

# Venezuela's thorny impasse: toward a new approach<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Analyzing Venezuelan authoritarian rule and its enduring history, this text argues that a united and strategic Venezuelan opposition, drawing on diverse elements of civil society as well as political parties, with support from the international community and focusing on recovering from humanitarian catastrophes, can achieve a reversal of Venezuela's social and political deterioration. Accelerating its economic recovery, developing and implementing transitional justice procedures, and rebuilding political institutions, it should be willing to work incrementally, and to make compromises and concessions to gain leverage rather than expecting sudden victory over entrenched interests that control state power.

**Keywords:** Venezuela; democratic transition; transitional justice; authoritarianism.

## O espinhoso impasse da Venezuela: para uma nova perspectiva

**Resumo:** Ao analisar o regime autoritário venezuelano e sua história duradoura, este texto argumenta que uma oposição venezuelana unida e estratégica, valendo-se de diversos elementos da sociedade civil e de partidos políticos, com apoio da comunidade internacional e com foco na recuperação de catástrofes humanitárias, pode reverter a deterioração social e política da Venezuela. Ao acelerar sua recuperação econômica, desenvolver e executar procedimentos de justiça de transição e a reconstrução de instituições políticas, a oposição deve estar disposta a trabalhar de forma contínua e a fazer acordos e concessões para se alavancar, em vez de esperar uma vitória repentina sobre interesses arraigados que controlam o poder do Estado.

**Palavras-chave:** Venezuela; transição democrática; justiça de transição; autoritarismo.

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1. This essay is an updated and revised version of *Venezuela's Elusive Transition*, published online in August 2021 by the Latin American Program of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (Lowenthal 2021).

In November 2021, Venezuela completed another flawed round of elections—this time for governors and mayors.<sup>2</sup> The candidates put forward by the United Socialist Party of autocratic president Nicolás Maduro apparently won 19 of 23 governorships (one is still disputed as of December 20) and elected the mayor of Caracas, the country's capital. The opposition United Platform, led by “interim president” Juan Guaidó (who had been appointed in January 2019 by the elected National Assembly, no longer in power by 2021), had delayed until the end of August to decide whether to participate in the 2021 elections. It then officially opted to do so, but remained divided and ambivalent, and large numbers of its constituents apparently abstained from voting; the United Platform carried two states and a third party, Neighborhood Force, won one.

Although the Maduro government and considerable international commentary portrayed the 2021 election as a sweeping victory for Maduro, others attributed the results to his manipulating the elections by excluding several candidates and parties on arbitrary grounds and because of asymmetric public campaign resources made available to the pro-government and pro-opposition candidates as well as arbitrary disqualifications of some opposition candidates. The most important electoral number, however, was the abstention by 57.7 percent of eligible voters, a strikingly low turnout in Venezuela. That outcome in effect confirmed polls before the elections, which had suggested that a strong majority of Venezuelan citizens disapproved of the Maduro government.<sup>3</sup>

Street protests, boycotts, emigration by millions of Venezuelans, and occasional bursts of electoral support for the opposition have not substantially weakened the Maduro government's hold on power over the past several years, even though it has not been popular. Broad as well as targeted economic sanctions by the United States and other governments have failed to loosen its grip. Very few of

2. Venezuela has had 12 national elections from 2006 through 2021: four presidential elections; three National Assembly (national legislature) elections; three regional elections for governorships alone; one for municipal elections only; and one in 2021 combining gubernatorial and municipal elections. The opposition to *Chavismo* came close to winning the 2013 presidential election after the death of Hugo Chávez and achieved a clear victory in the 2015 National Assembly elections. The opposition MUD officially boycotted the 2018 presidential election and the 2020 National Assembly election in which only 21 percent of eligible voters participated. The highest recent turnout was 74.3 percent in the 2015 National Assembly elections.

3. According to the April 2021 *Encuesta Nacional* Ómnibus, published by Datanalisis (2021), a leading Venezuelan polling firm, 92.4% of Venezuelans then had a negative evaluation of Maduro (47% “very bad”), with only 7.2 percent indicating a positive opinion of Maduro. These and other public opinion data in this essay come from that or subsequent Datanalisis reports. Only 42.3 percent of those eligible voted in 2021. The 4.1 million voters who supported candidates of the PSUV, the official governing party, were 46 percent of those who voted, but only 19.2 percent of Venezuela's eligible voters. The total of eligible voters who supported non-*chavista* parties was 52.1%.

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the many countries in the Americas and Europe that recognized Guaidó in 2019 as the country's constitutional president still do, but no alternative approach has taken hold.

Why have Venezuelan democrats and their supporters in the international community made so little headway in challenging authoritarianism? What might both sides learn by considering how other countries have ended autocracy and constructed (or reconstructed) democratic governance?<sup>4</sup> Can the Venezuelan opposition and the international community develop more viable strategies to strengthen Venezuela's political institutions, revive its shrunken economy, promote improved social equity, and build a strong opposition movement? Can and should the on-again, off-again negotiations between the Maduro government and the United Platform opposition be revived and, if so, how should they be approached?

*Can the Venezuelan opposition and the international community develop more viable strategies to strengthen Venezuela's political institutions?*

## Lessons from prior democratic transitions

Successful transitions from authoritarian rule toward democracy have had different starting points, paths, and outcomes, yet most have experienced four recurrent challenges.

### Preparing for the end of authoritarian rule

Domestic forces seeking to replace an authoritarian government must somehow gain enough popular support and national and international legitimacy to become plausible contenders for national power. Opposition movements must also become viable interlocutors for those within the authoritarian coalition who may seek or be amenable to an exit strategy. These are not easy challenges.

Achieving a democratic transition in the face of centralized power and the vested interests of incumbents requires an honest evaluation of the motives, strate-

4. I was deeply involved in the Wilson Center's project on transitions from authoritarian rule, undertaken in 1979 when all South American nations but Colombia and Venezuela were under autocratic rule. The project analyzed how these coercive regimes might be democratized by developing strategies to strengthen oppositions. It resulted in *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy in Latin America and Southern Europe*, a landmark volume edited by Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead (1986). More recently, with Sergio Bitar, a political leader and public intellectual in Chile, I co-edited *Democratic Transitions: Conversations with World Leaders* (Bitar and Lowenthal 2015), a study of nine successful democratic transitions featuring in person interviews with thirteen former presidents and prime ministers who played key roles in the transitions of South Africa, Ghana, Indonesia, the Philippines, Poland, Spain, Chile, Brazil, and Mexico. Both projects were exercises in "thoughtful wishing," normative in orientation but rigorous in method. That same concept animates this essay.

gies, assets, and vulnerabilities of diverse sectors of the ruling regime and a similarly objective assessment of the opposition's own assets, weaknesses, factions and strategies. It also requires bridging disagreements among diverse sectors of the opposition regarding goals, policies, and leadership to present a united alternative. Successful efforts to displace authoritarian governments generally unify the opposition while reinforcing divisions within the ruling coalition. These difficult goals can be achieved over time through persistent, disciplined efforts, reinforcing the toll that governing takes on authoritarian regimes—but this has not yet happened on a sustained basis in Venezuela.<sup>5</sup>

Autocracies control key resources and can use incentives and coercion to co-opt, intimidate, and repress opponents. They often appear to be invulnerable until things change. While they are in the saddle, autocrats reward loyalists and co-opt opportunists to disorient and divide the opposition. If and when the regime itself begins to decay—and if a coherent opposition emerges with an attractive vision, a realistic strategy, and genuine popular credibility—the prospect of ending authoritarian rule becomes more likely, if still far from inevitable.

## Weakening the authoritarian incumbents

An authoritarian government typically avoids relinquishing or even sharing power until at least one of its bedrock factions determines this is necessary to avoid major unwanted consequences, such as a severe loss of public support, civil violence, a split within the armed forces, economic devastation, international ostracism and/or crippling sanctions, or threats to the nation's territorial integrity.

Openness to relinquishing power usually occurs only when a segment of the established government tolerates (or openly supports) calls for political liberalization. For some within the authoritarian government, this may require assurances that a campaign of retribution will not be undertaken against the current rulers and their supporters, and that their legitimate personal, economic and institutional interests will be respected under law. Reconciling such assurances with the aspirations and resentments of long repressed members of the opposition coalition is difficult but necessary.<sup>6</sup>

## Managing the transfer of power

A successful democratic transition requires dealing with complex dilemmas.

5. For an excellent discussion of the Venezuelan opposition's infighting, see Maryhen Jiménez (2021). See also Laura Gamboa (2017).

6. There is growing literature on the issues posed by "transitional justice," the attempt to reconcile human rights concepts and political accountability with political feasibility and issues of reconciliation and coexistence in bitterly divided, often post-conflict societies. See, for example, Colleen Murphy (2017), and Michael Newman (2019). Cf. Cristián Correa (2021).

Those aiming to assume power must foster civic order and limit violence while striving to ensure that all security and intelligence forces—including those implicated in state repression—will henceforth act within the law. They must also disband—and, if possible, disarm—irregular forces operating outside the law and the democratic arena. They must inspire domestic trust and gain international legitimacy, which usually involves developing reliable electoral procedures to ensure that people can vote freely; that their votes will be faithfully recorded, monitored, and respected; and that the core interests of key minorities will be legally protected.

Those pushing for a democratic transition must be adequately prepared, technically and politically, to assume their new responsibilities. This may require a willingness to retain some officials from the outgoing administration although they worked closely with the autocratic regime, while also attracting back some administrative and technical experts from the diaspora, accelerating the training of new personnel, and offering incentives to those who have emigrated to bring their talents and resources back to the country they left.

Governance requires perspectives and competencies distinct from those exercised in opposition, especially learning to manage inherent tensions. New authorities must learn how to balance the need for bureaucratic, technocratic, security, and judicial expertise with the impulse to purge incumbents. They must redirect the civilian bureaucracy and all security and police forces away from controlling subjects and toward protecting and serving citizens. They need to convince citizens, in turn, to begin trusting a state that most will reject or approach warily and to encourage investors to take prudent risks to rebuild the economy.

Transitional democratic authorities must balance the imperatives of responding to those who suffered human rights abuses by holding accountable those who committed gross violations while assuring the discipline, morale, and effectiveness of established security forces. Security forces must convince citizens that they can deal with crime and violence and that they will not revert to repression. Political figures, high-level security officers, respected civic, business and labor leaders, representatives of faith communities, and cultural personalities should emphasize the virtues of mutual toleration among former enemies—no easy task, but one that has been achieved in prior cases, over time, and should be possible in Venezuela.

If the opposition comes to power, the new authorities will typically inherit long-standing practices of corruption and impunity that the authoritarian leaders have used to maintain support and in some cases to accumulate personal wealth. They must rebuild the national economy while buttressing regulatory authorities and independent judiciaries that can hold accountable national and local officials as

well public and private executives. They must disempower those officials and institutions that would otherwise block all efforts to strengthen accountability.

## **Imperatives for achieving democratic transitions**

For all these reasons, democratic transitions are rarely easy or quick; most take many years and suffer setbacks. There are no “magic bullets,” but heeding several important principles can improve the chances to navigate a path from autocracy to democracy.

### **1. Move Forward Incrementally**

Leaders of successful democratic transitions gain ground whenever and wherever possible—even when some objectives can only be partly achieved, and when some of their supporters continue to make maximalist and unfeasible demands. They pursue long-term strategies, and do not expect quick and total victory or promise too much, too soon. They are ready to propose and/or accept imperfect compromises that move in a desirable direction to enhance leverage toward achieving more satisfactory accords. Such compromises may require greater tenacity and skill than rejecting concessions outright, on principle.

### **2. Project a Positive and Inclusive Vision**

Opposition leaders should consistently project a positive and compelling vision of the future they seek. They should emphasize progress rather than dwell on past grievances, and should acknowledge the inevitability of sacrifice, compromise, and imperfection. Communicating attractive, inclusionary, and feasible goals, and taking concrete steps toward them, can counter the pervasive fear and pessimism that often demobilizes social organizations, opposition parties, and individuals. Letting political rivalries and ideological disputes fester will reduce the chances for making a transition.

### **3. Build Convergence and Coalitions**

Opposition movements must build coalitions with different factions and unaligned forces. They must connect with social movements including trade unions, student federations, women's organizations, human rights groups, and faith-based institutions. Taking the time to cultivate these alliances can build broad popular confidence that the movement for democracy is not merely a vehicle to advance



the interests of particular individuals or groups. It is important to build bridges with open-minded elements within the ruling circle and in other power centers, and to focus sharply on what unites people rather than what divides them. This requires engaging with people who have previously supported the autocracy.

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It is also necessary to reconcile—or sometimes, to choose between—the views of opposition leaders in exile and those still within the country. Those in exile often make demands that exceed what those in the country think feasible. International actors should not favor diaspora groups just because they are more familiar; they are often imperfect guides to a country from which they are alienated.<sup>7</sup>

#### 4. Create and Protect Spaces for Dialogue

It is critical to create and protect spaces for confidential dialogue among opposition groups and between them and those in or close to the incumbent government to facilitate understanding of different perspectives and develop familiarity and even a degree of trust among participants.

“Dialogue,” correctly understood, is a technique for building effective communication, not a means for one party to convince the other or to wrest concessions as a prerequisite for further exchanges. The confidentiality of such discussions should be firmly protected. It should not be understood as proof of loyalty to reject dialogue between incumbents and their challengers.

In conducting dialogue, listening well is needed, not grandiloquent proclamations. Clear statements, respectful questions, and constructive responses, communicated empathetically, are crucial. It can be helpful to propose steps that respond to expressed concerns of the other party and can be feasibly implemented at a reasonable cost. Setting forth mutually desired objectives can motivate both sides, even if the path to achieve them cannot yet be fully articulated. Discrediting a mediator or neutral third party for not favoring one’s side misconceives the purposes of dialogue and can undermine prospects for success.

Productive dialogue occurs only when significant elements of both sides recognize that important objectives may be achievable through agreements from which both sides can ultimately gain. The opposition needs to make reasonable demands,

7. For useful data on the political attitudes of Venezuela’s diaspora, see International Crisis Group (2021).

encourage popular pressure to support these demands, and mobilize international support. The proper aim of negotiations is to reduce the areas of recurring conflict, not to dictate terms of surrender.

## 5. Establish Civilian Control of the Military, Police, and Intelligence Services

From the beginning of a democratic transition process, it is imperative to try to bring the armed forces, police, and intelligence agencies under civilian control, and to disband irregular forces and vigilante groups. It is also vital to recognize the legitimate role of security forces and agencies, their appropriate claims resources, and their need to be protected from reprisal. Such provisions will likely provoke concern and anger among many people who have been victimized by these same institutions. These concerns should be addressed thoughtfully through modes of transitional justice.

## 6. Foster Transitional and Transformational Justice and Collective Memory

Transitions produce strong popular pressure to hold members of the former regime accountable for human rights violations, blatant corruption, and other abuses. Transitional justice requires rejecting calls for the wholesale prosecution of former officials; establishing transparent legal processes for determining and recounting, to the extent possible, the truth regarding human rights violations and other flagrant abuses; providing recognition and perhaps reparations to victims; cultivating “collective memory” regarding the excesses of the authoritarian era; and, when prudent, bringing major perpetrators to justice.

There is no simple formula for handling these issues, but keys are to emphasize the acknowledgment of victims, enact concrete measures to prevent future violations, and to avoid a cycle of revenge. Building effective reconciliation processes requires developing give-and-take among the outgoing regime (including security forces), the democratic opposition, victims and their families, and civil society organizations. This calls for commitment, leadership, empathy, and flexibility.

Over the course of a transition to democracy, the options for achieving peaceful coexistence must be expanded beyond amnesty or amnesia, on the one hand, and revenge or reprisal on the other. It is more important to reach agreement on the principles and procedures by which standards of justice will be protected and victims of injustice will be acknowledged, as well as by which political power can be achieved and challenged, than to specify in advance all the details of political representation and the particular modes of civilian control of security forces.



## 7. Mobilize Effective External Support

External actors—foreign governments; international, intergovernmental, and multilateral institutions; corporations, trade unions, faith-based organizations, international federations of political parties, professional associations, women’s groups, and other entities—can lend support to democratic transitions but they will be more effective if they respect the primacy of local actors.<sup>8</sup> Democracy requires self-determination, not external imposition. External support for democratization is more likely to help when it is strategically imported.

External actors can provide venues and help set the conditions for confidential dialogue among opposition leaders, and then for eventual negotiations between representatives of the opposition and of the authoritarian government; the Kingdom of Norway is already playing such a role in the Venezuelan case. They may also offer access to international expertise on a range of practical issues—from electoral campaigns to effective media strategies, conducting polls, monitoring and securing elections, and providing educational and networking opportunities. Concerted external pressure, including targeted economic sanctions, can sometimes help curb repression of human rights and protect the lives and rights of opposition leaders. Strategic offers of trade, investment, aid, and other forms of cooperation, designed as incentives to reinforce and facilitate democratic transitions, can be more effective than punitive sanctions, however. International economic assistance to respond to humanitarian crises and encourage economic reconstruction can be crucial when it is provided in response to local needs and in cooperation with local actors.<sup>9</sup>

## 8. Encourage International Cooperation

Partisans on both sides should urge outside powers not to create or reinforce obstacles to peaceful resolution of their country’s internal conflicts. They should focus on how the core interests of foreign powers might be reconciled in ways that bolster self-determination and reconstruction. This approach may require challenging familiar mindsets, as well as good faith engagement by multiple international powers with conflicting—but perhaps, also compatible—interests.

## Rethinking opposition strategies

Progress toward an eventual transition from authoritarian rule to peaceful

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8. Numerous examples of the methods mentioned in this and the following paragraph are documented in Bitar and Lowenthal (2015).

9. For a helpful memo on how US policymakers should support humanitarian work in Venezuela, see Geoff Ramsey and Kristen Martinez-Sugerli (2021).

democratic coexistence in Venezuela will require the opposition, their external supporters and the incumbent government and its international allies to develop and implement new strategies.<sup>10</sup> Venezuela's diverse opposition groups must comprehend the *chavistas'* enduring appeal to various sectors of Venezuelan society, their political priorities and core interests, and their demonstrated capacity to remain in power. The Venezuelan opposition and their international supporters must also understand how their own approaches have contributed to *chavismo's* staying power. They must appreciate why Hugo Chávez was so popular and still retains solid support, and why the majority of Venezuelans today disapprove of the Maduro government but are also quite critical of the Venezuelan opposition. It will take soul-searching by diverse opposition factions and their international backers, and by members and supporters of the autocratic regime, to conduct fruitful political negotiations that can end authoritarian rule and establish inclusive democracy in Venezuela.<sup>11</sup>

*Progress toward an eventual transition from authoritarian rule to peaceful democratic coexistence in Venezuela will require the opposition, their external supporters and the incumbent government and its international allies to develop and implement new strategies.*

## Understanding the appeal of *chavismo*

Chávez reached the Venezuelan presidency because his understanding of the deterioration of Venezuela's democratic institutions and its national economy guided his successful 1998 election campaign. From the late 1950s into the 1980s, Venezuela had enjoyed stable, competitive electoral democracy and robust economic growth

10. For the next sections, I have drawn on reports and discussions produced by the Center for Political Studies at the Catholic University Andrés Bello (UCAB) in Caracas, the International Crisis Group, the Inter-American Dialogue, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Atlantic Council, the U.S. Institute for Peace, the Carter Center, the Washington Office on Latin America, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies, as well as by the Venezuela Working Group of the Wilson Center's Latin American Program. I also draw upon many columns and interviews published in *Tal Cual*, *Pro DaVinci*, *El Universal* and *El Nacional* in Caracas, and the writings of and discussions with leading analysts of Venezuelan affairs: Mibelis Acevedo, Benigno Alarcón, Paul Angelo, Cynthia Arnson, Sergio Bitar, Michael Camilleri, Javier Corrales, Richard Downie, Philip Gunson, José Ignacio Hernández González, Miriam Kornblith, Luis Vicente León, Margarita López Maya, Jennifer McCoy, Francisco Monaldi, Frank Mora, Moisés Naím, Deborah Norden, Michael Penfold, John Polga-Hecimovich, Geoff Ramsey, Francisco Rodríguez, Steven Salisbury, Michael Shifter, David Smilde, Harold Trinkunas, and Laurence Whitehead, as well as the late Simón Alberto Consalvi, Pedro Nikken and Teodoro Petkoff. I have also drawn on confidential discussions regarding Venezuela with Thomas Shannon and Elliott Abrams, senior officials in charge of the U.S. government's Venezuela policy at different points, and with other former and current officials of the United States, Canada, and several Latin American and European nations. None of these persons is responsible for any of the statements or arguments contained within this essay, with which some no doubt disagree.

11. An example of such productive rethinking is Michael Penfold's *Democratization in Venezuela: Thoughts on a New Path*, the November 2021 report of the Venezuela Working Group, Latin American Program, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. I was an active participant in this group.

within the procedural and policy limits established by the Puntofijo power-sharing pact, signed in 1959.<sup>12</sup> Years of petroleum-based prosperity, economic growth, and political clientelism made Venezuela an apparent success story, with average rates of economic growth of more than five percent a year for three decades.

But these favorable economic conditions gave way sharply during the global economic recession of the 1980s. Slow economic growth, deteriorating living standards, and rising national debt led to the implementation of painful austerity policies advocated by the International Monetary Fund and other international financial institutions, as well as by Venezuelan economists. Increasing popular resentment ultimately exploded in a violent uprising in 1989, known as the *caracazo*.

The economic duress of the 1980s, and the growing perception that the economic plight of most Venezuelans was being ignored by an entrenched and complacent *partidocracia*, led to a steady drop in voter participation in national elections. The two best-established parties, *Acción Democrática* and *COPEI*, each received slightly more than 20 percent of the vote in 1993, when former president Rafael Caldera, on a third-party ticket, won election with just 30 percent. Popular rancor was effectively channeled by Lt. Col. (ret.) Chávez, who had led an unsuccessful coup in 1992. Chávez positioned himself in 1998 in opposition to the established parties and politicians, corruption, inequality, and international “neoliberal” intervention, and won a decisive victory with 56.2 percent of the vote.

Venezuela’s establishment, stunned by Chávez’s election and early policies, opposed him through economic sabotage, a national strike, capital flight, and emigration. They marshalled international backing, especially in the United States, against Chávez. Some in the U.S. government apparently encouraged an attempted coup in 2002; some welcomed it publicly during its first hours.<sup>13</sup>

With a combination of political instinct, willpower, and good fortune, Chávez managed to emerge from the opposition’s attacks stronger than before. He travelled throughout the country, frequently appearing on radio and television, and establishing—with Cuban assistance—major programs to address the urgent needs of the poor and lower middle classes.

Chávez fell ill with cancer in 2011 and died in March 2013. To the end and beyond, he retained strong popular support, due in part to his ability to convert U.S.

12. The Puntofijo accord among COPEI, *Acción Democrática* and the URD (*Unión Republicana Democrática*), three social democratic parties that together represented the majority of Venezuelan voters, was a pact that helped Venezuela maintain democratic competition within agreed limits and provided stability for more than twenty years, while in effect freezing out parties farther to the left and to the right. See Steve Ellner and Daniel Hellinger (2004).

13. No official US acknowledgement of a role in the aborted coup attempt against Hugo Chávez in 2002 has ever been provided but press reports and statements then by senior US officials, including Otto Reich, Roger Noriega, and White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer, showed US sympathy for the attempted coup and quick acceptance of the new government. See, for example, Julian Borger and Alex Bellos (2002).

opposition into a domestic and international political asset. Chávez took advantage of the global rise in oil prices (from 2003 to 2012) to spread the gains of the commodities boom around the country, funding programs that reduced poverty and increased living standards for poor, working, and middle-class Venezuelans. Over this period, Chávez increasingly manipulated electoral procedures, undermined checks and balances between branches of government, challenged judicial independence, stepped up interference with the independent media, intimidated dissenters, relied on loyal military officers to fill high-level cabinet posts, and politicized the armed forces. He turned Venezuela into a hybrid regime, and then into an autocratic state.<sup>14</sup>

Chávez was succeeded by his handpicked successor, Minister of Foreign Affairs Nicolás Maduro, who used the popular support he had inherited to win the presidential election in April 2013, albeit by a fairly small margin. Maduro's support dropped as a result of drastic economic decline, skyrocketing inflation, deteriorating public services, rampant violence, worsening corruption, intensified political repression, and his personal lack of charisma. Despite diminishing levels of public support, Maduro's management of promotions and assignments in the armed forces and his purging of dissenting officers helped him retain power.

Maduro's approval rating has rarely exceeded 15 percent. Approval for opposition leader Guaidó was over 50 percent soon after he became "interim president" in January 2019, and briefly reached 77 percent weeks later, but declined sharply thereafter. His attempt to fracture the armed forces by delivering humanitarian aid across the Colombian border in February 2019 failed badly, as did efforts to recruit senior government officials to overthrow Maduro on April 30, 2019, although both plots apparently enjoyed sympathy within the US government.<sup>15</sup>

Support for Guaidó plunged even further in the wake of Operation Gideon, a bungled effort to overthrow Maduro in May 2020, spearheaded by Venezuelan opposition maximalists in cooperation with foreign mercenaries, U.S. Special Forces veterans, and some former Venezuelan military personnel. This operation was penetrated by Venezuelan and Cuban intelligence and failed embarrassingly. The constitutional term of the National Assembly that had designated Guaidó as interim president ended in January 2021, attenuating the legal basis of his claimed legitimacy. Maduro and Guaidó have since then been about equally unpopular among

14. For an analysis of the stages of evolution from electoral democracy to autocracy, see Javier Corrales and Michael Penfold (2015). David Smilde (2021) provides an illuminating update in his essay.

15. Well-sourced and detailed coverage of the April 2019 and May 2020 incidents are available on Wikipedia. The ill-conceived and ineptly implemented scheme to divide the Venezuelan armed forces by using force to bring humanitarian aid across the Colombian border was reinforced by measures the Trump administration imposed to channel relief through partisan opposition and nongovernmental organizations, thus violating international conventions and established US government policies. See Office of the Inspector General, US Agency for International Development (2021).

the Venezuelan public, with approval ratings hovering between 10 and 20 percent each over the past year.

Some Venezuelan opponents of *chavismo* have attributed its durability to Maduro's ruthlessness and to what they characterize as unprecedented repression and corruption that has ensured the loyalty of both the military leadership and key civilian officials. Many also accuse the U.S. government of failing to challenge the Venezuelan government sufficiently, and/or maintain that Maduro's durability is due to Cuba's alleged control.

The *chavistas*, especially under Maduro, have harassed and repressed the opposition—employing extended incarceration, torture, and extrajudicial killings by security forces—but significant opposition activity, including open dissent and street demonstrations, has nevertheless persisted.<sup>16</sup> The Maduro government has undoubtedly rigged some elections, but the opposition has boycotted some in protest (in part to mask their lack of support), and the *chavistas* have conceded two electoral losses at the national level. In 2021, in response to discussions between European diplomats and opposition figure Henrique Capriles (who had nearly defeated Maduro in the 2013 election and is now a rival of Guaidó for leadership of the opposition), two leading opposition figures were named among the five rectors of the National Electoral Council (CNE), responsible for administering Venezuela's elections. These appointments may indicate that Maduro has felt pressure—not only from the opposition and the international community but perhaps also from some in the armed forces—to improve Venezuela's international reputation with respect to human rights and electoral integrity.

Some senior Venezuelan officials and military entities have been involved in the international narcotics trade and other illicit trafficking. Venezuela remains much less important in the global narcotics trade than Mexico or Colombia, but the participation of *chavista* officials adds a complicating factor to any transition and to negotiations. Cuba's providing healthcare and other social services as well as military intelligence and counterintelligence services has been helpful to *chavista* governments, but Cuba does not control Venezuela; indeed, Cuba depends on Venezuela for energy security.<sup>17</sup>

Hugo Chávez was charismatic and astute, but perhaps his greatest asset was that he rose to and consolidated power during a sustained period of high petroleum prices that funded social policies. Millions of Venezuelans felt more empowered and engaged in politics than at any previous point in the country's history. Many Ven-

16. The best source on Venezuelan human rights violations, including thousands of extrajudicial killings by security forces, is the extensive report produced by Michelle Bachelet (2019), United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and former president of Chile.

17. For an insightful note on Cuba-Venezuela-US relations, see Richard E. Feinberg (2021).



ezuelans still nostalgically associate *chavismo* with an era of largesse and inclusion. Nearly a decade after the death of Chávez, Venezuelan polls show that he has personal approval ratings above 50 percent, sometimes over 60 percent.

Another important source of *chavismo*'s endurance has been international political, diplomatic, economic, and logistical support, not only from Cuba but also from China, Russia, Turkey, Iran, and India, as well as several Caribbean, Central American and South American nations (including, at different points, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico).<sup>18</sup> Each international ally has supported Caracas for its own reasons—in many cases, as an indirect rejection of U.S. policies. Several have undermined international economic sanctions, hampering the US campaign of “maximum pressure” on Venezuela’s government, while sanctions have had the unintended effect of strengthening international support for Maduro.

### **Strategic errors of the Venezuelan opposition and its US supporters**

Leading opposition figures have underestimated support for the *chavistas* among Venezuela’s disadvantaged populations as well as Maduro’s personal tenacity. They have also underestimated the importance of articulating a compelling positive vision for Venezuela’s future, beyond denunciation of Maduro and his claims. The opposition has exaggerated the efficacy of delegitimizing the Maduro government through rhetoric and boycott. Importantly, the Venezuelan opposition has failed to demonstrate in effective practice its commitment to helping solve the problems Venezuelans face on practical issues, from Covid-19 to power outages, education to deteriorating infrastructure, drought to humanitarian relief.

The opposition’s high degree of dependence on international support and its deference to elements in and around the U.S. government, particularly during the Trump administration, has also weakened its appeal.<sup>19</sup> Some maximalist leaders hoped the United States would deploy military force to remove the *chavistas*, a fantasy reinforced by irresponsible remarks made by some U.S. officials, including President Trump, that “all options [were] on the table.” Hopes for US military intervention may have retarded some in the opposition from developing independent strategies while they waited in vain for US action.

The U.S. government also encouraged the opposition’s counterproductive decision to boycott the 2018 elections, and in effect helped sabotage the 2019 Norway-led explorations of a possible negotiated agreement, by imposing additional

18. See Cynthia Arnson (2021).

19. This and the following paragraph are based on personal interviews, and on John Bolton (2020) and Olivia Beavers (2020).



sanctions just as negotiators on both sides were preparing to discuss a shared request to lift certain existing sanctions. Over time, the opposition's vocal advocacy of U.S. sanctions became a political liability, as most Venezuelans suffered deprivation while the sanctions failed to end or to ease *chavista* rule.<sup>20</sup>

## Toward a new approach

The Maduro government, the democratic opposition, and the Venezuelan people more generally have all failed to achieve their main aims. Maduro has retained power but been unable to achieve economic prosperity, social stability, and sustained popular support, raising questions about the long-term electoral viability of *chavismo* and of its commitments to equity and inclusion. The opposition political parties have remained divided and largely ineffective. Those in the international community who had hoped that Venezuela would recover from its humanitarian catastrophe and emerge as a peaceful, stable, productive, law-abiding and prosperous nation have also been stymied thus far.

No credible security threat will trigger foreign military intervention to set Venezuela on a different path. The days when the U.S. government's disapproval of internal affairs in a Latin American country was sufficient to produce decisive covert or military intervention to produce regime change are over, due to changes in global geopolitics, geoeconomics, and international norms, as well as the evolving attitudes of the U.S. public.

Effective progress toward ending authoritarianism and restoring the rule of law and democratic governance will depend on the internal dynamics of Venezuela itself—in the armed forces, civil society and the private sector, the opposition and the ruling coalition—not primarily on the will and priorities of the United States or any other country. Those who seek political change in Venezuela must internalize this reality in order to fashion a new approach, based on five fundamental principles:

First, an effective strategy for political change needs to reflect Venezuela's history, values, norms, and popular expectations, while also adhering to international law, including the protection of fundamental human rights. Such a vision should be based on broad consultation with and among representatives of civil society, diverse

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20. U.S. policy, especially during the Trump administration, contributed unintentionally but significantly to reinforcing the *chavistas'* hold on Venezuela. President Trump appears to have realized, perhaps from an early stage, that U.S. military intervention in Venezuela—however alluring it might appear—would be highly problematic. Evidence mounted that an invasion to overthrow the Maduro government might lead to U.S. involvement in another protracted, "useless" war that would be deeply unpopular with the U.S. public (including much of Trump's core political base). Nearly all U.S. military, intelligence, and diplomatic advisers recommended against military action. The apparent decision not to use force was never explicitly communicated, however, despite its significance—probably because Trump and his advisers wanted Cuban-American and Venezuelan-American voters, especially in the swing state of Florida, to be impressed by the ample public and symbolic support the Trump administration was providing to anti-*chavista* leaders.

political organizations, business enterprises and trade unions, and educational and religious figures. Processes to facilitate such deliberation need to be strengthened to attract some of the many Venezuelans who once supported Chávez before becoming disaffected, as well as those who previously supported Guaidó before becoming discouraged.

Second, opponents of Maduro's autocracy should work with willing partners in government to develop action programs to protect public health, recover from the pandemic and its repercussions, upgrade the educational system, curb violence, expand employment, and improve housing, transportation, and infrastructure. The opposition should strive to cooperate actively with the national, regional, and local governments in Venezuela, despite political differences, rather than insist that the Maduro government's "illegitimacy" precludes any such cooperation.

Third, the opposition should vigorously contest local, state, and national elections, including the presidential election scheduled for 2024. Elections provide the best way to achieve political legitimacy in Venezuela, where democratic values remain popular. The opposition should continue—with the support of international governments and multilateral organizations—to press for reforms in electoral rules and procedures to make them fair and to assure international monitoring of elections to guarantee their integrity. They should devise and put into practice transparent processes for selecting national and regional leadership and choosing candidates for election. Even if the elections do not immediately meet the opposition's international standards for what is free and fair, and even if the opposition does not do well in any given election, active participation will nonetheless help the opposition craft and communicate its political messages, build greater public support, develop new leadership, and enhance its legitimacy nationally and internationally, as well as strengthen its political base.

Fourth, opposition representatives, government officials (including national security officers), and other civil society leaders (including those from the private sector and faith-based institutions), should work together to develop a credible process for defining and implementing transitional justice to foster coexistence, recognize the victims of human rights abuses, clarify responsibility for violations, and avoid cycles of revenge. Experienced international experts can help with this important work by drawing on their prior involvement in other cases. The recent announcement of a Memorandum of Agreement between the International Criminal Court and the Maduro government suggests another avenue for pursuing these issues.

Fifth, if and when a unified and strategic Venezuelan opposition emerges and begins to develop and implement a medium to long-term strategy, it should chart its

own course, rejecting any undue influence or oversight by foreign powers or multilateral organizations. International actors can play vital supportive roles in facilitating Venezuela's democratic transition, but they should not and cannot effectively impose a unilateral solution, nor be asked to do so.

These five steps could help the opposition improve its position, expand its popular base, bolster its negotiating stance, and reinforce its demands for clean election procedures, all of which could help remove obstacles to an eventual democratic transition. Establishing effective democratic governance and economic recovery may well take time, but these steps would orient the process in a promising direction.

A united and strategic Venezuelan opposition, drawing on diverse elements of civil society as well as political parties, should gain support from the international community by focusing on recovering from humanitarian catastrophes and reversing Venezuela's social and political deterioration, accelerating its economic recovery, developing and implementing transitional justice procedures, and rebuilding political institutions, including an independent judiciary. It should respect the core interests of all parties under the rule of law to improve the prospects for a peaceful and durable transition.

All stakeholders in the international community should rally behind these goals, which serve the respective interests of each in Venezuela's recovery. In this context, the United States and/or Canada should quietly explore with Cuba whether positive changes in U.S.-Cuba bilateral relations can be negotiated on the basis of mutual respect for sovereignty, fundamental human rights, cooperative problem-solving and the settlement of outstanding disputes. Progress on this long-accumulated agenda could alter the roles of both countries in Venezuela in ways that would greatly benefit the Venezuelan people. It might also encourage a broad, medium-term multinational effort to improve social, economic, and political conditions throughout the Caribbean Basin.

Viewed through the prism of U.S. electoral politics, such a positive scenario seems remote. But changing international and internal circumstances could lead Cuba to try to reinvent itself—with international encouragement—as an active and constructive partner in the whole region's future. A peaceful transition in Venezuela, supported by both Cuba and the United States, would help bring an end to many decades of stagnation, not only in Venezuela and in US-Cuba relations, but in how the United States and its closest neighbors in the Americas relate to each other in a radically changed and challenging international environment. That would indeed be a silver lining to Venezuela's dark cloud. ■

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