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The show must go on

The absence of the president and the first lady shows that Venezuela is not a one-man dictatorship and never has been

Months of uncertainty, a night of fear and terror — and the president is gone. The events of the night of 2 to 3 January suddenly thrust Venezuela into the spotlight of world attention. But whether anything will actually change for the country remains entirely unclear.

The dramatic night still haunts the people of Caracas. On the Ávila mountain, otherwise a popular destination for hikers and campers, many experienced the attack under the open sky. Added to this was the concern about forest fires that could be triggered by the rockets. Although the bombed targets were military installations, they are located in close proximity to residential areas. The impacts were loud and violent, and hardly anyone slept that night. Parents tried to explain to their children what was happening without knowing themselves how far the attack would go and what might follow. While cheers could be heard in the diaspora, fear and uncertainty dominated in the country itself.

The day after Maduro's arrest, the usually bustling streets of the capital were dead quiet. The shock was palpable. A day later, however, cars were already rolling again, and in a few days, life should return to its usual pace. For the people in the country, nothing has changed — for the time being.

Both remain silent

The same old leadership that has ruled Venezuela for years remains in power — minus two people: Nicolás Maduro and his wife, MP Cilia Flores. The military attack did not enable Edmundo González, who was elected president in 2024, to return and take office, nor did it pave the way for a new political figure. Nor is there any sign of a plan that would give any indication of where the country is now heading. Against this backdrop, it is only logical that many assume that nothing will change for the time being and that everyday life will resume. The smoke has cleared, and it is clear that the scenario many observers had predicted has come to

pass.

As dramatic as Maduro's capture was, looking back now that the dust has settled, it is clear that the scenario predicted by many observers has come to pass. Weeks of political attrition followed by targeted attacks designed to be as 'clean' as possible and without major bloodshed. The figures from hospitals in Caracas and La Guaira paint a different picture, however. On Saturday, there was talk of around 60 injured and several soldiers killed. On Monday, the Venezuelan Foreign Ministry reported 32 dead security forces from Cuba who were deployed to protect Maduro.

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It is implausible that no Venezuelans or Americans were harmed. However, neither side has any interest in being seen as a warmonger (the US) or weak (Venezuela). Accordingly, both remain silent, and images of a precise operation without collateral damage can be broadcast around the world.

The rhetoric of peace cultivated by the Venezuelan government for months ultimately had no effect. Even rigorous discipline within the circle of those closest to power had no visible impact. No one allowed themselves to be provoked by the north; everyone fulfilled the roles assigned to them in the power system: the president, close to the people; the outwardly serious face of the former foreign minister and vice-president Delcy Rodríguez; the hardliner with interior minister Diosdado Cabello; the loyal general with defence minister Vladimir Padrino. Control of parliament has been in the hands of Jorge Rodríguez, the vice-president's brother, for years, and he was re-elected to his post that night. He swore in his sister as the new acting president, who immediately declared a national state of emergency to restore 'peace and order' in the country. Simultaneously, the regime began a targeted search for suspected collaborators in the US attack.

The state will not fall apart

The absence of the president and the first lady shows that Venezuela is not a one-man dictatorship and never has been. The apparatus functions even without them. The country is ruled by a clique that originally came to power legitimately but, in view of dwindling support among the population, is increasingly resorting to repression and violence.

Is this unconditional loyalty now suddenly crumbling? Will the absolute priority of retaining power, which has determined government action for years, be abandoned? Will declared enemies of the US now become

cooperation partners, at least rhetorically? This seems unlikely, especially since US President Trump has no interest in profound political change. He is relying on an existing regime that can control the military and police. The president elected in 2024, Edmundo González, the actual challenger and Nobel Peace Prize winner María Corina Machado, and other democratic parties play no role in this calculation.

While parts of the opposition celebrated in exile, democratic actors in the country reacted with much more restraint. It is still unclear whether new political opportunities will open up. One of the first to speak out was MP Henrique Capriles, who called for a peaceful and democratic transition. He is one of 28 MPs in the 2025 parliament who do not belong to the ruling party. Negotiations on a coalition of opposition forces were underway when the rockets struck. On 5 January, the newly elected parliament began its work in accordance with the constitution.

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At this point in time, the current government guarantees one thing above all else: that the state will not fall apart. The army and police remain under control. Since his election in 2013, Maduro has systematically fragmented the security apparatus, knowing full well that, as a former trade unionist, he would never enjoy the support of the military that his predecessor Hugo Chávez had. The deliberate avoidance of concentration of power continues to shape the security sector to this day.

The years of rampant crime are not long past. Draconian police operations and the economic crisis have temporarily pushed it back. But there is justified concern about the impact a possible collapse of the regime would have on public safety. Transforming this entrenched security structure into a democratically controlled system would be a Herculean task. It would require lengthy negotiations, material incentives and, above all, a functioning labour market with real prospects for the future. A look at the police academies shows that they mainly train people who have few opportunities elsewhere and cannot afford alternative paths.

Stability is also in Trump's interest. A failed state in the US' 'backyard' that triggers new migration movements is unacceptable to him. At the same time, stability serves as the basis for the Venezuelan government to maintain its power. On this point, the interests of both sides coincide. Democracy and the rule of law, on the other hand, play no role for either side.

This is precisely why the international community cannot afford to stand idly by, but must take a clear stance and develop political proposals — ideally in close coordination with Venezuela's immediate neighbours. Colombia and Brazil are key strategic players in this regard. They have already taken a first step by issuing a joint declaration together with Mexico, Chile, Uruguay and Spain. Given the differing interests in the region, this is anything but a natural step.

The current situation is not a revolution, but a moment in which windows of dialogue can open.

The attack on Venezuela shows once again how urgent it is for Europe to emancipate itself from the United States as a supposedly reliable partner. Instead of speculating about Trump's statements, alternative alliances should be strengthened, both in terms of security policy and economics. Multilateral institutions and regulatory frameworks must be strengthened and filled with life, rather than being exploited for national self-interest.

For the acute crisis region, this means above all deepening cooperation with South American nations and developing concrete offers for countries such as Venezuela: investments, humanitarian aid, development programmes, education campaigns — all clearly linked to conditions that correspond to European values. The current situation is not a revolution, but a moment in which windows of dialogue can open. Even if Trump has announced that the US will now steer the country's fortunes, Venezuela remains a sovereign state that chooses its own allies.

As Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva said shortly after the attack, this is not purely a Venezuelan conflict, but an attack on the international community. Whether the latter will draw any political consequences from this remains the crucial question.



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Caracas
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