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Venezuela 2025: Crónica de una caída anunciada

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ABSTRACT

The year 2025 was marked by a paradox in Venezuela: a regime that had brazenly stolen the July 2024 presidential election, faced the most sustained external pressure campaign in its history, and presided over a continuing economic collapse, nevertheless managed to survive the full calendar year until Nicolás Maduro's capture on January 3, 2026. This article analyzes the factors that simultaneously explain Maduro's resilience and the U.S. actions against the regime. Drawing on the authoritarian consolidation and personalist-military hybrid regime literatures, the article examines four interlocking dynamics: the regime's consolidation of internal control through post-electoral repression, including the manipulation of the May regional and July municipal elections; the oscillations of U.S. foreign policy between transactionalism and maximum pressure; the regime's multilayered survival strategies across economic, coercive, and diplomatic dimensions; and the structural fragmentation of the democratic opposition. The article concludes that the regime's resilience in 2025 is explained not as much by its own institutional strength, but by the combination of coercive internal cohesion, the exploitation of external divisions, and the absence of a credible coordinated alternative. The analysis closes with the U.S. special operations raid, which resulted in Maduro's detention and his transfer to New York, opening a new and uncertain transitional scenario for Venezuela.

Keywords: Venezuela, authoritarianism, hegemonic closure, authoritarian consolidation, Chavismo

* The views expressed herein are solely those of the authors and do not represent the views of or endorsement by the United States Naval Academy, the Department of the Navy, the Department of Defense, or the United States government.

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RESUMEN

El año 2025 estuvo marcado por una paradoja para Venezuela: un régimen que había robado descaradamente las elecciones presidenciales de julio de 2024, enfrentado la campaña de presión externa más sostenida de su historia y presidido un continuo colapso económico, logró sobrevivir durante todo el año hasta la captura de Nicolás Maduro el 3 de enero de 2026. Este artículo analiza los factores que explican simultáneamente la resiliencia de Maduro y las acciones de Estados Unidos contra el régimen. A partir de la literatura sobre consolidación autoritaria y regímenes híbridos personalistas-militares, el artículo examina cuatro dinámicas interrelacionadas: la consolidación del control interno del régimen mediante la represión postelectoral, incluyendo la manipulación de las elecciones regionales de mayo y municipales de julio; las oscilaciones de la política exterior estadounidense entre el transaccionalismo y la máxima presión; las estrategias de supervivencia multifacéticas del régimen en las dimensiones económica, coercitiva y diplomática; y la fragmentación estructural de la oposición democrática. El artículo concluye que la resiliencia del régimen en 2025 se explica no tanto por su propia fortaleza institucional, sino por la combinación de una cohesión interna coercitiva, la explotación de las divisiones externas y la ausencia de una alternativa coordinada y creíble. El análisis finaliza con la incursión de las fuerzas especiales estadounidenses, que resultó en la detención de Maduro y su traslado a Nueva York, abriendo un nuevo y incierto escenario de transición para Venezuela.

Palabras clave: *Venezuela, autoritarismo, cierre hegemónico, consolidación autoritaria, Chavismo*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the pre-dawn hours of January 3, 2026, U.S. Delta Force units raided Fuerte Tiuna, Venezuela's principal military base on the outskirts of Caracas, while simultaneous strikes targeted the La Carlota Air Base, the Antenas El Volcán communications hub, La Guaira port, and Higuerote airport. President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, were seized, transported aboard the USS Iwo Jima, and flown to New York. Approximately eighty people were killed in the audacious operation, among them 32 Cuban security personnel, while no U.S. casualties were reported (Barnes, Pager, and Schmitt 2026). U.S. President Donald Trump held a press conference within hours to announce that the United States would "run the country until there is a safe, proper, and judicious transition" while naming that Vice President and Oil Minister Delcy Rodríguez would be interim president (The White House 2026). Two days later, Rodríguez was sworn in as interim president. The Supreme Tribunal upheld the constitutionality of Rodríguez's appointment, and in the days that followed, the principal pillars of the *Chavista* regime publicly pledged their loyalty to the new president. Notably, the Trump Administration's surprising decision sidelined opposition leader María Corina Machado and many elements of her movement.

That extraordinary denouement was the product of a year of accumulated pressures, failed negotiations, military escalation, electoral manipulation, and diplomatic repositioning. Understanding it requires reconstructing the full complexity of Venezuelan politics throughout 2025. How did a regime that had stolen a presidential election amidst intense public scrutiny, faced an unprece-

dented campaign of external coercion, and presided over continuing economic deterioration, manage to survive intact until a foreign invasion ousted its leader? We argue that the answer lies in the logic of the regime's consolidation. A government that could no longer win free elections nonetheless preserved and employed its coercive capacity, maintained a sufficiently cohesive ruling coalition, and exploited the structural fragmentation of its adversaries both at home and abroad. In line with research on crisis survival and authoritarian consolidation under Maduro (Polga-Hecimovich and Sanchez Urribarri 2024, 2025a), the regime's resilience in such dire circumstances is the result of a unique combination of several internal and external factors. This article explains Maduro's survival in the presidency in 2025 in detail, delving into the reasons that help account for how he stayed in power until the events of January 3.

The article proceeds as follows. Section II situates the analysis within the literature on authoritarian closure, personalist-military hybrid regimes, and the consolidation framework developed in recent comparative scholarship. Section III examines regime consolidation following Maduro's January 10 inauguration, focusing on post-electoral repression and institutional control. Section IV analyzes the 2025 electoral cycle, from the May regional and legislative elections to the July municipal elections, including the opposition's boycott calculus and the regime's use of subnational elections as a consolidation tool. Section V examines the dynamics of U.S. maximum-pressure policy and its internal contradictions. Section VI reconstructs the regime's multilayered survival strategies. Section VII then analyzes the fragmentation of the democratic opposition. A concluding section synthesizes the main findings and identifies the open questions that the January 3 operation left unresolved.

II. AUTHORITARIAN CONTROL, CONSOLIDATION, AND HEGEMONIC CLOSURE

Venezuela's authoritarian trajectory has been the subject of sustained scholarly debate, particularly regarding the appropriate characterization of the regime at different moments in its evolution after Chávez's arrival in power and the onset of the Bolivarian Revolution (e.g., Brewer-Carías 2010; Corrales and Penfold-Becerra 2011; Corrales 2023). The competitive authoritarianism framework of Levitsky and Way (2002, 2010), which describes systems in which elections are held regularly but the playing field is systematically tilted against the opposition, accurately characterized Venezuela under Chávez and possibly even in the early Maduro years (Sanchez Urribarri 2016). However, that framework became analytically inadequate by the mid-2010s, when a cascade of institutional changes moved Venezuela decisively beyond hybrid regime territory. The opposition's victory in the 2015 legislative elections, the first real test of whether *Chavismo* would accept an electoral defeat, was followed by the regime's nullification of the opposition-controlled National Assembly with the active and unrestricted assistance of a submissive Supreme Tribunal, the

questionable creation of the National Constituent Assembly in 2017, and the escalating repression of civil society. Venezuela's Varieties of Democracy scores corroborate this trajectory from electoral democracy in the early Chávez years, to illiberal democracy and competitive authoritarianism, to electoral autocracy and finally hegemonic authoritarianism by 2024 (Alarcón and Hidalgo 2024).

Polga-Hecimovich and Sanchez Urribarri's (2024, 2025a) four-level framework of authoritarian consolidation—adapted from Schedler's (2001) analogous typology for democratic regimes—distinguishes consolidation as a graded process organized around four cumulative levels, rather than a binary threshold. The first level, *avoiding authoritarian breakdown*, constitutes the minimal condition of regime survival upon which all other levels are predicated, reducing the probability of autocratic collapse to the point where leaders can be confident that authoritarianism will persist over time. The second level, *avoiding regime liberalization*, captures the regime's capacity not merely to survive but to prevent the reintroduction of free and fair elections or liberal democratic elements, actively closing off the possibility of even a constrained democratic opening. The third level, *completing authoritarianism*, describes the shift from a diminished subtype of autocracy (such as competitive authoritarianism) to a fully hegemonic regime in which the pretense of free and fair elections is abandoned entirely. The fourth and most advanced level, *deepening authoritarianism*, involves the active elimination of liberal democratic institutions and the construction of authoritarian institutional infrastructure whose logic and practices persist beyond any individual leader. In that work, we argue that Venezuela under Maduro, particularly following the 2024 electoral fraud, met many of the conditions of this fourth level.

Crucially, Polga-Hecimovich and Sanchez Urribarri (2025a) draw a conceptual distinction between *regime consolidation* and *individual power consolidation*. This is analytically important for interpreting the January 3, 2026 denouement. Regarding individual power consolidation, a leader may accumulate and concentrate personal power across a range of regime types, while regime consolidation refers to the institutionalization of authoritarian norms, practices, and coalition arrangements that can outlast any single individual. Events in Venezuela illustrate this distinction sharply. Indeed, the fact that Maduro's removal did not produce immediate regime collapse—that the ruling party (*Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela*, PSUV) apparatus, the military command structure, and the Bolivarian institutional architecture remained operative under Delcy Rodríguez—is evidence of regime-level consolidation at the fourth level, independent of Maduro's personal fate.

Göbel's (2011) tripartite conceptualization of authoritarian power provides a complementary analytical lens. Göbel distinguishes between despotic power (the capacity to impose the regime's will through coercion), infrastructural power (the capacity to regulate society through institutions and organizations), and discursive power (the capacity to shape what actors want and expect, making authoritarianism appear normal or inevitable). His hypothesis—that

regime durability increases to the extent that elites manage to enhance their infrastructural and discursive capabilities, reducing reliance on naked coercion alone—also maps onto the Venezuelan trajectory. By 2025, the Maduro regime's coercive apparatus, from the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (*Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional*, SEBIN), to the paramilitary groups referred to as *colectivos*, to the Bolivarian National Armed Forces (*Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana*, FANB) remained formidable. At the same time, so did its infrastructural reach through the PSUV's penetration of subnational governance, the state-owned oil company's role as a patronage mechanism, the use of the National Electoral Council (*Consejo Nacional Electoral*, CNE) as an electoral control instrument, and its control of the Supreme Tribunal (*Tribunal Supremo de Justicia*, TSJ), lower courts, and the rest of the justice system.

The typological literature on authoritarian regime types adds a further dimension. Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2018) classify Venezuela under Maduro as a personalist-party hybrid with a strong military component—a system combining formal party structures with high executive personalism and deep military penetration of the state. This hybrid character has important implications for durability and succession. Pure personalist regimes tend to collapse rapidly when the leader is removed because no institutional successor mechanism exists, while party-based regimes survive individual leaders because the organizational apparatus retains autonomous capacity. The Venezuelan hybrid sits between these poles: Maduro's removal did not produce regime collapse because the PSUV and the Bolivarian military apparatus retained the institutionalized capacity that Polga-Hecimovich and Sanchez Urribarri's fourth consolidation level predicts. Finally, the distinction between survival and consolidation is essential for interpreting 2025 as a whole. Survival is a *necessary* but not *sufficient* condition for consolidation, and 2025 demonstrates that the regime had moved well beyond survival into the active deepening of authoritarian governance infrastructure.

Alternative frameworks offer less interpretive power. Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2018) identify personalist-military hybrid regimes as among the most fragile regime types because they concentrate authority in a single leader while simultaneously depending on a military coalition whose loyalty is conditional on continued material benefits and credible signals of regime durability. Under maximum external pressure, this and similar literature would anticipate elevated defection risk and a non-trivial probability of regime breakdown through elite fracture. Escribà-Folch and Wright (2010) similarly find that economic sanctions increase the probability of authoritarian collapse when the resources available for elite co-optation are degraded. On these predictions, Venezuela in 2025 should have been a strong candidate for coup-initiated transition or elite-defection cascade. As such, the fact that the governing coalition held, that no significant military defection materialized, and that the regime ultimately succumbed to external military decapitation rather than internal fracture demonstrates the relative strength of the consolidation framework.

A fourth relevant conceptual element is the notion of hegemonic closure, understood as the process through which a consolidated authoritarian regime forecloses arenas of domestic contestation through which opposition forces might otherwise convert popular support and other resources into institutional leverage, from elections to the judiciary to the legislative branch and civil society (Schedler 2006). Where competitive authoritarianism describes a system in which the playing field is tilted but electoral competition retains some meaningful uncertainty, hegemonic closure describes an instance in which a country's institutional architecture has been redesigned to prevent any opposition pathway from producing a change in the governing coalition. Hegemonic closure not only describes a regime configuration, but the strategic environment in which actors must operate. When domestic arenas are effectively sealed, opposition strategy turns outwards towards international advocacy, diaspora mobilization, and reliance on external pressure to replace the accumulation of domestic institutional power as the primary instruments of political competition. This externalization logic, developed in Section VII, is the direct behavioral consequence of hegemonic closure under the conditions Venezuela reached by 2025.

III. MADURO'S INAUGURATION

On January 10, 2025, Nicolás Maduro was sworn in for a third presidential term in a ceremony attended by representatives of the dwindling circle of states that still recognized his government. The inauguration took place amid ongoing repression that had not abated since the July 28, 2024 elections, after which human rights organizations documented over two thousand political detainees, as well as systematic reports of torture and forced disappearances (Mijares 2025a). PROVEA's quarterly monitoring reports, for example, documented 2,167 arbitrary detentions between July 28 and December 31, 2024, of whom 1,083 remained imprisoned at the time of Maduro's inauguration (PROVEA 2025). Human Rights Watch published a detailed corroborating report in April documenting the post-electoral abuses, which the regime dismissed without engagement (Human Rights Watch 2025). The Universidad Católica Andrés Bello's ENCOVI survey, Venezuela's most comprehensive longitudinal household study, provided a concurrent baseline for understanding the social conditions against which this repression unfolded. According to it, by late 2024, roughly 82 percent of Venezuelan households remained in poverty, with extreme poverty affecting 53 percent (ENCOVI 2025). María Corina Machado was briefly detained in January during protests organized for inauguration day—but she was released within hours, almost certainly in response to diplomatic pressure and the calculation that prolonged detention would generate more international problems than it resolved.

In parallel, the Donald Trump administration assumed office on January 20. Within days it became apparent that the new U.S. government was prepared

to engage with Venezuela in ways that the Biden administration had largely avoided. Special Envoy Richard Grenell visited Caracas on January 31, opening the first direct channel of communication between Washington and Caracas in years. Grenell negotiated the release of six American citizens held in Venezuela and the resumption of deportation flights for irregular Venezuelan migrants in the United States, in exchange for signals of flexibility whose precise nature was never fully disclosed (Blanco 2025). This first contact was a strong hint of the faultline that would run through U.S.-Venezuela policy for the entirety of 2025: the Grenell-transactionalism axis versus the maximum-pressure axis of Secretary of State Marco Rubio (Renzullo Narváez 2025). Specifically, Grenell operated as a channel of pragmatic negotiation, willing to recognize interlocutors within *Chavismo* in exchange for concessions on deportations, American detainees, and oil access, while Rubio and his team conceived a strategy oriented toward regime collapse or unconditional capitulation. This duality generated contradictory signals that Maduro initially proved adept at exploiting.

Domestically, the Maduro regime moved rapidly during the first semester to consolidate its institutional position in the wake of the 2024 electoral crisis. A systematic purge of the armed forces removed officers deemed insufficiently loyal, while the pliant judiciary rubber-stamped all disputed electoral results and rejected opposition legal challenges without exception (Sanchez Urribarri and Capriles 2025). The government-controlled National Assembly passed a series of measures in March that broadened presidential authority in economic matters, providing legal cover for increasingly arbitrary interventions in the private sector. Maduro's April declaration of an economic emergency signaled the regime's desire to govern by decree under exceptional circumstances and also provided a legal umbrella for resource allocation decisions that would otherwise have required legislative justification (See Acceso a la Justicia 2025).

The international coalition's composition illustrated both the regime's isolation and its continued capacity to maintain meaningful external relationships. Russia, China, Iran, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Bolivia sent representatives or messages of support, confirming the durability of the axis of authoritarian solidarity that had sustained Venezuela through previous rounds of sanctions (Arnson 2021; Boersner-Herrera 2025). Simultaneously, Russian and Chinese state enterprises continued to purchase Venezuelan oil through intermediary networks, providing revenue streams that partially offset the impact of U.S. sanctions. The Iranian connection, institutionalized through agreements covering oil-for-gasoline swaps and technical cooperation, continued to function despite U.S. interdiction efforts. In short, the regime's international survival strategy rested on maintaining multiple alternative economic and diplomatic partners capable of partially substituting for any single relationship that U.S. pressure might sever.

IV. THE 2025 ELECTORAL CYCLE: SUBNATIONAL MANIPULATION AND OPPOSITION BOYCOTT

Despite—or perhaps because of—the authoritarian context, the Maduro government organized regional and legislative elections to be held on May 25 and municipal elections on July 27. These were less exercises of democratic representation than instruments of constraining any democratic aperture. Indeed, the regime's decision to hold elections so soon after the fraudulent 2024 presidential vote (Mebane Jr 2024; Corrales and Kronick 2025) seems to have been a deliberate political calculation. By forcing the opposition to choose between participation in a process administered by the same national electoral authority (*Consejo Nacional* Electoral, CNE) that had certified the July 2024 fraud, on one hand, and a boycott that would leave it institutionally voiceless, on the other, the government ensured that either outcome served its consolidation interests.

The May elections included voting in the disputed Essequibo region, a territory lying within Guyana's internationally recognized borders that Venezuela has historically disputed, and which the Maduro government claimed as the Venezuelan state of "Guayana Esequiba." The legal basis for this claim derived from a December 2023 referendum in which the Venezuelan government declared the annexation approved (Melimopoulos 2023).[1] The elections went ahead despite an International Court of Justice ruling issued on May 1, 2025, ordering Venezuela to refrain from conducting elections in the region. CNE president Elvis Amoroso duly declared PSUV candidate Neil Villamizar the new governor of the region, though the territory remained under full Guyanese administrative control and no internationally credible voting process could have taken place there.

The principal opposition coalition, the Democratic Unitary Platform (*Plataforma Unitaria Democrática*, PUD), led by Machado and former presidential candidate Edmundo González Urrutia, called for a general boycott of both electoral rounds (Reuters 2025). The boycott position rested on both principled and strategic grounds that the structural conditions for any meaningful competition were absent, and that participation in elections administered by a fraudulent CNE constituted implicit recognition of Maduro's stolen mandate. Machado claimed after the May vote that over 85 percent of voters had abstained, a figure sharply at odds with the CNE's official participation rate of 42.63 percent (Buschschlüter 2025). The boycott, however, deepened a pre-existing fracture within the opposition. Henrique Capriles Radonski, a former *Primero Justicia* presidential candidate, was expelled from the party for defying the abstention strategy, and led a competing slate under the *Alianza UNT-Unión* ticket. Capriles Radonski argued publicly that "abstention cannot be the way" and

[1] The March 2024 Organic Law for the Defense of Guayana Esequiba created the new state. In March 2025, authorities expanded the chamber from 277 to 285 seats to accommodate eight deputies for the territory: six elected in the state and two through the national list.

that choosing not to participate was tantamount to choosing nothing, warning the opposition against remaining "trapped in rhetoric" (Lafuente 2025).

The academic literature on authoritarian elections argues that the effectiveness of participation versus boycott strategies depends on the degree of regime consolidation, the availability of credible domestic and international observation, and the presence of internal regime divisions that competitive results might activate (Levitsky and Way 2010; Donno 2013)—conditions that in Venezuela in 2025 favored neither option unambiguously. The participationist critique, advanced in the Venezuelan context by Jiménez (2023), holds that boycott strategies in hegemonic regimes typically strengthen incumbents by surrendering the only arena in which opposition social support can be publicly demonstrated, and by allowing the regime to fill subnational offices uncontested. In this interpretation, the PUD's abstention handed the regime a landslide result produced without the friction of a real contest. Conversely, participation in elections administered by the same CNE that had certified the July 2024 fraud would possibly have carried the cost of normalizing the stolen mandate and potentially fracturing the electoral narrative that underpinned González Urrutia's claim to the presidency. Ultimately, the split between the boycott and participationist currents produced the worst of both worlds, with the PUD surrendering institutional presence without achieving the unified pressure that might have altered the regime's calculus.

The CNE announced results for the May 2025 elections with 93 percent of votes counted. In the legislative elections, the ruling *Gran Polo Patriótico Simón Bolívar* (GPP), the Chavista alliance led by the PSUV, won 82.68 percent of the vote and captured 253 of the 285 National Assembly seats, representing 88.8 percent of the chamber. Opposition-aligned parties, meanwhile, won just 29 seats in total. *Alianza Democrática* (AD), a coalition that the PUD dismissed as a regime collaborator, took 6.25 percent of the vote; *UNT-Unión*, the Capriles-aligned breakaway, won 5.18 percent; and *Fuerza Vecinal*, a coalition of local parties, took 2.57 percent. Three indigenous representatives were elected separately on June 1 under a constitutional quota; all were government allies. Capriles himself was elected as a national deputy under *UNT-Unión*, which won 11 seats across the chamber. Table 1 presents the full state-by-state breakdown of National Assembly seat allocations across both single-member district plurality (SMDP) and party-list tiers.[2]

[2] Since the passage of the Ley Orgánica de Procesos Electorales in 2009, Venezuela has used a "parallel" or mixed-member majoritarian electoral system for National Assembly elections in which voters cast two votes: one nominal vote for individuals elected via SMDP rules and the second for a national party list (Asamblea Nacional de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela 2009, Article 8).

Table 1. Venezuela May 2025 National Assembly Election Results

	SMDP seats		Party list seats		
State	**GPP**	**Opposition**	**GPP**	**Opposition**	**Total**
Amazonas	3	0	3	0	6
Anzoátegui	7	0	4	0	11
Apure	3	0	3	0	6
Aragua	7	0	5	0	12
Barinas	4	0	3	0	7
Bolívar	6	0	4	0	10
Carabobo	10	0	6	0	16
Cojedes	0	3	2	1	6
Delta Amacuro	3	0	3	0	6
Falcón	4	0	3	0	7
Guárico	4	0	3	0	7
Guayana Esequiba*	3	0	3	0	6
La Guaira (Vargas)	3	0	3	0	6
Lara	8	0	5	0	13
Mérida	4	0	3	0	7
Miranda	11	0	8	0	19
Monagas	3	0	4	0	7
Nueva Esparta	2	1	2	1	6
Portuguesa	4	0	3	0	7
Sucre	4	0	3	0	7
Táchira	5	0	4	0	9
Trujillo	4	0	3	0	7
Yaracuy	3	0	3	0	6
Zulia	13	2	7	3	25
Capital District	8	0	5	0	13
Indigenous	3	0	N/A	N/A	3
National	N/A	N/A	32	18	50
Total	129	6	127	23	285

Source: No publicly available vote results; seat distribution from *El País* (2025) and authors' notes. SMDP = single-member district plurality tier.
* Guayana Esequiba seats were allocated despite an ICJ ruling of May 1, 2025, ordering Venezuela to refrain from holding elections in the disputed territory; Guyana disputes Venezuela's claim to the region.
† Cojedes opposition seats reflect the *Vamos Vamos Cojedes* local ticket, not the PUD coalition.
Three indigenous members elected separately on June 1 are included in the total.

In the concurrent gubernatorial elections, the GPP won 23 of 24 state contests. The sole exception was the state of Cojedes, where local opposition candidate Alberto Galíndez of *Vamos Vamos Cojedes* was re-elected governor—an outcome observers interpreted as a managed concession designed to project a minimum of subnational pluralism rather than as a genuine competitive result (Martínez 2025). Notably, the GPP recaptured three states it had lost in the 2021 elections (Barinas, Zulia, and Nueva Esparta), completing a near-total reconsolidation of the regional executive. In state legislative councils, the GPP secured 238 of 260 seats (91.5 percent), with the opposition holding 13 and indigenous representatives accounting for 9. Table 2 presents the full state-by-state breakdown of gubernatorial outcomes and legislative council seat distributions.

Table 2. Venezuela May 2025 Subnational Elections: Governorships and State Legislative Councils

State	Governor	Leg. Council- GPP	Leg. Council- Opp.	Leg. Council- Ind.	Total council seats
Amazonas	Gran Polo Patriótico	6	0	1	7
Anzoátegui	Gran Polo Patriótico	14	0	1	15
Apure	Gran Polo Patriótico	6	0	1	7
Aragua	Gran Polo Patriótico	15	0	0	15
Barinas	Gran Polo Patriótico	9	2	0	11
Bolívar	Gran Polo Patriótico	14	0	1	15
Carabobo	Gran Polo Patriótico	15	0	0	15
Cojedes†	Vamos Vamos Cojedes	2	5	0	7
Delta Amacuro	Gran Polo Patriótico	6	0	1	7
Falcón	Gran Polo Patriótico	11	0	0	11
Guárico	Gran Polo Patriótico	9	0	0	9
Guayana Esequiba*	Gran Polo Patriótico	6	0	1	7
La Guaira (Vargas)	Gran Polo Patriótico	7	0	0	7
Lara	Gran Polo Patriótico	15	0	0	15
Mérida	Gran Polo Patriótico	10	1	0	11
Miranda	Gran Polo Patriótico	15	0	0	15
Monagas	Gran Polo Patriótico	10	0	1	11
Nueva Esparta	Gran Polo Patriótico	5	2	0	7
Portuguesa	Gran Polo Patriótico	11	0	0	11
Sucre	Gran Polo Patriótico	10	0	1	11
Táchira	Gran Polo Patriótico	13	0	0	13
Trujillo	Gran Polo Patriótico	9	0	0	9
Yaracuy	Gran Polo Patriótico	9	0	0	9
Zulia	Gran Polo Patriótico	11	3	1	15
Capital District	—	N/A	N/A	N/A	—
TOTAL		238	13	9	260

Source: No publicly available vote results; reconstruction of seats from Gangi (2026).
* Guayana Esequiba results are contested internationally.
† Cojedes reflects the *Vamos Vamos Cojedes* local ticket.

The July 27 municipal elections followed the same logic. With just 82.45 percent of votes counted, CNE president Amoroso announced that GPP candidates held unassailable leads in 304 of 335 mayoralties and 2,182 of 2,402 municipal council positions. PSUV mayor Carmen Meléndez retained the mayoralty of Caracas, and the party also regained control of other major cities, including Barinas, San Cristóbal, and Valencia. Most significantly, the PSUV captured the mayoralty of Maracaibo, Venezuela's second-largest city, with GPP candidate Giancarlo Di Martino declared the winner with 73.64

percent of the vote. The position had been held on an interim basis following the October 2024 arrest of former opposition mayor Rafael Ramírez Colina of *Primero Justicia*, one of the highest-profile detentions in the post-electoral crackdown. Despite the boycott, the opposition did secure some isolated victories: *Fuerza Vecinal* won the municipalities of Chacao, Baruta, and Diego Bautista Urbaneja; *Partido Ecológico* won El Hatillo (Miranda state); and *Vamos Vamos Cojedes* retained Ezequiel Zamora municipality. Official CNE turnout figures stood at 34 percent nationally; Machado, operating from hiding, claimed participation was as low as 10 percent.

The Capriles Radonski episode added complexity to the picture. His electoral success demonstrated that some portion of the electorate was willing to reward electoral participation even under degraded conditions. But *UNT-Unión*'s 11 seats represented 3.9 percent of the 285-seat chamber, a share structurally incapable of exercising any legislative check on the GPP supermajority. In the end, the partial participation purchased visibility at the cost of the appearance of legitimating a fraudulent process, while the boycott strategy preserved moral authority at the cost of institutional presence. Neither produced the coordinated pressure that the scholarly literature identifies as the condition most likely to compel authoritarian concessions (e.g., Escribà-Folch and Wright 2010), and the split between them further weakened the opposition's negotiating position vis-à-vis both the regime and its external interlocutors in Washington.

V. U.S.-VENEZUELA POLICY: FROM PRAGMATIC TRANSACTIONALISM TO MAXIMUM PRESSURE

The Trump administration's Venezuela policy in 2025 reflected a persistent tension between two competing logics within the executive branch. The Rubio-led State Department and National Security Council (NSC) designed a maximum-pressure strategy oriented toward regime collapse or unconditional capitulation which consisted of escalating sanctions, diplomatic isolation, explicit support for González and Machado as Venezuela's legitimate authorities, and a framework in which any negotiation with *Chavismo* constituted an unacceptable normalization. By contrast, Grenell's informal back-channel approach operated on a willingness to recognize interlocutors within *Chavismo* and a framework in which concrete deliverables like deportation cooperation, American detainees, and oil access took precedence over democratic principles. The resulting policy contradictions were strategically consequential, since they prevented either framework from generating the sustained, credible, and unambiguous pressure that might have altered the regime's calculus.

The external pressure campaign proceeded through several different phases. The first, spanning January through March, was at least partially economic and included the revocation of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Venezuelan migrants in the United States, the formal designation of the Tren de Aragua as

a Foreign Terrorist Organization, and the cancellation of the Chevron operating license with a wind-down deadline of April 3 (subsequently extended to May 27). In March, Trump invoked the Alien Enemies Act to deport 238 Venezuelans, including alleged Tren de Aragua members, to El Salvador's CECOT prison, in a move that was challenged in federal courts and generated intense controversy (Ramji-Nogales 2025). Venezuela responded by suspending its deportation cooperation.

The second phase, concentrated in April and May, added trade coercion to the sanctions toolkit. An Executive Order signed on March 24 imposed 25 percent secondary tariffs on countries purchasing Venezuelan oil (Trump 2025), a measure designed to deter Chinese, Indian, and other buyers from circumventing the bilateral sanctions framework. Maduro responded with an economic emergency declaration, expanding presidential authority over the allocation of foreign exchange and the regulation of prices in a move that served as much as a domestic political signal as an economic instrument. The tariff order coincided with Venezuela's regional and legislative elections, discussed above.

The third and most dramatic phase began in August with an unmistakable military escalation. The deployment of three U.S. guided-missile destroyers to the Caribbean was followed in early September by the first kinetic strike on a vessel allegedly linked to Venezuelan drug trafficking—the first direct U.S. military action against targets associated with Venezuelan state actors. By December, more than twenty-five such operations had taken place, resulting in over one hundred deaths. Maduro responded by mobilizing members of the Bolivarian militia (*Milicia Bolivariana*), deploying the navy to oil production sites, and militarizing the Colombian border. The U.S. doubled the reward for information leading to Maduro's capture to $50 million in August, and deployed the aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford to the Caribbean in November. Trump authorized CIA covert operations in Venezuela in October, and in December announced a "total blockade" of sanctioned oil tankers.

Amid this escalation, the July 18 prisoner exchange provided the clearest window into the simultaneous coexistence of the confrontation and transaction strategies. Following weeks of negotiation, 252 Venezuelans who had been deported to CECOT were returned to Venezuela. In exchange, ten American citizens detained in Venezuela were released, along with approximately 59 political prisoners. Both sides presented the exchange as a victory: Washington recovered its citizens, Caracas demonstrated its leverage and gained a reprieve on the deportation front, and the transaction confirmed that operational channels of communication between the two governments were functioning beneath the rhetorical confrontation. This also illustrates the selective use of cooperative gestures as a dilatory tactic to manage the intensity of external pressure without conceding the structural changes that the sanctioning power formally demands—a dynamic that Escribà-Folch and Wright (2010) identify as characteristic of authoritarian survival under sanctions and which Martínez Meucci (2025) explicitly cites as a tool of *Chavismo*.

The maximum-pressure approach's incentive structure presented a fundamental strategic problem. Maduro faced indictment in U.S. federal courts on narco-terrorism charges since 2020. As such, his realistic alternatives in late 2025 were continued resistance or capture and prosecution. An authoritarian incumbent confronting the prospect of criminal judgment has few incentives to negotiate his departure and strong incentives to resist as long as his coalition holds. Maduro's November offer to step down voluntarily in two to three years, which was rejected out of hand by the White House, was less a real concession than a signal of the regime's assessment that the costs of continued resistance remained manageable. A November phone conversation between Trump and Maduro, whose contents were never fully disclosed, likely served a similar function of testing the parameters of any possible deal without committing to terms that would be politically untenable for either side. By December, with the Citgo sale to Amber Energy completed for $5.89 billion and Venezuelan airspace declared closed to deportation flights, the conditions for a non-negotiated resolution were fully in place.

VI. REGIME SURVIVAL STRATEGIES: ECONOMIC ADAPTATION, DIPLOMACY, AND COERCION

Confronting unprecedented external pressure throughout the year, the Maduro regime deployed a multilayered repertoire of survival strategies: 1) economic adaptation, 2) diplomatic realignment, and 3) coercive management. Once again, the regime appealed to multiple simultaneous efforts in different dimensions to survive the crisis and continue consolidating.

On the economic adaptation dimension, the regime navigated between structural deterioration and tactical adaptation. The Venezuelan economy continued to contract in the first quarter of 2025, and the revocation of Chevron's license, effective May 27, removed the regime's most important Western operator and export channel. The interruption proved temporary. In late July, the Treasury Department issued Chevron a new, more restrictive license allowing it to resume operations in its joint ventures with PDVSA, reportedly on terms that barred tax and royalty payments to the Maduro government. The reversal neatly exemplifies the oscillation between maximum pressure and transactionalism, with Washington restoring a stabilizing presence in the oil sector while simultaneously attempting to deny the regime the revenue it generated. The regime responded by deepening its Russian energy partnership and by expanding gold extraction from the Orinoco Mining Arc, which continued to be exploited by a combination of state actors, regime-affiliated paramilitaries, and organized criminal groups under conditions of acute humanitarian crisis for indigenous communities in the zone (Ebus 2019; Sanchez Urribarri and Rosales 2026). Revenues from the informal gold economy flowed through opaque channels, providing a discretionary income stream that financed both the repressive apparatus and the regime's clientelist networks.

The informal economy's role in sustaining the regime is best understood through the selective and partial nature of Venezuela's economic aperture and authoritarian capitalism (Bull and Rosales 2023; Bull, Rosales, and Sutherland 2025). Rather than a coherent liberalization strategy, the regime pursued what amounts to authoritarian economic management under scarcity through tolerating dollarization and informal market activity at the retail level while retaining tight control over the oil, gold, and foreign exchange allocation that fund the coercive apparatus and the elite coalition. This approach mirrors what Corrales (2020) termed "function fusion," granting existing institutions the ability to perform multiple roles, such that the state-owned oil company PDVSA functions simultaneously as a revenue source, a patronage mechanism, a foreign policy instrument, and a coercion enabler. The result is a regime that can absorb significant economic deterioration without losing coalition cohesion, because the deterioration itself concentrates the distribution of scarce resources in the hands of regime loyalists.

On the diplomatic dimension, the regime skillfully exploited the Essequibo dispute as a domestic cohesion resource while absorbing its diplomatic costs. The February border incidents provided a temporary boost to nationalist sentiment, activating the Bolivarian foreign policy narrative of resistance against imperial encroachment, a narrative which was later reinforced by the escalating U.S. military presence in the Caribbean. Maduro's May visit to Moscow for the formalization of the Russia strategic partnership signaled that Venezuela retained meaningful great-power backing—and, possibly, that Rubio's isolation strategy was incomplete. The persistence of the China, Russia, and Iran relationships, which was consistent with long-term autocratic solidarity and cooperation (Brand, McEwen-Fial, and Muno 2015; Boersner-Herrera 2020; Arnson 2021), showed that the sanctions architecture could not achieve total economic strangulation. Indeed, these relationships had been essential to prior authoritarian consolidation (Boersner-Herrera 2025; Mijares 2025b), and remained so in 2025.

In recognition of her efforts galvanizing opposition mobilization and challenging the regime, especially during the fraught 2024 presidential electoral campaign, the Nobel Committee awarded Machado the Nobel Peace Prize in October. In an attempt to accept the prize in person at the award ceremony, she fled Venezuela, slipping through military checkpoints to reach a fishing boat bound for Curaçao and a private jet headed to Norway via the United States (de Córdoba, Bergengruen, and Leary 2025). This action presented the regime with the choice of detaining Machado, thereby preventing her departure and generating that would have further tightened the pressure. It chose instead to let her go, perhaps calculating that the symbolic value of the Nobel ceremony was preferable to the diplomatic costs of another high-profile detention, and that Machado's physical presence abroad reduced rather than enhanced her political effectiveness inside Venezuela. From the government's standpoint, the decision proved correct, insofar as Machado's Oslo speech generated glob-

al headlines, but her absence from Venezuelan territory further weakened the PUD's capacity for domestic mobilization.

On the coercive dimension, the regime's management of the Tren de Aragua issue illustrated the strategic ambiguity that characterized its approach to external pressure. The Trump administration had invoked the Alien Enemies Act in March precisely because of the organization's alleged links to the Venezuelan state. Meanwhile, the November Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) designation of the so-called Cartel de los Soles made the connection between the regime and organized crime an explicit element of U.S. policy. The Maduro government responded at two levels simultaneously. Rhetorically, it denied any institutional connection to either organization and framed the designations as political persecutions. Operationally, it offered selective signals of counternarcotics cooperation that it believed were sufficient to maintain the appearance of engagement without dismantling the underlying networks. Performative cooperation with U.S. drug policy has been used in the past (e.g., Horwitz 2010), and its deployment in 2025 confirmed that the Maduro regime retained capacity for managing its international image even under conditions of acute external hostility.

At the same time, the "Operation Guacamaya" escape of five opposition members from the Argentine embassy in May illustrated the limits of coercive capacity. The five had sheltered in the embassy for months, and their escape was made possible by an intelligence operation whose specifics were never fully disclosed (Delgado 2025). The incident did not modify the balance of power in any meaningful way, but it provided evidence that the regime's surveillance capacity, while extensive, was not total. It also served as a reminder of the degree to which Venezuelan civil society and opposition networks, despite operating under extraordinary pressure, retained residual organizational capacity. With that in mind, we now turn to the opposition's response in 2025's repressive environment.

VII. THE FRAGMENTED OPPOSITION: STRUCTURAL LIMITS AND THE EXTERNALIZATION OF POLITICS

The Venezuelan opposition entered 2025 having demonstrated the capacity to win a presidential election with nearly 70 percent of the vote, according to tally sheets collected by opposition witnesses (Kronick 2024; Mebane Jr 2024), but lacking the instruments to convert that electoral victory into political power. Edmundo González Urrutia, recognized as Venezuela's legitimate president by the United States and a limited number of Latin American and European governments, operated from exile in Spain with little capacity to directly influence the country's internal dynamics. Machado, who had led the campaign and commanded by far the greatest popular following within the opposition, remained in Venezuela in relative clandestinity, making strategic public ap-

pearances but lacking the organizational infrastructure necessary to sustain continuous mobilization.

As pointed out above, the opposition's fundamental strategic debate in 2025 concerned participation versus boycott in subnational elections. The boycott position, championed by Machado and the PUD leadership, rested on the argument that participation would confer implicit legitimacy on a fraudulent electoral administrator, and the return from electoral competition under these conditions would be too small to justify the reputational cost. Capriles Radonski argued that abandoning subnational institutional spaces entirely would further marginalize the opposition and eliminate the local organizational footholds. The split was consequential. It prevented the opposition from presenting a unified negotiating position to external actors, including both the Rubio and Grenell channels in Washington, and it reduced the PUD's leverage by making clear that *Chavismo* could always find opposition figures willing to participate in managed processes. What is more, the absence of electoral results created an information vacuum that made it impossible to assess the current geographic distribution of opposition support.

The October Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Machado was the opposition's most visible international success of the year, and her December escape to Oslo for the ceremony represented a moment of extraordinary symbolic weight. Her acceptance speech, broadcast globally, reaffirmed the democratic legitimacy of the July 2024 outcome and called on the international community to support Venezuelan self-determination. Yet the political impact of the Nobel within Venezuela was constrained by the same structural factors that had limited opposition effectiveness throughout the year: Machado's authority was moral and symbolic, not institutional; her capacity to translate international recognition into domestic organizational capacity remained severely limited by the repressive environment; and the audience of FANB officers and civilian elites whose defection could have produced a negotiated transition remained part of the governing coalition and appeared unwilling to reconsider.

The broader process of what might be termed the "externalization" of Venezuelan opposition politics, through which the center of gravity of oppositional activity moved to the diaspora and to international advocacy, carries significant theoretical and practical implications (Esberg and Siegel 2023). Theoretically, it supports Schedler's (2006) argument that hegemonic closure produces a qualitative shift in the logic of opposition strategy. Specifically, when the domestic arena is effectively sealed, survival and international legitimation become the primary goals, displacing the accumulation of domestic institutional power that is the normal currency of political competition. In turn, it means that the opposition's fate becomes dependent on variables over which it has very limited influence. This structural dependency explains why the opposition, despite possessing enormous electoral legitimacy, was unable to convert that legitimacy into effective political transformation over the course of the year.

The events of January 3, 2026—specifically Trump's explicit marginalization of Machado at the post-raid press conference, and his endorsement of Delcy Rodríguez as the preferred transitional interlocutor—represented the logical culmination of this process. Having built its strategy on the premise that external pressure would eventually produce a transition that honored the July 2024 electoral result, the opposition found itself bypassed by an external actor that had different priorities. The CIA's reported assessment that Rodríguez was best positioned to maintain stability in the immediate post-Maduro period was not a judgment about democratic legitimacy, but a judgment about institutional capacity and reliability. It reflected the subordination of democratic objectives to geostrategic ones that had characterized U.S. policy toward Venezuela throughout 2025, and that the opposition, for all its moral authority, had been unable to redirect.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Operation Absolute Resolve, carried out in the early hours of January 3, 2026, was an exogenous shock of extraordinary magnitude upon an equilibrium that had shown unexpected stability throughout 2025. The Maduro regime had withstood twelve months of combined economic, diplomatic, covert, and military pressure without conceding on any of the points its adversaries considered fundamental. It had not surrendered power to González Urrutia, released its political prisoners, dismantled its repressive apparatus, or relinquished control of PDVSA. At the same time, it had been unable to neutralize the accumulation of external pressure that culminated in the decision to move from coercion to direct action.

The Venezuelan experience of 2025 yields several findings of broader theoretical significance, though they must be stated with caution that the recency of the events demands. First, the four-level consolidation framework proves analytically useful because it is testable against competing predictions. As we argued in Section II, the personalist-military coalition literature would have anticipated elevated defection risk and an elevated probability of regime breakdown through elite fracture under the conditions Venezuela faced in 2025 (sanctions eroding patronage resources, a militarily escalating external adversary, and leadership with no viable exit option). Escribà-Folch and Wright (2010) similarly predict that sanctions increase authoritarian fragility when they successfully degrade elite co-optation resources. However, no overt military defection or coup attempt materialized, and the regime required external military decapitation rather than internal fracture to be dislodged. The gap between the personalist-coalition fragility literature predictions and what actually occurred is where the fourth-level consolidation argument offers some clues. Specifically, the PSUV's organizational unity, the CNE's electoral control functions, and the Supreme Tribunal's judicial subordination of the opposition created institutional buffers that reduced the coalition's dependence on any single patronage stream.

Second, the survival-versus-consolidation distinction the framework emphasizes proves essential for interpreting the January 3 transition, albeit with an important caveat. The orderly character of Rodríguez's succession is consistent with the hypothesis that Venezuela had reached the fourth level of authoritarian consolidation ("deepening consolidation"), as the PSUV apparatus, the judiciary, the FANB command structure, and the Bolivarian governance infrastructure all retained operative capacity in the immediate aftermath of Maduro's removal. Had the Venezuelan regime merely survived through coercion, without institutionalizing authoritarian practices, Maduro's removal might have produced a real power vacuum. Instead, it produced a managed succession in which the institutional architecture of *Chavismo* remained coherent. That said, the evidence available at the time of writing is insufficient to confirm the causality of this claim. While a succession induced and overseen by the intervening power is consistent with deep institutional consolidation, it is also consistent with a stabilizing external hand. Whether Rodríguez's government will sustain itself through its own institutionalized logic, or will require continued U.S. management to remain coherent, is the crucial question that only a longer time horizon can answer.

Third, Göbel's (2011) emphasis on infrastructural and discursive power as opposed to naked despotic coercion helps explain why maximum pressure failed as a regime-change mechanism despite reaching unprecedented intensity. U.S. sanctions targeted the regime's revenue streams and the personal assets of its leadership; they were well designed to degrade despotic capacity. But they had limited purchase on the infrastructural power embedded in the PSUV's subnational networks, the CNE's electoral control functions, or the TSJ's juridical subordination of the opposition—and they reinforced the regime's discursive power by providing an external threat against which Bolivarian identity could be mobilized. The anti-imperialist narrative, a constitutive feature of the "Maduro Doctrine" (Mijares 2025b), gained in resonance precisely as U.S. military pressure escalated.

The questions that remain open after January 3, 2026 map directly onto the unresolved theoretical questions that Polga-Hecimovich and Sanchez Urribarri (2025b) identify in their concluding chapter. Can a consolidated authoritarian regime undergo liberalization when its leader is forcibly removed by an external power, or does consolidation at the fourth level produce path dependence that even regime change cannot easily overcome? Can Delcy Rodríguez govern without Maduro's personal authority while satisfying both the PSUV's internal factions and Washington's transactional demands? Will Venezuela's democratic opposition—its electoral mandate increasingly distant and its institutional presence depleted—find a path from moral authority to political power in a transitional scenario being managed primarily by actors with dubious democratic commitment? And will Maduro's federal trial in the U.S. produce meaningful accountability, or will it become an instrument of the same transactional logic that governed the year preceding his capture?

Venezuela in 2025 was, in sum, a laboratory for tensions that comparative politics has studied since the transitions literature of the 1980s without resolving. What the year revealed is that authoritarian regimes that reach the level of deepening consolidation are not merely surviving, but reproducing the institutional and coalitional conditions of their own persistence. Displacing such regimes requires more than pressure: it requires dismantling the infrastructural and discursive architecture that makes authoritarian governance self-reproducing. Whether the post-January 3 scenario creates the conditions for that dismantlement, or whether it simply installs a new equilibrium within the consolidated authoritarian framework, is the question that the Venezuelan year-in-review for 2026 can begin to answer.

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