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STRENGTHENING
DEMOCRACIES
IN LATIN AMERICA

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Venezuela After Maduro's Arrest

Political Landscape Report



What Happened on January 3?

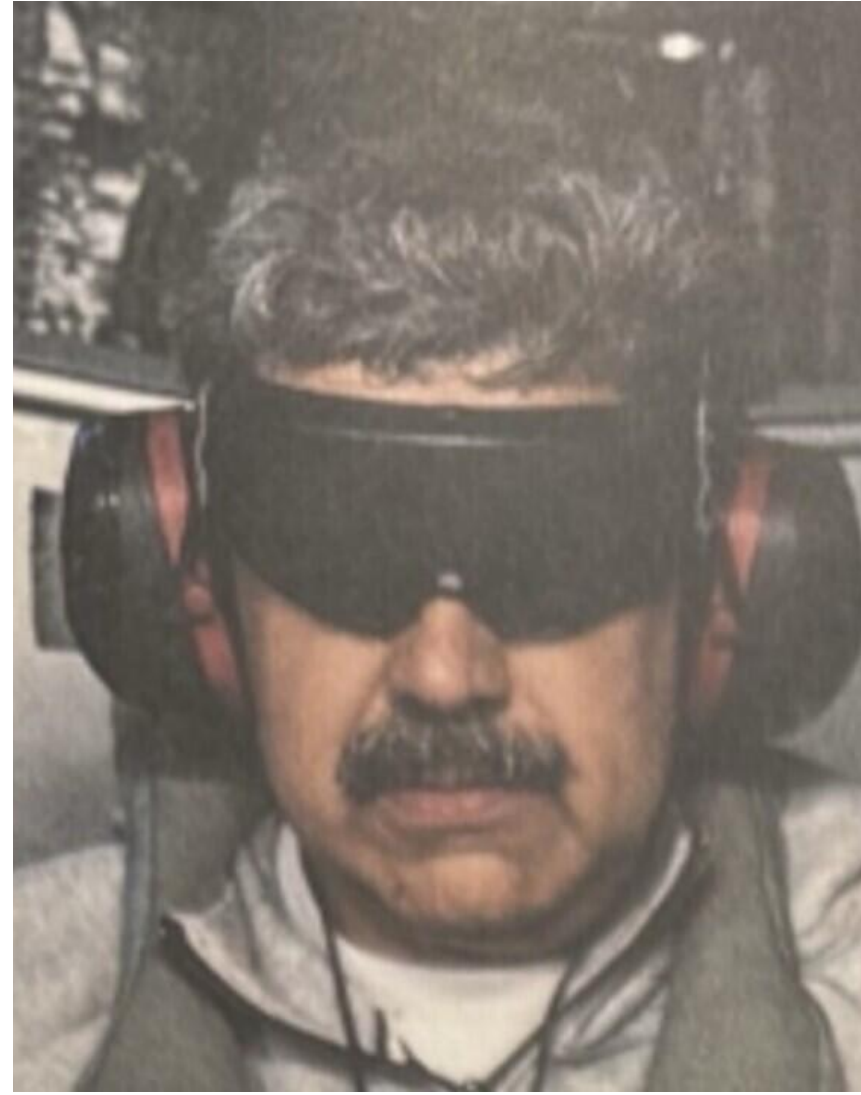


In the early hours of January 3, 2026, U.S. special forces carried out a military operation in Caracas that resulted in the capture of Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores. The operation, dubbed “Operation Absolute Resolve,” involved aerial and ground strikes against Venezuelan facilities, including Forte Tiuna and the La Carlota air base.

The resulting power vacuum was addressed institutionally by Venezuela’s Supreme Tribunal of Justice, which ordered Vice President Delcy Rodríguez to assume Maduro’s duties. Rodríguez took office as acting president for an initial period of up to 90 days, subject to extension by the National Assembly, pursuant to Article 234 of the Constitution.

Separately, Donald Trump stated that the United States would temporarily administer Venezuela while pursuing a “legal and fair” transition. While he initially did not specify how the United States would secure control over the country, subsequent signals suggest Washington intends to engage directly with Rodríguez’s interim administration. In that context, Trump downplayed a central role for opposition figures such as María Corina Machado.

The operation triggered immediate reactions. Chavista officials denounced it as an “imperialist invasion,” while opposition groups and segments of the public welcomed what they framed as the end of the Maduro era. Regionally, the capture heightened tensions across Latin America and reopened long-standing debates over U.S. intervention in the hemisphere.



After the Military Operation: Trump's Plans for Venezuela



Initially, Trump said the United States would temporarily govern Venezuela until it achieves a safe, orderly, and sensible transition. He stated that senior U.S. officials would lead the country to prevent figures aligned with Maduro's administration from taking power, underscoring the need to secure control over Venezuela's oil resources.

He stressed that the transitional governance plan would prioritize reviving the country's oil sector, which he described as critical to economic recovery and regional stability. Trump said major U.S. oil companies would invest billions of dollars to repair Venezuela's oil infrastructure.

As a result, on January 5, shares of major U.S. oil companies—including Chevron, ExxonMobil, and ConocoPhillips—moved higher. Chevron, the only one with active operations in Venezuela under prior licenses, rose by more than 5.4%, while its competitors posted similar gains on expectations of renewed access to Venezuelan reserves.

Trump also stated explicitly that his administration would set the terms for exploiting these resources, warning of a "second wave" of military action if local leaders interfere with his government's strategy.

As the hours passed, Trump's plan became clearer. Both he and Secretary of State Marco Rubio repeatedly said they would engage with Delcy Rodríguez's government, while emphasizing that the United States would reserve the right to apply additional pressure—including measures even tougher than those imposed on Maduro—if the new administration fails to cooperate with U.S. objectives for the country.

Delcy Rodríguez, the Country's New Leader: *Chavismo* Without Maduro?



Facing the U.S. intervention, Venezuela moved quickly to clarify its internal political situation in order to avoid any power vacuum. Hours after Maduro's capture, the Supreme Tribunal of Justice ordered that Delcy Rodríguez "assume and exercise, in an acting capacity, all the attributions, duties, and powers inherent to the Office of the President (...) in order to ensure administrative continuity and the comprehensive defense of the Nation." The ruling explicitly stated that the swearing-in took place "in light of the exceptional situation generated (...), which constitutes a case of material and temporary impossibility for the exercise of Maduro's functions."

The decision also clearly framed Maduro's absence as "temporary," allowing Rodríguez to serve as acting president without triggering Article 233 of the Constitution, which provides that in the event of an "absolute absence" of the president, the acting head of state must call elections within 30 days. For now, under the Constitution, Rodríguez would remain in office for at least 90 days, with the possibility of an additional 90 days if the National Assembly agrees. After that, the Assembly would have to determine whether an absolute absence exists to decide whether Article 233 should apply.



Who Is the New Leader?



She has a long political and personal trajectory on Venezuela's left. Born in 1969, she is a lawyer who graduated from the Universidad Central of Venezuela and later pursued studies abroad in Paris and London. Her father was a prominent leader of the *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria* and died in state security custody in 1976. According to the attorney general at the time, he suffered a heart attack after being subjected to repeated acts of torture by the Directorate of Intelligence and Prevention Services.

Against that family backdrop, Rodríguez built her political career within *chavismo*. She served as Minister of the Office of the Presidency (2006), Minister of Communication and Information (2013–2014), Minister of Foreign Affairs (2014–2017), President of the National Constituent Assembly (2017–2018), and Executive Vice President (since June 2018). She also served as Minister of Economy and Finance (2020–2024) and, since 2024, has held the portfolio of Minister of Oil and Hydrocarbons alongside the vice presidency.

Her loyalty to the “Bolivarian Revolution” has never been questioned, though she has often advanced more pragmatic positions than other senior chavista officials. On economic policy, she has supported engagement with private-sector actors and promoted cooperation with foreign oil companies. Her technocratic profile—more managerial than ideological—has made her a central figure in steering Venezuela's economy through crisis



What Were Her First Steps as Acting President?



Although Rodríguez formally took the oath as acting president on January 5, in practice she began leading the new government from the moment Maduro was captured. Over the weekend, she chaired the 757th meeting of the Council of Ministers alongside the same cabinet that had served under Maduro until his detention. To date, there have been no personnel changes, and all signs suggest that *chavismo* has closed ranks around Rodríguez.

However, the acting president's tone has shifted over the past 48 hours. In her first statements on Saturday, she took a hard line against U.S. actions: she strongly condemned the military operation, insisted that Maduro remains the legitimate president, called for safeguarding the country's natural resources, and stressed the need to preserve the continuity of the "Bolivarian Revolution."

By contrast, after Sunday's cabinet meeting she released a statement on social media that softened those positions. Rodríguez said that "Venezuela reaffirms its commitment to peace and peaceful coexistence," and that "global peace is built by first guaranteeing the peace of each nation." She argued that an "balanced and respectful international relationship between the United States and Venezuela (...) based on sovereign equality and non-interference" should be a priority.

She then extended an invitation to the U.S. government to work "jointly on an agenda of cooperation aimed at shared development, within the framework of international legality, and to strengthen lasting community coexistence." She also addressed President Donald Trump directly, stating that "our peoples and our region deserve peace and dialogue—not war."



Which Congress Will She Govern With? An Assembly Almost Entirely “Chavista”



On January 5, 2026, Venezuela’s National Assembly opened the 2026–2031 term with the swearing-in of its 273 lawmakers. The new Assembly—dominated by the ruling bloc, which holds more than 80% of the seats—takes office amid partial military control, U.S. pressure, and the appointment of Delcy Rodríguez as acting president for an initial 90-day period that can be extended.

Politically, the Assembly’s first challenge will be to craft a shared reading of the national moment that prioritizes Venezuelans’ interests, and then to leverage that footing in dealings with the Trump administration. Building that common ground appears unlikely in a body where the opposition and the ruling bloc hold sharply conflicting ideological views.

Still, the difficulty of converging on a single line also appears to constrain the ruling camp itself. Subtle fractures are emerging between hardline “*maduristas*,” who are likely to push motions condemning Trump and demanding Maduro’s repatriation, and more pragmatic figures such as Jorge Rodríguez—the Assembly’s president and the acting president’s brother—who may be willing to engage U.S. envoys to preserve oil concessions and avert a “second wave” of military action.

U.S. military leverage and Venezuela’s internal fragmentation are the two central factors underpinning Washington’s advantage in its intervention.

What Should Be Closely Watched as This New Phase Begins?



Venezuela's future remains uncertain. Two extreme scenarios frame the outer bounds—both unlikely in the short term: a further entrenchment of *chavismo's* authoritarian features through a new radical phase led by whoever ultimately holds effective power in the country; or the immediate launch of a transparent, plural, and participatory democratic process.

The U.S. military intervention—and Washington's ability to tighten economic pressure—appears to sharply limit any shift toward the regime's most hardline impulses. At the same time, the Trump administration's stated willingness to work with Rodríguez's government, even from a position in which she remains politically subordinate, seems to cool expectations of a rapid democratic transition.

That said, most outcomes are likely to fall somewhere in between. The key will be to watch how the following dynamics evolve:

- **Internal Cohesion Within “*Chavismo*.”** Delcy Rodríguez will need to bring the ruling coalition's different factions in line behind her new governing program. If her room to maneuver as acting president is effectively constrained by U.S. conditions, her immediate challenge will be to keep the most hardline currents—led by Diosdado Cabello—on board to preserve her decision-making capacity. The risk is that a Delcy Rodríguez without the backing of the full *chavista* apparatus could end up as an acting president without real political power.
- **The Scope of U.S. Influence Over Venezuela's Government.** How far Trump and his officials go in shaping Venezuela's domestic politics will be decisive. A deep U.S. footprint could carry significant economic, military, social, and reputational costs for Washington, but it could also accelerate a transition toward a new democratic order. By contrast, a pullback by the Trump administration could give the new government greater latitude to consolidate political control and delay the return to competitive elections.
- **International Public Opinion and Global Responses.** How the U.S. military action is received by other countries and by broader public opinion will be another key variable to monitor. Debates over international law and state sovereignty could impose reputational costs on the United States and strengthen Venezuela's position externally. The response of other major actors—such as the European Union, China, Russia, the United Nations, and Brazil—will also matter. Most have spoken out against the U.S. military intervention, while also qualifying their positions in light of disputes over the legitimacy of Maduro's government.



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