

Delcy Rodríguez has a Gun Pointed at her Head – Does She have Options?

STEVE ELLNER

Donald Trump's success in wresting concessions from Venezuela's interim President Delcy Rodríguez is a clear demonstration of what can be achieved through the barrel of a gun. Just hours after the military incursion that resulted in the kidnapping of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and First Lady Cilia Flores on January 3, Trump boasted "we're going to run the country" and shortly thereafter called himself Venezuela's "acting president." He has also heaped praise on Rodríguez for serving both U.S. and Venezuelan interests, explaining "[She's](#) doing a great job because she's working with us."

It's not hard to understand why Rodríguez – whose father was a revolutionary martyr – has been so compliant. On January 3, just hours after the kidnapping of Maduro and Flores, Trump publicly threatened then vice-president Rodríguez and other Chavista leaders with what amounted to decapitation, along with a far larger military assault. According to [Rodríguez](#), Rubio by phone gave her and the second-in-command Diosdado Cabello 15 minutes to acquiesce to Washington's new terms or face death. As she put it, "the threats and the blackmail are constant."

Some [critics](#) of the leftist government question the credibility of Rodríguez's claim. Her version, however, makes perfect sense. Trump himself repeatedly made similar threats in public, though couched in more oblique language. And decapitation is exactly what Washington subsequently did to much of Iran's leadership.

Washington's toolkit of coercive measures against Rodríguez includes the use of blackmail. Reuters reported in March that federal prosecutors "[put together](#) possible corruption and money laundering charges, and have communicated to Rodríguez that she is at risk of prosecution unless she continues to comply with Trump's demands." The prosecutors' money-laundering allegation in the Venezuelan oil industry is a code word for circumventing U.S.-imposed sanctions.

Trump touts the benefits the United States derives from the neocolonial relationship he has established with Venezuela. On August 28, he announced the reaching of "the [biggest](#) oil deal in world history" which gives the U.S. priority treatment for the sale of 65 billion barrels of proven reserves in their entirety, greater than those in the U.S. Other generous aspects of the deal include 20 percent of the oil production to be purchased at cost by the State Department and the Pentagon's 35 percent ownership of the operating company.

The threat of military force is only part of the explanation for Rodríguez's willingness to accept the deal. The devastating toll that a decade of severe U.S.-imposed sanctions has taken on Venezuela's state-run basic industries such as oil, gas, electricity, and telecommunications has to be brought into the picture. The sanctions impaired the ability of the state oil company PDVSA to maintain, repair, replace and operate equipment, as has been recognized by the U.S. congress' [Congressional](#) Research Service and [nonpartisan](#) research organizations.

In the latter years of his rule, Maduro acknowledged the deterioration and turned increasingly to private capital. Among those who benefited was Alejandro Betancourt who, unlike Venezuela's

traditional bourgeoisie, had developed close ties with the Chavista government. The new 65-billion-barrel deal under Rodríguez designates Betancourt as the key operator and in doing so recognizes that he is better positioned to attract vast sums of foreign capital than a highly deteriorated PDVSA. The system of sanctions intimidated everyone involved in Venezuela's oil industry, forcing operations into secrecy and creating fertile ground for corruption. Betancourt himself was accused of illicit dealings. Despite these charges, Chavista leaders prefer dealing with businesspeople like Betancourt, rather than the traditional elite that spearheaded several attempts to topple Chávez. Most of the blame for the corruption rests with Washington.

For all Trump's warm words about Rodríguez, the sanctions that have inflicted such damage on the Venezuelan economy remain in place. Trump has only selectively loosened them by issuing individual "licenses" in order to favor U.S. capital.

Navigating or Selling Out?

On several occasions, pressure and threats from Washington forced Rodríguez to swallow her nationalistic pride as a longtime leftist. One was Venezuela's cooperation with the U.S. Southern Command in carrying out the air strike in June that killed Niño Guerrero, the top leader of the notorious gang Tren de Aragua. Compare that with Mexican president Claudia Sheinbaum's repeated refusal to accept joint military operations on Mexican territory against drug cartels.

In addition, following Venezuela's highly destructive dual earthquakes on June 24, Rodríguez met with an Israeli delegation that included military officers at the presidential palace and praised Israel's role in the relief efforts. Chavista demonstrators protested the U.S. and Israeli military presence following the earthquake with the slogan "[This](#) Isn't Aid, It's Occupation." President Chávez had broken relations with Israel in 2009.

The problem, of course, isn't just foreign policy. The Rodríguez government has reformed Chávez's flagship legislation the Organic Hydrocarbon Law (LOH), which had set off the abortive coup against him in April 2002. Rodríguez's reform, which modified the LOH in fundamental ways, set the stage for Trump's "biggest oil deal in history."

In the early months of Rodríguez's presidency, some on the left credited her ability to navigate such a precarious situation. Former Italian Red Brigades militant Geraldina [Colotti](#) called it "an act of political maturity in a context of unprecedented blackmail." Now, however, her deference to Washington has divided the U.S. left, as it has in Venezuela.

Those who support the Rodríguez government run the risk of ultimately being viewed as lending support for an imperial project. Defending Trump's "biggest oil deal in history" is particularly uncomfortable because leaders on the other side of the political spectrum are denouncing its lack of transparency. Amazingly, economist Ricardo Hausmann, one of the main architects of Venezuela's neoliberal project of the 1990s, calls the deal "[the most](#) imperialistic thing the U.S. has ever done in its history."

Particularly worrisome is the prospect that the Trump administration abruptly changes course and opts for regime change, before Rodríguez's strategy for economic recovery gets off the ground. Such a shift from transactional pragmatism – it's all about the oil – to rabid anti-

communism is in line with the position championed by Marco Rubio and other right-wing hawks. The break with Rodríguez is predictable, though not the timing.

Thinking Strategically

Progressive activists have to place Trump's imposition of the notorious Monroe Doctrine – now the Donroe Doctrine – at the forefront of all solidarity work. The [pro-Venezuela](#) and pro-Cuba solidarity movements have shown that the most committed activists are those who to varying degrees sympathize with those governments not the ones who demonize them.

It's easy to say that Rodríguez, her brother Jorge, Cabello and the other top Chavista leaders should simply say no to Trump and walk away rather than negotiate in such an unequal relationship. That's what some on the left advocate. But is abandoning power or inviting military retaliation at this moment an option?

Juan Carlos Monedero, a former leader of Spain's Podemos party and advisor to Chávez, told me: "The Chavista leadership under Delcy should consider abandoning power since the relationship with Washington is just too asymmetrical. The Sandinistas did that in 1990 and then returned."

Relinquishing power, however, would mean turning it over to the extreme right led by María Corina Machado, who has many powerful supporters in Washington. If you go back to the 48 hours during the 2002 coup when the right-wing opposition unleashed repression against the Chavistas – with dozens killed – or if you examine Machado's vindictive rhetoric over the years you will know what is in store for the Chavistas and the social movements if she reaches power: repression Pinochet style. In addition, her slogan "popular capitalism" – which she borrowed from Margaret Thatcher and Pinochet – underscores the extreme neoliberal policies that she embraces. The burden is on those on the left who demonize Rodríguez to explain what realistic strategy they advocate.

Moreover, a Machado government would add to the growing number of far-right, pro-Trump governments belonging to the "Shield of the Americas," an alliance committed to militarization under the banner of combating drugs, but with the real aim of driving China from the region. At the founding summit of the Shield in Doral, Florida in March, Trump reportedly phoned Machado, put the call on speaker, and told her "[Everybody](#) loves you here."

Chávez, Maduro and Rodríguez have drawn inspiration from the example of China. During one of her many official visits to China in 2025, Vice-President Rodríguez praised the Chinese economic model as "[an example](#) of dignity, resilience and economic growth." A guiding principle of China's foreign policy, dating from Mao's death in 1976, was Deng Xiaoping's dictum "hide your strength, bide your time." The phrase basically means that when the correlation of forces is unfavorable, don't antagonize or alarm your enemy. This is precisely what Rodríguez is doing. Objective conditions in Venezuela – the result of a veritable [war](#) waged from Washington – and subjective conditions – the resultant erosion of enthusiasm even among the Chavistas – are highly unfavorable. The strategy may invite criticism given the obvious

differences between Communist China and capitalist Venezuela, but it is hardly far-fetched – and even less so counterrevolutionary.

Rodríguez's pragmatic strategy is in line with the general mood of the country – cutting across the political spectrum. Venezuelans as a whole are exhausted from the devastating effects of Washington's war on Venezuela which played a central [role](#) in driving the average workers' income down by roughly 80 percent since the mid-2010s. The call by Machado's followers grouped in the Vente Venezuela party for mass protests against Rodríguez has not materialized.

Agree to Disagree

One searches history in vain for a close parallel to what is unfolding in Venezuela. Consider: an imperial power kidnaps a country's president, then reaches agreements and establishes friendly relations with his vice-president who remains committed to the ideals of the movement they both represent. For Rodríguez, the uniqueness presents a formidable challenge.

The Left must also recognize that, more than is usually the case, crucial pieces of the puzzle remain unclear. Most important, nothing is known about the negotiations between the Rodríguez government and the Trump administration. [Time](#) reports that “Rubio and Rodríguez are in nearly daily contact through phone calls and WhatsApp messages,” but without revealing the details. The key question is just how far Rodríguez can go in defending Venezuelan interests without triggering a turnaround on the part of the all-too-erratic Trump. At what point will Trump go from his transactional, pragmatic mode to his anti-Communist mode and promote regime change in Venezuela?

Critics of the Rodríguez government are right to warn that alliances with sectors of the bourgeoisie, as represented by Alejandro Betancourt, could open a Pandora's box which ends up corrupting the broader project of change. But drawing clear lines between friends and foes from within may have to wait for better times, when real options are on the table.

Meanwhile, the solidarity movement needs to remain united, even with diametrically opposed viewpoints on the Rodríguez government. The starting point has to be an acknowledgment of the uniqueness of the moment and of how much remains unknown. Most important, the movement needs to stay focused on combating the atrocities committed by Washington: the liberation of Maduro and Flores, the lifting of all sanctions and the return of billions of dollars of Venezuelan assets seized abroad at the behest of Washington. There should be no doubt that the blame for Venezuela's dire situation both before and after January 3 lies squarely with Washington.

Steve Ellner is a retired professor of the Universidad de Oriente in Venezuela where he lived for over 40 years and is currently Associate Managing Editor of *Latin American Perspectives*. He is the author and editor of over a dozen books on Latin American politics and history. In 2018 he spoke in over twenty cities in the U.S. and Canada as part of a Venezuelan solidarity tour.