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REFLECTIONS ON THE END OF VENEZUELA'S INTERIM GOVERNMENT

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[The decision](#) on December 30 by most parties in Venezuela's opposition National Assembly to end the interim presidency of Juan Guaidó was a sad commentary on the state of play inside the country, the resiliency of President Nicolás Maduro's authoritarian regime, and the harsh realities of the global landscape. Above all, it reflected the struggles of the interim government, [established in January 2019](#), to bring about a rapid democratic transformation.

In the coming weeks and months, negotiations between opposition representatives and the Maduro government, [taking place in Mexico City](#) and supported by a constellation of international actors, are likely to be the center of efforts to lay the groundwork for democratic elections in 2024. Doing so will be a [significant challenge](#), given the growing confidence of Maduro, increasing regional accommodation to his rule, and the declining visibility of the democratic opposition.

Cover Photo: Former Interim President of Venezuela Juan Guaidó during his inauguration ceremony in Caracas, January 23, 2019. Julio Lovera, Shutterstock.



These new realities can make it easy to forget that Guaidó's interim presidency was a constitutional, sustained and internationally supported attempt to restore Venezuela's democracy following fraudulent and unconstitutional presidential elections in 2018. Without the interim government, and despite its failings, it is hard to envisage another way an organized Venezuelan opposition would have survived the last four years of increasing political repression. A primary reason the Maduro government agreed to negotiations with the newly formed Unitary Platform of opposition parties is because of international sanctions meant to buttress Guaidó's presidency.

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The negotiations will take place in the context of Russia's war on Ukraine and its impacts on global energy markets, and political shifts inside Latin America. Both trends are favorable to the Maduro regime which has ceded little and seems determined to press its advantage. The goals of the Venezuelan oppo-

sition and its international partners in this more somber environment remain the same as in 2019 – democratic elections and an end to the political repression, human rights abuses and economic mismanagement that continue to fuel the largest humanitarian crisis the Western Hemisphere has ever witnessed.

The Moment

The interim presidency should be remembered for what it was: a radical but entirely legitimate response to Maduro's efforts to consolidate his increasingly dictatorial rule.

Critically, it was also a Venezuelan-conceived and led effort from the start. It is certainly true that [the opposition was in regular touch](#) with Washington and the Organization of American States as it challenged the legitimacy of the May 2018 presidential election. [The United States intensified sanctions](#) against Venezuela that same year, and in 2019 quickly embraced and supported the interim government. But it is also true that [the National Assembly mobilized internally and called](#) for the presidential elections to be declared null and void. My impression, as senior adviser to the U.S. secretary of state at the time, was that key U.S. officials were largely responding to

what was happening in Venezuela and uncertain how far the National Assembly would go in its challenge to Maduro.

The fractious opposition parties, which had struggled to challenge increasingly undemocratic governments after 1999, surprised even their supporters when they moved to back Guaidó rather than recognize Maduro's investiture in January 2019. They relied upon their majority in the National Assembly – still operational despite Maduro's attempt to [empower a parallel constituent assembly](#) – and [invoked Article 233 of the constitution](#) developed by Maduro's predecessor, Hugo Chávez, to declare the presidency vacant and appoint Guaidó as the country's interim leader.

The interim government then successfully appealed for international recognition, despite enjoying no control of the formal levers of executive power. [Approximately sixty countries](#) – including much of Latin America and Europe, as well as the United States, Canada and Japan – recognized Guaidó. It would be simplistic to suggest this was mostly the result of arm-twisting by the United States. In the post-1989 era, there is no parallel anywhere in the world of an internal democratic opposition

mobilizing that level of support as it challenged a dictatorial government.

The decision by Latin American governments was groundbreaking in a region where the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of other countries is widely embraced. It reflected deep concern over the scale of Venezuela's political, economic and social collapse. Its Latin American neighbors were alarmed by the millions of migrants to their countries as they faced difficult economic challenges and stresses of their own. Venezuelan refugees and migrants, [numbering seven million](#), now represent the second-largest population displacement in the world.

Venezuela's migration crisis was the result of gross economic mismanagement and widespread corruption by a politically inept authoritarian state, which violated basic human rights, systematically closed political space, and provided sanctuary to insurgencies targeting Colombia. The economic collapse of Venezuela, a once prosperous nation with among the largest known oil reserves in the world, [was of epic proportions](#). [The economy shrank by two-thirds](#) between 2014 and 2020, and then further during the COVID





Photo Credits: Venezuelans during a demonstration called by former Interim President Juan Guaidó in Caracas, July 5, 2019. David Jose Pena Alarcon, Shutterstock.

pandemic and as U.S. sanctions on the oil sector took effect. The country was in freefall, with collapsing educational and health sectors and food shortages. [Drug trafficking](#) became part of how the regime generated income. It is hard to find a comparable deconstruction of a national economy anywhere in the last 70 years. So it is hardly surprising that Guaidó enjoyed [widespread popular support](#) inside Venezuela in the early stages of the interim government, with polls suggesting he would easily defeat Maduro in a fair presidential election.

Venezuela's economic collapse was accompanied by the crumbling of its democracy. Maduro, who succeeded Chávez in 2013, [was even more ruthless](#) in shutting off political space for the opposition than his predecessor. Arbitrary detentions

increased and numbered in the thousands; hundreds of [independent media outlets](#) were shut down; extrajudicial killings increased dramatically; demonstrations were increasingly crushed; and opposition political leaders were systematically isolated, arrested and forced into exile, and their families and associates harassed and worse. The opposition united, not because it had overcome its differences, but because in the face of increasing repression, and Maduro's stolen election in 2018, there was no other option rather than to further fracture and become irrelevant.

Post-Mortem

Yet the effort to produce a democratic transformation in Venezuela failed.

There are many reasons why this turned out to be the case. The first and most important have less to do with the failings of the interim government than the capacity of repressive regimes to withstand internal strife and international sanctions. That resiliency has been underestimated throughout the post-Cold War era, from Saddam Hussein in Iraq after the first Gulf War and Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe to Bashar al-Assad in Syria, the Cuban regime and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua.

There was an assumption among the Venezuelan opposition and the U.S. government that dire economic circumstances and Maduro's unpopularity had left the regime vulnerable. In the early months of 2019, almost weekly protests involving hundreds of thousands of ordinary citizens nationwide fueled the expectation of a peaceful political transition. Maduro and his allies seemed flummoxed, and there was widespread speculation he would lose the support of the security forces. As international recognition of the interim government expanded, the opposition grew more confident that change was imminent.

Instead, it became clear that Maduro would use all the levers at his disposal to stay in power. Attempts

to pressure Maduro failed, including an opposition-led, [U.S.-supported humanitarian aid bridge](#) in February 2019 designed to deliver assistance across the Colombian border over the regime's objections. [In April 2019](#), secret negotiations to attract the support of the country's armed forces and the chief of the supreme court for a transition government that would have included *chavistas* collapsed on April 30 when a hoped-for uprising did not materialize, dampening hopes for high-level regime defections.

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The White House reacted with [threats of harsher sanctions](#) against Cuba for supporting Maduro and floated the [possibility of a military intervention](#) in Venezuela, but Maduro's government held firm. There was also [debate in the White House](#) after April 30 about whether Venezuela policy required a change of direction. As the social and economic crisis deepened, and repression intensified, Venezuela's long-suffering population shifted from protest to survival. The opposition began to lose domestic credibility.



Though Guaidó had attracted significant international support, Maduro was never completely isolated. Indeed, [Russia and China significantly supported the regime](#), as did Cuba, Turkey and Iran to a lesser degree. As a result, Venezuela's economy, which had been struggling even more amid tightening U.S. sanctions in 2019, began to show signs of life by 2021, with Maduro's partners helping to resuscitate the country's vital oil industry. That turnaround strengthened Maduro's domestic standing. It is often forgotten that Maduro is the heir to his charismatic predecessor, who rode the early 2000s commodities boom to almost ironclad support among a sizable portion of the Venezuelan population. Even as Venezuela's economy continued its decline after 2018, polls indicated that Maduro and his party retained some backing. By late 2022, [Maduro was more popular](#) than the interim president.

Through it all, the United States, the European Union and the Lima Group – a bloc of mostly Latin American nations promoting a democratic transition in Venezuela – supported the interim government and its call for fair national elections, while leaving the door open to negotiations with Maduro. Though Washington repeatedly called for Maduro's im-

mediate resignation, and pursued punishing sanctions, it did not categorically oppose negotiations which Maduro used to play for time.

There is debate over whether the U.S. policy of "[maximum pressure](#)" harmed Venezuela's population more than it did Maduro. Many of the measures mirrored policies taken by Western nations to address gross abuses by other dictatorial governments. Still, it was increasingly clear that U.S. policy was not pushing Maduro from power. Characterizing his regime a [narco-terrorist state](#), a [corrupt cabal](#), or part of a [new axis of unfriendly countries](#) with Cuba and Nicaragua as allies also had little effect.

In this context, U.S. and international efforts refocused on [talks brokered by Norway](#). These began in late 2019, just before the COVID pandemic became the primary concern of the region, not negotiations between the Venezuelan parties. In 2021, Maduro, who had made no concessions to the opposition, [abandoned the process](#). His position was stronger at home and abroad, as Guaidó weakened both inside and outside Venezuela. By December 2022, [only four countries](#) reportedly still recognized Guaidó as interim president.

The opposition contributed to its own woes. [It fractured again](#); competing personalities undermined Guaidó's efforts to provide a convincing alternative to the regime and allowed Maduro to co-opt or buy off elements of the opposition. [Reports of corruption](#) and mismanagement of overseas Venezuelan funds under the control of the interim government further tainted the opposition's image. Critically, the interim presidency's increasing dependency on advice and financial support from the United States led to questions about its independence. More recently, [the relaxation of U.S. restrictions](#) on companies working in Venezuela's oil sector and [meetings between U.S. officials and the Maduro government](#) raised doubts about the U.S. commitment to the interim government.

What Now?

Throughout the last four years, the personal courage of individual political leaders, civil society actors, and ordinary citizens has been remarkable. The decision to contest the November 2021 regional and municipal elections reflected their resolve. Despite [significant irregularities](#), fraud and intimidation, opposition candidates won governorships in several states, including in

Barinas, Chávez's birthplace, and more than 100 of 330 municipalities nationally.

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By the end of 2022, however, it was undeniable that Maduro was firmly in control. The economy had begun to recover, [growing by over 5%](#), and oil exports increased despite sanctions. As significantly, the political environment in Latin America had changed. Leftist leaders in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Honduras and Mexico began normalizing ties to the regime, and [Brazil is expected](#) to do the same early in 2023.. Colombia, the interim government's most steadfast supporter alongside the United States, [reopened its embassy in Caracas](#) in August 2022, and [the border between the two countries](#) reopened this month. Russia's invasion of Ukraine was an additional blow to Guaidó. Oil-producing countries that had been kept at arms-length were suddenly courted by the West in an effort to find alternatives to Russian oil and gas.

It therefore is not surprising that key leaders of the opposition determined



on December 30 that the interim government had run its course. Indeed, [the U.S. government seemed to suggest](#) on January 3 that its strategy going forward would focus on broader support for the opposition National Assembly and the Unitary Platform.

Questions are now being raised over whether the interim government was worth supporting in the first place. As [the experience of the Nicaraguan opposition](#) under Daniel Ortega suggests, however, Venezuela would likely have been even further down the road to a full dictatorship without the National Assembly's constitutional challenge to the regime

It now falls to the full range of the democratic opposition to carry on the challenge to Maduro's authoritarian state. In their favor is the continued support of a large number of countries committed to a return to democracy in Venezuela. That includes the United States, which appears willing to use sanctions policy to help the opposition extract concessions from the regime and to continue [holding Maduro to account](#) for past abuses. Analyses by [the Wilson Center](#) and [the U.S. Institute for Peace](#) include thoughts on how negotiations can proceed.

The opposition, however, will play a weak hand. On January 5, the National Assembly elected as its president Dinorah Figueroa who, along with her deputies and unlike Guaidó, [is in exile](#). The Venezuelan government ordered their arrest January 9. On January 16, [a warrant was issued](#) for the arrest of another senior opposition figure. The legislature's control of overseas government assets once administered by the interim presidency is also being challenged. [On January 17](#), the regime made further negotiations conditional on the return of the frozen accounts. There are certain to be more delaying tactics and intimidation.

Maduro, moreover, is likely to follow the example of authoritarian governments around the globe that are finding new ways to resist international pressure. He will be tempted to avoid serious concessions in the negotiations and to limit any meaningful opposition that would threaten his rule. Venezuela's future democratic transformation will depend on convincing him otherwise. The prospect looks slim at the moment; that there is any hope of this happening at all, may be the most significant legacy of Guaidó's interim government.



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