

WHAT WILL BECOME OF VENEZUELA'S POLITICAL PRISONERS?

Jésus Armas, a prominent opposition leader, has been in prison in Caracas for the past year. With the country in turmoil, his mother worries about his fate.

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Photograph by Ariana Cubillos / AP



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El Helicoide, a brutalist complex sitting atop a hill in central Caracas, is known as one of Latin America's most notorious detention centers. Built as a shopping mall in the nineteen-fifties, the structure was taken over by Venezuela's national-intelligence services, who turned its abandoned

storefronts and lavatories into makeshift prison cells.

Early on Saturday afternoon, hours after American forces captured Nicolás Maduro, Amanda Monasterios sped off to El Helicoide. Her son, Jesús Armas, a prominent opposition leader, was among the political prisoners held inside. Monasterios, who is seventy-four, looked out at the capital's eerily deserted streets: *caraqueños* had awakened to a bombed city, where people had been called on to begin *la lucha armada*. She arrived at El Helicoide to find that armed men had sealed off the premises. Patrol cars guarded the entrance—and there was no way to get near the prison. “It was as if the entire national police were guarding the approaches,” she said.

Her son had been in detention for just over a year, during which time Monasterios had been allowed to see him only occasionally. Clutching a bag of homemade food, she was prepared to step out of her car and seek a way into El Helicoide, but a companion advised her against it. “Don’t do it,” the person implored her. “We’ll come back on Wednesday.”

An engineer by training, Armas made a foray into politics as a student and was later elected a councilman in Caracas. He worked to address the city’s crumbling infrastructure, but it was his work in the general election of 2024 that drew the regime’s attention. After officials barred María Corina Machado, the opposition leader, from entering the race, she anointed a retired diplomat named Edmundo González to run in her place. Armas helped lead González’s campaign in the capital.

The election was mired in fraud: Armas, along with others, rallied hundreds of volunteers to observe the vote and preserve printed tallies from every voting machine. When polls closed, Maduro rushed to claim victory—a claim the opposition forcefully disputed, showing proof that González had won in a landslide. The regime never released a full count of the vote. Instead, officials engaged in a vicious crusade to repress whoever dared challenge the outcome.

On the morning of December 10, 2024, Armas was abducted from a cafeteria in eastern Caracas. It took almost a week—and a sustained public campaign—for him to be tracked down. Saimar Rivas, Armas’s partner and a longtime civil-rights activist, told me that he had been taken to a clandestine site run by the SEBIN, Venezuela’s intelligence agency. “There, he was tortured, asphyxiated with plastic bags, and questioned about the whereabouts of Edmundo, María Corina, and other opposition leaders,” Rivas said. “They offered him to become an informant, but he refused.”

What followed was a ten-month period of isolation at El Helicoide, where Armas was barred from any visits. He became one of about two thousand Venezuelans detained in the election’s aftermath; many of them remain behind bars to this day. “Every single leader who was involved in the election is either in detention, living in exile, or hiding,” Rivas said.

From the beginning, Donald Trump’s pressure campaign against Maduro raised numerous questions about the fate of Venezuela’s political prisoners. Inside detention centers, rumors spread that an American intervention would trigger a killing spree. Family members worried that their relatives could be held hostage or disappeared by the regime. “I haven’t slept in a year,” Monasterios said. Stories abounded of prisoners gone missing and of relatives who never got to see their loved ones again. Now, people worried that detainees could be used as human shields.

Trump’s silence on the subject had only raised more doubts. In public, the President had seldom mentioned political prisoners. His rhetoric around Venezuela had focussed almost entirely on the country’s oil resources and on what the U.S. stood to gain. In the eyes of many Venezuelans, his endorsement of Delcy Rodríguez, Maduro’s second-in-command, was proof of his disregard for Venezuela’s democracy. “The fact that Delcy has been sworn in as President is, in itself, a flagrant violation of our sovereignty,” Rivas said. “And to do so under an American tutelage is to double down on that violation.”

Rodríguez, she went on, embodied the state's repressive force. "At the end of the day, she is a continuity of that regime—a person who looked on as crimes against humanity were committed," Rivas said. A number of political analysts have argued that keeping Rodríguez in power was necessary to prevent an implosion in Venezuela. Whether that holds true will depend on her political overtures. Gerardo Munck, a political scientist at the University of Southern California, noted that the release of political prisoners was a first step. "It's a concession," he said. "A sign of respect for civil liberties."

Until now, the regime had shown no such signs. Immediately after Rodríguez took the oath of office, her government issued a decree ordering police forces to go after "any person involved in the promotion or support of the United States' armed attack"—an order that could arbitrarily be used to persecute civilians and quell dissent. At the National Assembly that day, more than a dozen journalists were detained while covering Rodríguez's swearing-in. Though the journalists were released within hours, the National Press Workers' Union issued a poignant statement denouncing the fact that twenty-three of their members were still behind bars, and that censorship remained prevalent in Venezuela.

Trump has insisted that Rodríguez must play by the United States' rules. In a press conference following Maduro's capture, he boasted that the new leader was "essentially willing to do what we think is necessary to make Venezuela great again." Days later, he referred in passing to a "torture chamber in the middle of Caracas that they're closing up," without offering any specifics. It remains unclear whether the release of political prisoners is among the Trump Administration's conditions. But to Rivas—and to many family members of detainees—it is an imperative need. "Only then will it become clear that we are headed toward a transition where individual freedoms can be respected," she said. "Until such time, the dictatorship in Venezuela will be left intact." ♦