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Venezuela for the Venezuelans: What It Takes for Free Elections

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Abstract: Following the US capture of Nicolás Maduro, Venezuela is governed by an interim presidency under close US tutelage, with Washington framing elections as the final phase of a three-step transition. This article asks what credible elections require, drawing on recent experts' takes on Venezuela's democratization alongside the Carter Center's mission to the 2024 election. It finds convergence on the need for an independent electoral council, an end to arbitrary disqualification, diaspora enfranchisement, and the restoration of civil freedoms.

Keywords: Venezuela; electoral authoritarianism; democratic transition; electoral management body; election observation.

Venezuela is, for the moment, governed less by its own institutions than by the terms set in Washington to benefit the United States economically. This is different from one year ago, when Venezuela was also not governed by its own institutions, but rather by an authoritarian regime that twisted the letter of the law to favor the unelected dictator Nicolás Maduro. The abduction of the dictator by US forces produced an interim presidency headed by Delcy Rodríguez, Maduro's own Vice President and a *chavista* loyalist of two decades' standing, operating under the explicit oversight of the Trump administration. President Trump said as much on the day of the operation, telling reporters the United States was "going to run" Venezuela (Faguy2026), dismissing any influence or say by the popularly acclaimed opposition leader María Corina Machado on the emerging new government structure. Over the following months, that arrangement has seemingly hardened rather than dissolved, maintaining prominent *chavismo* characters in the top State circles. Rodríguez has publicly resisted the framing that Venezuela is under foreign administration, even as her government depends on Washington's disposition of frozen assets, sanctions relief, and the disbursement of proceeds from tens of millions of barrels of Venezuelan crude oil that the United States now controls.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio has described the path out of this arrangement as a three-phase process: stabilization, recovery, and transition (Lewis & Zengerle 2026). However, for Venezuela to be truly back in the hands of Venezuelans, the people must choose their leaders through free and fair multiparty elections. On Rubio's framing, elections belong only to the third and final phase, and Rubio has

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been explicit that no election date can be set until the preceding phases have done their work. In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he was direct about why a date alone would not suffice, emphasizing the need for a pluralist and free environment for media, political parties, and election administration (Efecto Cocuyo 2026). Much attention was given to his claims for the need to reform the Electoral Management Body (EMB), the CNE (*Consejo Nacional Electoral*), staffed by election officials trusted across the political spectrum, capable of guaranteeing an honest process.

In practice, however, reports indicate that Marco Rubio effectively runs Venezuela from Washington, coordinating its oil sector, public revenues, and finances in close coordination (or tutelage of) with Delcy Rodríguez (Pager & Kurmanaev 2026). In this scheme, one could wonder why the US would rush to guarantee the conditions for free and fair elections that could give the people of Venezuela the freedom to decide their path, even if that path might not necessarily accommodate US interests. On the *chavismo* side, new free and fair elections could mark the consummation of the long-awaited transition away from that political movement, suggesting the current design might be its last gasp in power. There, the best strategy might be to wait for Trump's Presidency to end, hoping a new administration would be less interventionist (Pager & Kurmanaev 2026). Between the two parts currently "sharing power", the current balance is optimal. Why bother with elections?

Still, for US internal politics reasons, Venezuela tutelage cannot go on forever. Republican Party-Latino voters fond of María Corina Machado, an unignorable share of Trump supporters, want to see her on the ballot sooner rather than later. Rubio's own political aspirations might push him to transition Venezuela and claim his fair share of the credit. For all of that, there is a window

In this essay, the goal is to review what is required for free and fair elections to take place in Venezuela, a crucial step towards the restoration of the rule of law and the free will of the people in that country, and to seize the current window of opportunity. (...) The terms of Venezuela's democratic transition are no longer seriously contested among those who have studied the country's electoral collapse most closely.

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In this essay, the goal is to review what is required for free and fair elections to take place in Venezuela, a crucial step towards the restoration of the rule of law and the free will of the people in that country, and to seize the current window of opportunity. To do so, this essay draws on three sources chosen for their breadth of expertise and complementary vantage points. Two are 2026 policy reports that synthesize the judgment of large, cross-national panels of Venezuela specialists on what a democratic transition requires. The first is informed by a working group of international experts convened by Chatham House (Sabatini 2026); the second is a working paper written and endorsed by 21 recognized specialists from diverse backgrounds (Smilde et al. 2026); the third is the Carter Center's empirical record of what broke during the 2024 electoral process, along with its recommendations for future processes. Together, these are arguably the most comprehensive and up-to-date assessments currently available, and their conclusions converge to a striking degree. The terms of Venezuela's democratic transition are no longer seriously contested among those who have studied the country's electoral collapse most closely.

WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY IS NEEDED

Drawing on a working group of twenty Venezuelan and international election experts, former diplomats, and scholars of democratic transitions, Chris Sabatini (2026) recently argued that Venezuela needs, with international support, to begin in parallel two tracks of work: macroeconomic stabilization and the "multitude of preparatory measures essential to holding credible elections". Crucially, he insists these tracks cannot be sequenced one after the other. Elections cannot wait for the economy to recover, as some US messaging at the time seemed to suggest, because that would risk losing a window of opportunity while the country's surviving repressive apparatus consolidates with oil sector revenue. The reforms Sabatini's working group identifies as necessary read as a checklist against which the Rubio formula can be measured. They include the reappointment of an independent CNE; guarantees that the politicized armed forces will not interfere in the vote; repeal of the laws restricting freedom of expression, independent media, and foreign financing of civil society that have been used to throttle opposition organizing; a negotiated timeline for which elections will be held and when; renewal of voter registration, including for the

diaspora; a transparent audit of the electronic voting system; and the deployment of professional international monitors alongside non-partisan citizen observers.

Two elements of Sabatini's analysis deserve particular emphasis because they recur, in different languages, throughout much of what experts have been saying recently. The first is his insistence that CNE reform is not primarily a technical competence issue. V-Dem's measures of EMB capacity and autonomy are telling in this regard. On a scale from 4 to -4, Venezuela scores 0.55 in the EMB capacity measurement, against a Latin American average of 1.2; for EMB autonomy, though, Venezuela scores -2, against a regional average of 1.15 (Coppedge et al. 2026). Venezuela's electoral administration has ample technical capacity, but a problem of credible appointment and depoliticized staffing at every level, not only the five-member board of rectors. The second is his attention to what he calls "incumbents' fears": the proposition, echoed across the transitions literature, that durable reform requires reducing the zero-sum stakes of losing power, through measures such as revoking the indefinite-reelection amendment, diversifying control of PDVSA, and establishing a credible transitional-justice framework that balances accountability against the practical need for reconciliation (Sabatini 2026).

The Venezuela Comparative Politics Research Network (VCPRN) working paper, *Pushing for a Democratic Transition: Contributions from the Academy* (Smilde et al. 2026), offers another structural diagnosis written by an international group of 21 Venezuela specialists explicitly seeking to broaden the discussion of what democratization requires across twelve substantive domains, from the economy to transitional justice. Its chapter on democratic institutions is the most directly relevant to the electoral question; it places the problem at an upper level: that Venezuela's problem is not simply a captured CNE, but a constitutional architecture that made capture of the CNE, the Judiciary, and the citizen branch nearly inevitable once a single coalition controlled the National Assembly. And the authors trace this capture mechanism with some precision. The 1999 Constitution nominally preserved a role for civil society in the appointment of non-elected authorities, including the CNE's rectors. However, that guardrail was "eroded through organic-law reforms and political practice rather than formal constitutional amendment" (Smilde et al. 2026, 69-70). The *Ley Orgánica del Poder Electoral* of 2002 and the repeated reforms of the *Ley Orgánica del TSJ* produced, in practice, a Nominations Committee process in which the slots reserved for civil society were themselves captured by organizations aligned with the ruling coalition, in a traditional electoral autocracy simulation of plurality while ensuring control of institutions. The conclusion is precisely the same as Sabatini's paper: the CNE reform is not a matter of technical design, but rather of good faith compliance with the letter of the law.

The VCPRN paper also identifies a second, related and acute mechanism: Venezuelan parties have operated since 1999 under a constitutional ban on public financing, which has made their survival dependent on capturing subnational office, producing an “office-seeking” logic that both entrenches incumbent advantage and creates perverse incentives within the opposition itself. Restoring competitive party financing, through a mixed scheme of proportional public funding and regulated private contributions overseen by an independent electoral body, is accordingly listed as a precondition for reducing the structural stakes that make Venezuelan elections winner-take-all contests rather than ordinary alternations of power. On the question of candidate eligibility specifically, the VCPRN working paper calls for the rehabilitation of parties and candidates arbitrarily and unconstitutionally disqualified between 2016 and 2024, through administrative procedures without a firm judicial sentence, an unmistakable reference to the mechanism by which the Comptroller General barred María Corina Machado and a string of other opposition figures from running for office.

THE CARTER CENTER’S 2024 ELECTORAL MISSION: WHAT ACTUALLY BROKE

The Carter Center’s Technical Election Mission to observe the presidential election on July 28, 2024 provides an empirical record of what specifically failed the last time. Its recommendations are the most concrete and immediately actionable template available for the next electoral cycle, precisely because they were drafted against the backdrop of a real and recent election process in the country. This source complements the arguments experts have been making recently about the necessary electoral reforms.

The mission’s conclusion was unambiguous: Venezuela’s 2024 election did not meet international standards of electoral integrity and cannot be considered democratic. This was not, the report stresses, a story about election-day fraud. The electoral playing field was twisted from the start, with candidates prohibited from running, a restrictive media environment, political freedoms coerced, and opposition candidates harassed. Still, on election day, the voter turnout was strong, and the electronic voting machine system, including biometric voter identification and voter-verified paper receipts, was technically robust enough that political parties and civil society expressed high confidence in it. Nevertheless, the major collapse occurred afterward, when the CNE declared Maduro the winner with 51.2% of the vote against González’s 44.2%, refused to publish results by polling station, and claimed without evidence that a cyberattack had prevented it from doing so. The opposition’s

own parallel collection of more than 80% of the printed results, later validated by external auditors, showed González winning by a margin of more than 2-to-1. The Supreme Tribunal of Justice's subsequent "forensic audit," conducted without opposition observers, a published methodology, or public evidence, simply ratified the CNE's announcement. However, the report's diagnosis of the structural conditions that enabled this outcome, rather than the act of falsification itself, is what concerns the current transition debate. Four findings stand out.

First, the CNE's own composition was a central problem. The mission found that the acting composition of the CNE was less independent than previous configurations, following an irregular 2023 process in which the prior board resigned early, the two opposition-aligned rectors were forced out, and the replacement board's chairperson was the former Comptroller General, who had disqualified prominent opposition candidates. The CNE plenary, according to one of its own members, had reportedly not convened in over two months, with its chairperson making unilateral decisions. This is precisely the depoliticized-appointment problem that both Sabatini and the VCPRN paper identify as the heart of CNE reform; the 2024 case supplies the concrete mechanism by which an ostensibly multi-member, balanced body can be hollowed into a single-actor instrument.

Second, candidate registration was compromised by exactly the administrative-disqualification mechanism the VCPRN paper flags as a priority for reversal. Machado, having won the opposition primary with 93% of the vote in November 2023, was barred from the ballot under a fifteen-year disqualification imposed by the Comptroller General on undisclosed grounds. When the opposition then attempted to register a substitute, the CNE's own registration system blocked the registration of academic professor Corina Yoris with no apparent reason, forcing the coalition to settle, in a second registration window, on former diplomat Edmundo González.

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Between January and July 2024 alone, nineteen opposition leaders and sitting officials were disqualified by the same administrative mechanism.

Third, the diaspora and domestic voter registry was systematically restrictive. Of an estimated 5.5 million voting-age Venezuelans living abroad, only around 69,000 were registered, owing to consular requirements (such as proof of legal residency status) that domestic civil-society organizations documented as arbitrary and inconsistently applied across countries, including Colombia, Peru, Spain, and Argentina.

Fourth, the results-publication failure that ultimately defined the election was itself foreseeable from the CNE's prior pattern of non-transparency: the mission notes that CNE decisions throughout the process on candidate registration criteria, on the accreditation of citizen observation groups, and on changes to the electoral calendar were often not published in a timely manner and were communicated, when communicated at all, through press releases lacking technical detail, leaving opposition representatives largely unable to obtain responses from the CNE chairperson.

Based on these findings, the Carter Center issued twenty numbered recommendations spanning legal framework, election administration, voter education, voter registration, candidate registration, campaign regulation and financing, election observation, media, voting technology, and election-day procedure. Several explicitly reiterate recommendations the Center had already made after the 2021 regional and local elections, underscoring that these are not novel requests but a backlog of unaddressed reform. Among the most consequential are: amend, repeal, or withdraw laws, bills, and regulations that seek to unduly restrict freedom of expression and association (Recommendation 2); reconsidering CNE appointment procedures to secure genuine cross-party confidence (Recommendation 3); publishing CNE decisions and the electoral calendar promptly and systematically (Recommendation 4); organizing a comprehensive voter registry for the diaspora without unnecessary migration-status restrictions (Recommendation 10); abolishing the Comptroller General's power to disqualify candidates by administrative sanction, so that political rights can be suspended only by judicial decision with full due-process protections (Recommendation 11); adopting an effective political-financing law with disclosure and enforcement mechanisms (Recommendation 13); strengthen the capacity of the CNE to ensure that State media resources are not used for partisan purposes (Recommendation 15); restrict the practice of blocking websites and blocking of media, multimedia platforms, and censorship circumvention tools (Recommendation 17); and ensuring full and timely publication of polling-station-level results going forward (Recommendation 20).

THE NEXT STEPS

Some points of convergence are worth drawing out explicitly because they suggest that the remaining disagreement is not about the diagnosis but about sequencing, enforcement, and political will.

The first is on CNE reform itself. Every expert on Venezuela seems to agree that the problem is not the CNE's technical capacity, but the credibility of its appointment process and its depoliticization at every administrative level, not merely the five rectors. Rubio's own formulation in June 2026, calling for "trusted election officials", is consistent with this consensus, though it leaves unaddressed the harder question all technical sources confront: trusted by whom, and appointed through what mechanism that the ruling coalition does not control.

The second is on candidate eligibility and the disqualification mechanism specifically. This convergence matters because it identifies the single most legally tractable reform among those discussed: unlike judicial restructuring or constitutional amendment, ending an administrative practice (Comptroller General's power to disqualify candidates) that itself violates the existing constitutional text requires no new law, only the will to stop applying an unconstitutional one.

The third is on the diaspora vote. Sabatini's call for "renewal of voter registration, including for Venezuelans in the diaspora" and the Carter Center's Recommendation 10, explicitly reiterating its own 2021 finding, describe the same gap using the same evidence: a registration regime so restrictive that, in 2024, barely one percent of an estimated 5.5 million eligible emigrants could vote. Given that this diaspora is itself substantially a product of the political and economic conditions under examination, its exclusion from any future vote would replicate precisely the legitimacy problem a transition is meant to resolve.

The fourth is broader but decisive: competitive, free, and fair elections cannot take place in a repressive, restrictive environment for political and civil freedoms. Venezuelans must be able to express themselves freely, freely inform from alternative sources of independent media, freely campaign, freely associate, and freely compete for office. Elections under electoral-authoritarian rules, such as the 2024 presidential election in the country, are defined by constrained freedoms, which ultimately define the election as not being free and fair. Any democratic contest in Venezuela must take place in a liberal environment that allows dissent, the rule of law, and competition.

The reform agenda is well known, has been known since at least the Carter Center's 2021 mission, and has now been independently re-derived in several analyses

of what it takes for Venezuela to hold free, fair, and competitive elections. Still, democratic reforms are first and foremost driven by political consensus rather than technical assessments, with inclusive opportunities for input from a diversity of actors being key to their prospects of success (GNSEI 2024). Venezuela needs these reforms to be broadly discussed, but the reality check might aim towards the other direction. If the US administration and old regime actors are the only ones left in the negotiation room, the outcome might not be plural democracy but rather a new extractivist puppet regime that follows US interests. Only with the inclusion of real opposition parties in the reform's discussions could the real transition move forward. The immediate next step is to guarantee political diversity in the US-supervised transition.

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CONCLUSION

Venezuela's path back to its own institutions runs through a paradox. The same United States that abducted Maduro and now disburses his country's oil revenue is insisting that elections must be free, fair, and competitive before Venezuela can be handed back to Venezuelans. While the criteria the US administration has set out for transition are not seriously disputed among those who have studied the country's electoral collapse most closely, the impetus behind them is domestic US politics rather than a commitment to Venezuelan self-determination. That gap creates an additional challenge. Will the actors in charge implement the necessary reforms in line with democratic norms of pluralism, participation, and transparency? Or would the upcoming reforms reflect a renewed bias, patronage links, and corruption that would benefit US economic interests while accommodating the old regime factions? Elections are not a discrete technical event that can be bolted onto an otherwise unreformed political system; rather, they are the final expression of freedoms that must already exist—among Venezuelans and for Venezuelans. Reforms are urgently

needed, and must be the outcome of a truly inclusive process that expands the current set of actors responsible for discussing the terms of the transition.

International or regional players demonstrate reduced leverage to influence this process. As a regional power, Brazil eventually raised the tone with the Maduro administration following the 2024 flawed electoral process. However, the Lula administration might still be perceived by the US government as supportive rather than critical of the old regime. President Lula's official response to Maduro's capture stopped short of directly criticizing the US or Trump for the operation (Lula 2026). One could argue that the US could solve a decades-long problem for Brazil and Lula—a problem they were never fully able to address. Brazil should fully support a democratic process in Venezuela, as it also reflects the country's and the region's interests.

While a complex web of interests from within and outside the country unfolds, Venezuelans wait. 🇻🇪

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