

# VENEZUELA IN 2023 AND BEYOND: CHARTING A NEW COURSE

BY ABRAHAM F. LOWENTHAL



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## PROLOGUE

This report is a product of the Venezuela Working Group, assembled by the Latin American Program of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. The group is a diverse collection of experts, including scholars and former senior government officials from several countries, among them individuals with deep knowledge of Venezuela and of transitions from authoritarian rule. They present their analysis and recommendations, based on extensive discussions and deliberations, as individuals, not as representatives of any institution.

The Venezuela Working Group issued its first major report in November 2021, "[Democratization in Venezuela: Thoughts on a New Path](#)," authored by Dr. Michael Penfold, a prominent Venezuelan political scientist and Wilson Center global fellow. The report explored prospects for the re-democratization of Venezuela and for bringing about social peace and sustainable growth in a country debilitated by decades of extreme political polarization, catastrophic economic decline, public corruption, repressive rule, and international sanctions.

The report, authored by Dr. Abraham F. Lowenthal, the Latin American Program's founding director and a leading scholar on U.S.-Latin America relations and democratic governance, examines the recently resumed negotiations between the Venezuelan government of Nicolás Maduro and the Unitary Platform, representing the democratic opposition. For many observers of Venezuela's prolonged crisis, these negotiations are doomed to fail. That skepticism is understandable, and not only because previous talks have produced few meaningful results. After all, the primary objectives of the opposition include free and fair elections that could very well lead to the end of Maduro's autocratic rule. Moreover, the Maduro government has consolidated its authority in recent years and overseen a modest economic recovery. By contrast, the opposition and its leading figure, Juan Guaidó, have seen their support erode. Why then would Maduro's representatives make serious compromises at the negotiating table?

They might not. But the Venezuela Working Group sees potential for breakthroughs in these negotiations, especially if the United States continues to provide incentives, including sanctions relief, that encourage the Maduro gov-

ernment to engage seriously in this process. The Venezuela Working Group's support for the negotiations does not reflect ignorance or naiveté regarding the nature of the Venezuelan dictatorship, but rather careful analysis of the Maduro government's interests. Those include the lifting of sanctions and the normalization of Venezuela's international relationships, both essential for Venezuela's long-term political and economic stability. Moreover, Maduro and his rivals have demonstrated the capacity for deal making, such as a recent agreement on a \$3 billion fund, to be administered by the United Nations, for urgently needed humanitarian assistance, drawing on Venezuelan assets frozen by the United States.

As in most transitions from authoritarianism, the process in Venezuela will likely be slow and involve uncomfortable compromises. As Lowenthal writes, "the talks and potential agreements are unlikely to produce a rapid transfer of power," or to "eliminate deep resentments among Venezuelans or to produce an immediate economic recovery." This dialogue, however, could improve the daily lives and prospects for millions of Venezuelans and at least begin rebuilding the country's fractured institutions. That would be preferable to the alternative, perpetual punishment that the Maduro government richly deserves but that has little prospect of dislodging the dictatorship.

For that reason, nearly 90 percent of Venezuelans support these negotiations, and so do we.

On behalf of the Wilson Center and its Latin American Program, I express our deep appreciation to Abe for his tireless efforts to draw upon the expertise of Venezuela Working Group members and build consensus. His contributions to this publication reflect a decades-long commitment to the Latin American Program. They also demonstrate his unbending support for democracy and his unshakable belief that serious dialogue and negotiation can open the path from authoritarianism, even, or perhaps especially, in cases involving major power imbalances and clashing interests and worldviews.

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# VENEZUELA IN 2023 AND BEYOND: CHARTING A NEW COURSE

BY ABRAHAM F. LOWENTHAL

The tragic deterioration of Venezuela's society, economy, and political institutions is beginning to be addressed through potentially meaningful negotiations in Caracas and Mexico City. Opening a possible path toward a more peaceful, democratic, and prosperous Venezuela – one built by diverse sectors of the country and supported by the international community – would be a welcome change. There is no way to be sure of success, but 89 percent of Venezuelans polled in mid-November 2022 support this attempt at negotiations.<sup>1</sup> So do we, with differing mixtures of optimism and pessimism, but with shared conviction that the opportunity to negotiate for democratic change should be firmly grasped.

Venezuela has suffered years of polarization, repressive authoritarian rule, human rights abuses, economic catastrophe, corruption and institutional decay – as well as international jockeying for influence and advantage. Today, most Venezuelans, both in the country and abroad as migrants and refugees, want a new course.<sup>2</sup> Citizens and organizations throughout the Americas and beyond empathize with Venezuelans while also seeking protection from the disruptive effects of mass Venezuelan migration to their countries. So do officials in governments, civil society, and international organizations across the world who want to support Venezuela's recovery.

## *Who we are*

This report was prepared by a pluralist, multinational group of former government officials, current and former officers of international and nongovernmental organizations, and scholars of democratic governance, economic and social development, and international relations at universities and research institutions in the United States, Latin America, including Venezuela, and Europe. In preparing our report, we drew on several virtual group discussions, interviews

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<sup>1</sup> Datanálisis (September 2022).

<sup>2</sup> In a poll conducted in November 2022, Instituto Delphos found only 5.4 percent of those polled wanted things in Venezuela to remain as they are; 92.2 percent wanted change, 60 percent radical change.

the whole group or individual members conducted with Venezuelan and international actors and experts, [a number of previous VWG papers](#), and extensive exchanges of views among us.

***Today, most Venezuelans, both in the country and abroad as migrants and refugees, want a new course.***

We participated in our individual capacities, not in representation of any organization with which we are or have been affiliated. We do not share any particular political or ideological tendency. Rather, we were brought together by the Latin American Program of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars – a nonpartisan institution with more than 45 years of dedication to Latin America and transitions from authoritarian rule – to pool our knowledge and produce actionable ideas to improve conditions in Venezuela. Not every Working Group member necessarily agrees with every phrase in the text, but all affirm their support for the report’s central arguments and recommendations.

We have been openly critical of authoritarian abuses, gross human rights violations, devastating economic mismanagement, and divisive populism by the Venezuelan governments led by Hugo Chávez and later Nicolás Maduro. Yet all of us recognize that negotiated transitions from authoritarian rule are not about finger-pointing but about repairing. We all believe that the only way for Venezuela to exit its stalemate is by sustaining the negotiating process to craft agreements that address the interests of both the Venezuelan government and the democratic opposition. These agreements should serve the needs of all Venezuelans by articulating a set of shared goals and by laying the foundations for how that vision should be achieved. We ground our approach on years of studying Venezuela and on the insights of practitioners and scholars who have fashioned or analyzed successful democratic transitions in many regions throughout the world. We are inspired by their contributions.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Among the most important sources on democratic transitions influencing our analysis is the landmark Wilson Center work, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy in Latin America and Southern Europe*, edited by Guillermo O’Donnell, Philippe Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead, with an introduction by Abraham F. Lowenthal, published by The Johns Hopkins University Press in 1986. Another key source is Sergio Bitar and Abraham F. Lowenthal, eds., *Democratic Transitions: Conversations with World Leaders* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press and International IDEA, 2015), a study of nine successful transitions in five continents, featuring in-person interviews by the co-editors with former presidents and prime ministers who played key roles in Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Ghana, South Africa, Poland, Spain, Indonesia, and the Philippines.







*From left to right: Unitary Platform of Venezuela's Head of Delegation Gerardo Blyde, Mexico's Secretary of Foreign Affairs Marcelo Ebrard, Norway's Head of Facilitation Team Dag Halvor Nylander, Government of Venezuela's Head of Delegation Jorge Rodríguez, during the resumption of negotiations between the Unitary Platform of Venezuela and the Government of Venezuela in Mexico City. Source: [Secretariat of Foreign Relations, Mexico, November 26, 2022.](#)*

## **Changing direction: the crux of the matter**

The recent return to well-prepared negotiations in Mexico City and Caracas between Venezuela's government and the Unitary Platform coalition of democratic opposition parties is an important step. All key actors – the Maduro administration and its domestic and international supporters, the democratic opposition and its backers at home and abroad, Venezuelan civil society, the governments and nongovernmental organizations of the United States and of other engaged international players – should approach this process with realistic strategies and expectations, in support of honest, respectful, and arduous negotiations. They should remain engaged in the negotiating process and not let it be derailed by short-termism or personal ambition.

The talks and potential agreements are unlikely to produce a rapid transfer of power away from Nicolás Maduro and his entourage, Venezuela's governing parties, and the security forces – Maduro's main pillar of support. Nor will they end all the influence of Maduro's international allies. The negotiations are also not likely quickly to eliminate deep resentments among Venezuelans or to produce an immediate economic recovery. They will not produce effective democratic governance from one year to the next. In fact, there is no certainty that the Maduro administration will accept the possibility of negotiating itself out of autocratic power through agreements on free and fair elections. There is no other venue, however, where humanitarian relief, human rights, electoral

issues, re-institutionalization, and economic recovery can be effectively addressed in tandem.

## ***Appropriate goals***

We believe the appropriate goals for negotiation at this stage, therefore, are movements in these directions: improving the daily lives and prospects of Venezuelans; rebuilding the institutions of democratic governance, including free and fair elections with international supervision; and establishing priorities

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for facing Venezuela's other major challenges. Negotiators and their international allies should not expect to resolve all the country's problems at once. These issues should be approached by both sides with the goal of finding common ground.

Making progress on these important dimensions would increase the possibility for new political openings and emerging coalitions. These could facilitate arrangements for competitive and meaningful elections, internationally observed, as well as gradual reforms to restore and reinforce the rule of law and build new habits of association and patterns of cooperation. All these reforms could reinforce momentum toward a democratic future for Venezuela.

Although some believe that alleviating the population's suffering would simply reduce pressure on the Maduro government, it is always important to relieve suffering and to remember that immiseration rarely leads to popular mobilization, but often produces passive acquiescence. That pattern has been evident in Venezuela.

The chances that the negotiations will lead to significant positive changes will mainly depend on whether the Maduro government seriously engages in the process, and on whether the democratic opposition overcomes its structural weaknesses and broadens its political base. It will also depend on Venezuelans with different ideas and loyalties taking incremental steps in the direction of democratic coexistence and pragmatic problem-solving and coordinating



with the international community to promote mutual compromise. Both sides should propose and accept cooperative ways to tackle shared problems. They will each need to make hard bargains on concrete issues. That takes courage.

### ***Strategic patience***

Many negotiated transitions from authoritarian rule and settlements of difficult conflicts – in Latin America and around the world – took years to achieve. They often experienced reversals and zigzags, sometimes because of asymmetric power and sometimes because of unexpected contingencies. Negotiating liberalization and strengthening democratic institutions require strategic patience and persistence. Achieving these goals depends on skilled and dedicated political leadership on both sides, and on sustained engagement and active participation by nongovernmental organizations, civil society, business and labor representatives, and ordinary citizens. It also depends on the international context; in recent years, that has tended to shift radically and in unexpected directions, influencing the calculations of actors in negotiations and political conflict. The same will hold for Venezuela, where a left-wing trend in governments in Latin America and the unfolding impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine will influence calculations and pressure points on the parties to the negotiations.

Venezuela was not transformed overnight from a peaceful, democratic, and relatively prosperous (albeit highly unequal and corrupt) society to a polarized and violent nation with widespread poverty and hunger, severely weakened public health and educational infrastructure, and mass emigration. It should not be expected to recover overnight, either. It might take years. But reversing course is well worth striving for.

### ***Background to the negotiations***

The negotiations bring together designated representatives of the Maduro administration with representatives of a broad spectrum of parties and organizations from the country's democratic opposition under the banner of the Unitary Platform (PU, for its initials in Spanish). The Platform includes elements from the former "interim government" led until early January 2023 by Juan Guaidó, who emerged in 2019 from Venezuela's then-democratically elected Nation-



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recognize it. Its popular support also shrunk considerably, below that of the Maduro government.<sup>4</sup> Key party leaders of the democratic opposition became unwilling to support its continuation. The broader Unitary Platform also has links, which should be strengthened and extended, with representatives of other political parties, civil society associations, and private sector figures and groups, comprising a large cross-section of the country's democratic opposition.

Efforts to build a coherent opposition coalition have been difficult, given that the Maduro administration has directed energy and resources to repressing the opposition and coopting key politicians and parties. Elections, normally used to renew leadership, have been clouded by irregularities and fraud. The opposition leadership, for its part, should err toward the inclusion of factions and take fully into account the variety of positions that others have taken to confront an authoritarian government.

### ***Preparing the negotiations***

Over the past few months, representatives of the PU and the Venezuelan government, supported by Norwegian negotiators and, in separate discussions, by U.S. government officials, quietly conducted fruitful pre-negotiations in Caracas to build confidence and lay the groundwork for formal talks. They fashioned important agreements, some of which involve new steps by the U.S. and Venezuelan governments. Other measures taken prior to and independent of the resumption of negotiations to build mutual confidence included the appointment by each side of trusted negotiators; agreement by the Maduro government to allow representatives of the International Criminal Court and

<sup>4</sup> In a November 2022 poll, Instituto Delphos found that 29.7 percent of respondents rated Maduro's performance as "excellent" or "good," while 13.2 percent gave those ratings to the opposition. Other opinion polls in recent years show similar results, except early in 2019, when hope was high that Guaidó would succeed.



UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to visit; modest reforms, prior to the September 2021 regional and local elections, of the National Electoral Council (CNE), including the appointment of two new commissioners, nominated by moderate factions of the opposition, which made the CNE a somewhat more credible manager of fair and meaningful elections; and a prisoner exchange between Venezuela and the United States.

Perhaps the most concrete step forward was the agreement between the Maduro government and the PU, with the blessing of the U.S. government, to create a Social Fund, to be administered by the United Nations, to address humanitarian crises in the country. The Venezuelan government and the

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Unitary Platform jointly agreed on a shared governance structure to unfreeze more than \$3 billion in Venezuelan overseas assets to provide food aid and invest in the country's crumbling infrastructure, including the electric power grid, hospitals, and public schools. The fund will also help expand World Food Program activities in Venezuela. Under the terms of the 2021 Memorandum of Understanding, both sides will appoint representatives to a joint commission, with the participation of civil society actors, to seek further resources for the fund, identify key projects, and assure transparency. Although the agreement attracted criticism, including in the U.S. Congress, we see merit in an approach that allows both poverty alleviation and a wider array of opposition Venezuelan voices a say in the administration of resources inside the country. These negotiations have shown that both sides are, at least in some situations, willing to put the interests of the country and its citizens first, and even to share governance structures to increase the effectiveness of humanitarian efforts. That itself is an important step forward. Whether the progress made so far will be sustained remains to be seen in practice, but what has already happened should not be dismissed or minimized.

In addition to humanitarian initiatives, the U.S. and Venezuelan governments agreed to allow Chevron to export Venezuelan oil to the United States and make some limited new investments in Venezuela. Similar agreements are be-



*A Venezuelan child rides on the back of a vehicle in a neighborhood in Caracas, Venezuela.  
Source: [Eneas De Troya, Flickr, November 6, 2016.](#)*

ing extended to other international energy companies, including two European firms, ENI and Repsol, which have already been authorized to make some oil shipments to cancel Venezuelan debt. The U.S. government has signaled that additional licenses to facilitate investments in the Venezuelan oil industry are possible should negotiations advance. Some critics have argued that these agreements buttress the Maduro administration's credibility and financial resource base. Although these views are understandable, it should also be acknowledged that a changing global energy environment has already opened markets for Venezuela, even with significant U.S. sanctions in place. Those opportunities are likely to increase, not decrease, in coming months. Furthermore, as the Biden administration has made clear, U.S. concessions are designed to incentivize negotiations.

### ***Incentives to bolster genuine negotiations***

The delegations have different aims and interests, of course. Some observers are skeptical about the prospects for negotiation, given the failure of previous talks between the Venezuelan government and the opposition. But circumstances might well be ripe for success, especially as the U.S. government has signaled its willingness to remove sanctions if concrete agreements are reached.

The Unitary Platform has re-evaluated the strategy the democratic opposition pursued over recent years. Its leaders recognize that the policy of mobilizing "maximum pressure" to bring about regime change by government collapse,





primarily through actions by the United States, failed to remove Maduro from power, although it might have made him more open to serious negotiation.

Renewed U.S. escalation of harsh coercive measures is not likely nor would it be justifiable; that approach would only harden hostilities. The PU now seeks to ameliorate humanitarian emergencies, protect human and political rights, begin rebuilding the Venezuelan economy, and especially, open the way toward genuinely inclusive democratic governance, with an immediate focus on arranging fair, internationally monitored national, regional, and municipal elections, expected to be held in 2024 and 2025, respectively.

Such elections could change the composition and leadership of the executive and legislative branches, help restore a strong and independent judiciary, and promote the re-institutionalization of accountable Venezuelan governance, all key opposition goals. The PU also seeks to rebuild damaged educational, public health, and social welfare systems; improve food and citizen security; expand freedom of the press, assembly, and political participation; and nurture respectful coexistence among sectors of Venezuelan society that have been deeply antagonistic. Major elements of Venezuelan civil society and the private sector share these goals.

The Maduro coalition remains entrenched in power, however, with control of the nation's territory and all government programs and institutions, and its leaders want to maintain influence. Significant repression, constrained political space, extensive corruption, environmental destruction, and systematic closure of independent media outlets continue.

[The Memorandum of Understanding](#) between the two negotiating teams, released in September 2021, suggests, however, that there are many areas of potential agreement between the Maduro government, the Unitary Platform, and the broader public. Maduro and at least some of his colleagues understand, moreover, that Venezuelans have long highly valued and still favor democratic elections.<sup>5</sup> Free and fair elections could provide a more stable and legitimate basis for governing than autocracy and repression. And clean elections might well lead to the lifting of some or all painful international sanctions.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Eighty-four percent of those polled by Instituto Delphos in November 2022 said they were “sure” or “inclined” to vote in elections, and only a small fraction said they were unlikely to vote.

<sup>6</sup> It is hard to document the likely internal divisions within *Chavismo* regarding the level of repression and the

Senior officials in the Maduro camp also no doubt seek assurances that they will not lose their political rights, or be subject to revenge or retribution, if they eventually give up power. In prior transitions from authoritarian rule, efforts to assure democracy, stability, memory, and justice have nearly always been in tension, and reconciling these in Venezuela will not be easy. But other transitions from authoritarian rule have managed – through persistent, focused effort – to develop solutions that combine principle and pragmatism.<sup>7</sup> The means to accomplish these goals must be carefully thought through, discussed, and constructed, perhaps with assistance from international experts. These will be thorny issues, probably best reserved for the final stage of negotiations, when a higher level of mutual commitment and trust has ideally been achieved.

### ***Managing expectations***

No one who has followed Venezuela expects the Maduro government to go along with everything that the democratic opposition has been demanding, and that the U.S. government has until now largely supported. The Maduro government is authoritarian and many of its officials are corrupt, but it has important domestic allies, including the security forces, some business sectors that are close to the government, and social sectors that felt marginalized and politically excluded in the decades before Chávez came to power. Maduro's public approval is modest, though higher than that of most opposition leaders, including Guaidó.<sup>8</sup> *Maduristas* control most levers of power and all governing institutions inside the country. They also have strategic international backing from Cuba, Iran, Russia, China, Turkey, and other countries, and they have demonstrated skill and resilience in coping with harsh sanctions.

*Maduristas*, in short, are in the saddle, and should be expected to be tough negotiators. They have strengthened their position over the past several years,

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commitment to clean elections, but analysts have detected such cleavages in Venezuela, as in many other transition situations studied in the literature cited in footnote 3 and elsewhere.

<sup>7</sup> There is a growing literature on the issues posed by transitional or restorative justice, the attempt to reconcile human rights principles and accountability with political feasibility and the challenges of reconciliation and coexistence in bitterly divided, often post-conflict societies. See, for example, Colleen Murphy, *The Conceptual Foundations of Transitional Justice* (Cambridge University Press, 2017); Michael Newman, *Transitional Justice: Contending with the Past* (Polity, 2019); and Cristián Correa, *Preguntas Esenciales para una Política de Justicia Transicional en Venezuela* (International Center for Transitional Justice, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> See polling data from Datanálisis and Instituto Delphos over the last ten years. Maduro has ranked recently somewhat below or somewhat above such opposition figures as María Corina Machado, Henrique Capriles, Manuel Rosales, and Juan Pablo Guanipa, all of whom rank higher than Juan Guaidó.







Venezuelans protest against the government of Nicolás Maduro during a march called by Juan Guaidó.  
Source: [Alex Abello Leiva, Wikimedia Commons, February 2, 2019.](#)

in part due to their own decisions and actions, in part to changing international circumstances, particularly Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the disruption of world energy markets. They have also benefited from the election of left-leaning presidents in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Honduras, Mexico and Peru. They also gained ground because of misjudgments by maximalist factions of the opposition and their international backers, particularly in the U.S. government, especially during the last administration. Finally, the repression and exile suffered by many of Maduro's critics, combined with the largest flow of migrants ever to occur in Latin America, reportedly 7.1 million since 2015, have no doubt eased domestic pressures on Maduro.<sup>9</sup>

Some observers argue that the Maduro government has improved its position so much that it might lack serious interest in substantive negotiations because it might not believe it has much to gain and simply wants to buy time and reduce international pressure. But Maduro's administration is not popular, and Venezuela's economic recovery has been slow, erratic, and severely handicapped by mismanagement, corruption, and international sanctions. The country's international reputation remains badly tarnished. The path toward broad international acceptance might be long, but almost certainly runs through negotiation and compromise. We think, therefore, that the Maduro government has substantial incentives to negotiate, and that negotiations could produce positive changes for Venezuelans on both sides, especially if progress on the political agenda triggers further U.S. concessions.

<sup>9</sup> The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that 7.1 million Venezuelans left the country between 2015 and 2022. See *The New York Times*, October 17, 2022.

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Venezuela's economic performance has improved somewhat over the past five years because of important policy changes in a market-friendly direction, shifts in world energy markets, and quasi-dollarization, partly through expanding remittances. But the government will not see a sustained economic recovery without a stronger legal framework, more openness to the world economy, and substantial domestic and foreign investment, including in its all-important energy sector. None of that will take place until there is more legitimate and stable governance and domestic and foreign investors have reliable expectations of greater profits, less government interference, and limited exposure to international sanctions enforced by the United States. Venezuela needs considerable international cooperation and domestic support, as well as access to substantial international capital and credit, to tackle its vast educational, public health, infrastructure, and social and economic deficits.

### ***Negotiation strategies***

Negotiations should proceed in stages. Both sides should focus first on the common ground emphasized in the Memorandum of Understanding of 2021: alleviating humanitarian distress, freeing political prisoners, protecting human and political rights, beginning to rebuild Venezuela's economy, and reconstructing effective democratic governance. The last goal should be pursued by improving conditions for the anticipated 2024 presidential elections and 2025 legislative and municipal elections, and by re-institutionalizing the Venezuelan state while also strengthening a vigorous network of civil society organizations.

Regarding the 2024 and 2025 elections, the aim should be to assure that opposition parties can compete freely; that neither the democratic opposition nor the ruling party's candidates boycott the electoral competition; that the vote count is transparent and fair; that elections are effectively monitored both nationally and internationally; and that the results are validated and widely accepted. Ideally, both the democratic opposition and the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV, for its initials in Spanish) coalition should develop substantive policy agendas, choose leadership and candidates through par-



ticipatory processes, and build electoral coalitions that attract domestic and international support.

### ***Ending the attempt to coerce regime change***

The new approach that the United States should take toward Venezuela will be more credible and effective because the United States is setting aside its previous policy of maximum pressure. As part of that pivot, it has phased out its recognition of the “interim government” and instead is focusing U.S. political support on the Unitary Platform as representing a broad democratic actor in Venezuela.<sup>10</sup> A return to the maximum pressure approach—whether because of disappointment with the pace and product of the negotiations or because of domestic political factors in the United States—would almost certainly be counterproductive. The Biden administration apparently understands this, but has been reticent up to now about explaining its Venezuela policy in detail.

***It will be important to build bipartisan support for a transition from “maximum pressure” to efforts to support negotiations, build coexistence, protect human rights, encourage effective democratic governance, and promote economic recovery in Venezuela.***

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It will be important to build bipartisan support for a clear transition from “maximum pressure” to encouraging negotiations, building coexistence, protecting human rights, facilitating effective democratic governance, and promoting economic recovery. This approach should involve U.S. engagement with the full range of democratic opposition leaders and groups that are active in Venezuela. Targeted sanctions on the Maduro government and its representatives remain a necessary element of the approach in this phase.

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<sup>10</sup> The “maximum pressure” approach, resisted at the time by some key national security professionals, included repeated, though never credible, presidential threats of U.S. military intervention; a \$15 million bounty for assistance in Maduro’s arrest by the United States; reported U.S. support for efforts to overthrow the Maduro government by force; public diplomacy; and the use of humanitarian assistance to provoke a rebellion against Maduro. On the last point, see Office of the Inspector General, U.S. Agency for International Development, “Enhanced Processes and Implementer Requirements Are Needed to Address Challenges to Fraud Risks in USAID’s Venezuela Response” (Washington, D.C., April 26, 2021).



## ***Negotiating point-by-point***

The Venezuelan government, the Unitary Platform, and relevant members of the international community, including the U.S. government, should address concrete questions point-by-point. Initial efforts should include negotiating the terms for free and fair, internationally observed elections anticipated for 2024 and 2025. The parties should agree on election dates and should honor that agreement. The parties should also pursue progress on issues most likely to produce a negotiated accord that would be broadly supported in Venezuela. A possible sequencing might begin with expanded humanitarian aid, distributed transparently; the release of political prisoners; recognition of political parties and the rehabilitation of political candidates. Electoral reforms – including the [23 recommendations](#) proposed by the European Union’s electoral observa-

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tion mission of 2021, which would improve the credibility of the next elections – should be expedited to assure effective international monitoring. The Maduro government and the PU should jointly invite European monitoring, including regular pre-election monitoring visits, beginning as soon as possible. Latin American and Canadian observers should be invited to complement those of the European Union.

Complex issues must be worked out in coordination with the National Electoral Council, including the registration of Venezuelans in the country and abroad and the establishment of consular facilities for facilitating the participation of overseas Venezuelans, especially in the countries with the largest number of Venezuelan refugees and migrants, Colombia, Peru, Chile, Spain, and the United States. This should be a priority. To support Venezuelan diaspora voting, and for other policy objectives, the United States should consider at the appropriate moment the possible reestablishment of its embassy and consular activities in Venezuela, while permitting the Maduro government to do the same in the United States.



The U.S. government, the European Union, and Venezuela's Latin American neighbors all have an interest in seeing Venezuela stabilized as a democratic polity. The United States and other international actors, in support of the Norwegian mediators who have gained the confidence of the Venezuelan negotiators on both sides, should provide incentives to both parties to take specific steps. They should work together to gradually relax sanctions in return for progress on concrete issues, while maintaining the capacity to "snap back" sanctions if agreements are not implemented.

### ***Democratic coexistence***

Well before negotiations can reach a final stage, it will be important that the Maduro administration and the Unitary Platform, as well as other elements of Venezuelan society, take practical and visible steps to facilitate democratic coexistence among Venezuelans, who have been so polarized in recent year. These should include efforts to bring about strengthened governance and judicial institutions, the rule of law and accountability, and the protection of human and political rights, with mutually agreed upon mechanisms for national and international monitoring.

It will also be important for the government and the PU to design and agree on processes that document systematic violations of human rights, the suppression of democratic freedoms, and gross corruption. This should be done in consultation with activists and human rights defenders, both Venezuelan and international, as well as victims, with due regard for principles of justice and accountability under national and international law. Among the topics to be explored should be potential reparations for victims, as well as the nurturing of meaningful coexistence. A number of social projects have been initiated by the opposition that could be carried out cooperatively, for example, as part of the nation's recovery and eventual reconciliation.

### ***The requirements of effective negotiation***

For some years, the Venezuelan opposition, with concurrence at times from the U.S. government, resisted entering into or sustaining negotiations or participating fully in elections. This was partly because it underestimated the *chavista* movement and Maduro's tenacity, exaggerated its own stature, and expected





Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro broadcasts of his weekly television program “Contacto con Maduro” from the Miraflores Palace. Source: [Eneas De Troya, Flickr, December 18, 2016.](#)

more decisive support from the U.S. government. For its part, Maduro’s government repeatedly backed away from negotiations and used political dialogues for tactical advantage, to weaken the opposition and strengthen its own control. Each side now needs to step up firmly to the requirements of conflict resolution and forge workable compromises.

The democratic opposition has tried several times – sometimes successfully at the height of election campaigns, but not consistently over time against the Maduro government’s concerted obstacles – to construct a united, coherent, and credible alternative.<sup>11</sup> It has not always coordinated with fragmented political parties and civil society groups, nor has it successfully expanded and strengthened its durable political base within Venezuela, despite important efforts. It has not always been clearly committed, moreover, to a realistic idea of what negotiation entails.<sup>12</sup> Negotiations should now begin from the agreed principles announced in 2021 and reaffirmed on November 26, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Maduro and his allies have worked repeatedly to divide the opposition, disqualifying opposition politicians and parties, taking over opposition party leadership and symbols through judicial manipulation, and negotiating with some opposition parties and not with others, pitting those that have access against those that do not. There is no easy way around such maneuvers, and they must be ended as part of negotiating the electoral terms of engagement. The Maduro government should be pressed by the international community, including Latin American democracies, to abandon these tactics. For its part, the opposition should err toward inclusion in building its coalition, while negotiating an end to unfair electoral conditions.

<sup>12</sup> This was evident from the opposition demand that talks be televised, and from a proposed opposition strategy that included, as its first step, “ending the usurpation,” i.e., removing Maduro from power.



## ***Broadening involvement in the negotiating process***

Negotiators need to balance the necessary confidentiality of negotiation with efforts to involve Venezuelan political parties, civil society, and the public in the process. Democratic transitions and peace-building efforts often thrive when broad sectors of society are engaged. Their participation helps ensure that any agreement addresses the needs of the population. The Venezuelan government, the Unitary Platform, and relevant international experts should work together to develop consultative mechanisms that would strengthen the peacemaking effort. Such mechanisms should go beyond organized civil society to include meaningful consultation with everyday citizens, including victims of Venezuela's multiple crises.

Part of this effort should be public diplomacy – not opening confidential talks to public view, but providing periodic reports that build trust in the negotiators and their work. The democratic opposition should not lose sight of the likely utility of organizing occasional street demonstrations, not to overthrow the government, but to increase opposition leverage. Combining pressure and concessions, in different ways and at different times, is often a valuable strategy for negotiations.

## ***Protecting the negotiating process***

We call for genuine, meaningful, and professional negotiations that sincerely and consistently advance shared interests, solve common problems, and resolve differences through compromise. Some critics will probably attack the negotiating process without presenting any real alternative, perhaps because they are not committed to a negotiated settlement and prefer immediate, rather than incremental, change and often only in their favor. Such attacks, from either or both sides, should not be allowed to derail the negotiations. Both Venezuelan sides should rig-

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rously maintain the confidentiality of the negotiations and a disciplined commitment to persisting, but they should also be open to creative ways to solve difficult problems. Both sides and other actors should keep in mind the dictum that “just when the inevitable approaches, the unexpected comes up.”<sup>13</sup>

There is plenty of room for honest debate on how best to make negotiations successful in reaching a just and lasting outcome. But one clear imperative should be broad national and international support for those who are resolutely re-launching and conducting negotiations that aim to improve Venezuela’s chances for economic and social recovery, restore democratic governance, and strengthen political institutions with adequate checks and balances, as well as cultivate mutually respectful international relations.

Those who participate actively and sincerely in the negotiations and develop constructive working relations with their counterparts should not be attacked as appeasers or traitors, nor as naïve. They are on the whole realists and patriots, each doing his or her part to resolve deep conflicts, step by step, and to advance the interests of Venezuela and its citizens. They seek to overcome a traumatic period that has badly damaged Venezuela, destabilized the region, and harmed millions of their compatriots.

### ***The special roles of the United States and Latin American democracies***

Many nations throughout the Americas and from Europe, and Asia have been engaged in Venezuela, each in pursuit of its own sovereign interests and many in solidarity with one or the other of the contending Venezuelan coalitions. Several have aligned themselves with U.S. policy. Others criticized the Maduro government, but also opposed the U.S. campaign of “maximum pressure.” Still others allied themselves with Maduro and provided his government financing, valuable goods and services, and support in international institutions. If and when negotiations reduce the nature and dimensions of the Venezuelan confrontation, most of these aspects of international involvement in Venezuela should give way to more normal patterns of commercial, educational, technological, and cultural exchange.

<sup>13</sup> See interview with former Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso in Bitar and Lowenthal, op. cit., 27. Cardoso’s interview, and those by Patricio Aylwin, Ricardo Lagos, Felipe González, Tadeusz Mazowiecki and others, present valuable advice about how incremental approaches helped produce transitions from authoritarian governments in their countries.







A Venezuelan grandmother and her granddaughter in Caracas, Venezuela. Source: [Eneas De Troya, Flickr, November 25, 2016](#).

The U.S. government has been the most involved in Venezuela, withholding diplomatic recognition from the de facto government, lobbying other countries to support economic sanctions to change Venezuelan policies or oust Maduro, and dissuading other countries from recognizing Maduro as the president of Venezuela. These efforts did not succeed over time.

The situation in Venezuela has changed and so has the international context. These facts require new and different U.S. responses. The United States should be actively involved in counseling and supporting compromise and democratic coexistence. It should treat the Maduro administration and the Unitary Platform as the most relevant political actors in Venezuela and help make space for the full range of nonviolent parties and organizations, including those associated with *chavismo*. Treating democratic and law-abiding *chavistas* as legitimate participants in Venezuelan public and political life will be essential for any democratic outcome.<sup>14</sup>

***The most important role for the U.S. government will be to coordinate relief from its sanctions with progress in the negotiations; this relief is the most important leverage the opposition has, but the U.S. government in fact controls its employment.***

The most important role for the U.S. government will be to coordinate relief from its sanctions with progress in the negotiations; this relief is the most important

<sup>14</sup> It is noteworthy that Hugo Chávez continues to have an approval rating in Venezuela of about 60 percent, nearly a decade after his death, according to multiple public opinion polls.

leverage the opposition has, but the U.S. government in fact controls its employment. The U.S. government should also provide generous assistance to countries that are absorbing refugees from Venezuela, and should continue to provide Temporary Protective Status to Venezuelan migrants in the United States. It should stand ready to meet reasonable requests from the negotiating parties to help solve practical problems.

***One new feature of the landscape that could help reinforce the negotiations is the coming to power in Colombia, Chile, and Brazil of left-leaning governments that share many values and historical experiences with Venezuela but, unlike the Maduro government, are committed to democracy and the protection of human rights. Indeed, they have at times been critical of the Maduro government, and they clearly favor a democratic transition. Leaders of these governments ... have democratic credibility and direct channels to the Maduro government. They should be encouraged to share their countries' relevant experiences.***

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to share their countries' relevant experiences. Their respect for democratic governance, full protection of political and human rights, institutional reforms to protect the indigenous, Afro-descendants, and other minorities, and social and economic policies to reduce poverty and exclusion could help Venezuelans develop a vision and narrative for the future of their own country.

Their perspectives would likely be more compelling than admonitions from the United States or other countries outside the region. These South American countries have not taken Venezuela's path over the last twenty years, and they can help Venezuelans understand the advantages of political contestation and

One new feature of the landscape that could help reinforce the negotiations is the coming to power in Colombia, Chile, and Brazil of left-leaning governments that share many values and historical experiences with Venezuela but, unlike the Maduro government, are clearly committed to democracy and the protection of human rights. Indeed, they have at times been critical of the Maduro government, and they clearly favor a democratic transition. Leaders of these governments – Gustavo Petro of Colombia, Gabriel Boric of Chile, and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil – have democratic credibility and direct channels to the Maduro government. They should be encouraged





reform through democratic institutions. The U.S. government should respectfully encourage Latin American involvement of this sort, not by fiat or pressure, but by recognizing that these countries may be more effective than Washington in making arguments for democratic governance. They might become a new “group of friends” to accompany the negotiations.

### ***Taking responsibility for peaceful democratic change***

Apportioning blame for Venezuela’s troubles is not likely to spur progress toward repairing the damage and improving Venezuela’s future. On the other hand, negotiations, however constituted and executed, are not guaranteed to succeed. At best they will take considerable time, but they deserve national and international support.

No path is without risk in such highly conflictual circumstances. Yet the risks of fully exploring a negotiated road to genuine democratic governance, respectful coexistence, and economic recovery in Venezuela should now be taken by all relevant actors – after so many years of polarization, repression, and deprivation.<sup>15</sup> The time for an all-out effort to negotiate solutions to Venezuela’s multiple crises is now. That is our central message.

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<sup>15</sup> For an important example, see the analysis of Chevron’s approach to Venezuela, see Collin Eaton, José Córdoba, and Patricia Garip, “Venezuela Return Brings Chevron Risk,” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 5, 2022.

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*The participation in the working group of individuals employed by the U.S. government does not express or imply official endorsement of any of the report's findings or recommendations by the U.S. government, but rather the personal opinions of the signers.*

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**Abe Lowenthal expresses his appreciation to members of the Venezuela Working Group who engaged so actively in preparing this report. He also expresses his gratitude to his wife, Professor Jane Jaquette, for her many contributions to this project.**



*A Venezuelan woman holds flags of Venezuela. Source: Eneas De Troya, Flickr, October 27, 2016.*







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