

U.S. Raid Leaves Venezuela in Confusion

After Maduro ouster, Trump keeps regime in place while issuing threats to successor

BY DAVID LUHNOW AND JOSÉ DE CÓRDOBA

President Trump ticked off a list of reasons for his decision to capture and arrest Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. He talked about the Maduro regime sending illicit drugs and gangs to the U.S. and nationalizing American oil-company assets.

One thing that wasn't mentioned: a desire to restore democracy in Venezuela. Instead, Trump said after Saturday's raid, the U.S. would run the country indefinitely until a "safe, proper and judicious transition" could be arranged. He didn't raise the prospect of elections.

The president said "it would be tough" for the country's opposition leader, María Corina Machado, who won the Nobel Peace Prize last year, to play a major role, saying she lacked popularity. Instead, he expressed a willingness to work with Delcy Rodríguez, Maduro's vice president, a hard-line socialist and regime stalwart.

On Sunday, Secretary of State Marco Rubio played down expectations of a quick

Armed men on motorcycles, supporters of Nicolás Maduro, drove through Caracas a day after Maduro's capture by the U.S. JESUS VARGAS/ GETTY IMAGES

return to democracy, saying it was unrealistic. "They've had this system of Chavismo in place for 15 or 16 years, and everyone's asking, why 24 hours after Nicolás Maduro was arrested, there isn't an election scheduled for tomorrow? That's absurd," he said on CBS.

Rubio outlined the more immediate goals for the U.S. in dealing with the Venezuelan regime under Rodríguez, who is now the interim president, and said Washington would use a blockade on Venezuelan oil exports and the threat of further military force as leverage to force the government to change its behavior.

"We want drug trafficking to stop. We want no more gang members to come our way. We don't want to see the Iranian and, by the way, Cuban presence in the past. We want the oil industry in that country not to go to the benefit of pirates and adversaries of the United

States, but for the benefit of the people,” he said.

For many Venezuelans, including millions of those who have fled the country to places like the U.S., the initial glee at hearing of Maduro’s capture has given way to growing angst that while Maduro is gone, the rest of his regime remains intact, and appears set to stay in power for the foreseeable future.

“Venezuelans are alternating between euphoria that Maduro is out, but disappointment that the guys with guns and the structure of guns and corruption is still running the show,” said Moises Naim, a former Venezuelan trade minister and analyst at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Even if the regime softens and changes policies to please the Trump administration, that feels more like “colonial submission” and doesn’t give ordinary Venezuelans a say in their future, said Rafael Banega, a community activist in Caracas. “This isn’t what we expected in any way, and it seems to frustrate our expectations. I can’t see most people supporting this,” he said.

Larry Gumbiner, a former U.S. diplomat who served in half a dozen Latin American countries during a 31-year career, said the Trump administration is giving priority to stability over democracy.

Trump’s plan, Gumbiner said, appears to be to keep the Maduro government in power minus Maduro, with the condition that the new president carries out Trump’s program of allowing U.S. oil companies to rebuild the oil sector, stopping drug trafficking and stopping support for Colombian guerrillas. If not, the presence of the U.S. fleet keeps alive the threat of a second round of attacks and captures.

There are good reasons why the Trump administration might not be able to impose a fast transition to democracy. Venezuela’s army and other security forces remain loyal to the regime, and have benefited from widespread corruption under Maduro and his late predecessor, Hugo Chávez. Absent a much larger U.S. military operation, they might be unwilling to cooperate.

The interim president, Rodríguez, will also have to keep the support of Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino and Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello, hard-liners who face U.S. criminal charges similar to those against Maduro and may balk at seeking an

accommodation with Washington.

Rodríguez's government has struck a defiant tone, telling its people it will oppose what it describes as an imperialist U.S. ambition to undermine Venezuelan sovereignty and take its oil.

Venezuela's constitution says Rodríguez, who was sworn in as acting president Saturday, must call for a new presidential election in 30 days if the president's absence is permanent. But Venezuela's Supreme Court, stacked with regime support--ers, has ruled that, given the extraordinary circumstances of Maduro's absence, it needs to study the question.

Some in Venezuela's opposition reacted angrily after Trump failed to mention holding new elections or forcing the regime to accept the result of the 2024 presidential election. The U.S. and other Western governments say that election was won by opposition candidate Edmundo González but it was ignored by Maduro, who stayed in power.

On Sunday, the exiled González declared himself the president-elect and called on the armed forces to show loyalty to the constitution.

Pedro Mario Burelli, an opposition member, praised the ouster of Maduro but called the plan for running Venezuela from Washington via regime members "bizarre" and "unacceptable."

Panama President José Raúl Mulino, who has strongly opposed Maduro, urged Trump to ensure a democratic transition in Venezuela and criticized Trump's backing of Rodríguez.

Machado, the Nobel winner who is widely seen as the country's leading opposition leader, has remained quiet. Other opposition figures say she likely feels she doesn't have much choice but to put her faith in Trump and hope a transition eventually comes.

A member of an armed civilian group guarded the entrance to a supermarket in Caracas. RONALD PENA R/ EPA/ SHUTTERSTOCK