MIRANDA CENTER
FOR DEMOCRACY

COLOMBIA

Laundering Maduro's Legitimacy:

How Gustavo Petro helped Nicolás Maduro stay in power after Venezuela's July 28, 2024 presidential election



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Introduction

This report examines the Gustavo Petro government's position toward the Maduro government in Venezuela, from the restoration of bilateral ties in 2022 to the U.S. military operation that captured Nicolás Maduro in Caracas on January 3, 2026. Its central episode is the Venezuelan presidential election of July 28, 2024, and the diplomatic sequence that followed: the presidential silence of July 29–30, the abstention at the Organization of American States (OAS) on July 31, and the months of mediation efforts that came after.

The documentary record runs from 2022 to January 3, 2026, and centers on the period after July 28, 2024. Later developments are noted only where they bear directly on that record, notably the findings of Colombia's Office of the Attorney General (Fiscalía) in March 2026 on the assassination of Senator Miguel Uribe Turbay and Petro's response to Colombia's 2026 presidential election. The report does not examine developments inside Venezuela after January 3, 2026, including changes in the presence of Colombian armed groups there.

The report is organized in two parts. **Part One** sets out the documentary record: dates, figures, votes, and statements on the public record. **Part Two** sets out the analysis the report draws from that record, including its conclusions and policy considerations.

For this report, the Miranda Center distinguishes between **passive and active legitimation** in international relations. Passive legitimation is silence, or recognition of a government without conditions. Active legitimation is diplomatic work that shapes the international response, for example by steering it toward requests for verification and calls for dialogue, or by maneuvering within bodies such as the OAS.
The analysis in Part Two applies one test to the main diplomatic actions recorded in Part One: whether each raised or lowered the international cost of the electoral fraud of July 28, 2024.



PART ONE

01

The Documentary Record

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1. The Bilateral Relationship before July 28, 2024

1.1 The Inherited Situation and the Restoration of Ties

Gustavo Petro took office on August 7, 2022. In February 2019, under President Iván Duque, Venezuela had broken diplomatic relations with Colombia.[1] Colombia was also a founding member of the Lima Group, created in 2017 to coordinate a regional response to the Venezuelan crisis.[2] Colombian exports to Venezuela fell from a peak of about $6.1 billion in 2008 to $673 million in 2023.[3] The two countries share a 2,200-kilometer border.

Source: DANE

$6.1B

2008 | Colombia exports to Venezuela

$673M

2023 | Colombia exports to Venezuela

Within weeks of taking office, Petro restored relations without conditions; Armando Benedetti arrived in Caracas as ambassador on August 28, 2022.[4] Benedetti, a former senator and one of Petro's closest political allies, was not a career diplomat. Press reports credited him with delivering the Caribbean coast vote in the presidential campaign and described him as holding sensitive political information from within Petro's inner circle, some of which surfaced in 2023 in a wiretapping scandal and in a separate scandal over illegal campaign financing.[5]

The Pacto Histórico (Historic Pact) coalition that brought Petro to power included politicians with long-standing ties to the Venezuelan government, such as the late Senator Piedad Córdoba, who, according to press reports, introduced Alex Saab to Venezuela's inner circle of power.[6]

Saab, a Colombian businessman, was charged in the United States in July 2019 with money laundering tied to a Venezuelan government housing contract.[7]

1.2 Documented Positions on Sanctions, Migration, and Regional Alignment

Petro began his political career in the M-19 guerrilla movement. Well before becoming president, he had publicly expressed sympathy for the Chavista project: he met Hugo Chávez in 1994, and after Chávez's death in 2013 described him as a great Latin American leader.[8] On March 5, 2016, during a visit to Caracas for the third anniversary of Chávez's death, he posted a photograph of a well-stocked supermarket and questioned media reports of food shortages (Figure 1). The post drew widespread criticism from Venezuelans on social media.[9]



Figure 1. Gustavo Petro's post on Twitter (now X) from Caracas, March 5, 2016. Source: @petrogustavo.

In office, three positions recurred in the administration's statements and actions on Venezuela:

1

Sanctions as the cause of the economic crisis

The administration attributed Venezuela's economic collapse primarily to U.S. and international sanctions.[10]

2

Migration as a consequence of sanctions

Petro attributed the exodus of millions of Venezuelans to economic sanctions, which he described as a "blockade" (Figure 2).[11]

3

A regional realignment away from Washington

The administration questioned the OAS's impartiality and clashed publicly with Washington,[12] sought closer alignment with Cuba,[13] rejoined the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) in 2023,[14] and aligned with left-leaning ideological blocs sympathetic to Caracas.

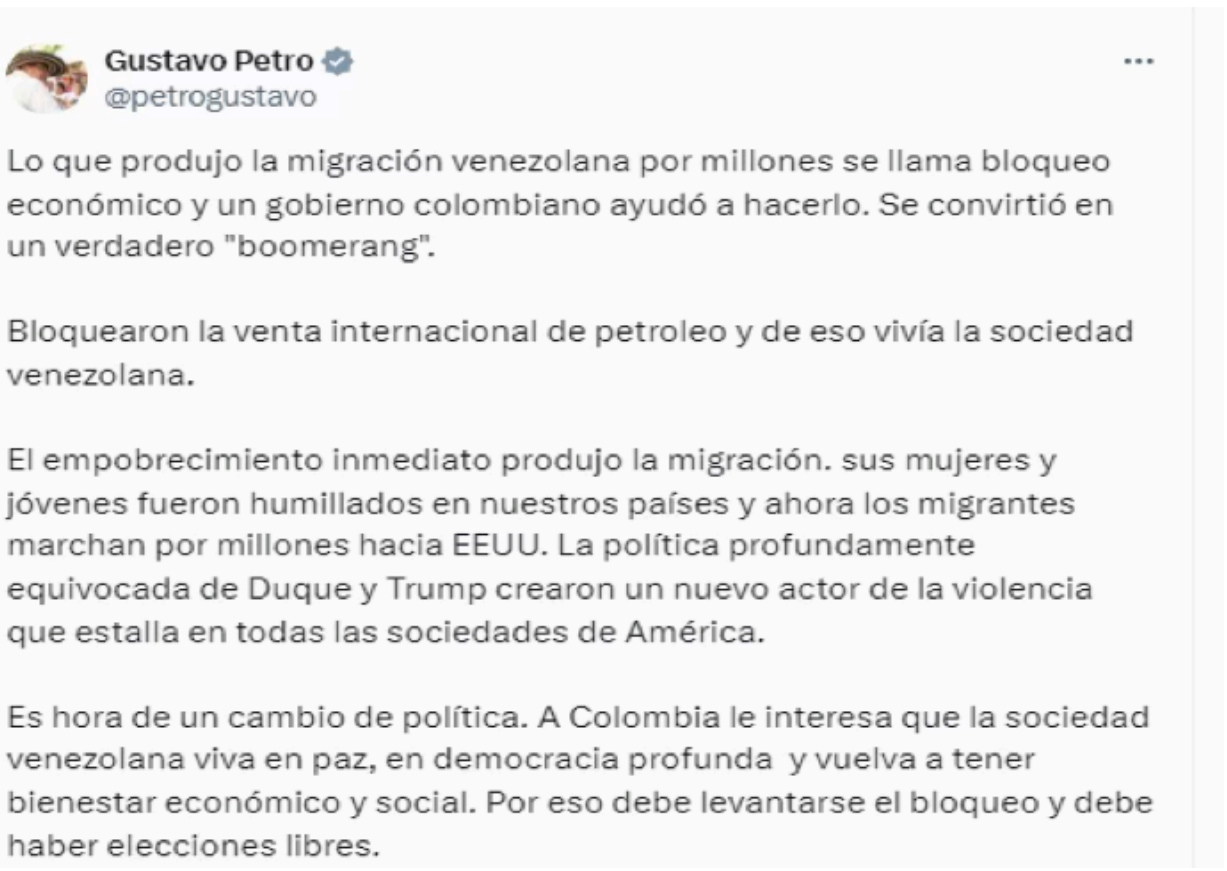


Figure 2. Gustavo Petro's post on X, January 25, 2025, attributing Venezuelan migration to the "economic blockade." Source: @petrogustavo.

1.3 Energy Cooperation Initiatives and Announcements

By 2023, the bilateral agenda included energy cooperation, centered on proposed joint ventures between Ecopetrol, Colombia's largest oil and energy company, and Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PDVSA), Venezuela's state oil and gas company.[15]

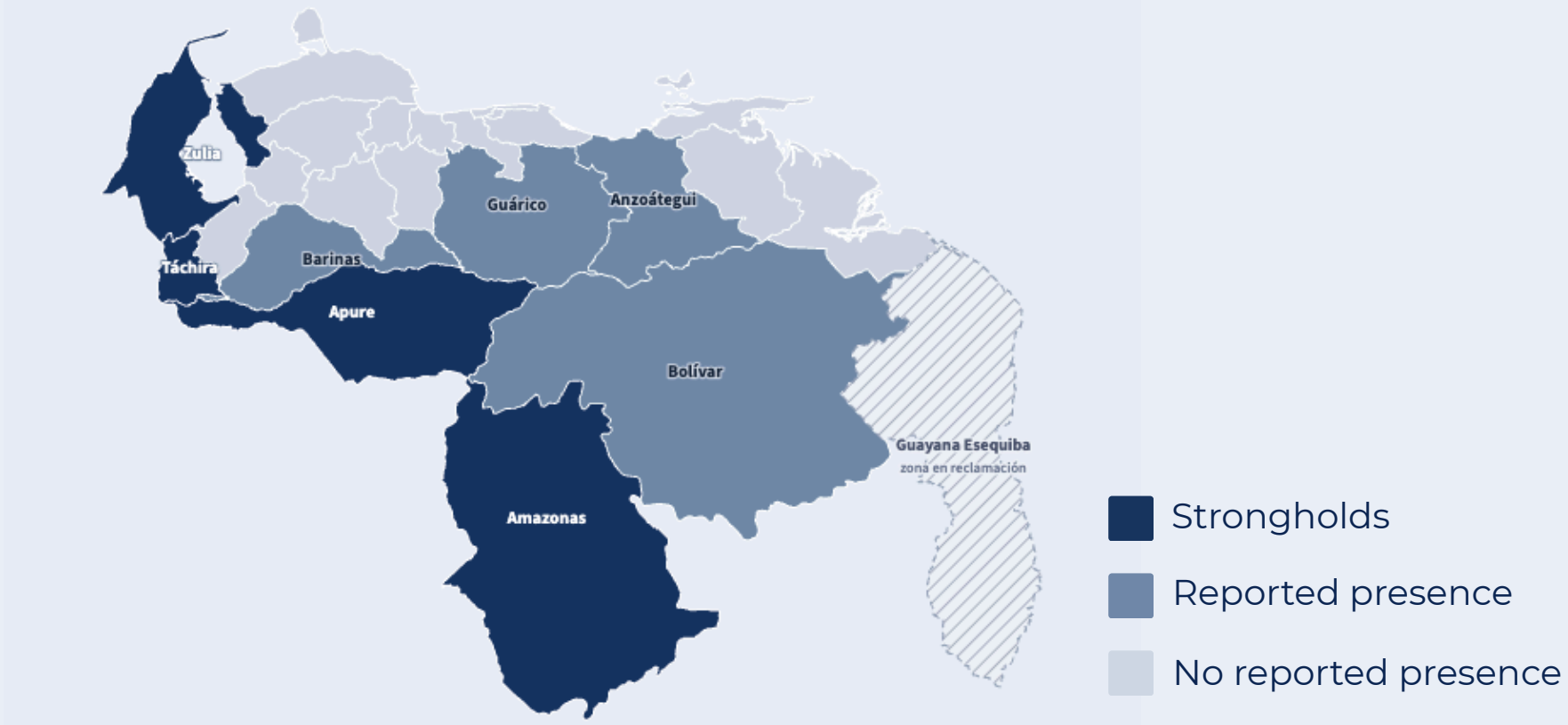


In November 2023, after a meeting in Caracas, Petro said it was likely that Ecopetrol would enter joint ventures with PDVSA.[16] The stated objective extended beyond purchasing Venezuelan gas to producing it on Venezuelan territory to support Colombia's energy transition. Petro had campaigned on ending new oil and gas exploration contracts, and his government stopped signing them, while contracts signed before August 2022 continued to run.[17] Three days after the announcement, responding to critics, Petro said that Colombia would not explore in Venezuela, while leaving open the possibility of commercial production there.[18] Two former finance ministers, José Manuel Restrepo and Juan Camilo Restrepo, and Senator David Luna had described the position as incoherent the day after the announcement.[19]

1.4 Paz Total and the Presence of Colombian Armed Groups in Venezuela

Paz Total (Total Peace), the policy framework set out in Law 2272 of 2022,[20] involved simultaneous negotiations with Colombia's armed groups. Venezuela was one of the original guarantor countries of the talks with the National Liberation Army (ELN), with Cuba and Norway, and, according to intelligence reports, a rear base for the armed groups with which the administration was negotiating.

According to InSight Crime, the ELN operated in at least eight Venezuelan states, with its main strongholds in the border states of Amazonas, Apure, Táchira, and Zulia and a presence extending into Anzoátegui, Barinas, Bolívar, and Guárico.[21] In 2024, Colombian military intelligence estimated that 1,276 of the ELN's 6,158 members were in Venezuela.[22] In 2022, according to InSight Crime, the ELN helped expel the 10th Front, a dissident faction of the former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), from the state of Apure "using a strategy of direct confrontation alongside Venezuela's armed forces"; Venezuelan forces had begun their own operations against that front in 2021.[23] InSight Crime has described elements of the Venezuelan state as the ELN's "most important allies" in the country. Residents and FARC dissidents reported that the Venezuelan military supported the ELN during the 2022 fighting in Apure; no official record of joint operations has been published.[24]



Colombian intelligence reports also documented units of two FARC dissident factions in Venezuela: the Segunda Marquetalia (Second Marquetalia) and, on a smaller scale, the Estado Mayor Central (Central General Staff, EMC).[25] The Segunda Marquetalia, led by former FARC commander Iván Márquez, who abandoned the 2016 peace agreement to take up arms again, used Venezuela as its main operational haven. Senator and presidential hopeful Miguel Uribe Turbay was shot on June 7, 2025, and died of his wounds on August 11.[26] In March 2026, the Fiscalía attributed the assassination to the Segunda Marquetalia.[27]

Caracas hosted the formal opening of the ELN talks and their first cycle, from November 21 to December 12, 2022, as well as the fourth cycle, which opened on August 14, 2023.[28] In October 2025, at a public event, Petro proposed that Colombian and Venezuelan police and intelligence services "integrate" their efforts against drug trafficking and illegal economies.[29]

2. The Machado Disqualification and the April 2024 Caracas Meeting

On January 26, 2024, Venezuela's Supreme Court upheld a 15-year ban on the candidacy of opposition leader María Corina Machado.[30] Chile's government, under President Gabriel Boric, expressed concern three days later.[31] Colombia made no public statement for two months, until a Foreign Ministry communiqué of March 26 on the obstacles the opposition faced in registering candidates; the communiqué did not name Machado.[32] On April 1, 2024, Petro described the disqualification of Machado and other candidates by administrative authorities as an "anti-democratic coup" (golpe antidemocrático).[33]

In the same remarks, Petro compared the earlier disqualification of another Venezuelan opposition leader, Leopoldo López, with attempts to disqualify him in Colombia: "Exactly the same thing they wanted to do to disqualify me here." He added that Colombia criticized such measures abroad while concealing that "the same thing is done here." Eight days later, on April 9, 2024, he traveled to Caracas for a bilateral meeting with Maduro, at which he linked political peace in Venezuela to peace with armed groups in Colombia.[34]



Figure 3. Colombian President Gustavo Petro (left) shakes hands with his Venezuelan counterpart, Nicolás Maduro, during an official visit to Miraflores Palace in Caracas, April 9, 2024. Source: AFP/Juan Barreto.

3. The Election of July 28, 2024, and the Documentation of the Result

On the night of July 28, 2024, the opposition reported that the transmission of polling-station tally sheets (actas) to the National Electoral Council (CNE) had stopped at several voting centers. Shortly after midnight on July 29, CNE President Elvis Amoroso announced that Maduro had won 51.2 percent of the vote, with 80 percent of polling stations counted, described the trend as "irreversible," and did not publish the actas.[35] In June 2024, a fellow member of the CNE board, Juan Carlos Delpino, had accused Amoroso of making decisions without convening the board since March.[36]

The democratic opposition, led by María Corina Machado and Edmundo González Urrutia, had obtained copies of the official actas and began digitizing and publishing them. The actas recorded about 67 percent of the vote for González and 30 percent for Maduro, against the 51.2 percent the CNE had announced for Maduro.[37] Protesters took to the streets across Venezuela to demand publication of the results.[38] In the first week of protests, more than 2,000 people were detained, according to the authorities' own figures.[39]



María Corina Machado (left) and Edmundo González (right)

4. Reactions between July 29 and July 31, 2024

4.1 Regional Statements and the Presidential Silence

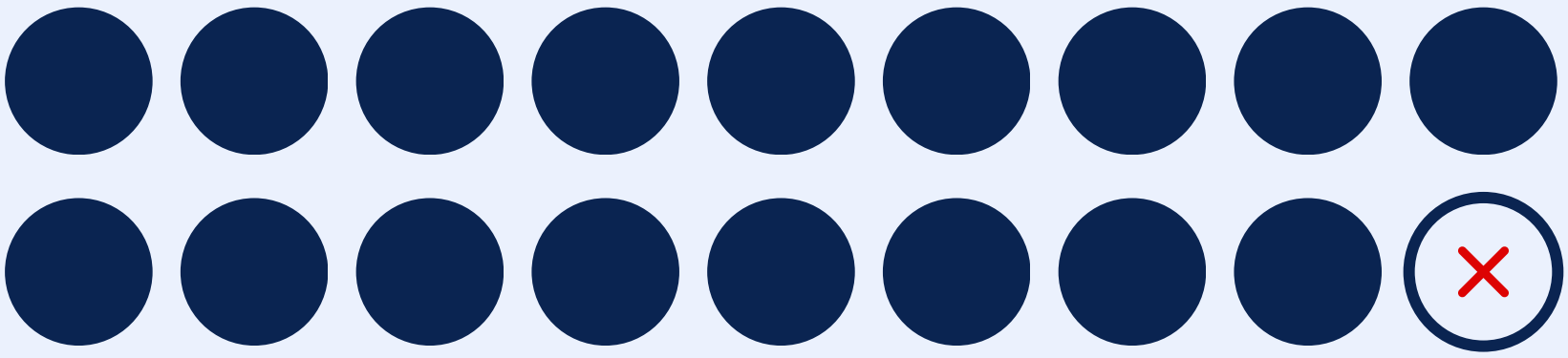
Chilean President Gabriel Boric reacted minutes after the CNE's announcement, calling the results "hard to believe" and demanding "total transparency" of the actas and the process.[40] Brazil's Foreign Ministry welcomed the peaceful conduct of the vote and said it awaited "data disaggregated by polling station."[41]

President Gustavo Petro did not personally address the announced result for more than two days. His first statement came on the morning of July 31, about 55 hours after the CNE's announcement.[42] On July 29, Foreign Minister Luis Gilberto Murillo issued a statement requesting "the total count of the votes, their verification, and an independent audit."[43]

4.2 The OAS Vote of July 31, 2024

OAS | JULY 31, 2024

One vote withheld vote killed the resolution



17 / 18 needed

Colombia abstained

On July 31, 2024, a resolution of the OAS Permanent Council calling on the Venezuelan authorities to immediately publish the results for each polling station failed to pass: it required 18 votes and received 17, with 11 abstentions and 5 absences. Colombia and Brazil were among the abstaining states, and Mexico was among those absent.[44] Colombia's ambassador to the OAS, Luis Ernesto Vargas Silva, argued that it was "very

complex" to present the OAS as an impartial body after the positions it had taken, and that a resolution against a country not present at the session was difficult to justify. He also said he had not received instructions from the Foreign Ministry.[45] The day before, the OAS Department for Electoral Cooperation and Observation[46] had concluded that the official results "do not merit confidence and should not receive democratic recognition."[47]

5. August 2024: Trilateral Communiqués and the OAS Resolution

In August 2024, the Petro government joined Brazil and Mexico in issuing two joint communiqués. On August 1, the three governments called on the Venezuelan electoral authorities to publish "the data broken down by polling station."[48] In the statement of August 8, they reaffirmed the "advisability" (conveniencia) of allowing impartial verification and called on political and social actors to exercise "maximum caution and moderation" in demonstrations and public events.[49] The statement also expressed confidence that a solution would emerge in Venezuela, and reiterated the three governments' support for dialogue. On August 16, the OAS Permanent Council adopted by consensus a resolution calling on the CNE to publish the actas "expeditiously"; Colombia and Brazil joined the consensus, Colombia without taking the floor, and Mexico was absent.[50]

On August 22, 2024, Boric stated that the international community faced a "dictatorship that falsifies elections" and declared that "Venezuela's dictatorship is not the left."[51] Earlier negotiation processes included the talks held in the Dominican Republic in 2017–2018, in which former Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero acted as a mediator, and the Norway-facilitated talks in Oslo and Barbados in 2019. Both ended without an agreement.[52] In October 2023, the Maduro government and the opposition signed the Barbados Agreement, which set electoral guarantees for the 2024 vote; three months later, the Supreme Court upheld Machado's disqualification.[53]

6. Positions and Events between September 2024 and August 2026

6.1 The United Nations General Assembly, September 2024

About 2.9 million Venezuelans were living in Colombia at the end of 2023; Colombia hosts the largest Venezuelan population outside Venezuela.[54] Addressing the UN General Assembly on September 24, 2024, Petro spoke at length about climate change, artificial intelligence, and Gaza. He mentioned Venezuela once, as a target of economic blockade, and made no reference to the post-election crisis, at a moment when members of Venezuela's democratic opposition were being persecuted, jailed, or forced into exile.[55]

6.2 The January 2025 Inauguration

On January 8, 2025, Petro announced that he would not attend Maduro's inauguration two days later, citing the detention of human rights defender Carlos Correa, among other events.[56] Foreign Minister Murillo stated that Colombia did not recognize the election results. Colombia maintained diplomatic relations, however, and its ambassador, Milton Rengifo, attended the ceremony.[57]



Foreign Minister of Colombia, Luis Gilberto Murillo

6.3 Foreign Ministry Turnover and European Statements

The administration had four foreign ministers in under three years: Álvaro Leyva, Luis Gilberto Murillo, Laura Sarabia, and Rosa Yolanda Villavicencio.[58] In Europe, Spanish Foreign Minister José Manuel Albares reported discussing Venezuela with Colombia, Brazil, and Mexico, including at a four-way meeting convened by Spain in September 2024. Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, explaining why Spain had not recognized Edmundo González as president, said that the role of Spain and other European Union (EU) member states was to create the conditions for an agreement between the parties in Venezuela.[59] In September 2024, the EU's High Representative, Josep Borrell, told the European Parliament that he commended "the ongoing mediation initiatives led by regional partners, notably Brazil and Colombia," and that the EU would use its foreign policy toolbox "to bolster efforts leading towards a peaceful and democratic Venezuelan-led solution."[60]

6.4 The Capture of Maduro



Nicolás Maduro's caputre

On January 3, 2026, a U.S. military operation in Caracas captured Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, who were taken to New York to face narco-terrorism and drug-trafficking charges. Vice President Delcy Rodríguez was sworn in as interim president on January 5.[61]

6.5 The Colombian Presidential Election of 2026

In Colombia's 2026 presidential election, Abelardo De la Espriella led the first round on May 31 and defeated the governing coalition's candidate, Senator Iván Cepeda, in the June 21 runoff by 251,854 votes (49.68 percent to 48.68 percent), the narrowest margin by share of the vote in Colombia's presidential history.[62] On election night, Petro said that "no president can be proclaimed." In July he renewed allegations of fraud, citing figures of affected votes that rose from 848,000 on July 14 to more than 1.8 million on July 31, and he did not attend De la Espriella's inauguration on August 7.[63]



Abelardo De la Espriella



02

PART TWO

Analysis

This part sets out the Miranda Center's analysis of the record in Part One, using the test described in the Introduction.

On that test, the Petro government's conduct in the months after July 28, 2024, lowered the international cost of the fraud for Caracas at the main decision points where Bogotá had discretion: the presidential silence of July 29–30, the OAS abstention of July 31, the August communiqués, and the September 2024 address to the UN General Assembly. This report calls that pattern whitewashing. The finding concerns effect and does not depend on showing a deliberate plan.

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7. Three Interests Tied Bogotá's Posture to Caracas

Three interests linked Bogotá's position to the Venezuelan government: an ideological affinity, an energy agenda that included Venezuelan gas, and Paz Total, whose negotiating counterparts were sheltered in Venezuela.

The ideological affinity documented in Section 1.2 is consistent with how the administration read the crisis. An account in which sanctions explained the economic collapse and blockades explained the exodus left little room to treat the July 2024 election as a problem of the Venezuelan government's own making.



Gustavo Petro

The November 2023 announcement of likely Ecopetrol–PDVSA joint ventures came from a government that had stopped signing new exploration contracts at home (Section 1.3). The partial retreat three days later did not change what the episode showed: the government counted Venezuelan gas as part of its energy transition, which gave Caracas leverage in the relationship.

Paz Total was the most consequential of the three. Because the ELN and FARC dissident factions kept a rear base in Venezuela throughout the

Maduro period,[64] and Venezuela was a guarantor of the ELN talks (Section 1.4), Caracas held influence over whether Petro's negotiating counterparts remained sheltered and reachable. A public confrontation with Maduro over the election would have put the president's central domestic initiative at risk, a cost that neither Brazil nor Mexico faced.

8. The Presidency Recast Documented Fraud as a Dispute between Parties

After the two-day silence, Bogotá withheld recognition both of Maduro's declared victory and of the result shown in the opposition's actas. Moving the discussion from verifying a result to negotiating a settlement treated documented fraud as a dispute between two parties and may have given Caracas time to consolidate. Petro's absence from the January 2025 inauguration did not alter that position (Section 6.2).

Two features of Petro's public statements after July 28 sustained that position.

First, he consistently prioritized vague calls for peaceful dialogue over the concrete demand for the release of the actas. He also framed the crisis mainly as a risk of violence. His first statement, on the morning of July 31, 2024, warned that doubts about the process could lead Venezuelans to "a deep and violent polarization," and at a public event later that day he asked whether "a war in the neighborhood" was approaching.[65]

Second, the timing of his response differed from the speed of his reactions to other elections in 2024. He congratulated Claudia Sheinbaum on the night of Mexico's June election and Donald Trump about two hours after the U.S. result in November; on Venezuela, his first statement came about 55 hours after the CNE's announcement.[66] Chile's Gabriel Boric, also a president of the left, reacted within minutes (Section 4.1), and the response to Machado's disqualification in early 2024 showed a similar delay (Section 2).

Petro's response to Colombia's own 2026 election shows a different standard of scrutiny. He questioned a certified count on election night and alleged fraud in the weeks before leaving office (Section 6.5). In Venezuela in 2024, where the opposition had published the actas, his government abstained on the July 31 OAS resolution that called for their publication and joined the August 16 resolution without taking the floor.

The September 24, 2024, address to the UN General Assembly is the clearest case of passive legitimation as this report defines it (Section 6.1).



Gustavo Petro (left) and Nicolás Maduro (right)

9. The OAS Abstention and the August Communiqués Diluted the Demand for the *Actas*

Colombia's conduct in multilateral bodies, alongside Brazil and Mexico, is the report's clearest case of active legitimation. It was consistent with the Presidency's position, although the ambassador to the OAS said he had

acted without instructions (Section 4.2). On July 31, Colombia and Brazil were the two largest of the 11 abstaining states, and a vote in favor from any one of the 11 would have carried the resolution. Both joined the consensus resolution of August 16, more than two weeks after the first resolution had failed (Section 5).

Between the August 1 and August 8 communiqués, the three governments moved from asking for data broken down by polling station to affirming the "advisability" of impartial verification (Section 5). The call for moderation, addressed to political and social actors after more than 2,000 people had been detained (Section 3), did not address the security forces carrying out the detentions.

The August 8 communiqué also expressed confidence that a solution would emerge in Venezuela. The earlier negotiation processes recorded in Section 5 had ended without an agreement, and the guarantees of the 2023 Barbados Agreement had been breached months before the vote. The communiqué produced no concession from Caracas.

10. A Divided Region Weakened the Multilateral and European Response

Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way identify linkage to the West and Western leverage as the two dimensions of international influence that most shape the survival of competitive authoritarian regimes.[67] In the Americas, regional organizations such as the OAS are one channel through which that leverage operates. Between 2017 and 2019, the Lima Group coordinated a regional position that culminated in January 2019 in the refusal of 13 of its members to recognize Maduro's new term (Section 1.1). In 2024, facing a fraud documented through published actas, the region produced no comparable bloc. The OAS failed to act on July 31 and adopted its August 16 resolution in Mexico's absence.

The regional posture also gave European governments reluctant to act a reason to wait. Both the EU's High Representative and the Spanish government framed their positions around the regional mediation, and Spain withheld recognition of Edmundo González (Section 6.3). Spain's

role is examined in Chapter 2 of this series. Andreas Schedler's work on electoral authoritarianism shows that such regimes rely on elections, and on the appearance of competition, for their legitimacy at home and abroad.[68] The withheld actas removed that appearance in July 2024. By treating the outcome as a matter for negotiation, the positions taken in Bogotá, Brasília, and Mexico City reduced the international cost of that loss and risked indicating to other governments that an electoral fraud of this scale need not end diplomatic accommodation with neighbors that share ideological or strategic interests.

11. Conclusions

Under President Gustavo Petro, Colombia's policy toward Venezuela departed from its earlier alignment with regional democratic efforts, including its role as a founding member of the Lima Group. After July 28, 2024, the language of mediation and dialogue accompanied conduct that lowered the international cost of the electoral fraud, the pattern this report calls whitewashing.

The record points to a disposition more than to a strategy. A government that had four foreign ministers in under three years was poorly placed to sustain a diplomatic design, yet its choices ran in the same direction wherever it had discretion, consistent with the ideological, energy, and Paz Total interests set out in Section 7. Because the posture depended largely on presidential choices, it may prove reversible.

Since the capture of Nicolás Maduro on January 3, 2026, an interim government headed by Delcy Rodríguez has remained in place, and as of September 2026 no date has been set for presidential elections.[69] A democratic Venezuela would narrow the space available to armed groups that operated from Venezuelan territory and would open the way to recovering Colombian exports to Venezuela, which fell by close to 90 percent between 2008 and 2023 (Section 1.1). President Abelardo De la Espriella, who took office on August 7, 2026, will shape Colombia's posture toward Venezuela's political future.

12. Policy Considerations

The considerations below are offered to Colombian and regional actors as Venezuela's political situation evolves. They start from the premise that free and fair presidential elections are the immediate priority for Venezuela.

FOR THE GOVERNMENT OF COLOMBIA:

1 Engagement with Venezuela's democratic actors

Colombia is well placed to support Venezuelan democratic institutions and representatives committed to a constitutional transition, and the participation of the democratic opposition, including María Corina Machado and Edmundo González. Such engagement would be most credible if it distinguished clearly between a constitutional transition and the interim authorities now in place.

2 Posture in the inter-American system

Colombian delegations to the OAS and other regional bodies could support resolutions on electoral verification, human rights, and the release of political prisoners in the forums where the previous government abstained. Sustained participation in those bodies may be the most direct way to reverse the precedent of July 31, 2024.

3 Rebuilding trade

The 2,200-kilometer border makes Colombia a natural trading partner for Venezuela. Technical planning for a trade and energy framework could

begin now, to be activated with a democratically elected Venezuelan government. Conditioning deeper integration on rule-of-law guarantees and on compliance with applicable sanctions would link commercial reopening to democratization, and reconstruction financing could be sought from multilateral lenders such as the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank.

4 Venezuelans in Colombia

About 2.8 million Venezuelans lived in Colombia in early 2026,[70] and surveys conducted in the first months of 2026 indicate that most do not plan to return in the near term.[71] Legal status and formal channels for binational commerce allow that population to contribute to Colombia's economy. Policies that protect those who stay while supporting voluntary return for those who choose it could serve both countries.

FOR REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRATIC ACTORS:

1 Dialogue and the electoral timetable

Regional governments could decline to treat calls for internal dialogue as a substitute for an electoral timetable where remaining authoritarian actors use such calls to delay one.

2 A regional group for democratic restoration

Regional democratic governments, with Colombia among them, could form a group supporting the institutional, security, and administrative conditions for free and fair presidential elections in Venezuela. The release of all political prisoners is a practical prerequisite for any credible electoral roadmap.

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