

The regime's last act: theater, fear, and the exhaustion of power

Antonio De La Cruz
Executive Director
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Venezuela's regime no longer governs—it performs, as international pressure tightens the noose.

On Sunday, July 27, while Venezuela awoke under the hush of abandoned polling stations and the deafening noise of popular indifference, General Vladimir Padrino López—Maduro's weary-eyed defense minister—stepped onto the stage with a solemn accusation: a U.S. surveillance aircraft, he claimed, had violated Venezuela's Flight Information Region (FIR).¹

Once, such declarations might have sparked diplomatic tension, urgent meetings at the OAS, or impassioned speeches at Miraflores Palace. Not this time.

This time, it all smelled like stagecraft.

The regime, long practiced in disguising weakness with theatrical gestures, needed a distraction. The country had refused to vote—civil resistance in silent defiance—and Washington had just designated Nicolás Maduro as the head of a narco-terrorist organization.² It was a blow that stripped the ruling clique bare, like the emperor in the fable. What better way to cover their shame than with a flag, a foreign threat, an old and faithful villain: Yankee imperialism. And so, the RC-135 reconnaissance plane became the newest protagonist in an overused script.

As with so many Latin American autocracies, power turns to performance when reality overwhelms it. It matters little that the U.S. aircraft never entered sovereign airspace, or that its path stayed within the ambiguous bounds of an internationally regulated FIR. What matters is the narrative. The regime's dramaturgy requires a villain and a hero—a loyal general, a brave comandante, a revolutionary state standing tall. Everything else is just scenery.

But this scene is cracking. Padrino's accusation aims not only to distract an exhausted public but also to mask the fractures within the Venezuelan armed forces—ranks increasingly uncomfortable with the stench wafting from the Cartel of the Suns. Venezuela no longer

¹ The Flight Information Region (FIR) is a portion of international airspace where a state is responsible for providing air traffic services, including monitoring and communication, but it does not equate to sovereign national airspace.

² In July 2025, the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated the "Cartel of the Suns"—a criminal network allegedly led by Nicolás Maduro and top Venezuelan military officials—as a global terrorist organization under Executive Order 13224.

believes—not in elections staged by the regime, nor in foreign threats, nor in the promise of a reborn nation that long ago rotted in cocaine, corruption, and repression.

Dictatorships rely on systematic deception and subdued fear. What we witnessed that Sunday was both: a lie delivered as patriotic fervor, and a half-confessed dread. Because what Maduro's regime fears most is not the intrusion of a reconnaissance plane—it is a different kind of intrusion entirely: the advance of a slow, silent war that does not rely on tanks or invasions, but on courtrooms, sanctions, surveillance, and intelligence.

Washington has made it clear it doesn't need bullets to isolate chavismo. It only needs to name, accuse, document. Each move is surgical. This is not about invasion—it is about leaving the enemy with no exits. Like a masterful chess endgame—or better yet, like the ancient Chinese strategy game of territorial encirclement—the goal is not to strike, but to suffocate. And in this, Venezuela is already surrounded.

The tragedy is that while the world watches, the regime entrenches itself behind a military elite ever more complicit, ever more suspect, ever less redeemable. The play may continue a while longer, yes—but every farce has its closing night. Regimes built on narcotrafficking—and worse, on terror—do not get happy endings. Their actors wind up in foreign courtrooms, in anonymous graves, or wandering in exile like ghosts. No masquerade can outlast history. No propaganda can permanently silence the internal tremor, the dull panic that betrays the guilty once the curtain falls.

In the end, *cabello-madurismo* no longer governs—it barricades itself. It no longer persuades—it improvises. And it no longer deceives—it performs only for itself, like a regime that has lost the country but clings to the curtain. The aircraft accusation was not a defensive gesture—it was a reflex, the spasm of a cornered power that needs enemies to obscure its true nature.

But this time, the enemy is not outside. It lives in the judicial indictments naming the regime as a narco-terrorist cartel. It pulses in the civil resistance that strips the regime of legitimacy. And it echoes in the barracks, where silence has become unbearable. Venezuela needs no more speeches, no more props. It needs the end of the play.

And that ending—however long they try to postpone it—has already begun.