

## Venezuela: a nation held hostage by a mafia state

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*"Modern autocracies are not traditional dictatorships; they are criminal networks that use state power to enrich themselves, shield their members, and stay in control. They don't negotiate with the opposition — they destroy it. They don't respect legal limits — they circumvent them. They don't fear international condemnation — they scoff at it. Their only logic is the survival of the ruling clan." - Anne Applebaum*

Venezuela, a battered nation that has tasted every poison concocted by the criminal organization ruling from Miraflores Palace, approaches an anniversary that history will remember as a grotesque paradox: nearly a year ago, on July 28, 2024, Venezuelans voted decisively for a new president, Edmundo González Urrutia. They chose freedom. They chose to step out of the shadows. They chose a return to democracy. Yet the man who holds power today is not the elected winner, but the usurper.

Venezuela's tragedy has moved beyond politics. It now resides firmly in the realm of organized crime. Nicolás Maduro no longer merely represents an authoritarian regime — he embodies, increasingly without disguise, a criminal cartel entrenched in power. The regime's links to Iran, Russia, the FARC and ELN guerrilla groups, and international drug trafficking are no longer speculative—they are judicially established facts. Hugo "El Pollo" Carvajal, the former head of military counterintelligence under both Chávez and Maduro, has confirmed it from a jail cell in New York: Miraflores Palace is the headquarters of a drug cartel masquerading as a government.

And the international community? Silent. Or worse, willfully blind. While the West acts with surgical speed in other regions to contain threats, it has offered only hollow rhetoric in response to Venezuela — as though the legitimacy of a popular vote could transform a regime that no longer plays by the rules of politics, but by the rules of organized crime.

The regime has mutated. Despite its continued use of revolutionary language, it no longer resembles a party dictatorship. It is a narco-state functioning with the logic of a mafia: it controls territory, eliminates rivals, and either corrupts or crushes those who get in its way. Its carefully crafted façade of electoral legitimacy — "we've won 27 out of 29 elections" — has disintegrated. Only fear remains. And with it, repression. Self-censorship. Impunity. Many civil actors now merely pretend.

Yet against all odds, the Venezuelan people have continued to resist. The numbers are stark: over 86% of the population wants Maduro gone. Seventy-seven percent reject socialism as a

viable model, according to the latest Meganálisis poll. This is a clear-headed, overwhelming majority. But they are trapped. Because in regimes this dark, votes are not enough. What is needed is force. A break. Maximum pressure.

The heroine of this chapter — perhaps the last — is María Corina Machado. She has been condemned not for crimes, but for votes. She remains in hiding, not fleeing, but resisting. Her mere presence in Venezuela defies the regime's security apparatus. Her leadership — both ethical and moral — remains the only visible lighthouse in a night that seems endless. She has laid out, with clarity and sacrifice, the blueprints for a possible Venezuela: one with real institutions, a functioning economy, and restored dignity. She is, as Jean-Paul Sartre might say, "freedom incarnate" — a lived, situated reality in the concrete world.

But freedom alone is not enough. Nonviolent resistance, though valid in democratic contexts, crashes against a structure that recognizes no rules. The armed forces, which should have safeguarded the democratic transition after July 28, chose instead the dividends of corruption. And the international community — particularly Europe — remains stuck in a diplomatic fiction that fails to acknowledge the regime's true nature.

There are only two viable paths to transition: international judicial pressure — from institutions like the ICC and the U.S. Attorney's Office in New York — and sustained popular mobilization. There is no rupture without risk. But without rupture, there is no exit. What is also required is diplomacy without illusions — one that understands it is dealing with criminals, not political adversaries.

July 28 must become more than a date. It must become a compass — the founding act of a new republic. In it lies the legitimacy the regime has lost. Around it, a coalition — both national and international — must be built to force the regime to yield. Not out of generosity, but out of calculation. Because a legal, political, economic, and moral siege will make the mafia's grip on power untenable.

Venezuela is not lost. But it is alone. The question that lingers, like the scent of gunpowder after a shot, is whether the free world — the one of values and principles, not interests — is willing to stand with it. Because if democracy becomes just a word, then crime will continue to pay. And history — that final witness — will not forget.