

## The Left vs. Venezuelan Democracy

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Since Hugo Chávez took power in 1999, a transnational ecosystem of leftist governments, think tanks, and NGOs has shielded Venezuela's regime with ideological cover and political protection. For over two decades, it claimed neutrality under the guise of ideology. In 2025, that fiction was made undeniable.

The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to María Corina Machado marked a moment of truth. Rather than celebrating a clear victory for *democratic resistance* and human rights, many of these same institutions responded with coordinated hostility. Their reaction was revealing. By attacking a Nobel laureate whose struggle has been explicitly peaceful and democratic, they exposed their true alignment—not with the Venezuelan people, but with the authoritarian system that oppresses them. This backlash served as definitive confirmation that ideological loyalty now outweighs democratic principles within large segments of the international left.

Maduro has ruled Venezuela since 2013, following Chávez's death, claiming continuity with Chavismo and socialism. In practice, his tenure has been defined by the systematic concentration of power in the executive, the erosion of institutional checks and balances, and the normalization of fear as a tool of governance. Venezuela today is not a flawed democracy; it is an authoritarian state with “civilian” leadership.

Elections continue to be held, but they lack the basic conditions required for political competition. International observers, opposition parties, and some human rights organizations consistently document electoral manipulation, candidate disqualifications, and institutional capture. The opposition-controlled National Assembly was neutralized through

parallel institutions and judicial maneuvers, eliminating meaningful oversight of executive authority.

The economic consequences have been catastrophic. Hyperinflation, food and medicine shortages, currency collapse, and mass poverty have devastated daily life. Structural dependence on oil, compounded by corruption, mismanagement, and declining production, hollowed out the economy. International sanctions—particularly from the United States—have further restricted revenue, but they did not create the collapse; they exposed and intensified an already failed economic model.

Human rights abuses are systematic. Opposition leaders face arrest, exile, or political bans. Protests are criminalized and press freedom is tightly controlled. Security forces are repeatedly accused of excessive force, arbitrary detention, and serious violations. The regime dismisses these claims as necessary measures to preserve order, reinforcing a pattern of repression rather than accountability.

Despite this record, Maduro retains international backing from states including Russia, China, Cuba, Iran, Spain, and Colombia. Meanwhile, over nine million Venezuelans have fled the country, producing one of the largest migration crises in modern history. Supporters frame Maduro as a defender of sovereignty against foreign interference; critics rightly identify a regime that has dismantled democracy, destroyed economic opportunity, and generated immense human suffering.

Venezuela today represents more than authoritarianism. Under Chávez and Maduro, the state has pioneered a dangerous hybrid model best described as *criminal populism*<sup>1</sup>—a system in which political power is sustained

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<sup>1</sup> Populism doesn't exist in a vacuum. In Venezuela and Colombia, it is inseparable from illegal armed groups and organized crime.

through alliances with transnational organized crime.

From its earliest years, the regime's survival depended on Colombian criminal organizations such as the FARC and ELN, deeply embedded in drug trafficking, kidnapping, extortion, and human smuggling. Over time, Venezuela evolved into a global safe haven for illicit actors, including Hezbollah, Hamas, and major Mexican and Ecuadorian drug cartels. These groups provide the regime with alternative revenue streams, enforcement capacity, and sanction-evasion mechanisms.

The regional balance shifted further in August 2022. With the election of Colombian President Gustavo Petro, Maduro gained a critical ally. Petro's "Total Peace" initiative has effectively replicated the Venezuelan model in Colombia by legitimizing illegal armed groups and organized crime as political interlocutors. Rather than dismantling criminal power, the policy has embedded it within state negotiations.

This criminal-state architecture persists because it is shielded internationally. A coordinated network of leftist governments, NGOs, and intellectual platforms continues to provide diplomatic and narrative cover, openly defying the United States and dozens of democracies that reject Maduro's legitimacy. Ideological solidarity has replaced democratic accountability, prolonging Venezuela's humanitarian crisis and obstructing justice.

Recent European commentary suggesting that U.S. oil transit sanctions are ineffective does not withstand scrutiny. Regional experts tracking logistics and financial flows report significant strain on the regime's operations. Equally troubling is the lack of transparency surrounding the "experts" cited in these narratives—many of whom are directly linked to the Maduro-Petro-Putin axis.

Millions of dollars are now being invested in coordinated influence operations across the United States and Europe to weaken sanctions through strategic misinformation. The

convergence of organized crime and state power in the Americas has created a hemispheric security threat.

Groups such as the Cartel de los Soles and Tren de Aragua are not isolated criminal phenomena; they are structural components of a transnational system of criminal governance. Denial of their role is a political smokescreen.

These organizations exercise *de facto* authority across vast territories. Colombia's "Total Peace" policy treats them as political actors rather than criminal threats, granting legitimacy while victims continue to bear the cost.

The Cartel de los Soles functions as the strategic command center—coordinating drug trafficking, arms smuggling, human trafficking, and financial networks. Tren de Aragua operates as the enforcement arm, expanding territorial control throughout the region in coordination with the ELN, FARC dissidents, and the Second Marquetalia. Together, they form the operational backbone of the Maduro-Petro criminal axis.

These actors are not dismantled; they are instrumentalized. Criminal organizations are used for territorial control, political leverage, and regional influence, undermining state sovereignty, eroding democratic institutions, and normalizing criminal governance under the guise of negotiation.

Defending democracy and the rule of law must take absolute precedence over ideological alignment. When engagement is treated as legitimacy, criminal regimes gain power, democratic institutions collapse, and human suffering accelerates. Venezuela is no longer merely a national catastrophe—it is an unmistakable regional warning.

The Maduro-Petro project represents criminal populism in its clearest form: governance sustained by illegal armed groups and organized crime.

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