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Maduro is gone, but his regime is intact. What happened behind the scenes?

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Thu 8 Jan 2026 08.00 EST



📷 'The machinations and intrigue behind this extraordinary moment in global politics remain darkly veiled.'
Photograph: Federico Parra/AFP/Getty Images

As late as Saturday afternoon, fires continued to smolder in parts of Caracas. Residents throughout the city, stunned and anxious, filled grocery stores and gas stations, stocking up before a future unknown. Everywhere the question hung in the air like the smoke still clouding Venezuela's capital: what next?

After months of military buildup, deadly strikes at sea and a looming ground war, the United States made good on its threats to attack Venezuela in a dramatic overnight raid that ended with Nicolás Maduro in a New York City jail cell. Yet 48 hours later, little else appeared different in Caracas: Maduro's inner circle remained in place; state institutions remained in their control; streets were calm, if tense, while authorities called on people to return to their daily lives. In other words: move along, nothing to see here.

If this is regime change, it seems a strange sort, one that leaves the regime otherwise intact, and which raises a more pressing question than what comes next: what happened? Of course, much remains speculative. But at this point, information available suggests that after over a decade of tight cohesion around Maduro, his inner circle calculated they were better off without him and struck a deal with the Trump administration: Maduro in exchange for staying in power.

In the early fray of foreign interventions, evidence is largely circumstantial. But here the circumstances tell a powerful story. First the raid itself. To be sure, US forces - covert and conventional - have formidable superiority over Venezuela's military apparatus, whose primary plan to combat US intervention has long been asymmetric rather than head-to-head war. Still, the absence of even minimal organized resistance to a raid that involved multiple low-flying, slow-moving aircraft traversing densely populated and otherwise heavily defended Venezuelan airspace for more than two hours invites speculation not only about prior knowledge of the attack by Venezuela's military, but about stand-down orders for the bulk of the country's armed forces.

Then came Donald Trump's press conference. That he flatly stated the US intended to take control of Venezuela's vast oil reserves and **"run" the country** were striking enough claims. Perhaps most stunning, though, was Trump's assertion that Maduro's vice-president - Delcy Rodríguez - would **remain in place** if she "does what we want". Summarily sidelined after years of building a government-in-waiting and offering up their country to Trump on a platter was Venezuela's expatriate opposition, led by the Nobel laureate María Corina Machado. In a bid to placate the US president, she had earlier dedicated her peace prize to Trump. It didn't work: "She doesn't have the respect" of the country, **Trump said**.

More likely for Trump, Machado didn't have the respect of the people who matter in a transition: military, police, institutions. Here Rodríguez's own statements over the weekend are key. Though initially striking a defiant tone on Saturday, calling for **Maduro's immediate return** and proclaiming him Venezuela's **only president**, by Sunday she declared her **desire to cooperate** with the US. By Monday morning, after a ruling by Venezuela's supreme court declaring Rodríguez next in line after Maduro's kidnapping and unlikely return, and surrounded by Maduro's erstwhile inner circle and newly installed national assembly, she took the oath of office to **become Venezuela's president**.

The speed and seamlessness of a post-Maduro transition, especially in the wake of a violent military assault, seems more than extraordinary. It seems calculated if one considers the incentives and agendas of various major actors. Key players in Maduro's government had just one card to play against the Trump administration's mounting pressure: only we can ensure stability in any transitional context. As defense minister, Vladimir Padrino López commands the nation's military and its vast economic interests; as interior minister, Diosdado Cabello can keep police forces as well as sprawling paramilitary groups - *colectivos* - in check; as national assembly president, Delcy Rodríguez's brother Jorge Rodríguez can deliver legislative authority; and as former head of PDVSA, Venezuela's national oil company, Delcy Rodríguez can manage the oil sector directly.

Given this array of institutional and extra-institutional control, the alternative - a full-scale regime change with the opposition installed in power through foreign military intervention - would result in chaos for the US to fend with and manage. As an occupying force, and despite widespread rebuke of Maduro and his government, US troops on the ground would provide ready targets to insurgent sectors of the military, police, *colectivos* and nationalist groups while an opposition long in exile and with little local standing moved to rebuild the entire state apparatus from scratch. Even if Trump believed in democracy promotion, which he has amply disavowed at home and abroad, a quagmire of his doing would alienate far too many in his *Maga* base.

In exchange for continuity in power, Delcy Rodríguez and others ultimately provided Trump with two prizes: oil and Maduro. Venezuela's vast reserves - the largest in the world - have long been in Trump's sights, especially as his rejection of the climate crisis and renewable energy drives his embrace of fossil fuels. In fact, Maduro himself had offered Trump major concessions for US oil companies to return to Venezuela under favorable terms. Yet his offer came with a condition to stay in power. As the administration mounted an ever louder case labelling Maduro the head of a multinational "narco-terrorist" cartel, striking a deal with him became untenable. That opened the door to others in his milieu to make a move handing Trump not just oil concessions, but Maduro as well.

Maduro proved an especially attractive, and necessary, prize for others in the Trump administration. Since taking office, the defense secretary, Pete Hegseth, has sought a spectacular display of US military prowess in order to proclaim a supposed return of US might. Lethal strikes against alleged drug boats had some effect. But each day the vast force of 15,000 troops splayed

across the Caribbean went unused was a day the US lost credibility and seemed taunted by Venezuela. A made-for-television commando raid offered an opportunity to grandstand the power of the US military. Secretary of state Marco Rubio claimed a prize of his own in the bargain: cutting off the last source of material support for Cuba's socialist government, leaving it vulnerable as never before to Rubio's dream of regime change on the island of his parents.

Even with prior collusion between the US and Venezuela, the scenario ahead remains rife with risk for Caracas and Washington. Delcy Rodríguez's government must now strike the most delicate of balances: following the Trump administration's orders while holding aloft the banners of independence and even anti-imperialism that have been hallmarks of Venezuelan governments going back 26 years. Further, her government needs to thread this needle with an armada off Venezuela's coast, resurrecting gunboat diplomacy for the 21st century. But it has been some time since Venezuela's leaders paid more than lip service to ideology, so the bargain may not be difficult after all. Especially considering the US is under constraints of its own: despite the threat of additional strikes, Trump's continuing resistance to a full-scale invasion means his own ability to force his will upon Caracas is not unlimited, giving Venezuela's government some room to maneuver.

For now, the smoke from Saturday's assault has cleared from Caracas. But the machinations and intrigue behind this extraordinary moment in global politics remain darkly veiled. Through the fog, for the people that matter most - Venezuelans in and out of Venezuela - the tragedy of a nation in the throes of a seemingly endless crisis shows no signs of abating.

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