

WHO'S RUNNING VENEZUELA AFTER THE FALL OF MADURO?

The country's interim leader, Delcy Rodríguez, is in the awkward position of having to appease two hard-line, opposing audiences: the Trump Administration and what remains of the Venezuelan regime.

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Photograph by Juan Barreto / AFP / Getty



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On Saturday, hours after U.S. troops seized Nicolás Maduro, the authoritarian leader of Venezuela, from a military compound in Caracas, Donald Trump delivered a press conference at Mar-a-Lago. Before it began, a former American official, who had served in the first Trump White House, told me there was a chance that Trump would simply “declare victory and go home.” Such a move, at once cynical and dangerous, would be typical of Trump. Maduro’s regime could easily survive without him; if it didn’t, a power vacuum among armed factions of the military, vigilante groups known as *colectivos*, and Colombian guerrillas operating along the border could unleash untold chaos and violence. “Trump didn’t promise anything,” the former official told me. “He just delivered on a huge win and a total embarrassment for Venezuela, and an important message to others. This victory gives the Administration an opportunity to disengage.”

In Trump’s usual fashion, his press conference raised a host of new and confounding questions. The Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, by far the Administration’s most fervent anti-Maduro ideologue, cautiously described the leader’s capture as a law-enforcement operation. But Trump, who had been reluctant during his first term to enlist American forces to overthrow Maduro, went further, suggesting a more prolonged U.S. presence in the country. “We’re not afraid of boots on the ground,” he said. Standing behind him was the team of advisers—Rubio; Stephen Miller, the deputy White House chief of staff; Pete Hegseth, the Secretary of War; and the C.I.A. director, John Ratcliffe—who, Trump went on, are “going to be running” the country for the time being. At one point, Trump offered what, to former U.S. officials and regional experts, was a confusing account of two key Venezuelan players: María Corina Machado, the opposition leader and Nobel laureate, and Delcy Rodríguez, Maduro’s loyal deputy and the acting Vice-President at the time of his ouster. When asked if Machado would have a role in the country’s transition, Trump was categorical. “She’s a very nice woman,” he said, but “she doesn’t have the support within or the respect within the country.” Rodríguez, by contrast, is “essentially willing to do what

we think is necessary to make Venezuela great again. Very simple.”

What went unmentioned was the fact that Trump had sanctioned Rodríguez for repressing dissent during his first term, and that she'd been handpicked for her current job by Maduro himself. “The disconnect between the reality of Delcy and the reality of María Corina Machado and how both of them were portrayed made me think that there was some confusion,” Carrie Filipetti, who worked at the State Department during the first Trump Administration, as the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Cuba and Venezuela, told me. The former official, who was watching the press conference and messaging with colleagues, also registered the confusion. “We caught it immediately at the time,” he said. A few of these colleagues were scheduled to give television or radio interviews after Trump’s speech. They started asking each other for clarification.

Behind Trump, Rubio labored to project a blank expression. Last April, writing in *Time*, he had called Machado “the Venezuelan Iron Lady,” whose “leadership is a beacon of hope.” In 2024, Machado, who’d been barred by Maduro from running for office, backed Edmundo González, a seventy-four-year-old diplomat, to run against Maduro. According to publicly available election returns, González won by an overwhelming margin. When Maduro declared victory anyway, U.S. officials, including Joe Biden, called the result a sham. As Secretary of State, Rubio has argued that Maduro was not the country’s legitimate President. On Saturday, once the news broke that Maduro had been captured, Machado issued a triumphant statement. “Venezuela will be free,” she wrote. “We have fought for years. We have given everything, and it has been worth the pain. What had to happen is happening.”

...he Venezuelan opposition has always been riven with divisions. During Trump’s first term, the U.S. recognized Juan Guaidó, a legislator, as the legitimate head of the country’s interim government, on the erroneous assumption that American support would pressure members of the military

to defect from the regime. The gambit failed, and the interim government fell apart in 2022. Machado distinguished herself by her belief that Maduro could only be forced from power with the direct intervention of a foreign power. The irony is that she turned out to be right but at a steep personal cost. Machado appears to be experiencing a fate shared by those who put their trust in Trump. “He just doesn’t like her,” the former White House official told me. “Maybe it has to do with his loss of enthusiasm for the opposition over all. He views them as losers. He hates losers. And, frankly, there’s Trump’s ego. She stole his Nobel Prize from him.”

There’s been speculation that, prior to Maduro’s capture, Rodríguez may have spoken with members of the Trump Administration. For now, it’s impossible to say. “I found it interesting that the United States had such an easy time capturing Maduro and his wife while they slept,” Francisco Rodríguez, a former Venezuelan legislator and economist, told *Foreign Affairs*. “That strongly suggests there was some type of internal collaboration from the Venezuelan forces that were guarding him.” Rodríguez, however, remains one of the Venezuelan regime’s staunchest loyalists. At the Saturday press conference, Trump said that Rubio had already spoken with Rodríguez, who’d just been installed as interim President by the Venezuelan Supreme Court. Rodríguez, for her part, wasted no time repudiating the U.S.’s actions. “There is only one President in this country,” she said, on Saturday. “His name is Nicolás Maduro Moros.” Venezuela, she went on, “will never again be anyone’s colony—neither of old empires nor of new empires, nor of empires in decline.”

Rodríguez, who is fifty-six, was a middling government bureaucrat before Maduro took power. Her father, a Marxist guerrilla known for his role in the kidnapping of an American businessman in 1976, was later jailed by the Venezuelan government; he died in custody after being tortured by the secret police. “All her hate for Venezuela’s old political establishment”—which was strongly pro-U.S.—“goes back to that abuse,” Brian Naranjo, a former American diplomat, told the *Wall Street Journal*. Her brother Jorge was

Maduro's chief political strategist; he went on to head the Venezuelan legislature, overseeing the 2024 elections that were marred by fraud. Delcy, a lifelong ideologue, earned a reputation for ruthlessness and competency, running Maduro's foreign ministry and later managing both the economy and the country's oil industry. "I've been watching her career for a long time," a senior U.S. official told the *Times*. "She's certainly someone we think we can work at a much more professional level than we were able to do with [Maduro]."

By Sunday, there were some indications as to what Trump and Rubio might consider to be a productive "working" relationship. "If she doesn't do what's right, she is going to pay a very big price, probably bigger than Maduro," Trump told *The Atlantic*. Rubio, who spent the day largely sidestepping questions about Trump's plans to "run" the country after Maduro's ouster, reasserted his long-standing position in a string of television interviews. "We don't believe that this regime in place is legitimate," he said, in an ABC interview. During another appearance, he added, "What you're seeing right now is a quarantine that allows us to exert tremendous leverage over what happens next."

The logic appears to be that Rodríguez has the bona fides to reassure the main players in the Venezuelan government and military that their interests, for now, will be protected. Diosdado Cabello, the Interior Minister, and Vladimir Padrino López, the country's top general—to name just two of the most influential actors—are hardly naïve. Will they believe that their own future can coexist with whatever the Trump Administration has planned for Venezuela? A day after being sworn in, Rodríguez tried to strike a more conciliatory tone. "We extend an invitation to the U.S. government to work together on a coöperative agenda, oriented toward shared development," she said.

Still, her two hard-line audiences—the Trump Administration and the Venezuelan regime—would seem to be at cross purposes. Trump has been

explicit about wanting U.S. companies to help jump-start the country's flagging oil industry and to begin extracting profits for themselves. "Don't ask me who's in charge, because I'll give you an answer, and it'll be controversial," Trump said, adding, "We should run the country where we can take advantage of the economics—which is valuable oil and valuable other things." It is a bald proposition that lacks even the pretense of restoring Venezuelan democracy. It's also immensely costly and politically fraught. A Venezuelan friend—relieved to see Maduro in handcuffs and yet appalled by how it came to pass—texted me with an old refrain: *tanto nadar para morir en la orilla*. So much swimming just to die on the shore. ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated the location of Trump's press conference.