

## Venezuela

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On January 28, 2026, Secretary of State Marco Rubio presented the Trump administration's strategy for Venezuela to the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He outlined a three-phase plan that the United States intends to implement following the capture of Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro on January 3. Rubio described the framework as a roadmap for managing Venezuela's political and economic transition from authoritarian rule toward a more stable and democratic system.

Rubio explained that the first phase, *stabilization*, aims to prevent Venezuela from "descending into chaos" after Maduro's capture. This phase emphasizes securing and managing the country's critical infrastructure, particularly the oil sector, and implementing a so-called "quarantine" strategy. This includes the seizure and sale of sanctioned oil, with proceeds directed toward essential public services rather than corruption.

The second phase, *recovery*, focuses on reviving the Venezuelan economy by reopening access for U.S., Western, and other international companies to participate in the oil industry and broader markets. Political and social reconciliation measures are also central to this phase, including amnesty for political prisoners and the return of exiles, with the aim of strengthening civil society and rebuilding institutions.

Finally, the third phase, *transition*, is designed to guide Venezuela toward long-term political change, ultimately aiming for free and fair democratic processes and governance reforms. Rubio noted that this transition could extend over several years and that aspects of stabilization, recovery, and transition may overlap depending on conditions inside the country.

### Context

Maduro's regime has remained in power through force and fraud, following three contested elections over the past two decades. During this period, Venezuela has documented approximately 36,800 victims of torture and political violence, more than 18,500 political prisoners, and over 10,000 extrajudicial executions.

Nearly 10 million Venezuelans have been forced into exile worldwide, creating one of the largest refugee crises in modern history. Inside the country, repression has been relentless: 468 people have been killed during protests, more than 400 independent media outlets have been censored or shut down, and an estimated 90% of the population has been pushed into poverty.

Despite losing at least three national elections that were never recognized internationally, the regime has clung to power while allegedly diverting an estimated \$2.5 trillion since Hugo Chávez's rise. These funds are believed to have financed political influence operations, advocacy networks, and allied parties across South America—such as Colombia Humana, which helped bring Gustavo Petro to power—as well as in Spain, including the Socialist and Podemos parties, and beyond. Critics argue that this strategy effectively exported authoritarian influence even as Venezuela itself collapsed<sup>1</sup>.

In March 2025, Maduro and Colombian President Petro—often described by critics as politically inseparable due to their close alignment—launched a coordinated and aggressive campaign against the Trump administration. This effort was reportedly supported by pro-Democratic Party lobbying networks in the United States. At the same time, organized criminal groups—including the Cartel of the Suns, Tren de Aragua, and other illegal armed actors operating across Colombia and Venezuela—reportedly *expanded* their power and territorial reach. Meanwhile, under *Petro's leadership*, Colombia in 2025 became the world's leading producer of cocaine for the third consecutive year.

The Maduro regime has also turned Venezuela into a key platform for drug trafficking, contributing significantly to the global cocaine market. Through state-protected networks, control of air and maritime routes, and alliances with transnational criminal organizations, drug trafficking has become a structural source of regime financing. This criminal economy has undermined institutions in both Venezuela and Colombia and fueled violence, corruption, and instability across the region and beyond.

Multiple reports suggest that Petro has increasingly *mirrored* Maduro's leadership style, advancing a shared strategy of institutional defiance, international provocation, and transnational influence—driven in large part by criminal economies and authoritarian practices embedded at the core of their political power.

In October 2025, during the UN General Assembly, Petro reportedly abandoned official proceedings to join street protests in New York against President Trump. Observers argue that he appeared to be betting on international mobilization—and possibly even arrest—to elevate himself as a *political martyr*.

In response to U.S. actions, including a significant military buildup in the southern Caribbean in September 2025, Maduro and Petro issued defiant

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xq5TDv3NL7w>

statements daring the United States to intervene. This U.S. deployment, publicly described as counternarcotics operations, included naval warships, Marine units, aircraft, surveillance assets, and support forces.

Venezuelan authorities viewed the deployment as a potential precursor to regime change and later confirmed that deadly U.S. strikes on vessels occurred during the campaign. Despite these heightened tensions, large quantities of cocaine reportedly continued to flow through Caribbean and Pacific routes, allegedly coordinated with groups such as the Clan del Golfo, the ELN, and FARC dissidents.

#### Colombia Context

Colombia is increasingly described by critics as *de facto* controlled by illegal armed groups and organized crime networks, many of which were incorporated into Petro's "Total Peace" policy. These groups dominate the cocaine trade, the illegal exploitation of natural resources, human being trafficking and large segments of the gold market. Opponents argue that they have been used to intimidate or silence opposition figures, judges, journalists, women, and civil society leaders—marking what some consider the *first time* in Colombian history that criminal networks have been openly empowered by a sitting government.

#### Venezuela Context

Following the U.S. military operation that captured Maduro, millions of Venezuelans reportedly expressed relief and renewed hope for a future free from authoritarian rule. Celebrations were observed across the Venezuelan diaspora in the United States and parts of South America. While some residents in Caracas voiced concern about civilian safety and instability, many expressed gratitude for the U.S. intervention, drawing parallels to public reactions seen in other crises, such as Ukraine or Iran.

In Colombia, the political debate intensified as critics called for Petro's removal, alleging that he had strengthened criminal networks to consolidate power and preserve his influence through Senator Iván Cepeda, whom they describe as his possible political proxy for the May 2026 presidential election.

#### International Context

On January 4, 2026, Senator Iván Cepeda traveled to Spain to publicly defend the legitimacy of Maduro's rule. His visit included speeches denouncing foreign intervention and raised questions about whether elements within the Spanish government informally facilitated the delegation. The official sources of funding for Cepeda's trip remain undisclosed, fueling speculation about behind-the-scenes support.

Meanwhile, public remarks attributed to figures such as Ben Saul, UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights, and Fabrizio Hochschild, adviser to the UN Secretary-General—referring to Maduro's continued legitimacy as "*the leader of the Venezuelan people*"—circulated widely online. These statements intensified debate over the United Nations' posture toward the Venezuelan regime.

These diplomatic signals emerged amid broader strains between the United States and the United Nations. Some analysts argue that the Secretary-General faces growing pressure from the current U.S. administration over the UN's structure, authority, and relevance. Critics contend that any perceived defense of Maduro stands in direct *contradiction* to the UN's core mandate: the protection of human rights, democratic governance, and the peaceful resolution of conflict.

More broadly, the Secretary-General's record has come under increasing criticism for sustained inaction. Ukrainians have seen little effective leadership for nearly four years; Venezuelans throughout his entire tenure; and Iranians, Colombians, and others have faced similar institutional absence. Rather than exercising moral and political leadership on the global stage, the Secretary-General is increasingly portrayed as disengaged—delegating diplomacy to staff and reducing international engagement to virtual statements instead of decisive action.

Meanwhile, Colombia's legislative elections in March and presidential elections in May are under *serious threat*. Illegal armed groups and organized crime now exert control over more than half of the country's municipalities—nearly 70% of Colombia's territory—severely undermining free and fair political competition.

In this climate of fear, only Petro's candidate can campaign with freedom. Other candidates face credible threats of violence or death, as illustrated by the assassination of Senator and presidential candidate Miguel Uribe Turbay in June 2025.

Bogotá, Colombia, 4 February 2026.