

Democratic elections in Venezuela won't happen overnight – here's the groundwork that's needed first

Policy Paper

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Summary

- Following the US's capture of Nicolás Maduro in early 2026, Venezuela has its best opportunity in over a decade to re-establish democracy and fix the country's collapsed economy. But the momentum for change is fading as the interim government and the US avoid committing to election specifics.
- To avoid missing its historic opportunity, Venezuela will need – with international support – to make a rapid start on macroeconomic stabilization and the multitude of preparatory measures essential to holding credible elections.
- Postponing elections for too long risks consolidating the still-present repressive apparatus that is a legacy of Venezuela's prolonged autocratic rule.
- The first step should be to negotiate a political pact on the timing of elections, and on associated institutional, legal and technical reforms. The US will have a critical role in putting its weight behind this process, and in corralling Venezuela's interim government, the political opposition, and other domestic and international stakeholders.
- The pact should cover reform of Venezuela's electoral commission (CNE), and adjudication of electoral disputes. Crucially too, it must ensure restoration of constitutionally guaranteed freedoms such as freedom of speech and assembly.
- Once a timetable is set, the interim government must invite independent, professional international election monitors as well as non-partisan citizen observers to scrutinize each step.

What's the problem?

Following the decapitation of the regime via the US military operation that captured Nicolás Maduro on 3 January 2026, Venezuela has its best opportunity in over a decade to re-establish democracy, restore human rights protections and fix its stricken economy. However, despite the mounting demands from Venezuela's political opposition for free and fair elections, both the Trump administration and Venezuela's interim government – headed by Maduro's former vice-president, Delcy Rodríguez – have avoided specific commitments on the organization and timing of elections.

If Venezuela is not to miss its historic shot at lasting change, it needs to make a rapid start on a multitude of electoral and related reforms so that the country reaches a position where credible elections can feasibly be held, where the results of such elections will be respected, and where the political and economic settlement that emerges from the process is durable and beneficial to all Venezuelans.

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A viable democratic government will require a minimum level of macroeconomic stabilization. This will entail achieving currency stability, a positive flow of hard currency – via legal exports and investments – and improvements in the fiscal balance. Although elections could occur without progress in these areas, this would leave the crisis of government legitimacy unresolved and increase risks of political and social instability.

At the same time, political reform cannot wait too long. Elections cannot be deferred – as some US messaging seems to have implied¹ – until the economy has recovered. That would be a recipe for kicking the proverbial can down the road. Instead, planning for elections must proceed immediately, in parallel with macroeconomic stabilization, and should begin even before a date is set for voters to return to the polls.

Several fundamental conditions must be met: political inclusion across the ideological spectrum, underpinned by legitimately recognized authorities; an end to arbitrary political disqualifications for opponents and critics of the government; institutional clarity regarding electoral and judicial competencies; legal and security guarantees for relevant political and social actors; and the technical integrity of the electoral system.

Achieving these conditions will require a series of specific political, institutional, legal and technical reforms. It will also require political commitments and good faith on the part of Venezuela's interim government, the opposition and international stakeholders (especially the US).

The reforms must include: the reappointment of an independent National Electoral Council (CNE,² the body that oversees elections in Venezuela); guarantees that Venezuela's politicized armed forces will not interfere in the elections; the repeal of laws limiting freedom of expression, independent media, political activity and foreign financing of civil society; a determination as to which elections will be held, with a timeline for each; renewal of voter registration, including for Venezuelans in the diaspora who are of voting age; a transparent audit of the election system; and the involvement of professional international election monitors and citizen observers throughout the process.

A political pact on electoral issues will need to be agreed to initiate and underpin these steps. The US, the EU and other international partners must work with Venezuela's interim president Rodríguez, in dialogue with the opposition and civil society, to outline specific agenda items, goals and timelines.

Why does it matter?

Venezuelans are anxious for change, and a failure to use Maduro's departure as a catalyst for democratization could create political instability or prompt the remaining elements of the regime to dig in, potentially further consolidating authoritarian rule. According to a recent public opinion survey by the US-based Gold Glove Consulting, a majority of Venezuelans were happy

¹ Reuters (2026), 'US energy secretary to visit Venezuela to discuss PDVSA leadership, Politico reports', 9 February 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/us-energy-secretary-visit-venezuela-discuss-pdvsa-leadership-politico-reports-2026-02-09>.

² Consejo Nacional Electoral.

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to see Maduro removed from government. According to the same survey, 68 per cent of respondents want elections this year, with only 14 per cent preferring to wait until 2030, the nominal end of the Maduro/Rodríguez term.³

The need to reverse the erosion of rights in Venezuela remains paramount. According to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, its independent fact-finding mission to Venezuela and independent human rights groups, the Hugo Chávez and Maduro eras produced a steady deterioration of judicial and security sector independence, with the ruling Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) using the judiciary and security services to repress dissent and smother popular will for change.⁴

The US and other international stakeholders will have an important role to play in election preparations by setting out and guaranteeing benchmarks and ensuring timelines are met. Yet experiences with past negotiations between the opposition and the Maduro administration demonstrate the risk that the interim government will delay making – and complying with – commitments to liberalize. Addressing this risk will rely on reducing the structural conditions that reinforce Venezuela's zero-sum politics, so that incumbents and their economic allies are less likely to resist reforms out of fears of retaliation or loss of status/privilege. This is a necessary precondition for any durable electoral pathway. At the same time, managing potential spoilers will be critical to preventing a repeat of previous delays.

Policy options and trade-offs

One of the essential dilemmas for Venezuela and its international stakeholders lies in the tension between responding to popular demands for rapid democratization and following the painstaking – and unavoidably lengthy – preparatory processes essential for ensuring credible elections.

If elections are held too quickly – without permanent or interim reforms to the electoral commission, the repeal of laws limiting political and civil rights, and a full upgrade of the voter registry for both domestic and diaspora voters – the risk is that a potentially democratic exercise would become largely symbolic. Worse, without depoliticization of the security services and reform of the judicial sector, any elected government that replaces the current regime could end up inheriting the pro-government legislature and politicized state of the PSUV. Such a government would also likely be short-lived, or – at best – severely hampered in its ability to deliver genuine democratic accountability.

On the other hand, delay risks leading to political stasis and more entrenched authoritarianism. It could allow the interim government to continue indefinitely in its present form, more or less intact except for the loss of Maduro as president. This would not just destroy hopes for democracy in Venezuela. It would also create a dangerous model for other countries in the Western Hemisphere, the majority of which have enjoyed more than 40 years of democratic governance.

³ Gold Glove Consulting (2026), 'Venezuelans Hopeful, But Desire Quicker Transition', February 2026, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/02.06.2026-ENG-VZLA-Gold-Glove-PPTX.v3.nd-1-public-2-18-AC-1.pdf>.

⁴ UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2025), 'Venezuela: Bolivarian National Guard responsible for systematic violations and crimes against humanity, UN Fact-Finding Mission says', press release, 11 December 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/12/venezuela-bolivarian-national-guard-responsible-systematic-violations-and>; Human Rights Watch (2026), 'Venezuela: Events of 2025', *World Report 2026: Events of 2025*, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2026/country-chapters/venezuela>.

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Electoral design – including timelines, procedures and monitoring – is inseparable from underlying power realities, including who controls institutions, who can block reforms, and which domestic and international actors shape what is feasible.

The US will be decisive in determining whether such problems are avoided. Its economic, diplomatic and coercive capabilities form part of the strategic environment shaping Venezuela's future. Any credible electoral pathway must be understood within this geopolitical context. The initiation and success of electoral reform will therefore depend substantially on the Trump administration. Nonetheless, other international actors have important supporting roles to play. Governments and multilateral institutions from Europe and the Americas will need to offer guarantees and assistance in negotiations on democratic elections, improvements in commercial law, and investment in key areas of the economy – including in infrastructure, socially responsible mining and financial services.

A rush to elections without reform of the CNE or an independent process to monitor voting, adjudicate in disputes and ensure that the candidate who gathers the most votes is duly declared the victor risks repeating the failure of the 28 July 2024 presidential election, though this time with greater threat of political and social upheaval.

Electoral design – including timelines, procedures and monitoring – is inseparable from underlying power realities, including who controls institutions, who can block reforms, and which domestic and international actors shape what is feasible. The goal in the new, post-Maduro context should be to find the minimum threshold for a political agreement on the institutional and legal reforms necessary to ensure credible, safe and enforceable elections without inciting instability.

The importance of calibrating the process in this way was underlined by the findings of US government analysts (including at the Pentagon and the State Department), who argued during Trump's first term, and again early in the military build-up in late 2025 that led to the removal of Maduro, that a wholesale attempt to quickly replace the entire Maduro government with the democratic opposition could result in chaos and violence.⁵

An essential security challenge in this context is that the once-independent armed forces have become deeply politicized by the PSUV. In addition, the pro-Maduro interior minister, Diosdado Cabello – still in power – is understood to control a private militia (known as the 'colectivos') that operates in support of the government. Establishing security both ahead of and after any elections will also be complicated by the wide-ranging presence and operations of the Colombian guerrilla/criminal group the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN). The ELN controls Venezuelan territory along the border with Colombia, and is also known to operate in the Orinoco gold mining region. With the alleged permission of Venezuelan armed forces, the ELN engages in narcotics trafficking and illegal gold mining, and in several cases the group provides *de facto* local governance in the absence of effective official rule.⁶

Two decades of PSUV rule have also led to the politicization of the national judicial system. The Supreme Court is packed with government loyalists, as are the lower federal courts, and the governing party controls a supermajority in the single-chamber National Assembly.

⁵ Crowley, M. (2025), 'U.S. Ran a War Game on Ousting Maduro. Venezuela Fell Into Chaos', *New York Times*, 20 November 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/20/us/politics/venezuela-maduro-fallout-trump.html>; Masih, N. (2025), 'How Trump's Venezuela threats echo CIA-backed regime change in Latin America', *Washington Post*, 10 December 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2025/12/10/cia-latin-america-trump-venezuela>.

⁶ InsightCrime (2026), 'ELN in Venezuela', 13 January 2026, <https://insightcrime.org/venezuela-organized-crime-news/el-n-in-venezuela>.

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Whatever the decision on their timing, elections will risk creating temporary uncertainty and social friction.

This partisan control of state apparatus complicates elections and any potential democratic transition. Under present conditions, if the opposition were to win a presidential election – even given a playing field currently tilted in favour of the PSUV – it would need to contend with a national legislature, public security forces, private militias and illegal groups all working with the collusion or cooperation of the armed forces, and a judicial system directly or indirectly controlled by elements of the now-interim Rodríguez-led government.

A related challenge is that Venezuela's armed forces have historically overseen the security, infrastructure and logistics of elections – a role that pre-dates even the terms of former president Chávez and his hand-picked successor Maduro, under a mechanism known as Plan República. Now, though, penetrated by loyalists and seemingly controlled by a PSUV interim president, those forces will need their operational remit and relationship with the state reviewed to determine how the military can transparently and objectively manage free and fair elections.

Whatever the decision on timing, elections will risk creating temporary uncertainty and social friction. Those risks can be reduced only if the international community, led by the Trump administration, and the interim government press ahead with negotiations over election conditions as soon as possible. Credible elections held under more neutral conditions that are agreed by consensus and accepted by all parties will establish a long-term framework and guarantee for broader economic investment and growth.

Recommendations

The analysis and recommendations in this section emerged from a Chatham House working group of 20 international and Venezuelan election experts, former and current diplomats, scholars of democratic transitions and democratization, and representatives of the Venezuelan opposition.

Discussions and preparations should begin with the steps set out below. If fully implemented, these steps will take at least a year – an indication, again, that the time to initiate the complicated negotiations required is now.

The recommendations, listed roughly in proposed chronological order of implementation, are aimed at the interim government, the opposition and civil society, and at the US and other international stakeholders. Depending on the task, various permutations of these actors will need to cooperate or coordinate on the following steps, namely to:

- **Repeal restrictive laws:** Any political agreement will have to commit to the restoration of constitutionally guaranteed political and civil rights. This requires the repeal of laws limiting freedom of expression, assembly and political organization. Specifically, the legislation that must be repealed includes the law against 'delinquency and terrorism',⁷ the law criminalizing

⁷ La Asamblea Nacional de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela (2012), *Ley orgánica contra la delincuencia organizada y financiamiento al terrorismo*, https://www.oas.org/juridico/pdfs/mesicic4_ven_ley_del_org_finan_terr.pdf.

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'hatred',⁸ the law of 'social responsibility of the media',⁹ and regulations restricting international financing of non-governmental organizations.¹⁰

- **Agree a political pact on the electoral process:** Negotiations over preparatory reforms should begin immediately, even before election dates are set. A political agreement between the government, the opposition and civil society should cover the following: CNE reform; mechanisms for arbitration of electoral disputes; legal recognition of political parties under the constitution; and associated legal reforms. The US should press for and act as guarantor of any agreement. In this capacity, the US can be supported by other international stakeholders – including, but not limited to, Canada, European governments, the EU, and Venezuela's Caribbean and Latin American neighbours. Many of those governments will have substantial leverage in discussions, whether over sanctions on government officials, Venezuela's re-entry into the international financial system, or the status of Venezuelan assets currently frozen in foreign banks.
- **Establish a timeline for elections:** Agreement on the sequencing and timing of elections is essential, but setting dates for all of the elections Venezuela will need to hold should not be a precondition for beginning the process of reform. The first priority should be organizing the presidential election, but its date should be agreed only as the dates are set for subsequent legislative, regional and local elections. The constitution requires that elections should be announced at least six months before they are held. Such a timeline should also include at least a four-month period to allow for primaries. The timing of the other elections should be close enough to the presidential poll to reduce the risk of the executive becoming politically isolated (and thus hostage to the remnants of the Maduro regime in the National Assembly and regional and local governments); this is also necessary to ensure that democratization maintains momentum.
- **Reform the election commission:** Establishing a politically independent, credible CNE is essential. The process for appointing a new CNE board of rectors will need to be determined in negotiations. The status – whether interim or permanent – of the reformed CNE will also need to be negotiated. All rectors will need to be renominated and confirmed, via a process that guarantees balance and ensures that the current political opposition has representatives on the board. Once a new board is confirmed, the composition of CNE staff at both national and regional levels will also need to be reviewed and confirmed.
- **Ensure credible, balanced mechanisms for dispute resolution:** Even with a reformed CNE, Venezuela will lack sufficient independent arbitral and judicial capacity to resolve disputes credibly. Of particular importance are the electoral and constitutional chambers of the Supreme Court. While judicial reform will be necessary over the long term for establishing genuine democratization, there are interim quicker fixes. For the purposes of enabling elections, some form of commitment among the current government, the opposition and international stakeholders on creation of an interim authority that can adjudicate disputes, or on institutional rebalancing, may be sufficient.

⁸ La Asamblea Nacional de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela (2017), *Ley constitucional contra el odio, por la convivencia pacífico y la tolerancia*, <http://www.psuve.org.ve/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Ley-Constitucional-contra-el-Odio-por-la-Convivencia-Pac%C3%ADfica-y-la-Tolerancia.pdf>.

⁹ La Asamblea Nacional De la República Bolivariana de Venezuela (2004), *Ley de Responsabilidad Social en Radio y Televisión*, <https://docs.venezuela.justia.com/federales/leyes/ley-de-responsabilidad-social-en-radio-y-television.pdf>.

¹⁰ La Asamblea Nacional De la República Bolivariana de Venezuela (2014), *Ley de Fiscalización, Regularización, Actuación y Financiamiento de las Organizaciones No Gubernamentales y Afines*, <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/ven234212.pdf>.

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- **Address incumbents' fears:** The working group highlighted three specific conditions for helping to reduce insecurity and zero-sum electoral competition. The first is to revoke the 2009 constitutional amendment allowing for indefinite presidential re-election. The second is to eliminate any governing party's monopoly over Venezuela's most important economic asset, PDVSA; a political pact should include steps to diversify and rebalance the state hydrocarbon company's board of directors. The third condition should be to agree to a truth and reconciliation framework that can balance the principles of accountability for human rights abuses against the pragmatic need for reconciliation.
- **Update the voter registry:** A new CNE's task will be to update Venezuela's voter registry. The CNE has conducted domestic updates sporadically. Voter rolls will also need to be updated for the millions of Venezuelans of voting age currently living abroad.
- **Publish polling station-level results:** In accordance with the law and past practice, the CNE must publish and respect polling station-level results; these must serve as the basis for official election results. To ensure public confidence in the vote, publication should conform to open election data principles,¹¹ and be handled in such a way that the results are made accessible in a timely manner to all political contestants and the public. The process of publication will need to enable verification of the results for individual polling stations. It must also ensure that the overall results accurately reflect data from all polling stations and the number of ballots cast.
- **Audit voting software and discuss broader reform of voting mechanisms:** A new CNE will need to convene a transparent audit of the current election software. Several opposition leaders have advocated a manual voting process. Shifting from nationwide electronic voting would require broader social consultation and could delay the elections.
- **Revisit the constitutional process for determining candidate/party eligibility:** Administrative sanctions used in the past to invalidate candidates and parties – typically opposition parties and leaders – will need to be eliminated.
- **Conduct risk assessment of Plan República:** The long-standing, pre-PSUV arrangement, Plan República, whereby the armed forces manage election logistics and security on election day will need to be reviewed. This is to address concerns about the partisanship of Venezuela's security forces. Fortunately, there is a model. Coordination among opposition parties, civil society and the armed forces in the elections of 2010, 2012 and 2015 granted a sufficient degree of confidence, and could be repeated without a complete security overhaul before elections.
- **Ensure comprehensive election monitoring:** Both professional international observers and non-partisan domestic (or citizen) observers must have unfettered access to monitor implementation of the pact and all aspects of the electoral process. This includes both international and national observers doing as follows: undertaking long-term observation of restoration of basic freedoms; monitoring the reform of the CNE; ensuring the ability of all parties and candidates to freely campaign; reporting on electoral preparations (including voter registration); working with technical teams to scrutinize particular aspects of the elections (auditing the voter registry and voting systems); guaranteeing systematic deployment of observers on election day

¹¹ Open Election Data Initiative (undated), 'Section 2: Open Election Data Principles', <https://openelectiondata.net/en/guide/principles>.

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(including critically independent results verification by national observers); and monitoring, post-election, the announcement of results, the resolution of electoral disputes and the taking of office by the winning candidates. All election observation efforts and invitations should be compliant with the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation.¹²

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¹² International Idea (2005), 'The Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and the Code of Conduct for International Election Observers', 27 October 2005, <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/declaration-principles-international-election-observation-and-code-conduct>.

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