

Q. & A.

THE MADURO REGIME WITHOUT MADURO

A political scientist explains how the Venezuelan President ran the country, why he was so unpopular, and, after his seizure by the Trump Administration, who might take over.

By Isaac Chotiner

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Credit: Source photograph by Nicole Combeau / Bloomberg / Getty



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Donald Trump has promised to “run” Venezuela after ordering, with scant legal basis, a military operation that killed at least eighty people,

some of them civilians, and involved the seizure of Venezuela's President, Nicolás Maduro, and his wife, Cilia Flores. On Monday, in New York City, Maduro and Flores pleaded not guilty to drug trafficking and other criminal charges. Trump has repeatedly said that he intends to exert control over Venezuela to allow American oil companies to profit. The Venezuelan opposition is led by María Corina Machado, who won the Nobel Peace Prize last year, but Trump has seemingly lost interest in her—he recently claimed that she “doesn't have the support” in Venezuela—and instead favors Maduro's Vice-President, Delcy Rodríguez, who has been elevated to replace him. In Caracas, on Monday, the National Assembly met and unveiled a portrait of Maduro and Flores, suggesting a degree of continuity. (The *Financial Times* reported that, last year, Rodríguez and her brother had held secret talks with the United States about a “post-Maduro future.”)

I recently spoke by phone with Javier Corrales, an expert on Venezuelan politics who is a professor of political science at Amherst College. During our conversation, which has been edited for length and clarity, we discussed how Maduro ruled Venezuela, how the opposition to his regime was viewed inside the country, and what Trump really wants to see happen.

How would you describe the Maduro regime as it existed a couple of days ago? And how would you say that regime changed over the course of his nearly thirteen years in power?

Maduro made it to the Presidency because of a decision by Hugo Chávez, a very popular and populist President who became semi-dictatorial. But, the moment Maduro came in, he started to lose popularity, which prompted him to become even more autocratic than Chávez. During the first six or seven years of his administration, his regime became a paradigmatic example of what we call autocratization. You start out with some democratic liberties—not a lot—and then you gradually tighten the regime in order to acquire more power and become more repressive. The way that he has maintained support within his inner circle relies on traditional autocratic practices—the

usual propaganda, terror, espionage, torture, control of the media—and also on Maduro granting the military special business contracts and lucrative opportunities, and allowing many of his collaborators to engage in illicit economic activities.

How do you describe Chávez's government and how it changed over time? And do you view Maduro's quick loss of popularity as being a result of Chávez having made mistakes that manifested themselves in the Maduro era, or a result of Maduro going in a different direction than Chávez—not just more authoritarian, but in ways that lost him popular support?

What Chávez did was a little bit original, but since his time we have seen the model repeated elsewhere. He was a classic left-wing populist with a military background, which for Latin America is not that unusual. He had an anti-democratic background, too—he staged a coup that failed—but, later, he decided to run for office and he was seen as this populist savior. And he used that popularity to basically overhaul the most important institutions of governance. Using his popularity, his referenda, his ability to win elections, he started to change the constitution to give himself more power and to take power away from other groups. He started to expand the use of decrees. He turned his ruling party into a rubber stamp.

He began to apply a lot of intimidation against members who had initially supported him, then turned against him. Once he consolidated full control of his movement, he began to treat the opposition exactly the same way. But, in the very beginning, he lucked out, because as he was acquiring more powers and becoming more dictatorial and more oppressive toward internal critics and outside opponents, he experienced an oil boom from 2003 till about 2008 or 2009. The price of oil skyrocketed right around the Iraq War. And this gave the government so much money that he was able to co-opt almost every sector of society, all the way from business élites and military leaders to the middle classes and the poor. And so we see a combination of a President engaging in a huge consumption boom while simultaneously becoming

autocratic.

That was Chávez, who was President from 1999 until his death, in 2013. Maduro comes in and the economic boom is over—the price of oil drops. The state is incredibly inefficient, it has too many liabilities. And so, in many ways, Maduro doesn't enjoy the economic instruments that Chávez had at his disposal to co-opt people. That's one reason he loses popularity. The second reason is he makes a number of important mistakes. He intensifies price controls. He takes nationalizations even further at a time when most Venezuelans were, like, "Enough with these policies." And so he experienced a very serious decline and he panics and then starts to become more authoritarian.

As you think about how the Maduro regime developed during his time in power, in addition to becoming more autocratic, I'm wondering how much it centered on him. We can think of autocratic governments that are more cults of personality and others that are not. One example of the former was Argentina after the Peróns, which was led by a junta. I'm thinking specifically about what this will mean if Maduro's loyalists continue running the country.

... think you're making an important distinction. Chávez was so popular that he didn't need to trade as many favors. Since Maduro didn't have that type of popular appeal, he relied on forms of coöperation. He would say to his inner circle, "You have to be very loyal to me and I am in command. I am in command the way a C.E.O. is in command of a corporation, but I will, in return, give you all autonomies to run whatever unit of this system you're going to be in charge of. So if you are doing military affairs, you get plenty of autonomy. If you are running the oil sector, you get plenty of autonomy. If you are a governor, you get plenty of autonomy." This is how he did it. What occurs is that they're all loyal to the main guy because the main guy is giving all these groups significant institutional autonomies. It's almost like a king and an aristocracy in which the nobles have enough leeway to run things as

they see fit.

So it's not exactly a vertical system, like when Fidel Castro was in office, or when Stalin was in office. It's a confederacy, in the sense that there is a central government, but the different federations have enormous leeway. That is why the regime doesn't collapse when the top leader gets removed from it, because what you have is a leader with ancillary institutions and fiefdoms operating on their own.

This suggests that if what the Trump Administration wants is to have a more pliant government that gives oil concessions to the U.S., but can keep the country relatively stable in the short or medium term, then that's a real possibility because the government will continue as it was before, to some degree.

That is correct. It depends on what concessions Trump is going to demand. One of the most important ones is that he wants to give more access to major American oil companies and bring them into the Venezuelan oil business. You don't need regime change in Venezuela to get that. This is something that Maduro was already willing to grant, and I think the current leaders of Venezuela are all ready to provide it because this does not require regime change. And they had already made the decision that it had been kind of crazy for the regime to move away from the U.S. market. So they were already pretty ready to do this. If the only thing that Trump demands is more access to oil assets in Venezuela, that is something that Delcy Rodríguez and the rest of the regime will easily provide.

Do you see Rodríguez as an important figure going forward? What was her role under Maduro?

She was a very close and trusted political ally of Maduro and, as such, she had plenty of autonomy. She was running a number of affairs. She was Vice-President. She was running the oil business. She was in charge of relations with the private sector. Her brother was in charge of the legislature. They

were perfect examples of what I was describing. They were very loyal, but they had quite a bit of autonomy. And, in many ways, she introduced important things that one would not have seen—policies, for example, that Maduro perhaps would have never implemented himself.

She has inherited a lot of power. Now, my only caveat with what I am saying is, every time you remove the strong man from any system, even this confederacy that I have described, you will inevitably have a discussion within the inner circles about who should really go next, who is more qualified, who has the better idea. I'm not sure if she's going to survive an internal power struggle, if it emerges.

How would you describe the Venezuelan opposition, which is led by María Corina Machado? She won the Nobel Peace Prize, and it seems like the Trump Administration may have lost interest in her. There's some reporting, from the *Washington Post*, about how her winning of the Peace Prize, which Trump thought was his, may have caused some resentment.

The Venezuelan opposition has been expanding significantly in Maduro's time, but here is the problem. The government increased the number of obstacles to undermine the competitiveness of elections, the ability to run an organized campaign, and this has included not just terrible regulations, but arrests and prohibitions. Most members of the opposition started to basically give up on running because they were, like, "The cards are so stacked against us." What Machado did in 2024, which is really extraordinary, is she changed her mind, and the United States helped. She was convinced that it made sense to compete even if the rules were stacked against them. And she was able to mobilize the most effective electoral campaign against an authoritarian regime that we have seen in a very, very long time. And she not only wins but she wins massively.

Just to be clear, she was barred from running herself.

Yes, her first choice for candidate was also barred from running, which gave

her very little time to pick somebody else, and then she selected Edmundo González. Everybody in Venezuela who voted in that election for González was voting for her, though. Even the government said this.

So do you view that as her having some independent power base, or is it more that she was just the alternative to an unpopular government? Is there a unified opposition that you view as having a real power base and ideological component that one can grab onto?

Machado became a folk hero of the Venezuelan opposition between late 2023 and 2024. She has always been around, and she has a past that many people have criticized.

How so?

There were moments when she was very extremist in not wanting to make agreements with other members of the opposition. She was very hard-line, very intransigent. She was, like, “With this regime, we just are never going to negotiate anything.” And many folks thought that that was a type of dogmatism and inflexibility that was not productive. She also has very market-oriented economic policies. She wants widespread privatizations that not a lot of people want.

But she changed approaching the 2024 elections and she built a spectacular coalition. She was able to, for the first time, really gather a massive movement. Contrary to what President Trump said, the respect that Machado enjoys both in Venezuela and abroad is unrivalled in the history of the opposition to Chavismo.

Left-wing figures in Latin America have often used anti-Americanism politically, in many cases for good reasons since America has been supporting coups and attempting coups right up to the present day. How much of the politics of Chávez and Maduro was based on anti-Americanism? And is it a problem for Machado that, if she is ever going to

take power, it seems like she's going to have to kiss up to Trump and be seen by the White House as someone that they can control, and therefore, because of the association with the U.S. and what the U.S. has done in Venezuela, will become more toxic?

In America, and in the world, anti-U.S., anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist sentiment is always very strong, but this is a very important thing to keep in mind: it is also a tool that autocrats use to justify their worst excesses. There's a very strong correlation with the rise of autocracy and human-rights abuses and bad governance and the increase in anti-American discourse. We see it everywhere. This is not coincidental. Most Venezuelans who are smart recognize that this is a rhetorical device. It works with a small group of ideologues. But it's not the main reason for the appeal. It's very important that we understand that this is what they tell themselves to rationalize their autocratic practices.

In terms of Machado being too aligned with Trump, I think this is a fair criticism. I understand why she did it. She felt very isolated internationally, and she felt that nobody was really helping. And, from the very beginning, Trump promised that he was really, really, really, really going to help. If you feel that your country has been hijacked, you have a tendency to choose the person who promises to carry out bold actions. But it is true that Trump is very unpopular and that Machado probably made a mistake and she has paid a price for it. And now she has been betrayed by Trump. It is one thing to be anti-American, but it's another thing to become too close to a President who is so incredibly polemical. But, in terms of her standing in Venezuela, I don't think it has affected her that much.

In terms of Trump, though, it's not that he's polemical. He just bombed the country and says he will run it and take the oil. No country wants to hear that or experience that from a foreign nation, whether they are leftist and anti-capitalist or not.

No, absolutely not. Most of the justifications that Trump has given are incredibly unpopular, even among the opposition. Of course, the opposition is very grateful that Maduro is gone. But as a defense of what was done, one has to say that Trump's was one of the worst possible speeches. The justifications that were given are things that most members of the opposition would be embarrassed to be hearing. These were not things that are part of what the opposition ever wanted: to talk about "We're going to be there and we're going to be running things and we're going to be taking all the oil and we're going to be keeping the rest of the Chavista regime in place." Any sensible speechwriter would have seen that—if it was part of any script—and said, "These are going to be statements that are going to fray the coalition that we're trying to build."

Right, but even talking about sensible speechwriters feels like it's in a different universe. Trump doesn't care about any coalition, and doesn't care about anyone in Venezuela. My concern would be that people on the ground in Venezuela—and if they feel like celebrating Maduro's fall, I certainly would never judge that—don't realize the degree to which literally none of these considerations matter at all to Trump.

A very fair point. I think there are many members of the Venezuelan opposition who are not used to a President who really doesn't care about the same values that they care about. There has always been the belief that the U.S. President defended many different objectives in foreign policy, but that the promotion of democracy, good governance, and rule of law were there. It may not be a priority, but it's always there. And I think what happened on January 3rd, and especially the statements made by Trump where he has been so transparent about what he really cares about, came as a shock to many people who have always refused to believe what for many of us has been very obvious for many years now—that he really is a President who only cares about acquisition, acquisition, acquisition for himself, dressed up as patriotism. ♦