DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 15.01.2026 | Anika Oettler & Stefan Peters & Jonas Wolff

Democracy can't be imported

Intervention can force change at the top, but it cannot deliver democracy. In Venezuela, the decisive struggle is between internal power blocs

In the outpouring of recent commentary on the US intervention in Venezuela in defiance of international law, the main focus has been the global order and the return of naked imperialism. 'Regime change' has also been a go-to reference. Much less attention has been paid, however, to the conditions under which a democratic transition might prove feasible in Venezuela and what such a process might look like.

The Colombian NGO Fundación Paz & Reconciliación (PARES) is an exception. It published a detailed analysis of possible scenarios as early as 4 January 2026. They range from a 'managed continuity' still under the aegis of Chavism, through radicalisation or division within the government bloc, to a 'transition under opposition leadership'. In the meantime, everything points towards the first scenario. The forces underpinning the regime swiftly mustered behind transitional president Delcy Rodríguez, who had signalled a willingness to cooperate with the US. The Trump administration has not given up its sabre-rattling, but quickly made it clear that, at least for now, it was happy with cosmetic change at the top of government, as long as key US interests were safeguarded, for example, with regard to Venezuelan oil. The upshot is that political change has been put on the back burner. Business and geopolitical interests are higher on the agenda than concerns about democracy, the rule of law or even social justice.

Three possible scenarios

Ostensibly, Trump and Rubio are aiming at an initial 'stabilisation' under the old/new government. A 'transition' is still on the cards, along the lines of the 'threefold process' Rubio announced on 7 January, but only as a third step, after a period of 'reconstruction'. As vague as it may be, it is primarily the US announcement of a later transition that leaves open the possibility of a negotiated return to democracy in Venezuela as an indirect consequence of the US intervention. Regarding the domestic

balance of forces, the repressive intimidation of the population is too effective, the opposition too weak and fragmented, and support for the bankrupt regime still too strong for any sort of political breakthrough from within. Unless the Trump administration uses its massive threat posture to compel the Rodríguez government towards political liberalisation, it is highly unlikely that the recent release of political prisoners will be followed up with anything more than lip service to the restoration of democracy.

There are thus three plausible scenarios. First, a continuation of 'managed continuity' is highly likely, in other words, a scenario of reconsolidation of the old regime, albeit as a dependent junior partner of the US. This presupposes that Trump, sooner or later, abandons the regime-change ambitions of his Secretary of State, pretty much along the lines of his habitual oscillation between pragmatic deal-making and ideological confrontation.

Assurances would be needed to entice the central pillars of the incumbent regime to accept the risk of electoral defeat.

Second, it cannot be ruled out that the US government will demand that the Rodríguez government implement substantial measures of political liberalisation. This would entail a negotiated transitional process involving the government camp, opposition forces and the US government towards competitive elections, ideally including civil society and also international actors. However, just reaching an agreement on holding elections would hardly be enough. For a start, institutional reforms are essential, for example, with regard to electoral jurisdiction, not to mention credible guarantees for the opposition, civil society actors and the media. On top of that, assurances would be needed to entice the central pillars of the incumbent regime to accept the risk of electoral defeat, which at the moment seems highly probable. This might take the form of an arrangement including power sharing and effective protections for Chavist grassroots organisations.

Thirdly, a negotiated transition process of this kind could easily fail. This might lead to a split in the current regime forces between moderates and loyalists, which Maduro's abduction initially kept in check. In that case, all eyes would be on the military. But even if the security apparatus, which was systematically fragmented under Maduro, remained loyal,

hardliners among Venezuela's plethora of armed groups, including local militias and armed bands from Colombia, would be likely to mobilise support. In this scenario, the risk of violence would be particularly acute.

But no discussion of plausible scenarios of democratic change should be restricted to the power calculations of key players. The need for far-reaching changes as part of a comprehensive democratisation process is every bit as important.

An obsessive focus on oil

One of the fundamental contradictions of contemporary Chavism is that socialist rhetoric confronts a reality in which one particular power bloc has amassed vast wealth. As a consequence of the regime's economic and social policies, around eight million Venezuelans have fled the country. Since Maduro came to power, hyperinflation, shortages of essential goods, and rampant corruption and public insecurity have afflicted broad swathes of the populace. In recent years, the economy has settled down at a low level, with no prospect of an upward turn. Poverty remains high, and there is extreme social inequality. Even if Trump eventually managed to entice the US oil industry into Venezuela, it would scarcely make a dent.

Furthermore, underlying Venezuela's gravest crisis is the obsessive focus on the oil industry. Diversification is still not a priority. What's more, there is rare unanimity on this between the government, the opposition and the Trump administration, who are all staking everything on the oil sector. Clearly, when it comes to short-term improvements, there is little alternative to the commodity sector. In the medium and long term, however, the lack of diversification entails a continuing susceptibility to socioeconomic crisis, a commitment to fossil fuels and the reproduction of political and societal logics that make sharing in the fruits of economic rent dependent on political loyalty. Any democratic turn must therefore include a change in the development model and consistently pursue alternatives to extractionism from the very outset.

Reconciliation as both a means and an end of peace and democratisation would be a mammoth task in a country that is so profoundly polarised.

This is also evident in the so-called Orinoco Mining Arc in the south of the country. Various local armed groups, as well as the now binational ELN and FARC dissidents from Colombia, are now active in the extremely lucrative gold mining industry. The ELN and FARC dissidents are also present in the border region, where they exercise de facto control over whole swathes of territory. Any transformation

in Venezuela must also tackle the presence of violent non-state actors.

In this context, security sector reform is crucial, though no doubt extremely difficult. One obvious issue is how to tackle the crimes of the past. There are internationally renowned examples of transitional justice in the region, such as in neighbouring Colombia. These are also under discussion in Venezuela. Of course, voices from the diaspora must be involved in this. Rubio, however, has conceded only a very limited conception of national political reconciliation, based on amnestying imprisoned or exiled members of the opposition. But reconciliation as both a means and an end of peace and democratisation would be a mammoth task in a country that is so profoundly polarised, and in which families and neighbourhoods are divided, and complex experiences of violence have to be worked through.

These are hardly auspicious circumstances for democratic change. On one hand, such change requires principles such as the separation of powers, an independent justice system, possibilities for political participation and functioning parliamentary controls. But there must also be discernible improvements in people's living conditions and, in particular, an effort to roll back the unscrupulous enrichment of groups with access to the trough. The Trump administration, which seems intent on running Venezuela for the foreseeable future, clearly has no interest in fostering substantial developments in the abovementioned areas. It will therefore be up to European and Latin American governments, in cooperation with Venezuelan actors, to try to ensure that these issues are not neglected.



Anika Oettler
Marburg

Anika Oettler is professor of social development and comparative social structure analysis at Philipps University in Marburg. Her research focuses on transitional justice and collective memory.



Stefan Peters
Bogotá / Giessen

Professor Dr. Stefan Peters is Director of the German-Colombian Peace Institute (CAPAZ) based in Bogotá and professor of peace studies at Justus Liebig University in Giessen.



Jonas Wolff
Frankfurt

Jonas Wolff is board member and head of the Domestic Conflicts programme area and professor of political science at Goethe University Frankfurt. His research focuses on democracy and political change, social protests and conflict dynamics, as well as foreign and development policy.

-