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### **QI Panel:**

#### What is the New Paradigm of US-Venezuela Relations Post-Maduro?

April 2nd, 2026  
2:00 - 3:00 PM ET

#### **Lee Schlenker**

Well, good afternoon, everybody. My name is Lee Schlenker, and I'm a research associate in the global south program at the Quincy Institute, a trans partisan think tank in Washington, working to rebuild a world where peace is the norm and war is the exception. We welcome everybody to this webinar titled, What is the new paradigm of us Venezuela relations. Post Maduro, now a little bit about our Institute, in the Quincy Institute's research and writing and through our advocacy f we promote ideas that move US foreign policy and national security policy away from military primacy and adventurism and toward a strategy of diplomatic engagement and the defense of our country based on the interests of the American people, not the corporate or political interests that have fueled American wars for the last seven decades.

Today, I am honored to welcome you all to discussion with prominent regional experts as they discuss the future of the United States's economic, political and security relationship with Venezuela in the wake of the first US military intervention in South American history, as well as what this evolution in US Venezuela relations and ties portends for us strategy towards Latin America and the Caribbean under the second Trump administration, 90 days after The United States is bombing of Caracas and dramatic capture of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro. US relations with Venezuela have experienced a historic turnaround. The two countries have reopened embassies. Sanctions on Venezuela's oil and mining sectors have been lifted, and President Trump has praised the leadership of maduro's Vice President del C Rodriguez, while seemingly sidelining opposition leader Maria Corina Machado. Yet even as high ranking US officials and executives flock to Caracas, the country's political and economic decisions remain largely under us control, and the threat of renewed military action looms overhead, while the restoration of sovereignty over some of Venezuela's Internal Affairs appears to be indefinitely delayed.

So to provide some insight into these issues and others, we'll hear from an esteemed panel including Dr Francisco Rodriguez, Dr Julia Buxton and Dr Orlando J Perez.

Dr Francisco Rodriguez is the Rice Family professor in the practice of International and Public Affairs at the University of Denver's Joseph Korbel School of Global and public affairs and a senior research fellow at the Center for Economic and Policy Research. CEPR a native of Venezuela, he has held prominent positions in the public and private sectors and international organizations, including as head of economic and financial advisory of the Venezuela National Assembly, head of the research team at the United Nations Human Development Report office

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and chief Andean economist at Bank of America. Francisco Rodriguez is the author of more than 60 research articles and four books, the most recent of which is titled, *The collapse of Venezuela scorched earth politics and economic decline from 2010 to 2020*

Julia Buxton is a professor of Justice Studies at Liverpool John Moores University, and also a regional head for the Andes at the risk consultancy firm Oxford. Analytica Julia is a senior research associate for Global Drug Policy observatory at the University of Swansea as well. She was previously British Academy global professor at the University of Manchester and associate dean and acting Dean in the School of Public Policy at the Central European University in Budapest. Her PhD research was published as *The failure of political reform in Venezuela*, and she's previously held research, teaching and management positions in Peace Studies at the University of Bradford, Georgetown University, School of Foreign Service and Kingston University.

Orlando Perez is a professor of political science at the University of North Texas at Dallas, where he served as dean of the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences, and he was previously associate dean at the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at Millersville University and chair of the political science department at Central Michigan University. He's worked as a consultant on various topics such as public opinion surveys, democratization, civil, military relations and anti corruption issues for USA ID and the UN Development Program. He served on the scientific support group for the Latin American public opinion project at Vanderbilt University, and directed the America's barometer survey in Panama and in Honduras.

And before beginning our conversation, I'd like to remind our audience members to please put your questions for our panelists in the Q and A section down below on Zoom, which we will be sure to incorporate into today's program. So now, without further ado, I'll dive into my first question, which is for Professor Julia Buxton. Now to start us off, Julia, how would you characterize the relationship between the Trump administration and the interim government of Delcy Rodriguez since the dramatic January 3 bombing of Caracas and the kidnapping of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and his wife Celia Flores.

So President Trump and many of his top cabinet officials, many of whom have traveled to Caracas in recent months, have praised Delcy Rodriguez's leadership and have said that she is cooperating with the administration's priorities. Yet, given the events of January 3, it seems she may have little choice but to comply with many of the administration's request. So to what extent does the current Venezuelan Government retain sovereignty over its internal and its external affairs?

### **Julia Buxton 6:10**

Thank you, Lee, and thank you very much for having me. It's always a pleasure to join any events in the US from this side of the Atlantic. We don't know whether you've descended into some kind of Netflix dystopia by this stage. So it's a real pleasure to be, to be with you. So thank you very much. Just to say, before we start, I think it's very difficult, because we always get

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these questions about, what's Trump thinking, what's Delcy Rodriguez thinking, what's going to happen next? And the real challenge right now is that it's very, very difficult to have any kind of predictive qualities to any of our comments, because we are dealing with the US administration, which I'm sure everybody would concur, is highly, highly unpredictable. In terms of this relationship between Elsie Rodriguez and Donald Trump, it's really quite beguiling, but it also seems to be remarkably constructive in the following way, we may not agree with Donald Trump's trampling over international law and international human rights. We may not agree with Delcy Rodriguez trampling over the Bolivarian constitution and the Hugo Chavez legacy, and certainly there's a limbo right now in Venezuela. We don't know clearly the next steps or the future what's going to happen, but the reality is that for now, it seems that Delcy Rodriguez and Donald Trump have a remarkably strong working relationship, and this is enabling them to unravel two things.

Firstly, these throttle essentially that the Nicholas Maduro presidency had over political developments in Venezuela. And the second aspect of this throttling has been the US sanctions that have we've seen imposed and rolled over by the Trump administration. So I think what's been interesting about this relationship is we do seem to be seeing movement forward. There's not been a lot of pressure at the moment in terms of this relationship. We've not had protests. We've not had any serious kind of threats domestically to Delcy Rodriguez herself. What is she doing? What is she hoping to get out of this? Has she lost sovereignty? Of course, Venezuela has lost its sovereignty right now. But I think the key calculation here for Elsie Rodriguez is actually about the future of Chavismo. And I would make that distinct from madurismo. I would say that many of the appointments that we've seen made by Delcy Rodriguez recently point to this leaning back towards what many within Venezuela would see as the the kind of original ideas of Chavismo. So I would say that certainly what we're seeing here is a surrendering of Venezuelan sovereignty. But the gamble is that the long term is going to enable an electoral, viable proposition for Chavismo to be retained.

### **Lee Schlenker 8:38**

Thanks, Julia, for for your insight about how you would characterize the political relationship in the bilateral sense, between both President Trump and the administration of Delcy Rodriguez. I'd like to bring Francisco into the conversation now to discuss more of the economic side of the relationship.

So Francisco, in your recent book, you discuss the effects of U.S. sectoral sanctions on the Venezuelan economy, particularly their role in helping to fuel the country's unprecedented migration crisis. Yet in the past three months, since the mission that was carried out by US forces on January 3, the Trump administration has been steadily lifting many of those sanctions, particularly in the oil, gas and mining sectors. And we all heard the news yesterday that the Treasury Department is lifting sanctions on Delcy Rodriguez herself. So walk us through a little bit the current state of US sanctions policy towards Venezuela right now, and what impacts if any, is this sanctions relief having, if at all, on key economic indicators in the country, including foreign direct investment, job creation, inflation, purchasing power parity and others?

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### **Francisco Rodriguez 9:43**

Yeah, well, first of all, thankfully and thanks to the Quincy Institute, and I'm delighted to be here with you, Julia, and Orlando having this discussion. So as you pointed out, much of my research over the past few years has centered on the effect of sanctions and how. The extent to which they helped drive Venezuela's economic contraction, and in fact, they contributed. They weren't the only driving factor, but they contributed significantly to the largest growth collapse ever documented outside of wartime, a collapse of 71% in the country's GDP per capita. That's the equivalent of three consecutive great depressions. And basically what happens with the Venezuelan economy is that the Venezuelan economy runs on oil, runs on oil revenues. So if you cut those oil revenues, as happened with sanctions. And of course, nobody's saying that sanctions were the only driver. There were other factors that incited on on the decline in oil revenues.

But the reality is that what we saw during the past decade was a collapse of oil revenues and a collapse of the Venezuelan economy, and they went hand in hand. This economy basically didn't have enough money to import. So what we should be seeing, and we what we even started to see, actually, over the course of the past five years was a recovery in oil revenues, and therefore a recovery also still separate in the Venezuelan economy. What we have seen this year is, on paper, a remarkable lifting of sanctions. In fact, I would say that essentially sanctions for all effects are gone. And what I mean is with one very important caveat, which is that all revenue has to be sold into the so called Venezuela government deposit funds, which are controlled by the US.

But aside from that, if you look at the general licenses that have been issued, they essentially allow PD VESA to carry out any type of economic transactions, and you you're already having also this step of the government being able to regain access to its assets, which also means access to its ability to use international accounts, for example, on behalf of pay visa. So in principle, you're what you're seeing should lead to a huge increase in oil revenues and therefore a huge recovery in the economy. And you've seen, for example, Secretary Rubio talk about the quantities that have been exported. We see data showing that exports are increasing significantly, rapidly. So all of this should lead us to expect to see the Venezuelan economy recovering rapidly.

And in fact, that's what most forecasters are saying now. Now wait, let me briefly mention the dimensions that we're talking about, because this is really important, the if, if the Venezuelan, if Venezuelan oil production recovers, say, by 400,000 barrels, which most people in over the course of the next couple of years, which most experts see as a conservative lower bound. I mean, the discussion is whether the economy can get to 3 million barrels but but pretty much everybody agrees that you can get to 1.4 million barrels. Well, that means that that you go from last year's exports of oil, which were \$18 billion dollars to \$25 billion on top of that, Venezuela is no longer selling at the deep discount that it was selling before because of the sanctions.

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So that, by itself, adds another \$5 billion to revenues. If on top of that, you put current oil prices that, given the crisis in Iran have driven oil prices to around \$100 a barrel. We're actually talking about another \$20 billion so Venezuela could, in principle, go from having \$18 billion in oil revenue to \$50 billion let's forget about the increase in prices associated with the Iran war. Let's just suppose that it's \$30 billion dollars, which is the effect? The other two effects, that's still a lot. I mean, that's a 70% increase in oil revenues. And what the evidence tells you is that the Venezuelan economy expands, essentially, one for one with oil revenues.

Now here's the problem. Where's the money? We don't know. We're not seeing it. We have only been able to document through public announcements that \$800 million have come into the Venezuelan economy so far this year, in the first quarter, Venezuela is has even, by the most conservative estimate, it has exported around \$4 billion so where's the rest of the money? It's not clear. Is it coming in. I mean, the Delphi Rodriguez government seems quite quiet about this. Now, we know that they're not exactly in the conditions to complain, but we don't know whether the Rodriguez government is getting it. We don't know whether the US is keeping it. What do we know? We know that there's no visible sign of improvements on the ground. We know that inflation in February was 620% that is the highest since 2021 which was when the country was coming out of hyperinflation. We know that the Bolivar has lost 80% of its value. So what we're seeing right now is that the optimism that you had a couple of months ago is now being replaced by a lot of concern that we're not getting the recovery that we should be seeing, because it's not clear when that money is going to come into the economy and how.

### **Lee Schlenker 15:09**

Thank you Francisco, that's extremely helpful in providing some of the economic context and the potential pitfalls of the current arrangement or the paradigm that we're seeing. And I would like to get back to you to go in a bit more depth about some of the potential factors that might be curtailing or or dampening the Trump administration's hopes for renewed investment in in the country. But I'd like to turn to Orlando now to talk a bit about the security situation in Venezuela, especially because Orlando, the January 3 military supported law enforcement operation that the administration refers to as Operation absolute resolved is just the tipping point of this administration's increasingly militarized foreign policy towards the western hemisphere, which

One could say, reached its apex on January 3 in Venezuela. But despite predictions from many experts, not just a small, small percentage, but many experts here in Washington and elsewhere, that kinetic action in Venezuela could lead to instability, chaos. I mean, the country has remained relatively stable and calm in the months after the raid. So how are Venezuela's armed forces, as well as irregular non state actors like collectivos, paramilitaries, Colombian guerrilla groups operating in border regions, as well as other organized criminal outfits responded in the wake of the of the US operation three months ago. And how are these security alliances being managed by the government of dels Rodriguez in order to maintain order and cohesion amid a an increasingly complex and evolving situation on the ground?

### **Orlando Perez 16:50**

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Yeah. Well, thank you, Lee for the invitation. Thank you to the Quincy Institute, and it's a pleasure to be with Francisco and Julia in this session. So I would frame it a little bit different. It's been calm on the surface, because the coercive infrastructure that kept Maduro in power is the same infrastructure keeping Rodriguez in power. The colectivos, the paramilitary groups that are headed by the Minister of the Interior are still deployed in neighborhoods. Cabello has been holding regular meetings with collectible leaders, and they have taken up their former role as defenders of the government. They remain embedded in urban neighborhoods and serve as the regimes off the books, coercive capacity, saving the national Bolivarian Intelligence Service and the dgcim, the General Directorate of military counterintelligence, are still operating. In fact, the UN fact finding mission, just recently in March, stated that the complex, quote, the complex legal and institutional machinery enabling repression largely endures. About 87 people have been detained since January, including journalists and civic space remains restricted.

There are signs that some opposition parties are being allowed to reopen their headquarters and their spaces, but we know that the CNE that basically allowed the stealing of the 2024 elections is still in place, and the registration of new political parties has been restricted. We know that the amnesty law did not go far enough, and that that many political prisoners have been denied amnesty protection in terms of the armed actors, specifically the ELN and the FARC gorillas that operate in the border in the porous border region, their status is mercury, I think, than the colectivos or that trendy Aragua, for example, the the cartel that was one of the linchpins of the Trump administration's policy against narco trafficking boats and against and one of the rationales for going into Venezuela, the ELN and the FARC, by all accounts, continue to operate in the in the region. The region remain the border. Region remains porous. Both groups have vowed to continue their operations. There have been reports in some newspapers in Colombia. Data of preparations for bilateral or trilateral military operations against the FARC and Elm camps, but it's unclear if those operations have, in fact, taken place.

The broader point, I think, is structurally these armed actors predate Maduro. They have their own revenue streams and territorial control, and removing one leader from Caracas does not remove the conditions that sustain them. Now, how is Rodriguez? How is Delcy Rodriguez managing this through a calculated combination of accommodation and selective reshuffling. I think we're going to talk later on about the military. But you know, she's kept Cabello, the hardliner with the deepest ties to the security apparatus as interior minister. She's kept the Kelleys tables operational, and with the military, she waited until March to make her move, replacing Padrino and the entire high end, but with figures drawn from the same Chavista security elite the new defense or, for example, Gustavo Gonzalez Lopez is a Former civilian chief sanctioned by both the US and the EU for human rights abuses. A human rights organization in Venezuela basically called it a quote, recycling of impunity. So the key point is that the management strategy here is continuity, not really reform, and it's a management authoritarianism, basically.

**Lee Schlenker 21:49**

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Julie, I'd like to bring you into the conversation on the security and Counter Narcotics sort of context and in Venezuela, as Orlando said, I mean, a major pretext for the operation to remove Nicolas Maduro from power was his alleged role in drug trafficking for which he now stands trial in New York. But in the days following the raid on Caracas, the Department of Justice quietly dropped its claims that the cartel de los soles, which Maduro is alleged to have run, is an actual group, and since that time, administration officials and even a large percentage of the press covers Venezuela has made very little reference to either that group or to the trend that agua, which Maduro is also alleged to have, have directed, according to this administration. So can you explain what is Venezuela's role in drug trafficking and other criminal enterprises now that Maduro no longer leads the country and how does it compare to its neighbors, like Colombia, Ecuador, Brazil, but more fundamentally, has mother's removal changed anything about trafficking networks operating in the country?

### **Julia Buxton 22:56**

Well, just to repeat what Orlando has just said then, which is that you remove one single head of a process or a system, and that doesn't deal with the the underlying infrastructure. So just to reiterate that message from Orlando Lee, let me just give you a small anecdote here on January the 15th, 2013 I started my new job in Budapest, in Hungary, and on that day, I received an email from a US consultancy firm, which we used to get a lot of in those days. And this particular email asked me, if there was a major drug cartel in Venezuela, would it be called a cartel de Bolivar B, cartel de Maduro C? So we went through this list of options of what this cartel might possibly be called.

As a result of that, it comes as absolutely no surprise to me that these allegations were dropped against Maduro. I think clearly what we saw was that the these allegations of drug trafficking were very much linked to these tortured, this kind of tortured effort from the Trump administration, really, to not have to seek congressional approval for military action or boots on the ground. So this arguments about the the drug aspect of the Maduro government was was really a kind of mechanism solely, I think, to secure and legitimize that intervention. The reality is that I think Donald Trump has played to a very tortured and arcane image of drugs cartels and cocaine, one that goes back to the 1970s when cocaine was very expensive and drug cartels actually existed.

That's not the case today. We don't have cartels. We have cartelitos. We have mini franchises. This is kind of a result of the blowback from earlier us Counter Narcotics policies in the region, I would argue, and cocaine is incredibly cheap. We are at the lowest price for wholesale and retail cocaine sales, both in the US and in Europe, than we have ever seen in the history of the post war regime. So really, the idea that Maduro was running a narco regime, the reality is you couldn't run a narco village on the export prices of. Cocaine right now, because these are very, very low Venezuela has never been a cultivator of coca. It's never been a manufacturer of cocaine, and it hasn't been a significant exporting nation. Most of the cocaine which has been going into the US historically has gone through the East Coast, sorry, through the through the

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East Coast, West Coast, sorry, up through the Pacific and into the US. It's not really typically gone through the Caribbean. Venezuela is certainly not a producer of synthetic substances.

So when we're talking about, you know, the impact of Venezuela on the US drug crisis, I think we have to understand that the US has always externalized its drug threat, and it's never looked internally to the roots of its problems. It was the Sackler family that killed 250,000 Americans. It wasn't Nicholas Maduro. So there is a much deeper conversation to have about drug policy within the US. The reality right now, I think, from the UK, the European perspective, is we are very, very seriously concerned that we are going to see much of the cocaine that might have been intended for the US market because of this tremendous US Coast Guard focus and military operation in the Caribbean. Our concern now is that we're going to see this cocaine coming down through Brazil, Colombia, sorry, Brazil, Paraguay, coming up through Africa and into Europe. That's the risk that we're now facing because of these actions by the United States.

The the final point I just like to mention here as well is that in real terms, as I was trying to emphasize here, the drug economy is really not as lucrative as historically has been the case. There is so much money to be made in the current period through illicit gold, illicit mining. There is a whole kind of underground economy right now, people trafficking, money laundering, digital currencies, which are all far more lucrative right now than the drug economy actually is. So the reality is that the crime challenge facing Latin America is evolving, and it's changing dramatically. To associate it with one particular country and to think that it can be addressed through removing one leader, is hopelessly naive, terribly, terribly optimistic. And I think Latin America is really building up some very, very serious crime concerns going forward.

### **Lee Schlenker 27:11**

Thank you, Julia, I think that's a really crucial point. And Francisco, I'd like your your input on on this, this notion of, you know, drug trafficking and the charges that were levied against Nicolas Maduro, perhaps as a pretext for the Trump administration's broader, broader goals and objectives in the country, particularly regarding the country's vast oil reserves, natural gas reserves, and other reserves of critical minerals and and mineral wealth. So you know, we've heard about some of the complex security challenges and other factors that might be impacting considerations by foreign investors, by multinational corporations, including those from the United States, to re enter the Venezuelan market, or not, to the extent that the Trump administration has explicitly sought.

So, along with some of these, you know, maybe security based concerns. Are there other factors, perhaps the ongoing sanctions framework, the opposition's perhaps unwillingness to recognize certain reforms that have been passed by the National Assembly, which we would love your insight on, on the nature of some of these reforms, or, more broadly, the deteriorated state of the country's infrastructure that could be deterring certain companies from from capitalizing on this pretty, pretty surprising shift in US relations towards towards Venice. But what's the foreign investment outlook, which countries are in, which companies are engaging or not, and what are some of the the constraints?

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### Francisco Rodriguez 28:38

Well, the first thing that I would say is that I actually see quite a lot of interest from oil companies to get involved in Venezuela. Venezuela has what by some accounts are the world's largest oil reserves. It's definitely a country that was constrained. It was constrained in its ability to export oil. It was constrained in its ability to import the necessary inputs to produce that oil. So you're opening up a lot of possibilities right now. Now, of course, people make a lot, and some, some, some observers make a lot out of the fact that you've had some oil executives saying, well, but we're not sure that we're going to go back in there. We were expropriated several times. They still owe us money, and you have to take all of this with, I think, more than a grain of salt, probably a few bags of salt, because, you know, I'll go back to the context in which some of those comments were made, which was a meeting in which Donald Trump actually called oil executives to the White House to try to convince them or to invest in Venezuela.

And it's actually not surprising that in that type of setting, you will get some oil executives who are saying, Oh, but we're not sure that we want to invest. We're not sure that the conditions are. Here, because what you really have is a bargain going on with a government, a government that is making very clear, the government of the US, that it wants this investment and companies which immediately see the game and they say, Well, okay, so you know, if we can get conditions from this government, and it's Donald Trump government, including if we can get them to subsidize us, as Secretary Wright said, that they will, that they were going to use the Export Import Bank in order to consider guaranteeing some of these investments, then all for the better.

In fact, for example, I mean, just to pick on one example, Exxon says that Venezuela owes a \$12 billion that's a quite a remarkable statement, given that the case of Exxon against Venezuela went to the World Bank, the Tribunal for the settlement of investment disputes. The Tribunal, in fact, issued a decision. That decision is of an order of magnitude of approximately \$1.5 billion and that has been paid already. Venezuela doesn't owe Exxon anything, according to the decision of the World Bank tribunal. Of course, Exxon is still free to say, well, they owe us money. We don't believe in we don't agree with the decision of the World Bank. Yes. I mean, you can say that, and maybe you can convince the president to fork over, president of the US to fork over \$12 billion because you say that so, so I would take all of those with a grain of salt. I do think that there's, there's a number of factors. Security, I don't think is really that big of a factor for oil production, because oil production is geographically very concentrated. It's not that difficult to secure private oil fields. I mean, even, even if, if the if the Venezuelan armed forces were unable to provide that security, it's not that difficult to bring in security in order to protect it. It's mining is somewhat, somewhat different.

And mining, I do think that you have, first of all, it's a lot more porous. Second, it is, effectively the areas of the mining arc are effectively controlled by by criminal gangs. But I do think that that when you get to oil, that's that's not the basic concern. There is an issue that oil companies worldwide have been trying to make sense of, which is, where are we in terms of oil prices, and do we need to invest in Venezuela or anywhere in the world in producing more oil, and frankly,

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well, that's how volatile the oil market is. I mean, three months ago, the answer to that was, we're not sure, because we have oil prices at around \$50 right now. The answer to that given that we have oil prices at 100 but more importantly, that we have futures markets telling us that this is essentially a long run issue, and that these oil prices are going to persist for a good amount of time, then that completely changes your outlook. But I would go back to, I mean, I do think that first of all, it's important to distinguish between the oil economy and the non oil economy.

The you know, the reality is that you we see oil firms investing in many countries which are completely authoritarian states. And if you I think that there's so that democracy, that there's a lot of value to democracy, intrinsic value to democracy. And I think that democracy is good for economic growth, but I think it's, it's, it's not correct to claim that democracy is necessary for extracting oil. That's just not how the world works. And look at all the major oil producers around the world, they're not exactly democratic countries, so but I do think that in the Venezuelan case, the issue of instability of governance arrangements is a serious one, and it doesn't come from where a lot of people think, I mean, this is not an issue that's easily solved by saying, Oh, well, then we just need to get a democratically elected government in there, and we need to get rid of Chavismo. That it's a lot more complex, among other things, because the when you're talking about security of property rights, you're talking about expropriation risk, and the expropriation risk comes from the fact that a government might say, well, you know, I don't agree with these deals which were made by whom, by the previous administration. I mean it with very few exceptions, governments do not expropriate the firms that they have signed deals with. They expropriate the firms that their predecessor government signed deals with.

So so the big problem, I think, is that you have, you have two, two governments which have this, this newfound relationship that Julie was talking about, which are the governments of del C Rodriguez and the governance of Donald Trump and investors. Don't know how long these are going to be around for either of them. So, so the problem is, is the next government that comes into Venezuela, or is the next government that comes into the US going to respect these agreements, going to think that these in these agreements were good and. And that's where, where I do think that a a particular type of transition to democracy in Venezuela could help, if it's the type of transition that occurs through negotiated agreements in which part of the negotiation is well, let's commit to a certain set of rules of the game for foreign investors, where foreign investors can know that that the agreements that are signed with them in order to enter the country are stable or not going to be questioned in the future.

So there's a national consensus built around a new framework of economic policy that could add a lot of value. But that's very different from just thinking, Oh, you hold elections, a new government comes in, and it's going to solve the problem, because that new government is going to have a new opposition also, and if you continue to have these levels of polarization, that's what generates instability and property rights.

**Lee Schlenker 35:51**

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Thank you, Francisco. I'd love to hear what Orlando has to say about this point, because there's a lot of news about Venezuelan opposition leader Maria Machado. You know she seemingly been sidelined for the time being by the Trump administration. Yeah, we know that she seems to that we she's meeting at least as of this week, with Secretary of State Marco Rubio. She simply symbolically awarded President Trump with her Nobel Peace Prize, and that she plans to return soon to Venezuela, despite warnings for many administration officials against doing so.

Yet, as Francisco said, Machado is not alone in calling for nationwide elections to be held in Venezuela. There's many that we've seen hoping that elections will be held by the end of 2026 as part of what Secretary Rubio has described as a the last of a three phase plan that the administration has devised for Venezuela. So in your view, is Venezuela ready to hold elections, or is this even advisable that the country should hold elections within the next six or, say, 12 months? And if not, what do you believe her faction of the opposition, as well as the strategy of other more moderate factions of the opposition within the country, should be in the interim as they seek to remain relevant in the eyes of both Washington and, more importantly, throughout Venezuela.

### **Orlando Perez 37:09**

Well, the short answer is no, it is not ready at this point to project to have free, competitive, fair elections in six or 12 months. But really it depends. The timetable. Depends on when you start making the deep reforms of the National Electoral Council, of the registration of parties, eliminating the ability of the controller General's office to administratively cancel opposition candidates nominations without judicial due process, the ability to have equal and fair access to the media. Some of that media environment is is getting liberalized, beneficial has a new lease on life, if you will, but, but the collectivos are still there. The repressive, coercive environment is still there, and so no, you're not able to project to those elections and and and the events of the last 48 hours really tells the story, right?

So, as you mentioned, Rubio met with Maria Corina Machado on Monday, and he basically said, you know, free elections must eventually come, but you know, there was no timetable. There's no benchmarks right after that. To contextualize that meeting, you have to think about the decision on Citgo, on the Citco board, and releasing the Citco board to Rodriguez and to the regime from the the National Assembly, from 2019 that that held those board seats the and this seems to be a dance where Washington keeps the opposition on board and quiet and committed to the plan while it continues to solidify its relations with the regimes, right? So Maduro gets sorry, Machado gets a meeting. Rodriguez gets sanctions relief and control of Venezuela's most valuable foreign asset.

The deeper problem, I think, in this question and in the transition question is, I think, the whole issue of transition timetable, and whether we are in a transition or when will we enter that third and fourth. Phase of a transition. Maria Corina channel seems to have tied herself ideologically and politically to Trump's timetable, whatever that may be, the transitions literature is clear on what that costs her most successful democratic transitions have been managed through direct

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negotiations, as Francisco mentioned, between opposition and regime actors, think Chile, think Poland, think South Africa, the opposition brings its popular legitimacy and mobilization capacity to the table and uses that as leverage to extract institutional concessions, electoral reform, media access, security guarantees. What's happening in Venezuela is very different. The opposition is deferring to Washington to manage the negotiations on their behalf, but Washington's interest and the opposition's interest do not fully coincide. Washington wants oil cooperation, migration control, geopolitical alignment. The opposition wants free elections, institutional reform and the release of all political prisoners. When those goals conflict, and they already are conflicting, Washington will prioritize its own interest.

So every month without a defined electoral timetable is another month that the interim government uses to consolidate control over the institutions that are going to shape whether any future election is genuine, free or competitive by the time the date gets set. And I think this is what the Rodriguez duopoly, the Rodrigo as I call it, is moving towards. By the time a date is set, the decisive constraints will already be in place, and that is how a competitive authoritarian regime is built, interestingly enough, and I'll end with this, the OFAC sanctions that were just released over Rodriguez, that were lifted from Rodriguez, these sanctions were imposed in 2018 specifically for her role in undermining democratic institutions and targeting the political opposition, those institutional behaviors continue. So Washington lifted the sanctions anyway. The delisting came with no announced democratic conditions, no requirement for an electoral timetable, and no benchmarks for institutional reform that tells the opposition everything it needs to know if it wanted to know, if it wanted to listen and to see about where democracy sits in Washington's priority list.

And this is the unfortunate reality that I think many that Maria Corina Machado herself is confronting, and many of her followers need to confront very quickly, and I think she's going to have to make a decision sooner rather than later, if she is going to push this timetable forward by basically returning to Venezuela, perhaps returning to Venezuela without the full support of the Trump administration, and pressing her leverage, which is her popularity within the country. It's risky. It'll anger Trump. But I think it's, it's the only way that I see in the short and medium term for there to be some sort of real timetable and benchmark and movement towards democratization within and true regime change in Venezuela.

### **Lee Schlenker 44:01**

Thank you, Orlando. And I'd like to bring Francisco back into the into the fold, particularly diving a bit deeper into this, this concept of election. There's some recent polling in Venezuela that was done last month that found that Venezuela's principal concerns are more material than political, the economy, health care, prices, and while democracy in the country was ranked maybe seventh on Venezuela's list of priorities, polling also found, as Orlando has mentioned, that Maria Corino Machado continues to wield more popularity among the population than Delcy Rodriguez or other figures in her administration.

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But in your view, if Delcy Rodriguez oversees a modest economic recovery in the country, right, and that's assuming that many of the oil revenues externally can come back to the country, which is a big caveat. Do you believe that it's plausible that her governing coalition might win a future presidential election 12 months down the road, or whenever it may occur? And how do you envision the Trump administration handling this scenario? And which a desired transition through the mechanism of free and fair elections potentially results in continuity rather than change. How might the administration respond to something like that?

### **Francisco Rodriguez 45:11**

I mean, I think it's a plausible scenario. I wouldn't necessarily predict that that's what's going to happen. I think, first of all, it's very difficult to predict electoral results and much more so far ahead of time, because I don't think that we're going to have an election in 12 months. I think that we may have an election by 2028 perhaps or maybe even just by 2030 I mean, I think that the quid pro quo, as Orlando was saying, These things typically move slowly. You need a lot of institutional reforms. You need. I mean, I think that the problem, let me stay, stay with this for a minute. The problem with having an election, if you don't lay out the groundwork, is that you could end up in the same situation that you had in 2024 but, this is but the groundwork isn't just, you know, let's set up an electoral council that is transparent and that isn't going to steal the elections. It's a lot more complicated than that, because, in the end, what we see in many cases of disputed elections is that even if the electoral council is independent, if the people in power don't want to give up power, then they just going to evaluate the election results anyway, or they throw the electoral council in jail.

So what you really need is something quite different. What do you need are a set of guarantees that make it to use the language of economists, of game theorists, incentive compatible for the government to actually accept the result of intellectual defeat if that happens. So, so when is it that for the government, it makes sense to say, Well, okay, I lost. I accept. I hand over power to you, whoever the opposition candidates, and I go into the opposition. Well, basic conditions that the government can't think, well, this means that I'm going to go to jail. And that's when we think about the transitions that Rolando was talking about. We think about Chile we think about South Africa. We think about Poland. There was that basic negotiation, a basic set of guarantees, that said, Okay, you guys hand over power. We're not going after you.

And that is something that in many cases, and in those cases, and I think definitely in the Venezuelan case, is going to require a lot more than words, a lot more than promises. It's actually going to require guarantees that are deeply embedded in the institutional framework, so that if a new government, if the opposition wins, and it decides that it's going to persecute Delcy Rodriguez and the people who work with her, Chavismo has an institutional ability to resist and to block that so, so, and that, in fact, is why many times these transitions occur through national unity government. And, for example, in South Africa, the clerk was the vice president. I mean, part of the deal is that the candidate who came in second was going to be vice president for for that first term. So anyway to now, is it possible that that you could have a scenario in which you have an economic recovery and Chavismo recovers? In principle? Yes. And I mean, there's

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huge amounts of international evidence and national evidence in Venezuela that voting behavior is very responsive to economic conditions, and in general, it's actually, it's very difficult, and there are only a few cases in Latin America for incumbents to actually lose elections.

So there's what's called the incumbency bias is very strong, and one of the conditions under which incumbents lose elections is when you have a major economic crisis. So if you take out that major economic crisis, the the normal prediction should be, if the government should win an election, the incumbent should should win an election if the if the economy is expanding now. Now, however, it's interesting, because in the case, for example, of Maduro so Chavez says popularity was very responsive to economic conditions, and when the economy started recovering strongly, in 2004 he won the recall referendum. Then he won re election that he won re election again in 2012 and then when the economy started attacking under Maduro, Maduro started losing, losing elections, right? Or he started needing to rig them, but, but Maduro nevertheless reached the floor in electoral support, which is actually going to quite, quite remarkable.

I mean, even if we take the opposition's result in 2024 the results that the opposition claims, I think correctly, that characterized the elections, and the amount of votes and Maduro getting after this deep economic crisis, getting more than 30% of the vote is actually quite remarkable. I mean, you don't see that in many Latin American. You certainly don't see that in Peru, where presidents you know are lucky to get out of office with high single digit approval rating. So, so, so, so that tells you also that there is, and I think that there continues to be, if this, this resilient movement of Chavismo, which is going to vote for the Chavista candidate, kind of, whatever the conditions are so.

So really, what you have is the electorate that continues to be split into three polls, Chavismo, a hardcore opposition, and then you have in the middle, around 40% of voters who are essentially very sensitive to to the economy, who might but the economy is not the only thing that drives them, because these voters became very anti Maduro, not just because the economy was very was doing poorly because they also rejected Maduro because he was authoritarian, because of the repression. But I think that if there's a Rodriguez is able to cleanse herself of that image and runs a government that is respectful of human rights, that doesn't have political prisoners, that allows and the freedom of speech in the press and under which economic conditions can improve, then I do think that you could very likely get Chavismo and get her or another Chavista candidate doing well in the next presidential elections. How is the Trump administration going to react? Well, I'm not sure that by the time that that happens, the Trump administration is going to be in office, but I do think that this is going to and if it's going to split the Venezuelan opposition again between those who are not going to want to recognize those results and those who will, and that will see itself reflected in reactions in the United States and in the international community at the same time, I think that given how protracted the Venezuelan crisis has been, the continued isolation of Venezuela, how difficult it has been to resolve.

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This process, if you have an electoral process which is reasonably transparent, with impartial with an impartial electoral and credible electoral council, with international observers, and the vote count says that the Chavista candidate won, then I think it's, I think that that government will have more than enough domestic and international legitimacy to continue governing the country, and I think that any attempts to isolate an administration like that are probably going to face a lot of problems.

### **Lee Schlenker 52:36**

That's very important point Francisco, and I think that's it leads nicely into our into our next question. As we, as we wrap up the webinar with just about eight, nine minutes left, I'd like to turn over to Julia and moving away from the topic of elections, more about sort of the geopolitics of this, what's been called the decapitate and delegate model, right? Is this a new paradigm that we're seeing that's applicable for the rest of the region in which the Trump administration is seeking increased leverage and control over certain countries, and then can sort of install political outcomes that it seeks through more compliant regimes and pushing off elections for a later date. I mean thinking about Cuba, but also, you know, there's the case of Mexico, Panama, Colombia, other countries that are in the administration's crosshairs. Is this a replicable model, and what are the constraints that the administration faces in dealing with other countries in the way that it seems to be dealing with with Venezuela right now? And are there other potential long term ramifications of this so called decapitate and delegate model.

### **Julia Buxton 52:36**

I'll give you a quick answer. Lee, I very much hope it's not a model for the future. I'm very disappointed that actually it's a recycling very much of traditional us strategies of focusing on kingpins and focusing on leaders and recurrently throughout history. The single lesson that seems to have not been learned is that removing individuals does not substitute for meaningful institutional and political change. I think the situation in Cuba will be approached in a very, very different manner by the United States. I think there are very, very different long term plans for Cuba, and the positioning of Cuba within the Western Hemisphere, strategy is very distinct from that of Venezuela.

But I think right now, this idea of decapitations going forward as being a coherent U.S. strategy is not something that is acceptable in international law. Will face a tremendous pushback from countries in Europe, is enabling China to reposition itself as being actually the kind of articulator of the international rule of law, which is quite a turnaround for China right now, and ultimately, we have to hope that the US does get back onto a platform of really promoting international human rights and the rule of law. But just to reiterate, what's happening in Venezuela is not new. In US strategy. We have a long history of assassination and leadership removal.

### **Lee Schlenker 55:02**

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Orlando, what do you think about this? This issue? I mean, particularly given the fact that US troops have been dispersed from the region, like the the ones that captured Maduro on January 3, they've been stretched into other theaters. And the Trump administration, as we've discussed today, seems to perceive that it's reaping broad economic and geopolitical benefits from this current, current arrangement. So based on what Julia said, is it plausible that US forces will be able to deploy the credible threat of renewed military force against Venezuelan leaders del C Rodriguez, or otherwise, in a potential scenario of non compliance, overt or, or, or more subtle, with, with the administration's directives.

And where are those red lines for the for the administration? I mean, we have a question about Venezuela's relations with Iran, with with China, with Cuba, the trajectory of those geopolitical relationships. I mean, are there areas where the administration is sort of granting Venezuela's authorities maybe more leeway that has surprised you and and what are those red lines? And do you see the fact that military force could be renewed as as plausible in the current, current scenario?

### **Orlando Perez 56:17**

Well, I mean this, this administration has made it its mo to cross red lines, to cross red lines domestically, to cross red lines internationally. But you know, it's, it's, it's gold for lightning to strike in a bottle twice, and the infrastructure of the arrangement that is being developed in Venezuela make it, I think, very difficult for there to be a follow on kinetic action somehow Rodrigo del C and Jorge and the Osdalo and company somehow rebel, or something happens that they distance themselves from, from Washington. I don't see that that happening now. There are, there are instances we see the deployment of of troops, for example, to Ecuador. We see, for example, in the shield of the Americas framework that the Trump administration is creating, which is the operation which I call, in a piece that just came out in just security, which I call the sort of operational component of the National Security Strategy, 2025 in which it is trying to re militarize the drug war, re, militarized policing and and, and Stephen Miller made it explicit, right? Send in your military. Don't send in lawyers, right? So the NSS 2025, emphasizes leverage, emphasizes transnational crime, migration control, denying strategic space to or extra hemispheric powers like China and Russia, right?

So it's a coercive framework for managing US relations and for exercising us sphere of influence in the region, democracy promotion in the traditional sense, does not appear right? So the administration seems to become authoritarian partners, as long as they cooperate on the issues that Washington cares about. That is a pattern we see in Venezuela. It's has implications for every country in the region, that wrong side of Washington's preferences, and I think it has very long term effects on on US Latin American relations. It may have some short term benefits, because we have some right wing governments that are aligned with Trump. But in the but in the long term, we are sowing the seeds of leftist populist nationalist leaders rising again, maybe in Venezuela, but certainly in other places in the region, through this sort of hard power coerce management policy.

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### **Lee Schlenker 59:53**

Great. Thank you. Orlando to wrap up, and I know we're at the hour, but I just need one minute from our three panelists to tell. Tell me and our audience, as the Trump administration has reopened its Embassy in Caracas, right we see Laura dougla, a career diplomat, leading the mission, and at the same time, Venezuelan diplomat Felix Placencia now being here in Washington as a representative, in your view, just one minute each, what would be one key priority and one ongoing obstacle for both of these diplomats as we seek a more productive relationship between the United States in Venezuela, as each of the countries are reviving their diplomatic footprints in both both capitals, if you were advising each of them, what were the one sort of priority and the one flag or obstacle you would point out start with Julia.

### **Julix Buxton 1:00:47**

Oh, my goodness. I think first of all, just to say that there was generally, I think, on this side of the Atlantic, the appointment of dogu was very well received. Venezuela has historically been such an important country for the US, but always neglected in terms of I think it's diplomatic culturing. I think the priority for the US right now is formalizing us recognition of Venezuelan sovereignty. I think that the diplomacy and embassies are going to play a key role in navigating these confidence building mechanisms, particularly in the context that we've heard from Orlando and Francisco, in terms of these deeply, deeply politicized institutions in Venezuela, for the Venezuelan government is going to be, I think, reopening consulates in order to support those many Venezuelans who are overseas and try and re establish its presence and its visibility in the United States.

### **Lee Schlenker 1:01:39**

Thank you, Julia, Francisco?

### **Francisco Rodriguez 1:01:41**

Yeah, well, you asked if I were advising these administrations, and I would start out with the caveat that I don't think that they'd necessarily pay attention to me, nor necessarily kind of like my recommendation, but, but, but I would focus on or I would advise both sides to establish a mechanism through which Venezuela can stably and transparently have access to its resources and be able to define how to use them in the development of its nations. First of all, I'd be very wary of creating any type of institutional stability around the current arrangements in which the US has this veto power over whatever Venezuela proposes. And effectively, the US decides how much money gets back to Venezuela and what's done with that money, or at least that's what they they claim is going on, and, and, and I think that this goes beyond that of the current Venezuela administration. I think that that type of external control, which actually looks very much like what the US tried to do in many countries in Latin America at the beginning of the 20th century, such as Cuba, Haiti, Dominican Republic, all which ended disastrously, because that it leads to an atrophy of Domestic Institutional capability. What we have to do is rebuild

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Venezuelan institutions that that mean means rebuild the capacity of the Venezuelan government to decide what to use, how to use its resources.

Now, at the same time, I understand that there's a concern for transparency and for controlling that use and for safeguarding that we don't end up in a distorted pattern where those funds are siphoned off to corruption or to repression. So the question is, how do we set up institutions of accountability over the use of resources which are transparent and credible, and for example, Orlando mentioned earlier, the role of the Controller General. Now the fact that the Controller General actually has this power to invalidate candidacies and the ability of former public officials to be candidates it's actually a side note. It's been very important. It's a side note to what the office is supposed to do. This office, its main role is to ensure accountability in the use of public resources. So I think that if we, if we focus on rebuilding the controller General's office, then then the reason why they're supposed to be external oversight is going to go away, and we can go back to to a more normal but also transparent use of those resources.

### **Lee Schlenker 1:04:31**

Wonderful and Orlando, final thoughts about your recommendations for each of the two diplomatic representatives, as well as a potential obstacle?

### **Orlando Perez 1:04:39**

So the first thing I want to say is that both of them are Dogo and Placencia. Both of them are career have a history of being career diplomats. I was pleasantly surprised at the appointment as charged affair at Google, who has a long history in Colombia and. In Honduras in Latin America. I think I would say that dogu has the harder mission, which is to balance the Trump administration's volatility and tendency for for chaos, with what I think is is key, which is to try to push for some sort of timetable for democratization and transition and and reforms, working within her remit, but also trying to push those key changes, being a neutral broker, if you will, between the opposition and and the the regime. Very, very difficult. Placencia has the the mission of trying to reopen and normalize fully relations between Venezuela and and the United States.

I think for me, for me, the key in the next few months is going to be what happens to the timetable and the conversation and the benchmarks for real institutional changes that could begin to set up a real transition, if that is where we are moving. And what does Maria Corina Machado does? Does she return to via Miraflores, meaning, through a negotiated process that allows her to come in and organize, or does she come in in some other fashion, clandestinely, and then pushes the timetable forward? That's going to be a big tell. I will end with this. I think a lot will be learned by November, and whether or not the Republicans keep control of the Congress on this side of you know, the Atlantic, because I think that's going to that's going to mean, or going to reflect new constraints that the Trump administration might have moving forward and solidifying whatever policy and whatever timetable they're going to want to solidify going forward.

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**Lee Schlenker 1:07:44**

Thank you so much Orlando and so I would appreciate a warm round of applause virtually from all of our audience members, for our three esteemed panelists, for all of your expertise, and to all of you in the audience, our viewers today for tuning in before I let you go though, I'd like to mention that the Quincy Institute's next webinar is a book talk that's titled money beyond borders, global currencies from crisis to crypto, and it'll be held on Thursday, April 9, from one to 2pm Eastern time. So you can register for that upcoming event by going to our events page at [quincyinst.org/events](http://quincyinst.org/events) you can also subscribe to the Quincy Institute mailing list from our homepage [Quincy inst.org](http://Quincy inst.org) so you'll receive invitations to all of our events and also be able to follow our future work. Thank you again today to Dr Julia Buxton, Dr Francisco Rodriguez and to Dr Orlando J Perez for joining our efforts to promote ideas that move US foreign policy away from endless wars toward military restraint and toward diplomacy in the pursuit of international peace. Have a nice afternoon.

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