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[Home](#) > [Opinion](#) > [South America](#)

Venezuela: The Path Forward

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By R. Evan Ellis

Thanks to the courageous work of the Venezuelan opposition, including obtaining [physical and photographic evidence](#) of over 80% of the individual “acts” from Venezuela’s more than 30,000 polling places, the [world generally knows](#) that Edmundo Gonzalez received far more votes than Nicholas Maduro in the country’s July 28, 2024, Presidential election. Nonetheless, he is unlikely to successfully take control of the state apparatus that controls Venezuela’s territory on Inauguration Day, [January 10, 2025](#).

As during the 2019-2020 period and before, Maduro’s criminal co-conspirators and the repressive apparatus that supports them have not broken with his leadership in any substantial way. However divided, discontent, and displeased with his leadership they may be, those at the top, understanding that governments and courts know their complicity in the regime’s criminality and corruption from the United States to the United Nations, now fear the criminal liability political change will bring more than they fear the dead-end road Maduro is taking them on. Those at lower levels are watched by both their fearful superiors and the [Cuban agents](#) who have thoroughly penetrated the Chavista governing and repressive apparatus.

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irregular forces such as the *collectivos* and armed gangs to kill or torture them. Such actions have a powerful dissuasive effect on protesters and create dilemmas for opposition leaders.

In responding to the present situation, the Venezuelan opposition must speak honestly with the Venezuelan people about the prospects for democratic change since that bond of confidence is what most contrasts them to the Maduro regime. The opposition must act cautiously so as not to bring unnecessary bloodshed. However, it also must not cede the moral ground or the hope of the Venezuelan people, which is the other pillar of the opposition's strength. Venezuela and its democratic allies, including the United States, must prepare for a protracted and dangerous struggle.

The international environment in which the struggle to control the Venezuelan state is currently taking place is [generally less favorable](#) for the opposition [than it was in 2019](#) when Juan Guaido became President *de jure* after Venezuela's unconstitutionally conducted election that year.

The United States government is less disposed to act overly harshly against the Maduro regime in response to its actions. The reasons for this include: (1) it would highlight the Administration's grave error in [lifting sanctions](#) against the regime following the Barbados accords. That admission could have significant political repercussions in the United States in the bitter and critical November 2024 U.S. Presidential elections. (2) U.S. decision-makers may worry that re-imposing sanctions will cause significant harm to the Venezuelan people, accelerate a likely new massive outflow of refugees, and adversely affect international oil markets.

The political disposition of the European Union (E.U.), with critical right-wing voices in select countries such as [Italy](#) and the [Kingdom of the Netherlands](#), and within the [European Parliament](#), is different, yet on balance not significantly more disposed to act decisively against Maduro than its predecessors in 2019-2020. As during that period, the E.U. now is unlikely to take the lead in sanctions or other aggressive actions against the Maduro dictatorship if the U.S. does not also do so. This is unlikely.

Beyond the U.S. and the E.U., for a combination of strategic, political, and business reasons, critical Latin American governments, including Venezuela's two most important neighbors, [Colombia and Brazil](#), and [Mexico](#), are not disposed to act firmly against Maduro. Aside from personal tensions between [Brazil's President Lula](#) and Maduro, the three are arguably not oriented to fighting meaningfully for democracy in Venezuela at the expense of undermining the "club" of left-oriented regimes in the region but merely seek to reduce their domestic political liability from Maduro's blatant robbery of the election and clumsy, repressive handling of the aftermath. The posture of Colombia and Brazil also greatly complicates sanctions involving border control and the management of refugees, humanitarian aid, and any military operations, many of which would ideally be conducted from their territory.

Beyond these states, a substantial portion of other governments in the region that were supportive of Juan Guaido and the Venezuelan opposition in 2019-2020 are now sympathetic to Maduro, with many, including Honduras and Bolivia, [recognizing his fraudulent election claims](#).

Uruguay faces a national election in October that the left-oriented [Frente Amplio may win](#). With even more sympathetic states such as [Peru and Chile](#) [politically weakened](#), there is less possibility of using multilateral tools such as the Lima Group or Organization of American States (OAS) to support the restoration of democracy in Venezuela.

Beyond the region, the People's Republic of [China \(PRC\)](#), [Russia](#), and [Iran are](#) far more aggressively supporting the Maduro regime, including recognition and support on military and petroleum matters, versus their more cautious posture in 2019-2020.

For Edmundo Gonzalez, the Venezuelan opposition, and its democratic allies, the best among bad options is to prepare for a "dual sovereignty" situation, similar to

that of 2019-2020, but employing lessons from mistakes made by the opposition during the earlier period. It must also manage public expectations that the establishment of the *de jure* government merely reflects the legal and constitutional reality. However, this establishment will not necessarily allow the duly elected government to take control of Venezuelan territory soon.

The opposition should be prepared for the tasks and challenges of "dual sovereignty" from day one, beginning with a formal inauguration of Edmundo Gonzalez attended by as many national leaders as possible, even if not held on Venezuelan territory. By contrast to 2019, where the Guaido government and the process through which it was delegated, resources were primarily improvised. The Gonzalez team, led by Maria Corina Machado,

Similarly, the United States and likeminded democratic states in Latin America and the Caribbean, Europe, Asia, and elsewhere should work now to ensure that *the de jure* government controls de jure diplomatic representation, bank account control, and the legal status of Venezuelan companies operating in foreign jurisdictions.

Through internationally-coordinated messaging from the *de jure* government and its democratic partners, the Maduro regime, in its control of Venezuelan national territory, must be recognized as an armed occupier of Venezuelan territory, not unlike the Nazi Germany-affiliated governments of World War II such as the Vichy Government in France.

As a complement to an internationally coordinated "Day One" plan for international governance, the United States must take the lead in imposing the strictest possible sanctions, denying the ability of the Maduro regime occupiers of Venezuelan territory to profit from the resources they extract from it while aggressively targeting those such as Russia, China, and even India, who overtly or surreptitiously contract with the Maduro regime for these resources that the regime is illegitimately extracting and stealing from the Venezuelan people. The U.S. and like-minded democratic allies must also aggressively target, through sanctions, agents of bordering countries such as Colombia and Brazil, who similarly seek to illegally profit from unauthorized cross-border commercial transactions with the illegitimate Maduro government. The combination of these sanctions and other measures on the illegitimate government and all parties working with it will limit, if not entirely cut off, the resources available to the Maduro regime to harm, both in and beyond the country, while discouraging its extra-hemispheric partners from too overtly conducting activities or locating primary economic operations in the country.

As with the *de jure* Gonzalez government, the U.S. and other partners should be clear from day one in their policy and public messaging that while it is desirable for sanctions and other responses to promote a transition to democracy, their principal purpose of the actions is to recognize the political, legal, and commercial reality of the democratically-elected Gonzalez government. The policy will thus not be "abandoned" if it fails to bring about an immediate democratic transition.

As a complement to "maximum" sanctions, the U.S. and international community should adopt policies focused on "containing" the Maduro regime and its ability to create problems elsewhere in the region. Such policies should include work with neighbors and others in the region, where possible, to increase Venezuelan border controls for people, money, drugs, and contraband. Such heightened attention should seek to reduce the ability of criminals operating out of or through Venezuela to use their access to the national territory for criminal enterprises, including the movement and production of cocaine or the mining, laundering, and selling of gold. The international community should similarly focus on the flow of persons from Venezuela from the perspective of controlling the movement and financing of terrorists and other armed groups, from Hezbollah to dissidents of the Colombia-based FARC and ELN.

Implementing the expanded control of the flow of people, money, and goods from Venezuela might include significantly expanded biometric programs with collaborating neighbors and expanded physical control of non-official border crossings while treating legitimate refugees with compassion. The U.S. and like-minded partners may also wish to pursue selective maritime intercepts of restricted goods arriving and leaving Venezuela within the limits of international law. Such steps should collectively reduce the degree to which Venezuela can continue to act as a base from which terrorists, subversives, or agents of extra-hemispheric actors can interact with the rest of the region.

Beyond limiting the cross-border movement of people, money, and goods, Venezuela's neighbor Guyana should receive vital U.S. and allied security assistance. To the degree acceptable for Guyanese authorities, this might include basing agreements and greatly enhanced presence and support for airspace and maritime awareness and control. The attention to Guyana will minimize the risk of the Maduro regime extorting its weaker partner's oil and mineral wealth while preserving a base for supporting a maritime intercept program against the Maduro regime as well as helping to control piracy and refugee flows into the Caribbean, which has been associated with the Maduro government in the past.

Beyond containment, it is probably desirable to avoid an attempt to oust the illegitimate occupying Maduro government from Venezuelan soil forcibly. Doing so would not only likely cause unconscionable amounts of bloodshed. However, it would also probably be rejected, particularly by Venezuela's immediate, left-oriented neighbors Colombia and Brazil, making management of such an action difficult. In addition, if the initial application of force were successful, the Venezuelan military and paramilitary groups, such as the *collectivos*, would probably go to the ground and establish themselves as a guerilla force, per Cuban and Chavista doctrine, seeking to fight a long-term campaign of terrorism and harassment, funded and encouraged by outside actors seeking to maximize and sustain the chaos to create a quagmire for the West. Such a guerilla campaign, in combination with resistance by other armed criminal and terrorist groups in the country to the democratic government, including gangs such as Tren de Aragua and Colombian paramilitary groups such as the ELN and FARC dissidents, would contribute to sustained, elevated levels violence and lawlessness and a refugee crisis far more significant than that already seen today.

For the same reason that making military action against Maduro unwise, the Gonzalez government and its allies should manage with caution the issue of participating in or encouraging those pursuing awards offered by the U.S. to bring the Maduro regime and its accomplices to justice, given the ability of such "decapitation" actions to generate unpredictable, possibly significant and widespread violence. At the very least, the Gonzalez government should have a plan to establish decisive control over national territory if all or part of the Madurista leadership were to be ousted through such activities.

The crisis in Venezuela has no easy solutions and many contradictions. These include maintaining hope while preparing for a long-term criminal occupation, containing the occupiers, and asserting lawful authority in the international domain while not attempting to militarily intervene or actively bring the occupiers to justice, all in the humanitarian interest of the Venezuelan people. While "foreign intervention" to restore democracy [has little support in Latin America](#) if there is no response option whatsoever to criminals hijacking and plundering poorly run states (of which the region has many), such hijacking and exploitation could become even more tragically commonplace. Suppose the U.S. and international community show that "containing" Maduro can bring about positive change. In that case, they will give hope to beleaguered democracies elsewhere in the region and give pause to those who would hijack them and their intra-hemispheric collaborators.

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