

Venezuela's Post-Maduro Political Transition and U.S. Policy

August 13, 2026

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

R49186



R49186

August 13, 2026

Clare Ribando Seelke
Specialist in Latin
American Affairs

Venezuela's Post-Maduro Political Transition and U.S. Policy

Some Members of Congress have closely followed the political and economic situation in Venezuela following the January 3, 2026, U.S. capture and arrest of President Nicolás Maduro (2013-2026) and his wife, Cilia Flores, on narco-terrorism and other charges. Following Maduro's removal, Delcy Rodríguez, Maduro's vice president and oil minister of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), took power as acting president. Apparent 2024 election winner Edmundo González Urrutia and opposition leader María Corina Machado have remained in exile. Secretary of State Marco Rubio outlined a three-phase plan for Venezuela involving (1) stabilization, (2) economic recovery and political reconciliation, and (3) political transition. On June 24, 2026, two massive earthquakes struck Venezuela, killing more than 6,100 and potentially setting back U.S.-supported efforts to stabilize the country.

On June 3, 2026, Secretary Rubio testified before Congress that significant progress had occurred in Venezuela since January, but that "in order to truly transition, they [Venezuela] have to have multi-party, free and fair elections." To date, U.S. pressure on the acting government apparently has secured U.S. control of Venezuela's oil sales and proceeds; the enactment of an amnesty law and release of some political prisoners; a rollback of Venezuela's ties to Cuba and Iran; and security cooperation on a U.S.-led operation that killed a leader of Tren de Aragua, a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization. It remains to be seen whether the earthquakes will delay or spur progress toward a political transition.

Some analysts predicted that negotiations between the acting government and the opposition on advancing a democratic transition would be led by María Corina Machado; the Trump Administration has backed a different dialogue process. Machado and some opposition leaders met in Panama in May and then called for negotiations under her leadership. The Trump Administration did not comment on the Panama statement but has backed talks led by National Assembly President Jorge Rodríguez of the PSUV (the brother of the acting president) and Dinorah Figuera, head of the democratically elected 2015 National Assembly. Machado and González Urrutia are not participating. The State Department welcomed the first round of talks that began on August 6, 2026, and are aimed at strengthening earthquake response efforts and expanding political freedoms.

During the 119th Congress, some Members expressed support for the Trump Administration's capture and arrest of Nicolás Maduro while others questioned whether President Trump had the authority to remove Maduro without congressional authorization. Following Maduro's arrest, some in Congress have praised the Trump Administration for pressuring the acting government to cut ties with U.S. adversaries and follow U.S. guidance in opening its economy. Other Members of Congress have sought to shape how democracy and human rights objectives are balanced against other U.S. goals in Venezuela through legislation, hearings, and other oversight.

Congress appropriated \$50 million in democracy funding for programs in Venezuela in the National Security, Department of State, and Related Programs (NSRP) Appropriations Act, 2026 (P.L. 119-75, Division F). The House-passed version of the FY2027 NSRP appropriations bill (H.R. 8595) would direct \$50 million for democracy programs for Venezuela. The act and accompanying report, H.Rept. 119-631, would require a report from the Secretary of State within 30 days of the bill's enactment on the strategy needed to advance a democratic transition in Venezuela with benchmarks and timelines. It would also require a report on the status of Venezuelan funds derived from the sale of oil and other natural resources held by the U.S. government to ensure those funds are benefitting the Venezuelan people. The House Foreign Affairs Committee reported legislation (H.R. 7674) that would require the Secretary of State to submit a strategy to support a democratic transition in Venezuela. A bipartisan Senate-introduced resolution (S.Res. 829) states that U.S. policy aims to support a peaceful transition to democracy in Venezuela through free and fair elections. A Senate-introduced bill (S. 4809) would, among other provisions, require a multipronged U.S. approach to support elections in Venezuela.

Contents

Venezuela Under Nicolás Maduro (2013-2026).....	2
Stability	5
Economic Situation	7
Possible Transition to Democracy	10
Congressional Considerations	13

Figures

Figure 1. Venezuela at a Glance	3
---------------------------------------	---

Contacts

Author Information.....	15
-------------------------	----

On January 3, 2026, U.S. forces entered Venezuelan territory and captured and arrested Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro (2013-2026) and his wife, Cilia Flores, on narco-terrorism and other charges.¹ Following Maduro's removal, Delcy Rodríguez, Maduro's vice president and oil minister, who was then subject to U.S. sanctions, assumed power as acting president.² The Trump Administration backed Rodríguez to serve in this capacity rather than Edmundo González Urrutía, whom the State Department had characterized as the "rightful" winner of Venezuela's 2024 presidential election, or opposition leader María Corina Machado.³ President Trump reportedly warned that Rodríguez would face consequences worse than Maduro if she did not cooperate with the United States but has since praised Rodríguez and other U.S. "friends in Venezuela, with whom we are working very well."⁴ On June 24, 2026, two large earthquakes struck Venezuela, killing more than 6,100 people and potentially setting back U.S.-supported efforts to stabilize the country and revive its economy. While earthquake response efforts appear to have reinforced U.S. support for Venezuela's acting government, some former U.S. officials have urged the Trump Administration to use its leverage to hasten the end of "socialist authoritarianism" in Venezuela.⁵

On January 7, 2026, Secretary of State Marco Rubio outlined a three-stage plan for Venezuela focused on (1) stabilization, (2) economic recovery and political reconciliation, and (3) democratic transition.⁶ On June 2, 2026, Secretary Rubio testified that Venezuela is on a "much better trajectory" than it was under Maduro but that "we have a lot of work to do" to ensure conditions are in place to hold elections.⁷ On July 14, 2026, a senior State Department official testified that while the earthquakes had delayed negotiations to establish those conditions, U.S. democracy funds would support a dialogue process between interim officials and the opposition to strengthen democracy.⁸ Prior to the start of talks on August 6, 2026,

¹ Donald J. Trump (@realdonaldtrump), Truth Social post, January 3, 2026, <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/115830428767897167>. For more information, see CRS Insight IN12618, *U.S. Capture of Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro: Considerations for Congress*, by Clare Ribando Seelke; CRS Legal Sidebar LSB11401, *The United States' Prosecution of Nicolás Maduro Moros: United States v. Maduro*, by Karen Sokol.

² U.S. Department of the Treasury (Treasury), "Treasury Targets Venezuelan President Maduro's Inner Circle and Proceeds of Corruption in the United States," September 25, 2018.

³ Ian Lovett and Kejal Vyas, "Delcy Rodríguez Goes from Pariah to the U.S. Pick to Lead Venezuela," *Wall Street Journal*, March 24, 2026; U.S. Department of State, "Secretary Rubio's Call with the Rightful President of Venezuela González Urrutía and Venezuelan Democratic Opposition Leader Machado," January 22, 2025. Also see Mayela Armas and Vivian Sequera, "Venezuela Bars Leading Opposition Candidate Machado from Holding Office," Reuters, June 30, 2023; Regina García Cano, "Venezuela's Highest Court Upholds Ban on Opposition Presidential Candidate," Associated Press, January 26, 2024.

⁴ Michael Sherer, "Trump Threatens Venezuela's New Leader with a Fate Worse Than Maduro's," *The Atlantic*, January 4, 2026; President Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), Truth Social post, June 12, 2026, <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/116740105083348004>.

⁵ Joshua Partlow, "The Bizarre Partnership Between the U.S. and Venezuela," *The Atlantic*, July 14, 2026; Josh Birenbaum and Carrie Filipetti, "Can the Earthquake Help Venezuela Shake the Dictatorship?," *The Daily Wire*, July 9, 2026 (hereinafter Birenbaum and Filipetti, *Can the Earthquake Help?*); Elliott Abrams, "The U.S. Is Losing Venezuela," *The Free Press*, July 13, 2026.

⁶ U.S. Department of State, "Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Secretary of War Pete Hegseth Remarks to the Press," January 7, 2026; Unidad Venezuela (@unidadvenezuela), X post, May 28, 2026, <https://x.com/unidadvenezuela/status/2060144278647533577?s=20>.

⁷ Testimony of Secretary of State Marco Rubio in U.S. Congress, House Appropriations Subcommittee on National Security, Department of State, and Related Programs, *The Fiscal Year 2027 State Department Budget Request*, hearings, 119th Congress, 2nd session, June 2, 2026 (hereinafter Secretary Rubio testimony, *Fiscal Year 2027 State Department Budget Request*).

⁸ Testimony of Mickael Kozak, Senior Bureau Official, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, U.S. Department of State, in U.S. Congress, Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC), *The National Security Strategy and the Western* (continued...)

Secretary Rubio predicted that a democratic transition would “require some persistence and a little bit of patience—not years, but certainly months and weeks.”⁹

Congress has supported U.S. and international efforts to hasten a return to democracy in Venezuela for more than a decade.¹⁰ Some Members praised the operation to remove Maduro, asserting that it eliminated a threat to U.S. national security and stopped Venezuela from serving as a foothold for U.S. adversaries in the region, while other Members questioned whether President Trump had the authority to capture Maduro without congressional authorization.¹¹ Some in Congress have expressed support for U.S. control over Venezuela’s energy sector, viewing it as a way to boost energy security and lower oil prices; other Members have urged the Trump Administration to prioritize a democratic transition in addition to U.S. economic interests (see “Congressional Considerations,” below).¹² The House-passed version of the FY2027 National Security, Department of State, and Related Programs Appropriations (NSRP) Act (H.R. 8595) and accompanying report, H.Rept. 119-631, would require a report from the Secretary of State within 30 days of the bill’s enactment on the strategy needed to advance a democratic transition in Venezuela. This report examines developments in Venezuela and U.S. policy toward the country and identifies legislative and oversight measures that may shape U.S. policy.

Venezuela Under Nicolás Maduro (2013-2026)

Venezuela had a relatively stable democracy from 1958 through the late 1990s, but corruption and inequality led to the rise of Hugo Chávez (in office 1999-2013), a charismatic populist who vowed to redistribute the country’s oil wealth. Chávez founded the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), rewrote the country’s constitution (in 1999), and expropriated many private companies.¹³ Chávez’s tenure coincided with high oil prices. His government nevertheless took on large amounts of foreign debt to pay for large social projects (including high-rise apartment buildings that collapsed during the June 2026 earthquakes) and subsidized oil given to the Cuban government, Haiti, and other Caribbean countries.¹⁴

Hemisphere, 119th Congress, 2nd session, July 14, 2026 (hereinafter Kozak, testimony, *National Security Strategy and the Western Hemisphere*).

⁹ U.S. Department of State, “Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Paraguayan Foreign Minister Rubén Ramírez Lezcano at the Signing of a Memorandum of Understanding for Strategic Civil Nuclear Cooperation,” August 4, 2026.

¹⁰ The last broad legislation guiding U.S. policy toward Venezuela, the VERDAD Act of 2019 (P.L. 119-94, Division J, Title I), expired in December 2023. See CRS In Focus IF10230, *Venezuela: Political Crisis and U.S. Policy*.

¹¹ House Foreign Affairs Committee, “Chairman Mast on Capture of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro,” January 3, 2026; SFRC, “Risch Statement on Maduro Capture, Venezuela Strikes,” January 3, 2026. For analysis of presidential and congressional authorities related to the use of force, see CRS In Focus IF13134, *Understanding the War Powers Resolution*, by Matthew C. Weed. Also see House Debate, “Reflecting on Impact of Illegal Action in Venezuela,” *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 172, no. 5 (January 8, 20, 26), pp. H246-H250; Senate Debate, “Commerce, Justice, Science; Energy and Water Development; and Interior and Environment Appropriations Act, 2026,” *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 172, no. 10 (January 14, 2026), pp. S186-S218.

¹² See, for example, U.S. Representative Austin Pluger, “ICYMI: Rep. Pfluger Calls for Strategic SPR Refill with Venezuelan Oil,” January 9, 2026. Also see U.S. Congress, SFRC, *U.S. Policy Towards Venezuela*, 119th Congress, 2nd session, January 28, 2026; SFRC, *The National Security Strategy and the Western Hemisphere*, 119th Congress, 2nd session, July 14, 2026; and SFRC, “Ranking Member Shaheen, Senator Cruz Lead Colleagues in Introducing Bipartisan Resolution Supporting Free and Fair Elections in Venezuela,” August 4, 2026.

¹³ Javier Corrales and Michael Penfold, *Dragon in the Tropics: Venezuela and the Legacy of Hugo Chavez*, 2nd ed. (Brookings Institution, 2015).

¹⁴ Council on Foreign Relations, “Venezuela: The Rise and Fall of a Petrostate,” updated July 31, 2024; Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, “Venezuelan Housing Program Scrutinized After Quakes Brought Down (continued...) ”

Figure I. Venezuela at a Glance



Area: 352,143 square miles; slightly more than twice the size of California

Population in Country: 26.9 million (IMF, 2025 est.)

Population Abroad: 7.8 million migrants and refugees since 2014 (UNHCR, 2026 est.)

Poverty: 73.2% (ENCOVI, 2024)

GDP: \$111.3 billion (current prices, IMF, 2025)

GDP Growth: 1.5% (2025, IMF est.), 4.0% projected (2026, IMF est.)

GDP per Capita: \$3,740 (IMF, 2025 est.)

Inflation: 238.8% (year-end inflation, EIU, 2026)

Unemployment: 34.6% (EIU, 2026)

Sources: Map created by CRS. Map information from the U.S. Department of State and ESRI. Socioeconomic statistics from the UNHCR (UN Refugee Agency), ENCOVI (Encuesta Nacional de Condiciones de Vida), International Monetary Fund (IMF), and Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU).

Nicolás Maduro took office after a narrow electoral victory following Chávez's death in March 2013. By most accounts, Maduro's government mismanaged the economy and engaged in widespread corruption.¹⁵ Venezuela's gross domestic product (GDP) contracted by more than 75% from 2013 to 2021, exacerbated by low global oil prices; declining oil production; and, from 2019 onward, also by U.S. sanctions (see "Economic Situation").¹⁶ Economic growth recovered after 2021, but Venezuela's economy in 2025 remained less than half the size it was in 2013 (not

Buildings," July 7, 2026; Jack Quinn, "Caribbean Leaders Want Petrocaribe Back. Could It Happen?," *Americas Quarterly*, August 15, 2023.

¹⁵ See, for example, Ryan C. Berg, *Parsing Fact and Fiction in the Maduro Regime's Narrative of Economic Recovery*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 22, 2022.

¹⁶ International Monetary Fund (IMF) Departmental Papers, "The Venezuelan Exodus: An Unprecedented Economic and Humanitarian Crisis," 2022; Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Venezuela: Additional Tracking Could Aid Treasury's Efforts to Mitigate Any Adverse Impacts U.S. Sanctions Might Have on Humanitarian Assistance*, GAO-21-239, February 2021, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-21-239.pdf>.

adjusted for inflation).¹⁷ According to a national survey by a Venezuelan university, roughly 73% of the population of 26.7 million lived in poverty in 2024, particularly outside the capital, Caracas.¹⁸ By December 2024, UN agencies estimated there were some 7.9 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants globally.¹⁹

Unlike Chávez, Maduro never achieved a majority approval rating and remained in power following elections in 2018 and 2024 that were considered fraudulent by international observers and the U.S. government.²⁰ Maduro relied on security forces and corrupt influence over the courts and legislature to quash dissent, as documented in annual State Department *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* covering 2017-2024. According to reports issued by a UN fact-finding mission, since 2019, security forces have arbitrarily detained, tortured, and extrajudicially executed Maduro's opponents, including dissidents in the military.²¹ Abuses spiked after the 2024 election, which evidence suggests Edmundo González Urrutía won.²² The legislature enacted laws limiting freedom of expression and association, including a 2024 law restricting the financing and operation of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). After Venezuela's attorney general issued an arrest warrant for González Urrutía on terrorism charges, he fled into exile in September 2024.²³ María Corina Machado, facing similar charges, went into hiding in 2024 before escaping to receive the Nobel Peace Prize in Norway in December 2025. She remains in exile; her post-earthquake attempts to return to the country reportedly have been thwarted.²⁴

Maduro, like Chávez, reportedly ensured the military's loyalty by permitting members, including a network of high-ranking officials known since the 1990s as the Cartel of the Suns (*Cartel de los Soles*), to profit from drug trafficking, gold trafficking, and extortion.²⁵ In 2020, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) charged Maduro and other current and former Venezuelan officials whom the DOJ alleged held leadership positions in the Cartel of the Suns with drug trafficking and narco-terrorism.²⁶ The State Department designated the Cartel of the Suns as a foreign

¹⁷ IMF Datamapper, GDP, Current Prices, Billions of U.S. Dollars, accessed August 1, 2026.

¹⁸ Universidad Católica Andres Bello, "Encuesta Nacional de Condiciones de Vida (ENCOVI), 2024," <https://www.proyectoencovi.com/>.

¹⁹ Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (R4V), December 2024.

²⁰ Benedict Vigers, "Decade of Distress Clouds Venezuela's Future," Gallup, January 8, 2026; CRS Insight IN10902, *Venezuela's 2018 Presidential Elections*; CRS Insight IN12354, *Venezuela's 2024 Presidential Election*.

²¹ For UN reports, see UN Human Rights Council, "Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela," <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/ffmv/index>. Also see UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "Venezuela: Harsh Repression and Crimes Against Humanity Ongoing Fact-Finding Mission Says," March 18, 2025 (hereinafter OHCHR, *Venezuela: Harsh Repression*). In November 2021, the International Criminal Court opened an investigation into reports of crimes against humanity committed in Venezuela since at least 2017. International Criminal Court (ICC), "Situation in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela," ICC-02/18. On July 25, 2026, the U.S. State Department issued a statement in support of Rodríguez's decision to withdraw Venezuela from the ICC. See U.S. Department of State, "Venezuela Withdraws from the ICC," July 25, 2026.

²² On the post-2024 election period, see OHCHR, "Venezuela: UN Fact-Finding Mission Expresses Alarm over Human Rights Violations in Post-Election Context," July 31, 2024.

²³ Associated Press (AP), "Venezuela's Top Prosecutor Announces Criminal Probe of Opposition Leaders," August 8, 2024; Matt Spivey, "Venezuela Says Opposition Leader Will Become Fugitive if She Collects Nobel," *BBC*, November 21, 2025.

²⁴ Stephanie Taladrid, "María Corina Machado's Opposition in Exile," *The New Yorker*, July 20, 2026.

²⁵ InSight Crime, "Profile: Cartel of the Suns," updated May 29, 2026.

²⁶ *United States v. Maduro* (U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York, March 2020), <https://storage.courtlistener.com/recap/gov.uscourts.nysd.534997/gov.uscourts.nysd.534997.11.0.pdf>.

terrorist organization (FTO) in November 2025.²⁷ A 2026 superseding indictment accused Maduro and others of distributing drugs in the United States by partnering with *Tren de Aragua* (TdA), a Venezuelan prison gang that the U.S. government has designated as an FTO.²⁸ Top U.S. officials cited these FTO designations when justifying U.S. military strikes on alleged drug trafficking vessels in the Caribbean (and Eastern Pacific) that began in September 2025 and the January 2026 capture of Maduro.²⁹

Stability

Prior to January 2026, some observers had predicted that chaos would occur if Maduro were forcibly removed from power.³⁰ Nine months since his ouster, those predictions have not been borne out, though power struggles within the government or clashes remain possible, particularly between and among security forces and U.S.-designated FTOs that control large swaths of Venezuelan territory. In early June 2026, Venezuelan security forces reportedly carried out operations against criminal groups involved in illicit mining in the Orinoco Mining Arc near the border with Guyana and supported a U.S. military strike in southern Venezuela that killed the leader of the TdA FTO.³¹ Rodríguez's apparent economic and security alignment with the Trump Administration has prompted divisions within the PSUV.³²

After Maduro's capture, President Trump chose to work with Maduro's allies, many of whom faced U.S. sanctions or indictments; some analysts maintain that the Trump Administration favored stability over a potentially chaotic transition.³³ Due to Acting President Delcy Rodríguez's previous positions, she enjoyed strong ties to U.S. and international oil companies and has styled herself as a technocrat opening the country to investors.³⁴ In April 2026, the Trump Administration lifted sanctions on Rodríguez that were imposed in 2018 for corruption.³⁵ The Administration also reportedly has told federal prosecutors not to take any legal actions against

²⁷ U.S. Department of State, "Foreign Terrorist Organization Designation of Cartel de los Soles," 90 *Federal Register* 53045, November 24, 2025.

²⁸ *United States v. Maduro* (U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York, January 2026), <https://www.justice.gov/opa/media/1422326/dl> (hereinafter *United States v. Maduro*, 2026); U.S. Department of State, "Foreign Terrorist Organization Designations of Tren de Aragua, Mara Salvatrucha, Cartel de Sinaloa, Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generacion, Carteles Unidos, Cartel del Noreste, Cartel del Golfo, and La Nueva Familia Michoacana," 90 *Federal Register* 10030-10031, February 20, 2025.

²⁹ *C-SPAN* "Secretaries Rubio and Hegseth on Drug Boat Strikes," December 16, 2025; Lazaro Gamio et al., "Tracking U.S. Military Killings in Boat Attacks," *New York Times*, May 20, 2026; Matthew Olay, "Trump Announces U.S. Military's Capture of Maduro," *Pentagon News*, January 3, 2026.

³⁰ See, for example, Michael Crowley, "U.S. Ran a War Game on Ousting Maduro. Venezuela Fell into Chaos," *New York Times*, November 20, 2025.

³¹ Reuters, "Venezuela Deploys Troops Against Illegal Miners in Key Gold Belt," June 10, 2026; Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth (@SecWar), X post, June 12, 2026, <https://x.com/SecWar/status/2065613430074065246?s=20>.

³² Regina Garcia Cano, "Venezuela's Ruling Party Unity Cracks as Delcy Rodríguez Shifts Chávez-era Policies," Associated Press, June 1, 2026.

³³ International Crisis Group, *Venezuela After Maduro: Transaction or Transition?* January 9, 2026.

³⁴ Eric Cortellessa, "How Delcy Rodríguez Went From Maduro Loyalist to Trump Proxy," *Time*, July 30, 2026.

³⁵ Treasury, "Venezuela-Related Designation Removal," April 1, 2026; For information on Rodríguez's alleged corruption, see Transparencia Venezuela, *Delcy Rodríguez: Shielded for the Post-Maduro Era*, January 2026, https://transparenciave.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Delcy-Rodriguez_Shielded-for-the-Post-Maduro-Era.pdf.

Rodríguez, who reportedly had been a “priority target” for the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration.³⁶

Acting President Rodríguez and her brother, Jorge Rodríguez, who is president of the National Assembly, have used U.S. backing to consolidate power through a process that some analysts have termed “normalization without transition.”³⁷ Rodríguez has purged some Maduro loyalists from her Cabinet and extradited Alex Saab, a key Maduro ally and money launderer, to the United States. Other Maduro allies remain in government. Venezuelan Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello, who arguably controls the *colectivos* (civilian militias) and, like Maduro, has been sanctioned and indicted in the United States for his role in the Cartel of the Suns FTO and his collaboration with Colombian guerrillas, remains in his position.³⁸ Cabello is also suspected of hiring the TdA to assassinate a Venezuelan military dissident in Chile.³⁹ Rodríguez replaced U.S.-indicted Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino López with General Gustavo González López, a former head of the military intelligence service accused of grave human rights abuses.⁴⁰ González López is also subject to U.S. sanctions.

June 24 Earthquakes

Two massive earthquakes (of magnitude 7.2 and 7.5) struck Venezuela on June 24, 2026, revealing persistent gaps in basic public services that have worsened during a humanitarian crisis that has persisted for more than a decade. As of early August, Venezuelan authorities had confirmed more than 6,100 deaths and 18,000 displaced by the earthquakes, with the impact concentrated in the capital district of Caracas and six states along the northern coast. The death toll could continue to rise, however, as the government’s limited forensic capacity has hindered efforts to identify thousands reported as missing. UN agencies estimate that the cost of reconstructing basic infrastructure could exceed \$37 billion.

On June 24, the acting government declared a state of emergency but took several days to deploy search and rescue teams to the affected zones. The perceived inadequacy of that earthquake response and Acting President Delcy Rodríguez’s repeated dismissals of any criticisms of government efforts have fueled popular discontent. Venezuelan security forces’ delayed and confused response hampered critical early response efforts, according to a Reuters investigation. Venezuelan security forces reportedly have restricted access to certain areas and interfered with rescue efforts, with some observers alleging that Venezuelan authorities have sought to protect and remove hidden caches of illicit funds, gold, drugs, and arms, according to the *Miami Herald*. Some observers are concerned that the government might divert or politicize earthquake donations. While many analysts have described how the earthquakes set back economic recovery and transition efforts, some have predicted that popular anger about sluggish earthquake recovery responses combined with U.S. and international support and scrutiny could spur progress in both areas.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio pledged a “robust” U.S. response during a press conference on June 25, 2026. As of July 8, 2026, the U.S. government had committed more than \$386 million in humanitarian assistance and other support to Venezuela. Some 2,000 U.S. military personnel, including troops on the ground in Venezuela, carried out search-and-rescue operations and—in collaboration with the State Department, other donors, and Venezuelan officials—are delivering assistance, rebuilding the international airport, and coordinating relief efforts.

Sources: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Earthquakes in Venezuela: Situation Report No. 32,” August 7, 2026; *UN News*, “Venezuela Quake: UN Continues to Scale Up as Damage Estimate Reaches \$37 Billion,” July 6, 2026; Reuters, June 29, 2026; Miranda Center for Democracy, *A Regime that failed to Respond Cannot Rebuild Venezuela*, July 23, 2026; Antonio María Delgado, “Chaos, Collapse and

³⁶ Joshua Goodman et al., “AP Exclusive: Trump Administration Tells Prosecutors to Stand Down on Venezuela Leader, Sources say,” Associated Press, May 28, 2026.

³⁷ See, for example, Benigno Alarcón Deza, “Normalization Without Transition: Delcy Rodríguez’s Playbook,” *Americas Society/Council of the Americas*, April 29, 2026.

³⁸ *United States vs. Maduro*, 2026; U.S. Department of State, Narcotics Rewards Program: Wanted, “Diosdado Cabello Rondón,” January 10, 2025.

³⁹ Sebastian Rotela, “He’s Suspected of Hiring a Venezuelan Gang for a Political Killing. Trump Officials Still Work With Him,” *Propublica*, July 10, 2026.

⁴⁰ OHCHR, *Harsh Repression*.

Cash: Is Venezuela Hampering Rescue Teams in Disaster Zone?," *Miami Herald*, July 3, 2026; Anatoly Kurmanaev et al., "A Long Night of Agony: The 48 Hours That Changed Venezuela," *New York Times*, August 6, 2026; Secretary of State Marco Rubio, "Secretary of State Marco Rubio Remarks to Press," U.S. Department of State, June 25, 2026; U.S. Department of State, "Update on the Trump Administration's Continued Delivery of Life-Saving U.S. Assistance to Venezuela," July 8, 2026; and U.S. Southern Command (@Southcom), X Post, July 31, 2026, <https://x.com/Southcom/status/2083236905898938581?s=20>; David Smilde, "Venezuela's Two Reconstructions: Can Disaster Recovery and Democratic Transition Work Together? Part II," *Venezuela and the United States Substack*, July 20, 2026.

Tensions with neighboring Colombia and Guyana could also destabilize the Rodríguez government. Colombian President Abelardo de la Espriella, inaugurated on August 7, 2026, has vowed to confront FTOs, including the National Liberation Army (ELN), a leftist insurgency active in both Colombia and Venezuela, with an influx of U.S. security assistance.⁴¹ The ELN has reportedly collaborated with Venezuelan security forces to mine and traffic illicit gold.⁴² Although both Rodríguez and de la Espriella are likely to face pressure from the Trump Administration to act against narco-terrorism, ongoing lawlessness along the Colombia-Venezuela border could hinder those efforts.⁴³ In addition to security, analysts predict that energy, trade, and migration could figure prominently on the bilateral agenda.⁴⁴

The International Court of Justice is considering a case that could reignite long-standing tensions between Venezuela and Guyana over the disputed Essequibo region. The case involves the validity and effect of an 1899 arbitral award and a 1905 agreement resolving a border dispute between Venezuela and then-British Guyana, which provided Guyana most of the disputed area along the oil- and mineral-rich Essequibo River.⁴⁵ In the past, Maduro threatened military action to reclaim the disputed region, while successive U.S. Administrations backed Guyana.⁴⁶

Economic Situation

In April 2026, the IMF predicted that Venezuela's economy could expand by 4% in 2026.⁴⁷ Following the earthquakes, Venezuelan economists interviewed by *Americas Quarterly* revised their initial 8% growth forecast for the country down to roughly 5.8% because of high inflation and the total economic costs of the earthquake, which they estimate could reach \$10.5 billion-\$12 billion.⁴⁸ Although the hydrocarbons sector was unaffected, the earthquakes caused significant infrastructure damage that resulted in the closure of Venezuela's primary international airport and set back efforts to attract investment.⁴⁹

⁴¹ Thomas Graham, "Colombia on the Brink: ELN Guerrilla Group Prepares for Return to War," *The Guardian*, August 7, 2026; U.S. Department of State, "A New Era in U.S.-Colombia Relations," fact sheet, August 7, 2026.

⁴² International Crisis Group, *Gold and Grief in Venezuela's Violent South*, February 28, 2019; Laura Weffer and Valentina Lares, "Blood Gold and New Opportunities: Foreign Firms Are Poised to Reenter Venezuela's Wild South," Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, March 27, 2026.

⁴³ Sally Sharif, "The Colombian Border Is One of the Biggest Obstacles to Building a New Venezuela," *The Conversation*, January 13, 2026.

⁴⁴ Colombia Risk Analysis, *On Thin Ice: The Relationship Between Colombia and Venezuela*, July 29, 2026.

⁴⁵ International Court of Justice, "Arbitral Award of 3 October 1899 (Guyana v. Venezuela)," Arbitral Award of 3 October 1899 (Guyana v. Venezuela) <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/171>.

⁴⁶ The Dialogue, "What's the State of Venezuela-Guyana Tensions?," July 11, 2025.

⁴⁷ IMF, DataMapper, April 2026.

⁴⁸ Asdrúbal Oliveros and Jesús Palacios Chacín, "Venezuela's Shattered Post-Quakes Economy," *Americas Quarterly*, July 16, 2026.

⁴⁹ Economist Intelligence Unit, "Devastating Earthquakes Cloud Venezuela's Recovery," July 3, 2026.

Venezuela has the world's largest proven oil reserves, but production had fallen from some 2.7 million barrels per day (mbd) when Maduro took office in 2013 to 1.0 mbd by August 2025 amid a combination of corruption, mismanagement, underinvestment, and U.S. sanctions.⁵⁰ Oil production in Venezuela stood at an estimated 1.16 mbd in July 2026; exports to the United States rose to 786,000 barrels per day, the highest level since 2019.⁵¹

In 2019, the first Trump Administration imposed sanctions on state oil company *Petróleos de Venezuela* (PdVSA) to use economic pressure to convince Maduro to cede power.⁵² These sanctions remain in place. Transactions with sanctioned entities generally require a license from the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC). Since late January 2026, OFAC has issued a series of licenses authorizing certain activities in Venezuela's energy sector, including transactions with PdVSA.⁵³ For example, after President Trump said on January 11, 2026, that no more Venezuelan oil shipments would go to Cuba, OFAC issued new guidance in February 2026 allowing the resale of Venezuelan oil to Cuba's private sector.⁵⁴

On January 7, 2026, the U.S. Department of Energy issued a fact sheet stating that "President Trump announced a [U.S.-Venezuela] energy deal."⁵⁵ The details have not been made public, but the deal reportedly has allowed the U.S. government to work with trading companies to market and sell Venezuelan oil, deposit the revenue from those sales in U.S.-controlled accounts, and disburse the funds to the acting government as described in Executive Order (EO) 14373.⁵⁶ Some Venezuelan economists have criticized this opaque process.⁵⁷ In April 2026, a State Department official asserted that \$3 billion had flowed through the U.S.-controlled accounts and that independent auditors from KPMG had been hired to conduct quarterly audits of the process.⁵⁸ On June 3, 2026, Secretary Rubio promised to share the audit results with Congress.⁵⁹ On July 14, a senior State Department official testified that the U.S. and Venezuelan governments had agreed

⁵⁰ For the 2013 figure, see U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), *Venezuela: Analysis*, updated February 8, 2024; CRS Insight IN12637, *Venezuela Oil Sector: Context for Recent Developments*.

⁵¹ Marianna Parraga and Mircely Guanipa, "Venezuela's oil Exports Fell Slightly in July, Cargoes to US Rose," Reuters, August 3, 2026.

⁵² Treasury also imposed sanctions on the state gold company, Venezuela's Central Bank, and on the Maduro government. Treasury, "Venezuela-Related Sanctions," <https://ofac.treasury.gov/sanctions-programs-and-country-information/venezuela-related-sanctions>. See also CRS In Focus IF10715, *Venezuela: Overview of U.S. Sanctions Policy*, by Clare Ribando Seelke.

⁵³ Treasury, OFAC, "Issuance of Venezuela-Related General License," January 29, 2026.

⁵⁴ Donald J. Trump (@realdonaldtrump), Truth Social post, January 11, 2026, <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/115876460615555838>; Treasury, OFAC, "Venezuela Sanctions 1238. Would OFAC Approve the Resale of Venezuelan Origin Oil to Cuba?" February 26, 2026.

⁵⁵ U.S. Department of Energy (DOE), "Fact Sheet: President Trump Is Restoring Prosperity, Safety, and Security for the United States and Venezuela," January 7, 2026 (hereinafter DOE, "President Trump Is Restoring"); Executive Order 14373, "Safeguarding Venezuelan Oil Revenue for the Good of the American and Venezuelan People," 91 *Federal Register* 2045-2046, January 15, 2026. News reports indicate that the funds were first deposited in U.S.-controlled accounts in Qatar and then in U.S. Treasury accounts. Spencer Kimball, "Venezuela Oil Sales Top \$1 Billion, Funds Won't Go to Qatar Account Anymore, Energy Secretary Says," *CNBC*, February 13, 2026.

⁵⁶ DOE, "President Trump Is Restoring." A Venezuelan government portal accounts for \$300 million of those funds; it has not been updated since March 13, 2026. The portal is available at <https://www.transparenciasoberana.gob.ve/>. Roxana Vigil, *The U.S. Took over Venezuela's Oil Industry. Where Has All the Money Gone?*, Council on Foreign Relations, June 3, 2026 (hereinafter Vigil, *U.S. Took over Venezuela's Oil Industry*).

⁵⁷ See, for example, Ricardo Hausmann, "The Rape of Venezuela," *Project Syndicate*, June 2, 2026.

⁵⁸ Testimony of Mickael Kozak, Senior Bureau Official, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, U.S. Department of State, in U.S. Congress, House Foreign Affairs Committee, Western Hemisphere Subcommittee, *Latin America After the Fall of Maduro*, 119th Cong., 2nd sess., April 16, 2026.

⁵⁹ Secretary Rubio testimony, *Fiscal Year 2027 State Department Budget Request*.

on the allowable and non-allowable dispersals (e.g., payments to Iran or the People's Republic of China [PRC, or China]). He stated that KPMG is "monitoring" U.S. funds disbursed to Venezuela but no longer referred to KPMG's activities as a formal audit.⁶⁰ In July, President Trump reportedly said that the United States has collected more than \$13 billion from Venezuelan oil sales.⁶¹

The Trump Administration is seeking to help the acting government attract investment in hydrocarbons and other sectors while limiting the involvement of U.S. adversaries (e.g., Iran and China) in those industries. Venezuela's legislature enacted a hydrocarbons law seeking to attract the \$100 billion over 10 years that some experts estimate would be needed to restore the oil industry and related infrastructure.⁶² The law amended the country's 1976 hydrocarbons law to create new models for private engagement in upstream activities, cap taxes and royalties, and allow international dispute arbitration.⁶³

OFAC's actions and Venezuela's reforms appear to have facilitated some new investment pledges, and ExxonMobil and ConocoPhillips—two U.S. companies that had their Venezuelan operations nationalized in the mid-2000s (and are still owed billions of dollars)—reportedly are in negotiations to return to the country.⁶⁴ Some companies reportedly have refrained from making large commitments due to legal uncertainty, political instability, and the country's poor infrastructure.⁶⁵ Although these concerns may be reduced with additional reforms, some experts argue that more holistic rule-of-law reforms are needed to bolster investor confidence.⁶⁶

Venezuela also produces gold and some other minerals of economic and strategic importance.⁶⁷ In March 2026, U.S. Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum announced a deal for Trafigura, a U.S. commodities trader, to purchase up to \$100 million worth of gold produced in Venezuela that would then be sold through a separate arrangement to refineries.⁶⁸ In April, Venezuela's legislature passed mining legislation to allow private and foreign investment in the sector, and OFAC issued licenses authorizing certain transactions by U.S. companies in Venezuela's gold sector (the state gold company had been subject to U.S. sanctions since 2019).⁶⁹ Environmental and human rights groups have criticized the law and the licenses, which they argue may risk supporting illicit mining operations in areas such as the Orinoco region that have been controlled

⁶⁰ Kozak, testimony, *National Security and the Western Hemisphere*.

⁶¹ Geoff Dyer et al., "The U.S. Has Collected About \$13 Billion of Venezuela's Oil Money. Where Is It?," *Financial Times*, July 21, 2026.

⁶² Lucia Kassai et al., "Trump's Venezuela Oil Revival Plan Is a \$100 Billion Gamble," *Bloomberg*, January 5, 2026.

⁶³ Charles E. Meacham, "Venezuela's New Hydrocarbon Framework- Key Considerations for Energy, Financial, and Sanction Sensitive Businesses," *National Law Review*, February 9, 2026.

⁶⁴ Kevin Crowley et al., "ExxonMobil, ConocoPhillips Negotiate Possible Venezuela Comeback," *World Oil*, May 26, 2026.

⁶⁵ Reuters, "Venezuela's Trump-Backed Reforms Have Yet to Draw Investors Wary of Legal System, Infrastructure," June 3, 2026.

⁶⁶ Christopher Sabatini and Alexandra Farsari, *The U.S. Plan for Venezuela Won't Work Without the Rule of Law. Here's How to Make Progress*, Chatham House, June 2026 (hereinafter Sabatani and Farsari, *The U.S. Plan for Venezuela*).

⁶⁷ Yolanda Fong-Sam, "The Mineral Industry of Venezuela," U.S. Geological Survey, March 2026.

⁶⁸ Secretary Doug Burgum (@SecretaryBurgum), X post, March 9, 2026, <https://x.com/SecretaryBurgum/status/2031043977571377275>; Bram Ebus and Alexandra Fuenmayor Starr, "U.S. Snaps Up Venezuela's Oil and Rare Minerals in Race for Supplies," *Agora Dialogue*, March 7, 2026.

⁶⁹ Venezuela Investigative Unit, "New Venezuelan Mining Law Obscures Old Corruption Problems," *InSight Crime*, April 20 2026; Treasury, "Venezuela-Related Sanctions," <https://ofac.treasury.gov/sanctions-programs-and-country-information/venezuela-related-sanctions>.

by criminal groups (including TdA and the ELN).⁷⁰ A 2025 U.S. State Department report indicated that revenue generated from illicit mining operations overseen by such groups has been paid to Venezuelan military officers for access to routes used to transport gold. The report asserts that the operations also contribute to environmental damage (including in protected areas), human rights abuses, and violations of Indigenous land rights.⁷¹

The Trump Administration has supported Venezuela's efforts to receive multilateral assistance from international financial institutions (IFIs).⁷² On April 16, 2026, the IMF resumed interactions with Venezuela, which had been suspended since March 2019, after a majority of its voting members recognized the acting Rodríguez administration as the legitimate government of Venezuela.⁷³ The World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank followed suit. For the first time in 20 years, Venezuela has started sharing economic data with the IMF and senior IMF officials visited Venezuela. In July 2026, Venezuela was able to access roughly \$346 million in liquidity support through IMF international reserve assets (*special drawing rights*, or SDRs) for post-earthquake reconstruction.⁷⁴ The IDB also has provided \$500 million in emergency humanitarian assistance.⁷⁵

The Venezuelan government defaulted on its government debt in 2017. It remains in default and has a complex set of debt obligations owed to private investors, bilateral creditors such as China, and international arbitration awards. The government's external debt and debt owed by PdVSA together may reportedly total \$240 billion.⁷⁶ In order for Venezuela to attract foreign investment and unlock larger IFI resources, the government likely needs to restructure its debt. In May 2026, the Trump Administration issued an OFAC license allowing the Rodríguez government to hire U.S. financial, legal, and consulting advisers to prepare for a restructuring.⁷⁷ Some analysts expect that restructuring Venezuela's debts will be a complex and lengthy process but that it could demonstrate a serious intention to repay bondholders and other creditors, which could boost investor confidence in the country.⁷⁸ Direct negotiations between Venezuela and its creditors would require additional OFAC permissions.

Possible Transition to Democracy

The Trump Administration's engagement with the Rodríguez government initially focused on stabilizing Venezuela's security and economic situation. On June 2, 2026, Secretary of State Rubio testified that while there ultimately should be elections in Venezuela, several conditions

⁷⁰ SOS Orinoco, *Grupos Armados Organizados en la Actividad Minera al sur del río Orinoco, Venezuela: Situación al 2026*, July 28, 2026; SOS Orinoco, "Joint Civil Society Statement on OFAC General Licenses 51A, 54 and 55 for Venezuelan Minerals," April 6, 2026; Fernanda Pinte, "Venezuela's New Mining Law Faces ESG, Security Challenges," *S&P Global*, April 13, 2026.

⁷¹ U.S. Department of State, *Report to Congress on the State-Sponsored Extraction and Sale of Gold from Venezuela's Orinoco Mining Arc, and from National Reserves in Venezuela Such as CaNaima National Park*, June 5, 2025.

⁷² Treasury, OFAC, "Issuance of Venezuela-related General Licenses," April 14, 2026.

⁷³ IMF, "IMF Reengagement with Venezuela (FAQs)," updated April 21, 2026.

⁷⁴ Jorgelina de Rosario, "Venezuela to Tap Its Money at IMF for Quake Reconstruction," *Bloomberg*, June 25, 2026.

⁷⁵ Inter-American Development Bank, "Humanitarian Assistance for Populations Affected by the Impacts of the Earthquakes That Hit the Central Coast of Venezuela," July 1, 2026.

⁷⁶ Ricardo Vaz, "Venezuelan Gov't Delegation Meets IMF amid Debt Restructuring Plans," *Venezuelanalysis*, June 1, 2026; Bart Piasecki, *Inside the Power Struggle over Venezuela's Debt Restructuring*, Atlantic Council, July 10, 2026.

⁷⁷ OFAC, "General License No. 58," May 5, 2026.

⁷⁸ Kate Winston, "Venezuela Debt Restructuring May Take Years, But Progress Could Boost Oil Investor Confidence," *S&P Global*, May 20, 2026.

need to be in place for free and fair elections to occur.⁷⁹ Secretary Rubio has identified some of those conditions as establishing freedom of the press, allowing all political parties to freely mobilize, and reforming the National Electoral Council (CNE).⁸⁰ Many of those reforms may be addressed during negotiations that are underway between the acting government and the opposition. Past negotiations could inform those efforts, including Norway-mediated talks that resulted in the 2023 Barbados Agreement between the Maduro government and the opposition, which enabled presidential elections to be held in 2024.⁸¹

The acting government approved an amnesty law that enabled more than 800 political prisoners to be released from January 2026 to May 2026, although the law excluded many military officers and opposition leaders in exile, including Maria Corina Machado.⁸² Many of those released from prison remain subject to government monitoring and restrictions.⁸³ *Foro Penal*, a Venezuelan human rights group, reported that some 382 political prisoners remained incarcerated as of August 3, 2026.⁸⁴ With opposition leaders still in exile and those in the country unable to exercise their full political rights, analysts maintain that political reconciliation efforts remain nascent.⁸⁵

The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and other international organizations have documented continued authoritarianism and human rights abuses under the Rodríguez government. In March 2026, OHCHR asserted that “structures that have sustained persecution for years have not been dismantled” and that there were no signs that the acting government intended to bring senior officials accused of crimes against humanity to justice.⁸⁶ Human rights groups also have noted that laws restricting press freedom and the independent financing and operations of NGOs remain in force and that digital censorship has continued.⁸⁷ Some analysts assert that the judiciary, which is tasked with interpreting those laws and the amnesty law, is still corrupt and politicized, as is the electoral authority.⁸⁸

Venezuela's opposition, civil society groups, and a group of experts convened by Chatham House (a think tank in the United Kingdom) have recommended steps to prepare for a credible election.⁸⁹ These steps include releasing all political prisoners; selecting a new CNE; opening

⁷⁹ Testimony of Secretary of State Marco Rubio in U.S. Congress, SFRC, *Review of the FY27 State Department Budget Request*, hearing, 119th Congress, 2nd session, June 2, 2026.

⁸⁰ U.S. Department of State, “Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Paraguayan Foreign Minister Rubén Ramírez Lezcano at the Signing of a Memorandum of Understanding for Strategic Civil Nuclear Cooperation,” August 4, 2026.

⁸¹ Marian Vidaurre, “Third Generation of Venezuelan Negotiations (2019-2024),” in *Venezuelan Negotiations, Perspectives on Global Affairs* (Springer, 2026), pp. 97-116.

⁸² Gustavo Ocando Alex, “Venezuela Frees Longest-Serving Political Prisoners, Jailed for More Than 20 Years,” *Miami Herald*, May 20, 2026.

⁸³ Alonso Moleiro, “Juan Pablo Guanipa’s Arrest Shows Venezuela’s Regime Still Controls the Machinery of Repression,” *El País*, February 10, 2026.

⁸⁴ Foro Penal, “Presos Políticos en Venezuela 3 de Agosto de 2026,” accessed August 10, 2026.

⁸⁵ See, for example, Javier Corrales, “Venezuela Needs Regime Change: The Narrow Path to a Democratic Transition,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 105, no. 3 (May 2026).

⁸⁶ OHCHR, “Venezuela: Uncertainty in Venezuela Must Give Way to Meaningful Human Rights Change, UN Fact-Finding Mission Says,” March 12, 2026.

⁸⁷ Statement Submitted for the Record of Luz Mely Reyes, Cofounder and Editor of Efecto Cocuyo, for U.S. Congress, House Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, *Human Rights in Venezuela: Status and Opportunity*, 119th Cong., 2nd sess., July 15, 2026.

⁸⁸ Sabatani and Farsari, *The U.S. Plan for Venezuela*; Testimony for the Record of Laura Cristina Dib Ayesta, Washington Office in Latin America, for U.S. Congress, House Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, *Human Rights in Venezuela: Status and Opportunity*, 119th Cong., 2nd sess., July 15, 2026.

⁸⁹ Unidad Venezuela, (@unidadvenezuela,) X, post, May 28, 2026, “Manifiesto de Panama,” <https://x.com/> (continued...)

civic space and restoring political rights; guaranteeing the safe return of exiles, including opposition leaders; updating the voter registry (including for voters overseas); and inviting international observers.⁹⁰ On May 23, 2026, María Corina Machado met in Panama with several other opposition leaders. After that meeting, attendees announced a Panama Manifesto outlining talks with the acting government under Machado's leadership. In a May 2026 interview, María Corina Machado estimated that an election could occur in as soon as 40 weeks and that she was coordinating her planned return to Venezuela with Trump Administration officials.⁹¹ Interior Minister and PSUV President Diosdado Cabello ruled out negotiating with Machado.⁹² The State Department did not issue any statements regarding the Panama meeting.

Some analysts have assessed that the Rodríguez government will seek to delay the start of an electoral process unless and until the Trump Administration, the European Union (EU), and others exert more direct pressure for a transition.⁹³ The Rodríguez government exceeded the 180-day period for an acting government to rule (as set out in Venezuela's 1999 constitution) in early July 2026. Without requiring that acting officials publicly commit to an electoral road map, the U.S. government has removed sanctions on Rodríguez, reached economic deals with her government, endorsed the government's debt restructuring efforts, and supported more recent efforts to immobilize Venezuelan assets sanctioned by other governments.⁹⁴ The EU has kept targeted sanctions on Rodríguez and others, and the European Parliament has called for sanctions to remain in place until a road map for elections is established and human rights are restored (e.g., all political prisoners are released).⁹⁵ Canada also has kept sanctions on Rodríguez.

Since June 2026 (prior to the earthquakes), the State Department has focused increased attention on encouraging negotiations to start a democratic transition process in Venezuela but has not addressed publicly what role, if any, it would support for María Corina Machado to play in those talks.⁹⁶ As previously noted, on July 14, 2026, National Assembly President Jorge Rodríguez and Dinorah Figuera, head of the 2015 democratically elected National Assembly, separately announced that talks to advance democratic reforms would begin on August 1. The two had first met on June 18, after Figuera returned to the country from exile.⁹⁷ Also on July 14, the State Department Senior Bureau Official Michael Kozak testified that U.S. democracy funds would support that dialogue process and related reforms.⁹⁸ While responding to questions regarding the alleged role U.S. officials played in stopping María Corina Machado from returning to Venezuela,

unidadvenezuela/status/2060144278647533577?s=20; "ONG Instan a Convocar Elecciones Presidenciales y Parlamentarias como «Válvula de Escape Democrática»," *Monitoreamos*, April 22, 2026; Christopher Sabatini, *Democratic Elections in Venezuela Won't Happen Overnight—Here's the Groundwork That's Needed First*, Chatham House, April 2026 (hereinafter Sabatini, *Democratic Elections*).

⁹⁰ Sabatini, *Democratic Elections*.

⁹¹ Boris Muñoz, "María Corina Machado: 'The Position of the United States and Other Allies Weighs on My Decision to Return, the Timing Has to Be Right'," *El País*, May 11, 2026.

⁹² Pedro Pablo Peñaloza, "Diosdado Cabello Slams the Door on María Corina Machado's Negotiation Proposal," *Infobae*, June 9, 2026.

⁹³ Sabatini, *Democratic Elections*.

⁹⁴ Vigil, *U.S. Took over Venezuela's Oil Industry*. Patricia Laya and Eric Martin, "Trump Seeks to Unlock Venezuela's Billions in Frozen Assets After Earthquakes," *Bloomberg*, July 24, 2026.

⁹⁵ Marc Jütten with Eunha Kim, *Venezuela at a Crossroads: Transition Towards Democracy or a New Form of Authoritarianism?*, European Parliamentary Research Service, May 2026.

⁹⁶ Jason Marczak and Geoff Ramsey, *Upcoming Venezuela Negotiations Are an Opportunity for the U.S. to Lock in a Victory*, Atlantic Council, July 22, 2026.

⁹⁷ U.S. Department of State, "Supporting an Institutional Democratic Transition in Venezuela," June 18, 2026.

⁹⁸ Kozak, testimony, *National Security Strategy and the Western Hemisphere*.

Kozak said that additional reforms would need to occur before Machado could repatriate.⁹⁹ Machado issued a statement on July 26 with Edmundo González saying that her faction of the opposition would not participate in the talks but would not stand in the way of the process.¹⁰⁰ The first round of talks were held in Caracas from August 6 to August 12, 2026; the parties reportedly agreed on a process to reform the judiciary and to work together to pursue the release of Venezuelan assets held at the Bank of England for use in earthquake recovery.¹⁰¹

Congressional Considerations

Since the removal of Maduro, observers have debated governance challenges, including the prospects for a democratic transition in Venezuela. On July 15, 2026, the House passed its version of the NSRP Appropriations Act (H.R. 8595); the accompanying report, H.Rept. 119-631, would require a report from the Secretary of State within 30 days of the bill's enactment on the strategy needed to advance a democratic transition in Venezuela. Congress may continue to address these issues, as well as how to balance democracy and human rights concerns against other U.S. goals in Venezuela, through legislation, including appropriations and conditions on appropriations, sanctions policy, letters, hearings, and other oversight. Congress could, for example, amend or enact broad legislation to shape U.S. policy, like the VERDAD Act of 2019 (P.L. 116-94, Division J, Title I) or consider discrete measures to address specific issues.¹⁰²

During the 119th Congress, the House Foreign Affairs Committee reported legislation (H.R. 7674) that would require the State Department to provide a comprehensive strategy to support a democratic transition in Venezuela and to consult with and report to Congress on the strategy's implementation. A Senate-introduced bill, S. 4809, would require the Secretary of State to update, with input from relevant congressional committees, the State Department's March 2020 Democratic Transition Framework for Venezuela; Trump Administration officials have not publicly mentioned this framework.¹⁰³ The bill would, among other measures, require monthly updates to relevant committees on progress made toward reaching benchmarks identified in the framework. Some Senators also have introduced a bipartisan resolution (S.Res. 712) calling for the Trump Administration to use all diplomatic tools available to push for free and fair elections and another (S.Res. 829) stating that U.S. policy aims to support a peaceful transition to democracy in Venezuela through free and fair elections.

The Trump Administration did not request any funding for democracy programs in Venezuela in its FY2026 or FY2027 budget requests and has sought to cut funding for entities that have supported democracy and human rights programs in the country, including the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).¹⁰⁴ Congress appropriated \$50 million for democracy programs in Venezuela and continued funding for the NED in the NSRP Appropriations Act, 2026 (P.L. 119-75, Division F). Such funds could be used to facilitate democracy transition efforts,

⁹⁹ Kozak, testimony, *National Security Strategy and the Western Hemisphere*; Juan Forero and Vera Bergengruen, "How Machado's Return to Venezuela Got Derailed After U.S. Resistance," *Washington Post*, July 3, 2026.

¹⁰⁰ María Corina Machado (@MariaCorinaYA), X post, July 26, 2026, <https://x.com/MariaCorinaYA/status/2081484734002020568?s=20>.

¹⁰¹ AFP, "Venezuela Talks End with Agreement on Judicial Reform and Frozen Funds," August 13, 2026.

¹⁰² The VERDAD Act addressed issues such as sanctions policy, humanitarian assistance, combating corruption by the undemocratic government in power, and establishing a Special Envoy for Venezuela to coordinate U.S. support for a return to democracy.

¹⁰³ U.S. Department of State, "Democratic Transition Framework for Venezuela," March 31, 2020.

¹⁰⁴ U.S. Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification for the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, FY2026, FY2027*.

including holding free and fair elections. The FY2027 NSRP appropriations bill passed by the House (H.R. 8595) would make \$50 million available for democracy programs in Venezuela.¹⁰⁵ The bill and the accompanying report, H.Rept. 119-631, would also require a report within 30 days of the bill's enactment on the diplomatic, economic, and foreign assistance strategy needed to advance a democratic transition in Venezuela, with benchmarks and timelines.¹⁰⁶

Congress has various means to influence how U.S. agencies, companies, and multilateral institutions such as the IMF engage on economic and other issues with the acting government.

- Congress could consider legislation to require U.S.-Venezuela economic agreements (including the energy deal) to be shared with relevant committees in Congress; measures to enable (e.g., H.R. 8974) or prevent (e.g., H.R. 7038/S. 3621 and H.R. 3685) the use of federal funds to support U.S. private investment in Venezuela; and/or measures requiring the U.S. Comptroller General to audit U.S.-Venezuela agreements (e.g., H.R. 7819/S. 3838). H.Rept. 119-631 accompanying H.R. 8595 would require a report on the status of funds derived from the sale of oil and other natural resources held by the U.S. government pursuant to EO 14373 to ensure those funds are benefitting the Venezuelan people and have not been diverted.¹⁰⁷
- Congress could require Treasury, the State Department, or other agencies that receive due diligence reports from companies operating in Venezuela under OFAC licenses to share those reports with relevant congressional committees.
- Congress could consider legislation that would direct the President to impose targeted sanctions on Venezuelans who have committed gross human rights violations (S. 4809). Congress could indicate its position on the removal of targeted sanctions on Delcy Rodríguez and delineate the circumstances under which other U.S. targeted sanctions could be lifted. Congress could urge or require the Administration to consult with the EU and Canada when making decisions on targeted sanctions.
- On sectoral sanctions, H.R. 8595 would prohibit funds provided by that bill from being used to “negotiate, allow, or facilitate the lifting of sanctions on Venezuela, unless the Secretary of State certifies and reports to the appropriate congressional committees that there have been free and fair elections in Venezuela.” Congress could broaden the requirement to apply to any funds provided in these or prior fiscal years for the Department of State or Treasury. Congress could consider legislation that would lift all sanctions currently in place.
- Congress could require the IMF to condition debt restructuring negotiations on reforms that would strengthen the rule of law. It also could call for regular briefings for relevant committees on how the restructuring process is advancing.

¹⁰⁵ H.R. 8595, §7045(l).

¹⁰⁶ H.R. 8595, §7019(e), and H.Rept. 119-631, p. 116.

¹⁰⁷ Executive Order 14373, “Safeguarding Venezuelan Oil Revenue for the Good of the American and Venezuelan People,” 91 *Federal Register* 2045-2046, January 15, 2026.

Author Information

Clare Ribando Seelke
Specialist in Latin American Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.