Salvador. Journal of Criminal Justice, 69, 101705; Cruz, José Miguel, Rosen, J. D., & Mizrahi, Y. (2023). The long arm of the gang: Disengagement under gang governance in Central America. *Criminology*, 61, 929–956.

[229] Enrique Desmond Arias, “Security, Politics, and Armed Actors in Urban Venezuela,” in *The Paradox of Violence in Venezuela: Revolution, Crime, and Policing during Chavismo*, ed. David Smilde, Verónica Zubillaga, and Rebecca Hanson (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2022)

consistently.[230] These programs involve sending trained outreach workers--often former gang members--to mediate conflicts and work to prevent retaliatory shootings, aiming to shift norms and interrupt transmission of violence.

Local experiences in Caracas show that community collective efficacy can be achieved when the social fabric in the barrios is strong, and there is a long tradition of civic organizations working to improve community conditions. In Catuche, a barrio in Caracas, community organizations, mostly formed by women and supported by university and church members, established "peace commissions" that prevented or de-escalated violent confrontations among local gangs[231]. This community model, based on local and family networks, was possible thanks to the strong support women received and the strong presence of well-respected institutions and figures.

The success of any violence reduction programs will depend on policies to reduce concentrated disadvantage and social and economic inequalities. The programs suggested here target individuals and/or families. However, decades of research have shown that individuals are more likely to engage in crime when they live in neighborhoods characterized by concentrated disadvantage and inequality. Thus, these programs must be complemented by institutional and structural changes that may prevent participation in crime and violence in the future, specially tageted to young men from impoverished neighborhoods. Finally, "mano dura" and militarized policing strategies must be eliminated, as they would undercut any progress made by the programs.

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[230] Avram, Rachel, Eric J. Koepcke, Alaa Moussawi, and Melissa Nuñez. 2024 "*Do Cure Violence Programs Reduce Gun Violence? Evidence from New York City*." arXiv, https://arxiv.org/html/2406.02459v1; Ransford, Charles, Monique Williams, and Gary Slutkin. "*A Systematic Review on the Effectiveness of the Cure Violence Approach*." *INQUIRY: The Journal of Health Care Organization, Provision, and Financing* 62 (2025): 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1177/00469580251366142; Washington University in St. Louis Institute for Public Health. (2023). *Cure Violence St. Louis Evaluation Final Report*. City of St. Louis Department of Health.

[231] Zubillaga, Verónica; Llorens Manuel and Souto, John. with AMNISTÍA INTERNACIONAL. 2013. *Acuerdos Comunitarios de Convivencia. Pistas para la Acción*. Caracas: Amnistía Internacional Venezuela.

Disarming, demobilizing, and reintegrating armed colectivo members

Given the multiplicity of armed actors and the limited state capacity to confront them, Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) processes in Venezuela should focus primarily on groups colluding with the state in repressive activities and illicit economies, especially armed colectivos. Disarmament involves the removal of weapons and ammunition; demobilization entails the formal dissolution of the groups; and reintegration refers to their sustained incorporation into social institutions such as employment, education, and political life. Within this framework, the transformation of these groups into political parties or civil society organizations, together with restorative justice mechanisms depending on the crimes committed, can facilitate their transition and reduce incentives for organized violence.

DDR schemes can be applied to groups such as armed colectivos as part of a broader policy aimed, on the one hand, at the demilitarization of society and the restoration of coexistence guided by respect for human, political, and social rights; and on the other hand, at policies oriented toward truth-seeking, justice, guarantees of non-repetition, and reparations for victims (see Chapter 12). Specifically, DDR processes in Venezuela would be embedded within the dismantling of the doctrine known as the Civil–Military–Police Union. This represents a policy aimed at restoring the State's monopoly over weapons as a fundamental attribute of the Venezuelan State. Weapons should be assigned exclusively to the armed forces and police. Parapolice armed groups acting in coordination with police forces must be explicitly prohibited.

The significance of colectivos is often exaggerated by the press, but they are nevertheless important armed actors to address. Although colectivo members are not insurgent groups and can be better characterized as vigilante groups controlling territories and populations under their influence, some lessons can be drawn from DDR processes, particularly the one carried out in Colombia. The Colombian DDR process took place within the framework of the 2016 Peace Accords. As a result of negotiations between the parties to the conflict, disarmament was renamed "laying down of arms"

(*dejación de armas*) to avoid suggesting the defeat of the FARC and to emphasize the transition from militarily structured armed groups to civilian organizations with political aspirations.

In short, the laying down of arms process in Colombia, with support from the United Nations, involved:

1. Registration and identification of weapons;
2. Monitoring and verification of possession;
3. Collection and storage of weaponry;
4. UN certification of individual disarmament and a formal commitment signed before the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace;
5. Removal of weapons stored in UN-guarded containers in designated rural zones;
6. Final disposal and certification of the disarmament process by the United Nations.

In Venezuela, there was an attempt to implement a process of weapons and ammunition control, as well as disarmament, through the creation of a presidential commission in 2012. This process was obstructed by the military sector.[232] Another priority identified through field observation was that, given the difficulty of implementing a population-wide disarmament process, efforts shifted toward regulating the use of weapons in public spaces, thereby distinguishing between possession and carrying of firearms. Weapons would be registered in a national registry and carrying them in public spaces would be prohibited. Any future initiative to control weapons and ammunition must have the support and political will of the military sector.

[232] Gabaldón, Luis Gerardo. "Criminal Violence and Government Responses Under Chavismo." In *The Paradox of Violence in Venezuela: Revolution, Crime, and Policing During Chavismo*, edited by David Smilde, Verónica Zubillaga, and Rebecca Hanson. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2022.

The process of weapons and ammunition control could be reconsidered in the country within the framework of democratic transition and the recovery of civilian life as a national process with special emphasis on pro-government armed groups such as colectivos.

The literature on DDR processes has shifted its focus from technical disarmament toward reintegration.[233] In countries such as Colombia, where access to weapons remains easy and armed structures such as FARC dissident groups persist, these processes are important both for the symbolic message of laying down arms and for transforming militarized identities and lifestyles into civilian ones.[234]

Some of these measures may inspire reintegration processes for armed colectivos. Colectivos present a particular challenge: many of their members are simultaneously state or police agents acting without uniforms, which makes it difficult to identify their membership and distinguish them from official structures—unlike guerrilla groups such as the FARC. Members of armed colectivos who are also active police officers should follow the institutional procedures described in the section on police forces: background verification, review of complaints, removal in cases involving criminal conduct, and corresponding judicial proceedings (see *Reforming state security forces*).

Several steps can be considered for reintegrating these groups into civilian life:

- Within the investigative lines of the Truth Commission, an important area of work will be diagnosing the different types of colectivos, their patterns of action, their involvement in criminal activities, and identifying networks of collusion with public officials and sectors of the State.
- Judicial proceedings for leaders and members implicated in serious crimes such as homicide, kidnapping, participation in torture, and extortion.

[233] Palik, J., & Marsh, N. (2025). A theory of the symbolic role of disarmament during peace processes: The laying down of FARC-EP's weapons in Colombia. *Security Dialogue*, *56*(1), 58-75.
[234] Ibid.

- Participation in reparations and guarantees of non-repetition processes. Members who contribute to investigations and truth-building efforts and who committed lesser offenses may receive benefits and participate in restorative justice processes within their communities, including apologies and recognition dialogues. They may also help identify those responsible, command structures, and operational patterns of the repression machinery of which they formed part.

- Reintegration may also build on recognition and support for local economic activities in which members already participate in working-class neighborhoods such as 23 de Enero. Some colectivos are already involved in productive local initiatives such as textile enterprises, urban agriculture, and food production. These lawful activities can serve as pathways to reintegration.

- Reintegration should take place within a reflective psychosocial process emphasizing the need to question militarized lifestyles and forms of warrior masculinity associated with weapons use and domination, facilitating a transition toward alternative identities connected to skills, vocations, or community service. One persistent criticism of past DDR processes has been their failure to address subjective and gendered dimensions related to masculinities and weapons.[235]

Foreseeable challenges:

The most significant obstacle to meaningful security reform in Venezuela is the lack of financing. Past regional demobilization efforts also show that DDR can create power vacuums later filled by new armed groups, so sequencing and territorial stabilization will be essential. US militarized anti-drug policies risk undermining the efforts outlined here by increasing incentives for criminal groups to reorganize and arm themselves and should be halted.

[235] Theidon, Kimberly. "Reconstructing Masculinities: The Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration of Former Combatants in Colombia." *Human Rights Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (2009): 1-34. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/hrq.0.0053.

Another key challenge for the future involves acknowledging the significant presence of armed groups such as the Colombian guerrilla group, the National Liberation Army (ELN). ELN has a long history of presence in the country[236]. These groups, as well as FARC dissident factions, must be addressed in coordination with the Colombian government. The goal is the demobilization of these groups. Any initiative must balance negotiation efforts with the threat of military action against the most violent incidents. The Colombian government has a long history of trying to deal with these groups by alternating military containment with negotiation under the policy of "total peace." Any option requires collaboration between both countries, particularly in containing the presence of these groups along the border with Colombia and in Venezuela, in the southern region where these groups, in collusion with members of the armed forces, operate in the mines. The Colombian president's visit to Venezuela marks the first steps in this direction, and there are signs that there will be greater cooperation between the Venezuelan and Colombian governments on security matters.

[236] International Crisis Group, "Armas por doquier: Cómo frenar la amenaza de grupos violentos a Venezuela," *Informe sobre América Latina* N°78, 20 de febrero de 2020.

12. Transitional Justice

Challenges:

- Failure to carry out the search for justice and an effective transitional justice process presents the following challenges to a democratic transition.
    - First, the legitimacy of any incoming government will be discredited if actors involved in human rights violations are not removed and held accountable for these crimes.
    - Second, democratic transitions that do not involve dialogue processes and meaningful search for truth and justice produce violent democracies in which impunity is perpetuated and state-criminal collusion is not dismantled.

Recommendations:

- Pursue victim's needs and rights immediately
- Launching a process of truth-seeking. Create a truth commission consisting of non-partisan citizens of known reputation
- Write, publish, and publicize the truth commission's report. Ensure its visibility
- Processes of reparation and memorialization.

Shortly after the capture of Nicolás Maduro and the designation of Delcy Rodríguez as interim president, one of her first decisions was to establish a Program for Peace and Democratic Coexistence and to propose an amnesty law that would frame the release of political prisoners. The president of parliament, Jorge Rodríguez, during the debate in the National Assembly over the law, declared: "We ask for forgiveness and we must also forgive; we ask for forgiveness because, to be clear, I do not like prisoners."[237] This

[237] Laura Juliana Castellanos Guevara, "Ley de amnistía en Venezuela: Jorge Rodríguez pide perdón a presos políticos y hace un llamado a militantes del chavismo a escuchar a las víctimas", El Tiempo, February 6, 2026, https://www.eltiempo.com/mundo/venezuela/ley-de-amnistia-en-venezuela-jorge-rodriguez-pide-perdon-a-presos-politicos-y-hace-un-llamado-a-militantes-del-chavismo-a-escuchar-a-las-victimas-3530331. [eltiempo.com]

chapter recommends further actions that can be undertaken to initiate dialogues, reconciliation efforts and justice in the current political transition and that can be expanded as the process moves forward. Transitional justice is a still evolving field of knowledge and practice in processes of transition from authoritarian regimes to democracies (Argentina, Chile) or from contexts of armed conflict to processes of peace and democratic recovery (El Salvador, Guatemala, Colombia).

To start, a couple of common misconceptions should be addressed. The first is that transitional justice amounts to processes of justice that happen exclusively *after* a democratic transition has occurred. In other words, once a transition happens, special processes of justice are developed to deal with violations of law and human rights that happened before the transition. The problem with this assumption is that oftentimes political transitions happen rapidly and if advocates of justice are not articulated, it can be left out entirely. Furthermore, waiting until a democratic transition has occurred misses a key opportunity. In several historical cases, the search for justice preceded and even precipitated democratic transitions. The most famous is that of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina who silently marched once a week to demand information about their missing daughters and sons during the military dictatorship. Their search for justice generated processes and pressures that pushed for democratic change.[238] Another case came in the Colombian peace negotiations when victims were invited to give their testimonies to the negotiating parties. Participants in the peace negotiations agree that this was a turning point in the negotiation process and was key to its success.[239] Likewise, seeking justice in individual cases of abuse, even where the courts are corrupted, can leave case briefings, testimonies and legal arguments on the

[238] Nora Amalia Femenia and Carlos Ariel Gil, "Argentina's Mothers of Plaza de Mayo: The Mourning Process from Junta to Democracy", *Feminist Studies* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 9–18,

[239] Isa Mendes, "Inclusion and Political Representation in Peace Negotiations: The Case of the Colombian Victims' Delegations", *Journal of Politics in Latin America* 11, no. 3 (2019): 272–297; Roddy Brett, "The Impact of the Victims' Delegations: Victims as Peacemakers", in *Victim-Centred Peacemaking: Colombia's Santos–FARC-EP Peace Process* (Policy Press, 2024), 207–249.

record that can later be part of broader legal action, and contribute to emerging narratives in favor of justice and democratic change..

A second misconception is that speaking of transitional justice increases political actors' fear of a transition. That can be true in certain circumstances. However, in most cases political actors know they are the subject of inquiries and face uncertain futures. If they can actively collaborate in exchange for greater certainty regarding their fate and the assurance they will not be the subject of witchhunts, they will often take advantage of the opportunity.[240] More broadly, Venezuela's political actors need to realize that history has shown that democratic transitions without robust processes of justice are not sustainable.[241] Thus for most politicians working for the public good, it is in their interest to include justice in their priorities.

The current Venezuelan conjuncture feels strange to many Venezuelans, as though much has changed, yet much has remained the same. Figures identified as responsible for massive human rights violations continue to hold positions of power within the current government; the repressive apparatus remains intact and has not been dismantled, and a comprehensive overhaul of the judicial system is not even being discussed. In this context, the movement of family members of political prisoners has emerged demanding processes of justice and the release of their loved ones. These demands for real change can create openings and pressures that may help drive a broader process of dialogue, a minimum consensus on peaceful coexistence, reconciliation, and the search for justice[242]. The amnesty law passed on February 19 is a modest step in the right direction and provides important relief to political prisoners and their families, and a good place to start. However, an actual process of justice and

[240] Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), esp. chap. 4 ("Negotiating (and Renegotiating) Pacts").
[241] Geoff Dancy and Oskar Timo Thoms, "Transitional Justice and the Problem of Democratic Decline," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 19, no. 1 (2025): 36–59.
[242] Lira, Elizabeth, and Mireya Lozada. "Venezuela: Dimensiones y necesidades psicosociales y procesos políticos en perspectiva comparada." In *Caminos y estándares para la transición en Venezuela*, edited by Armin von Bogdandy, Clara Sandoval, Mariela Morales Antoniazzi, and Eduardo Trujillo Ariza, 611–644. Valencia: Tirant lo Blanch, 2024.

reconciliation needs to be a much broader effort that goes beyond penal justice and extends in time to include efforts at truth, reconciliation and restorative justice. The term transitional justice combines those two terms meaningfully as processes of justice are key to any democratic transition.

Prior efforts: national and international monitoring of human rights violations

Human rights violations in Venezuela during Nicolás Maduro's administration—both in the context of militarized crime-control operations and through arbitrary detentions, torture, and violations of the right to life during public protests—reached such proportions that, together with the documentation and the active and persistent reporting by human rights organizations within the country, international bodies tasked with monitoring the human rights situation decided to focus their attention on Venezuela. In 2019, the United Nations Human Rights Council established an Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Venezuela to examine alleged human rights violations in the country[243]. In the publication of its first report, the Mission stated that there were "reasonable grounds to believe that crimes against humanity had been committed" and attributed responsibility to Nicolás Maduro.[244] In November 2021, following a Preliminary Examination initiated in February 2018, the International Criminal Court determined that it would open an investigation into Venezuela for crimes against humanity. The formal investigation has begun and is ongoing. Since its creation, the Independent Mission has published five reports. In its most recent report, it

[243] Valiñas, Marta. "Hallazgos de la Misión de Determinación de los Hechos de la ONU y retos que sugieren en materia transicional." In *Caminos y estándares para la transición en Venezuela*, edited by Armin von Bogdandy, Clara Sandoval, Mariela Morales Antoniazzi, and Eduardo Trujillo Ariza, 731–768. Valencia: Tirant lo Blanch, 2024

[244] Consejo de Derechos Humanos. (2019). Informe de la Alta Comisionada de las Naciones Unidas para los Derechos Humanos sobre la situación de los derechos humanos en la República Bolivariana de Venezuela. Geneva: La Oficina del Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Derechos Humanos.
https://www.ohchr.org/SP/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24788&LangID=S
https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/FFMV/A_HRC_45_CRP.11_SP.pdf

documented the brutal repression of protests by the population expressing its discontent in response to what was described as alleged electoral fraud. At least 1,062 people were deprived of their liberty, including adolescents. The existing documentation and the ongoing judicial process constitute fundamental precedents for the pursuit of justice in the country.

Starting points

A first and complex step in a transition process from an authoritarian and highly antagonistic regime to peacebuilding and democracy is the recovery of mutual recognition and basic trust for democratic coexistence. Transitional justice is a broad process that in Venezuela needs to include encounters and dialogues between the opposition and Chavismo (as well as within each political camp) to negotiate basic issues of justice, coexistence and transition. As with the amnesty law, the Program for Peace and Democratic Coexistence was not the result of a negotiation between the Delcy Rodriguez government and the opposition, but rather a unilateral creation by the government with some selected representation of the opposition. A more representative group, with victims having a central role, resulting from an agreement between various powerholders would generate better results. Nevertheless, the PPDC is a worthwhile effort that could lead to subsequent, incremental, and more representative space for dialogue and negotiation. Such a negotiation effort could agree upon a stepwise roadmap that takes into account the following suggestions from past experiences. To ensure that women's voices are included in justice and reparation processes, a Gender Sub-Commission should be created and included in the implementation of all steps we recommend here.[245]

[245] Amir, "The Contributions of International Commissions of Inquiry to Transitional Justice," in *Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law*, ed. Andreas Zimmermann and Norman Weiß (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022), chap. 15, https://doi.org/10.4337/9781839108273.00015. Valiñas, Marta. "Hallazgos de la Misión de Determinación de los Hechos de la ONU y retos que sugieren en materia transicional." In Caminos y estándares para la transición en Venezuela, edited by Armin von Bogdandy, Clara Sandoval, Mariela Morales Antoniazzi, and Eduardo Trujillo Ariza, 731–768. Valencia: Tirant lo Blanch, 2024.

We understand, of course, that transitional justice is not a fixed set of mechanisms imported from other countries, but rather a flexible and context-sensitive process that must be adapted to Venezuela's particular realities[246]. Nevertheless, we find the traditional framework of the ecosystem of four pillars of transitional justice useful for conceptualizing the search for truth and justice in our country: truth, justice, reparations and memorialization, and guarantees of non-repetition. In the following sections, we address each of these in turn.

National Truth Commission

Research has suggested that one of the most powerful tools of processes of transitional justice are truth commissions. When handled well, such commissions combined with trials can create "accountability shocks" that disempower violent actors.[247] This is perhaps easiest to see in the counter example. When there are no processes of truth, violent, anti-democratic and corrupt actors are usually quite adept at reinventing and reinserting themselves in the state and society, in a way consistent with their previous practices. In contrast, when truth commissions release their reports, the responsibilities of violent and corrupt actors become known and there is an "accountability shock" that goes beyond the capacity of trials. This impedes rapid reinsertion in public roles and requires a transformation of their behavior or their marginalization from important public roles. While it is tempting to think that immediate and comprehensive trials are ideal, these can be slow, resource intensive, and heavily politicized. In most cases, only a few banner cases are taken on in the medium term. Thus, truth commissions can, at the beginning of the transition, provide initial processes of accountability.

Successful national truth commissions often share the following characteristics: they are independent and transparent; maintain strong media and community outreach; have

[246] Correa, Cristián. "Preguntas Iniciales para Definir una Política de Justicia Transicional en Venezuela." In *Caminos y estándares para la transición en Venezuela*, edited by Armin von Bogdandy, Clara Sandoval, Mariela Morales Antoniazzi, and Eduardo Trujillo Ariza, 45–76. Valencia: Tirant lo Blanch, 2024.

[247] Guillermo Trejo, Lucía Tiscornia, and Juan Albarracín, *Accountability Shock: Why Transitional Justice Prevents Criminal Wars in New Democracies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2026).

adequate funding; provide protection for commissioners, staff, and witnesses; have well-defined mandates that provide clear definitions of the period and types of abuses under review; and spread out over a period of at least two years to allow for substantive research. Finally, as more recent truth commissions have demonstrated, gender and sexuality sensitive approaches are necessary to avoid excluding certain populations and their experiences with violence from the final report.[248]

An immediate task, then, is the establishment of a national truth commission tasked with producing a comprehensive report on the systematic human rights violations, chains of command and responsibilities in such violations and crimes; patterns of state violence that have occurred over the past several decades. The commission should reflect broad pluralism, incorporating representatives from academia, civil society, the church, and human rights organizations to ensure both credibility and legitimacy. Beyond documenting abuses, it should also situate recent violations within Venezuela's longer historical trajectory, recognizing that state violence has been a mechanism of social and political control predating the rise of Chavismo[249]. In the 1980s and 1990s, various events also revealed systematic patterns of abuse of force and police violence against the population in well-known massacres such as those in Cantaura (1982), Tazón (1984), Yumare (1986), El Amparo (1988), and finally the events known in Venezuela as el Caracazo (1989), where after two days of street looting armed forces were responsible of massive repression. As well, while the national truth commission should focus on the actions of those politicians and officials who are in power, there also needs to be research and fact finding about the impact of economic sanctions and other actions that were used against the Chavez and Maduro regimes that entailed significant

[248] Priscilla B. Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Facing the Challenge of Truth Commissions*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 67–109; United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Rule-of-Law Tools for Post-Conflict States: Truth Commissions* (New York and Geneva: United Nations, 2006), 5–22, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/RuleoflawTruthCommissionsen.pdf.

[249] Correa, Cristián. "Preguntas Iniciales para Definir una Política de Justicia Transicional en Venezuela." In *Caminos y estándares para la transición en Venezuela*, edited by Armin von Bogdandy, Clara Sandoval, Mariela Morales Antoniazzi, and Eduardo Trujillo Ariza, 45–76. Valencia: Tirant lo Blanch, 2024.

harms to the population, as well as waves of opposition protests that had numerous casualties among security forces and citizens.

While violence against middle class student protestors has received the most attention, the majority of violence perpetrated by state security forces, before and during Chavismo, has targeted poor and working-class communities, with such repression frequently justified as crime fighting. Any truth commission must center these victims and their families in its mandate. Special attention should be devoted to the ways in which the militarized anti-crime initiatives known as the Liberation of the People Operations (*Operativos de Liberación del Pueblo*), and subsequently the practices of the Special Action Forces (FAES) of the Bolivarian National Police, were responsible for thousands of deaths across the country in working-class neighborhoods. The scale of the lethal violence carried out by these operations was highlighted in the reports of the Independent Fact-Finding Mission. Police officers should be incentivized to participate in the truth commission (see section 10).

This process can be modeled on Colombia's post-conflict transition model, which required military and police officers and former members of the FARC guerrilla group to directly acknowledge harm and listen to victims. A defining feature of the Colombian model has been the "acknowledgment of truth and responsibility" hearings. In these proceedings:

a) Victims or their representatives directly address former FARC members.

b) They describe the harm they suffered—often in deeply personal and detailed testimony.

c) Former combatants are required to listen, publicly recognize their responsibility, and respond.

These hearings were not purely symbolic. The country's transitional justice system, particularly the *Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz* (JEP) conditioned reduced prison sentences for FARC members on full, early, and truthful acknowledgment of

responsibility. If former combatants failed to tell the truth or refuse to accept responsibility, they faced ordinary prison sentences of up to 20 years.

Transitional justice and truth commissions have traditionally focused on political violence; however, political conflict opens up space for criminal actors as well as relationships between authoritarian regimes and criminal groups. A Venezuela truth commission must recognize and map the criminal state nexus in order to dismantle it and document violence carried out by criminal groups that consolidated under the regime. In the Venezuelan case this would include not just extortion rackets, drug trafficking, and illegal mining, but food distribution, contraband and currency manipulation. It should also look at the ways officials were able to leverage impunity to regulate illicit markets, including collaboration with prosecutors. These are the mechanisms by which transitional justice can reduce post-authoritarian criminal violence.

The establishment of a truth commission, composed of members with credibility and legitimacy — one that sends a clear message about the seriousness of the task — constitutes a fundamental step in a fractured society such as Venezuela. Previous truth commissions during the Maduro government have been organized precisely by the government under scrutiny, have not had a transparent methodology, and have not enjoyed legitimacy among the various parties to the conflict.[250] This fact has undermined the ultimate purpose of truth-seeking: understanding the past in order to produce a process of justice and the pursuit of reconciliation.

Justice

Trials

Studies show that truth commissions are most effective when accompanied by trials that hold violent and repressive actors accountable. Together they provide a powerful

[250] "La Constituyente crea una comisión de la verdad para juzgar la violencia en Venezuela," *El País* (Madrid), August 9, 2017, https://elpais.com/internacional/2017/08/09/actualidad/1502260771_685114.html. [elpais.com]

message that impunity will no longer be tolerated. Trials also play a critical role in incapacitating repressive state actors who might otherwise reposition themselves as brokers of violence in a post-transition context or continue policies that commit massive human rights violations such as militarized “tough on crime” security policies. Where such individuals are neither revealed nor punished, they often retain their coercive expertise, networks, and access to arms—assets that can be readily transferred to criminal organizations and illicit markets. Notably, some of the countries with the highest levels of criminal violence in the region are those that failed to effectively dismantle and sanction the “violence specialists” embedded in prior authoritarian regimes. In the aftermath of transition, these actors frequently emerged as key figures within organized crime structures. The experiences of Brazil, Guatemala, and Mexico illustrate the long-term security consequences of neglecting accountability during political change.

Of course, the threat of accountability can generate resistance among incumbents who fear legal consequences, creating significant obstacles to political change. Nevertheless, meaningful transitional justice requires that high-ranking officials be held accountable for their role in serious human rights violations. Excluding senior actors from prosecution in the name of short-term stability risks entrenching impunity and undermining the legitimacy of the transition. While the specific modalities of punishment may be subject to negotiation, the possibility of trials for those most responsible should remain firmly on the table.

As mentioned above, the search for justice does not have to wait for a reconstruction of the justice system. Perhaps more effective in the short term is the pursuit of justice within Venezuela. While the focus is generally on student protestors, there are numerous cases of victims of police violence that are being investigated and should be pursued. Even where courts reject cases, filing them permits the documentation and development of a base and evidentiary trail that can be used in the future. The construction of justice comes not through the dramatic banner cases, but rather a slow accumulation of criminal cases over time.

Amnesty laws

Amnesty laws can have a role in processes of transitional justice. However, “blanket” or de facto amnesties for gross violations should be ruled out. Amnesties can be conditional, tied to full, early, and truthful cooperation with the truth process and to non-recidivism. This avoids the amnesty–violence trap identified cross-nationally and in Latin America specifically.

International Justice

The documentation gathered by international bodies and the opening of an investigation into crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Court reveal the scale of the violence and its organized and systematic character, aimed at controlling dissent and social conflict and at consolidating state power during periods in which its legitimacy has been questioned.

These processes take many years and their impact within Venezuela can be quite modest. Perhaps the most important impact can be through processes of “positive complementarity” in which the threat of ICC justice can lead national courts and judicial processes to develop to a point that the ICC refrains[251]. This can be an important push for change. This positive complementarity will not come automatically, but needs to be pushed by local stakeholders, including NGOs specializing in justice and human rights, as well as the support of other states that are signatories of the Rome Statute. However, the ICC case is only the tip of the iceberg of justice and should not distract from more tangible processes that can be taken on sooner.

Reparations and Memorialization

Penal justice is important but is often much less satisfying than restorative justice which includes efforts to repair damages. This can include economic benefits, and often

[251] Reed Hurtado, Michael. “La Corte Penal Internacional en Venezuela: De la ilusión a una ruta práctica orientada a maximizar su impacto en la búsqueda de justicia.” In *Caminos y estándares para la transición en Venezuela*, edited by Armin von Bogdandy, Clara Sandoval, Mariela Morales Antoniazzi, and Eduardo Trujillo Ariza, 875–919. Valencia: Tirant lo Blanch, 2024.

symbolic benefits, such as forms of recognition and apologies. Interviews with victims and their families often shows that recognition of injustice, the clearing of names, and official apologies are what they most want; in other words, the recognition of their dignity is central[252]. Reparations, in a general sense, imply acts of restoring what has been lost; they involve acts of redress in response to harm caused. In their minimal sense, they entail the provision of benefits to victims of certain types of crimes.[253] Symbolic reparations, more specifically, constitute a set of measures and practices aimed at conveying a message of dignity to victims, recognizing them as human beings who are subjects of rights, with the capacity for decision-making and action, and as important members of the community.[254]

In the short term, advocates could demand that the high representatives of the current interim government to apologize in a sincere and heartfelt manner during a solemn ceremony. Indeed in February, during an event broadcast on the state-run channel Venezolana de Televisión (VTV), Jorge Rodríguez reiterated his call to "ask for forgiveness and make amends," but also to "forgive[255]. This can be a start. A serious public apology offered by officials to families for the murder of one of their members is a significant symbolic step that can be done in the short term, and that paves the way for a broad framework of reparations. An apology that is not linked to other acts of reparation and that prioritizes the dignity of victims may even cause distress among victims and in society.[256]

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[252] Correa, Cristián, Julie Guillerot, and Lisa Magarrell. "Reparations and Victim Participation: A Look at the Truth Commission Experience." In *Reparations for Victims of Genocide, War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity*, edited by Carla Ferstman, Mariana Goetz, and Alan Stephens, 385–414. Leiden: Brill, 2009.

[253] Brandon Hamber, *Transforming Societies after Political Violence: Truth, Reconciliation, and Mental Health* (Dordrecht and New York: Springer, 2009).

[254] Cristián Correa, "Reparations for Victims of Massive Human Rights Violations," in *The Handbook of Reparations*, ed. Pablo de Greiff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 292–327. Sánchez, Francisco and Verónica Zubillaga. 2022. El poder reparador de lo simbólico. Reflexiones para nuestro país. Caracas: REACIN. Red de Activismo e Investigación por la Convivencia y Paz Activa.

[255]https://efectococuyo.com/politica/jorge-rodriguez-pide-a-legisladores-escuchar-a-familiares-de-los-presos-politicos-para-sumar-a-ley-de-amnistia/

[256] Roy L. Brooks, ed., *When Sorry Isn't Enough: The Controversy over Apologies and Reparations for Human Injustice* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

Reparations can be both symbolic and material. We can look to the most recent negotiations in Colombia to demobilize the FARC to consider the importance of symbolic reparations. While trials must hold the highest-ranking members of state security forces accountable for their actions, it is not feasible for all state actors who deployed violence against civilians to face penal repercussions. Colombia's post-conflict transition model required former state security actors and members of the FARC guerrilla group to directly acknowledge harm and listen to victims. Indeed, a defining feature of the Colombian model has been the "acknowledgment of truth and responsibility" hearings in which victims describe the harm they suffered and former armed actors are required to listen, publicly recognize their responsibility, and respond. These dialogues for non-repetition, following discussion and authorization with the victims and their families, are held as public events, broadcast on radio and online media. The framework for the conversations is one of respect and recognition.

This model promotes a form of accountability that is separate from penal logic. Given the magnitude of the abuses in the communities that were victims of the anti-crime operations in different regions in Venezuela, local processes of dialogue and recognition are very significant. Small-scale conversation processes with teams of psychologists and social workers who can handle the emotions and difficult processes that arise are meaningful and, with adequate preparation, can be developed in the short and medium term.

Special attention must be given to the symbolic and material reparations that should be dedicated to the mothers of male victims of extrajudicial executions carried out in the context of anti-crime operations. These women, many of them grandmothers, have had to take charge of their orphaned grandchildren and lack the resources or support policies needed to raise them at an advanced age. Reparations are fundamental and must include the participation of the victims themselves in defining them. Forms of symbolic reparation that fail to take into account the perspective of victims can be humiliating and those that are improvised can re-victimize victims — for example, through long lines and waits under degrading conditions.

Memorialization

One of the fundamental purposes of the processes of seeking justice and reconciliation is to acknowledge painful events from the past in order to understand how societies came to be so divided and violent. It is about learning lessons from the past, with the forward-looking intention of not repeating and avoiding denialism. Symbolic reparations and memorialization, both of which focus on victims, are closely related. Argentina and the Southern Cone experience has been crucial in showing that memory work is part of democratic reconstruction[257].

In this sense, the most successful processes of transitional justice have also included processes of memorialization in museum exhibits, that include literary production, public artworks, street names, and the building of sites of memories.[258] Important sites of memories have been built in Argentina, Chile, Colombia and Perú. Sites such as the LUM - Lugar de la Memoria, Tolerancia y la Inclusión Social, in Lima, Perú, and former centers of repression like the Space for Memory and Human Rights on the former campus of the Navy Mechanics School (ESMA) in Argentina; and Villa Grimaldi and Londres 38 in Chile reconfigure spaces of violence and repression into "living memorials" that institutionalize memory as an ongoing, participatory process linking past atrocities to present democratic vigilance and future-oriented human rights cultures.

In the context of symbolic reparations and the creation of memorial spaces specifically dedicated to victims of politically motivated deprivation of liberty, torture, and ill-treatment, a place like the Helicoide represents a site of considerable symbolic power for expressing this will toward repair and examination of the painful events of the past: transforming a current site of detention and torture into a space of historical memory oriented toward the democratic reconstruction. It could become a space where the State

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[257] See Elizabeth Jelin's work on memorialisation, particularly based on Argentina: Los Trabajos de la Memoria. 2021. Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultural Económica [2002, 1era edición].

[258] Robin Adèle Greeley, Michael R. Orwicz, José Luis Falconi, Ana María Reyes, Fernando J. Rosenberg, and Lisa J. Laplante, "Repairing Symbolic Reparations: Assessing the Effectiveness of Memorialization in the Inter-American System of Human Rights," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 14, no. 1 (2020): 165–192, https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijaa002. Sánchez, Francisco and Verónica Zubillaga. 2022. El poder reparador de lo simbólico. Reflexiones para nuestro país. Caracas: REACIN. Red de Activismo e Investigación por la Convivencia y Paz Activa.

demonstrates its willingness to acknowledge responsibility and foster the healing of its bond with citizens. This would entail a dialogic process with victims — a collective process of memorialization in which meaning can be given to what occurred (roundtable discussions, exhibitions); a commitment to honoring those who were deprived of their liberty, through the inscription of their names and stories, in order to restore the dignity of the victims who suffered so greatly there.[259]

As well, memorialization efforts should include public acknowledgment and the deliberate creation of memorial spaces to commemorate, reflect and process our mass forced migration.[260] As other chapters above documented, this has been a very painful dimension of the country's recent past.

Reforms to prevent recurrence

Perhaps the most important of all changes that are necessary is a reconstruction of the system of justice. Venezuela's justice system and overall rule of law framework experienced dramatic decline over the last two decades (Sanchez Urribarri and Capriles, 2025). This has been well documented in multiple accounts - for instance, in its 2025 iteration, the World Justice Project Rule of Law Index places Venezuela in place 143 out of 143 countries surveyed (see World Justice Project, 2025). In addition to the politicization of the judiciary and the erosion of judicial independence mentioned in other chapters, the justice system has experienced a sustained decline in its capacity to try, decide, and enforce cases across a range of issue areas. More than 80% of Venezuelan judges are provisional and do not have the tenure that could make them independent (See *Acceso a la Justicia*'s thorough work on the judiciary's composition). Many of these judges have not been appointed on a meritocratic basis, or have been promoted for reasons that have little to do with their performance or proven capacity.

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[259] Hamber 2009 op cit.

[260] Sabine Marschall, "Monuments in the Context of Migration: An Introduction," in *Public Memory in the Context of Transnational Migration and Displacement: Migrants and Monuments*, ed. Sabine Marschall (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 1–27, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-41329-3_1.

Moreover, judicial corruption has allegedly increased, as the salary of judges, clerks, and other professionals working in the court system have also declined substantially.

An important aspect of this multifaceted decline has been the deterioration of the criminal justice system, which in Venezuela has instead become a pillar of authoritarian rule (Report of the independent international fact-finding mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela 2022, (Capriles, Santacruz and Perez Perdomo, 2019; Sanchez Urribarri and Capriles 2025). Reforming the criminal justice system is a complex task that should encompass a variety of actors (Acceso a la Justicia, 2026), It goes well beyond discrete efforts in the judiciary, to also encompass the offices of other important actors such as the Attorney General's Office and the Public Defense system. Such efforts require a careful, data-driven, principled assessment of the justice sector based on the premises of judicial independence; restoring the system's capacity, professionalism, and commitment to the rule of law; a genuine effort to expand access to justice and protect fundamental rights, and a careful approach to nominations. As with other aspects of institutional life in Venezuela, there is a big gap between the *de jure,* nominal existence of norms governing different aspects of the justice system, and the country's *de facto* reality - characterized by a prerogative approach to power. Moreover, as is the case with the reform of state security forces, there must be an effort to make the justice system more responsive to citizens' needs, developing mechanisms for civil society input and enhancing the transparency of both the exercise of its prerogatives and its administration. Finally, the lack of willingness to uphold the law allows for rampant abuse and even uses the power of the justice apparatus to legitimise it. As pointed out before, a significant part of the effort to transform the criminal justice system as a whole involves a comprehensive depoliticisation and overhaul of the justice system personnel, including ensuring tha the judiciary is no longer staffed with temporary appointees, but rather with judges with security of tenure, selected and promoted in public competition.

Timing

The swiftness of transitional justice mechanisms matters for how successful they are. The sooner truth commissions begin to document violations and trials hold violators accountable, the more likely that a transition will produce a more peaceful and less conflictive society. The cases of Argentina and Brazil are instructive here. Argentina created the National Commission on the Disappeared (CONADEP) almost immediately (in 1983), producing the famous Nunca Más report that documented state crimes. The first criminal trials were held in 1985. While amnesty laws and pardons in the late 1980s slowed accountability, these early steps removed and deterred violent specialists. In Brazil a broad amnesty law passed before the democratic transition, shielding both state officials and opposition actors from prosecution. Brazil's national truth commission was not created until 2011 and its report was published three years later--almost three decades after the dictatorship ended. Since its transition Argentina has remained one of the least violent countries in the region (when measured by homicide rates and criminal violence) while Brazil consistently ranks as one of the most violent.

V. Sequencing Reform

With this report we aim to broaden the discussion of Venezuela's potential transition to democracy beyond exclusive focus on economic recovery and elections. As the transitions literature has long emphasized, many, mutually-reinforcing reforms have to happen at the same time for a successful process of democratic transition and consolidation.[261] What is more, processes of change are rarely linear and the actual course of events is generally decided more by political interests and contingent events than by detailed, optimized plans.

That said, we are aware of the danger of wanting everything all at once. The resources and bandwidth of political actors and democracy advocates are limited[262]; they often need to make hard decisions about where to focus. There are some reforms that are more urgent than others and the order in which they are carried out matters.[263] In what follows we seek to provide some ideas on prioritization and sequencing, as well as some tasks that should be considered transversal as they run through any conceivable democratic transition from beginning to end. We finish by pointing out some places where there are reforms and changes that are simply in tension with each other. These will provide the tough decisions that political actors and advocates will need to make as they forge a path forward. All of the below refer to reforms that are developed more fully above. We do not here extensively repeat those analyses.

The first two tracks consist of goals and tasks that need to run through the entire process.

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[261] Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

[262] Maryhen Jiménez, Javier Pérez Sandoval and Timothy J Power, "How Global Illiberalism Damages Democracy", Journal of Democracy, (2026), 37:2, 121-133.

[263] Terry Lynn Karl, "Dilemmas of Democratization in Latin America," *Comparative Politics* 23, no. 1 (October 1990): 1–21. Karl emphasizes how each decision in a transition structures later decisions.

- **Improvements in daily life**. The literature on transitions shows that state incapacity and severe poverty and inequality can undermine a democratic consolidation, regardless of elections, as citizens in such conditions are less resistant to support non-democratic options.[264] Thus some visible gains in terms of wages, health, access to food and other goods, such as water and electricity are essential (see Ch.2).
- **The demand for justice**. One of the first tasks taken on by the Delcy Rodriguez government was the formulation of an Amnesty Law. However, many political prisoners remain and an arbitrary end to the Amnesty process has been announced without legal basis. What is more, victims of police violence, arbitrary detention, torture and serious human rights violations committed by the state need to see immediate signs that their cases will be attended to. This demand for justice will need to find institutional expression in justice reform. Further, research increasingly shows that a comprehensive, well-developed effort at transitional justice is necessary for democratization.[265] These issues will run from beginning to end in any transition to democracy (see Ch.12).

Thinking in terms of phases, **right from the beginning** measures can be taken to stop the authoritarian slide and point Venezuela's political process in the right direction:

- There need to be some **humanitarian "quick wins"** including restoration of wages and improvement of basic services, as well as access to quality food and health services (see Ch.2).
- First, **ending repression and reopening civil space**. The media and participation sections above points to immediate actions that are not logistically difficult such as unblocking of independent media sites, lifting of controls on

[264] Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). Przeworski, A., Alvarez, M. E., Cheibub, J. A., & Limongi, F. (2000). Democracy and development. Cambridge University Press; and Mainwaring, S., & Pérez-Liñán, A. (2013). Democracies and dictatorships in Latin America. Cambridge University Press.
[265] Olsen, T. D., Payne, L. A., & Reiter, A. G. (2010). Transitional justice in balance: Comparing processes, weighing efficacy. U.S. Institute of Peace Press.

funding for NGOs, as well as the freeing of journalists and civil society activists. Public security forces need to refrain from practices such as reviewing citizens' cellular phones to check for "subversive" messages. Citizens must stop fearing arrest for their political views. The right to peaceful protest must return to the streets. All parties should be legalized as well. In short, political liberalization is a basic starting point for democratic opening (see Ch.s 7, 8 and 10).

- Second, some **guarantees and expectations for the future should be given to the military apparatus.** These guarantees should be prioritized to reduce risk of a coup or crackdown. At the same time, repressive practices against the population need to be eliminated (see Ch.9)..
- Third, a **minimal negotiated pact** setting out expectations, credible commitments and rules of the game could be established between the current government, opposition forces and other key national stakeholders regarding economic reforms and the reforms needed to get to free and fair elections. The goal here is to prevent veto players[266] from undermining a transition (see Ch.1).

Some tepid steps have happened with the first with the Amnesty Law and some limited openness to social mobilization and journalistic critique. However, it has been altogether too limited and families and activists have begun to mobilize to demand the liberation of all political prisoners. There have been some changes in the military but there is little information regarding the impact of these changes. Military figures known for serious human rights violations remain in positions of power. The biggest gap here is in having any sort of minimal pact between the government and opposition. Neither side thinks it is necessary and the only effort has been the Commission on Coexistence and Democratic Peace which only has limited presence of opposition activists.

A **second phase** should start to create the institutional anchors necessary to generate movement towards a democratic transition.

[266] Tsebelis, G. (2002). *Veto players: How political institutions work*. Princeton University Press.

- Recovery of the oil and mining industries need to be carried out with **transparency and domestic revenue architecture**. This needs to happen at the level of the United States' current control over the commercialization of Venezuelan oil, as well as within Venezuela in the National Assembly, the Central Bank and through the Comptroller's Office. There should be an oversight board including not just government officials but civil society and representatives of the opposition (see Ch.1).
- **Reconfiguration of chavismo** as a political movement and party that can manage not being in power, having internal democracy, and being just one option in a democratic field (see Ch.6).
- The development of **opposition coordination and conflict resolution mechanisms** that can manage the diversity of the opposition in such a way that it can draw up some unified objectives and strategies (See Ch.6).
- The creation of a **broad and inclusive process of political negotiations** to reach agreement on long-term political and institutional reforms aimed at reducing the stakes of power and lay the groundwork for a return to political alternability (See Ch.s 1 and 4).

Economic recovery has been the main focus of both the Trump administration and the Rodríguez government; however it is distinguished for its lack of transparency. The result has been the continuation of many of the corrupt practices and schemes from before. The population has seen precious little improvements in their daily lives and patience is wearing thin. The Venezuelan opposition could use their current marginalization as an opportunity for reorganization and a new institutionalization. However, Machado's team takes her 90% plus percentage victory in the 2023 primaries, and their landslide victory with Edmundo González Urrutia in the 2024 presidential elections as evidence that they are already unified and there has been little effort to build a structure that can manage diversity. Top-down decision-making should not be mistaken with coordination or unity.

A third phase could seek more substantial institutional changes.

- Legal and institutional changes that will **enable robust citizen participation and media pluralism**. This should include the elimination of anti-terrorism and hate laws as well as strictures on funding. It should include pluralism not only in independent media but state media. This could reduce the reliance on divisive social media (see Ch.s 4, 7 and 8).
- **Restore party viability,** including public financing and as well as restrictions on use of state institutions and resources for partisan purposes (see Ch.4).
- **Reconstruction of the National Electoral Council** including the naming of new rectors and the de-politicization of subnational electoral offices (see Ch.4).
- **Reconstruct electoral justice** including reform of the Supreme Tribunal of Justice's electoral chamber and control over the Comptroller's ability to disqualify electoral candidates (See Ch.4).
- The **demilitarization and professionalization of policing** to aim at providing public security rather than social control. Included in this needs to be a reemphasis on professional anti-crime strategies (See Ch.10).

Very little progress or movement towards these reforms has taken place. There has been some change in the TSJ, however, not specifically in the electoral chamber. The 2024 elections made clear that even an electoral landslide can be stolen if there is no prior reform in the electoral institutions. Doing institutional groundwork can make the difference between an electoral event and a democratic transition.[267]

In a fourth stage, the most difficult and contentious tasks should be addressed.

- A **renewed process of police reform** can be taken on, including the dismantling of the political police, vetting of police officers, training and professionalization, and reconstruction of the General Police Council into a non-partisan, civilian body governing the police (See Ch.10).

[267] Andreas Schedler, *The Politics of Uncertainty: Sustaining and Subverting Electoral Authoritarianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). [scholar.google.com], [en.wikipedia.org]

- A **strategy for dealing with non-state violent actors** based on a “pragmatic peace” This perspective prioritizes safeguarding citizens' lives and reducing the most serious forms of violence and a temporary tolerance toward minor crimes such as small-scale drug trafficking, until the State recovers its social presence and installs the rule of law. Concerning the ELN and FARC dissident groups a binational strategy and cooperation with Colombia is needed to tackle these groups (See Ch.11).
- A **transitional justice ecosystem** should be developed.[268] This can begin with an independent truth commission working in tandem with specially-created courts aiming at selective prosecutions tied to the availability of evidence and degree of collaboration with the truth commission. Transitional justice should include victim participation, as well as reparations and memorialization (see Ch.12).

A successful democratic transition could look towards an effort to significantly amend or rewrite the constitution which has some core elements that give the executive branch too much power and gives incumbents’ too large of an advantage.

This effort at sequencing builds on the assumption that not everything can change at once, and that it is important to start with easier reforms to build momentum for the larger more contentious issues. But there is no easy way forward in a more than quarter century long political conflict and all democratizers should know that there are and will be some identifiable **tensions that will be decided through political negotiation**. To end we would like to describe a couple of them.

- **Justice versus stability** On the one hand, the grave injustices, corruption and violations of human rights that have occurred require justice. Not only do the victims deserve it but research increasingly shows that the quality of transitional justice processes has important downstream effects on the quality of democracy. On the other hand, at this point the Maduro regime is still intact and many in the

[268] Olsen, T. D., Payne, L. A., & Reiter, A. G. (2010). Transitional justice in balance. U.S. Institute of Peace Press.

government and armed forces have the power to shut down any progress towards democratization if they feel threatened. Efforts should begin with documentation, victim support and pushing forward cases of police violence. Such initiatives can lead to efforts at justice reform and a broader effort at truth-seeking. When the process gains momentum broader prosecutions can occur, focusing on severe and well-evidenced cases. Such events can be accompanied by processes of reparation and memorialization (see Ch.s 4 and 12).

- **Economic recovery versus regulation** Rapid revival of Venezuela's oil and mining sectors is vital to any conceivable transition. However, without adequate transparency and financial regulation, the resources may never benefit the population. Furthermore, without environmental regulation, destruction of the environment will continue and worsen. Solutions to this dilemma could come through some sort of "oil for essentials" program in which proceeds could be ring-fenced for the population's needs. As well, a diversified oversight board could be created to monitor environmental impacts (see Ch.s 1 and 2).
- **Compliance with U.S. versus de-risking** Both the Delcy Rodríguez government and the Machado-led opposition understandably focus on fulfilling the demands and currying the favor of the Trump administration. However, in the longer term their autonomy and Venezuela's sovereignty would be best served by diversifying their international relationships around the globe especially with "middle powers." Neither side is in position to provoke retaliation from the U.S. and should start with multilateral human rights and humanitarian cooperation as well as engagement on development tasks such as health and infrastructure (see Ch.3).

We intend this presentation of sequencing as a contribution to discussion and decision-making. We have avoided making reference to specific time frames such as "the first six months" or "the next two years" on the assumption that political times are difficult to predict. Sometimes they can slow to crawl or seem to be blocked, only to suddenly accelerate the pace of change.

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