

# “Flourishing in the Abyss”

by Sophie Reichelt, Olena Butnyk & Emilia Webhofer

Once hailed as one of Latin America’s most prosperous and stable representative democracies, with its wealth built on vast oil reserves, Venezuela has descended into participatory competitive authoritarianism, economic collapse, and mass emigration over the past two decades under Hugo Chávez and, especially, Nicolás Maduro. The capture

of Nicolás Maduro by US forces on 3 January 2026 marked a profound rupture in this trajectory. However, the future remains highly uncertain.

In order to gain insights from within Venezuela at this critical moment, we spoke in April 2026 with the Venezuelan historian and political analyst Margarita López Maya, Anja Dargatz, head of

the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung office in Caracas, and the Venezuelan journalist Florantonia Singer. Our conversations focused on everyday life under Maduro, the role civil society played in this abysmal context and may play in the future, and what Venezuela needs in order to stabilize. Does Maduro’s fall offer a glimmer of hope?



Nottinghamshire, UK, 4 January 2026: British Newspaper widely reported that Trump had captured Maduro and was temporarily controlling Venezuela.

“It was terrible. The Maduro era is one of the worst eras that Venezuela has known. There was no future in Venezuela.”

Margarita López Maya

In 2016, the United Nations recognized that Venezuela was entering a multi-dimensional and multicausal crisis. By 2017, more than 90 percent of families were living in poverty (63.7% in extreme poverty). The once excellent public education system, funded by oil revenues, has collapsed. Hospitals suffer from severe shortages of electricity, water, and medicine, with many deaths going unrecorded during the pandemic due to manipulated statistics, as López Maya states. While the Venezuelan population was suffering from hunger and economic collapse, Singer and López Maya illustrate, the ruling elite enjoyed a prosperous life – channeling plundered resources and funds to autocratic allies such as Cuba, Russia, Iran or Hezbollah. Besides, Maduro’s “estado delincuente” (criminal state) became evident in the systematic violence exercised by state security forces against the Venezuelan population. These factors have led to a collective despair, as López Maya describes it. “Suicide rates, depression, and all mental illnesses have increased sharply. I know people who have committed suicide.”

The crisis has resulted in a huge exodus: since Maduro came to power in 2013, more than a quarter of the population has left. For Venezuelan society, this exodus has “destroyed the capacity to sustain itself economically,” López Maya states. At the same time, today, those who fled Venezuela are effectively “leading the country.” They provide care for older relatives, organize medical and nursing support “on the distance,” and channel remittances of around 4–5 billion dollars annually. Singer also highlights the diaspora’s role in professional development and knowledge transfer, pointing to migrant petroleum engineers funding training programs for Venezuelan students and clinics reconnecting with Venezuelan doctors abroad to train local staff. Both emphasize that the diaspora has also been crucial in drawing international

attention to Venezuela’s crisis that, as Singer claims, has been ignored by the international community for years.

### Social and Political Movements, Solidarity & Street Politics in Venezuela

Venezuela’s civil society has historically been relatively weak, largely due to the country’s oil-dependent political economy, which concentrated power within the state and reduced the need for autonomous civic organization. Under Chávez, attempts to institutionalize grassroots participation, most notably through so-called “community councils” and “communes”, initially aimed at fostering local autonomy, but gradually became instruments of state control.

At the same time, as Florantonia Singer highlights, the prolonged crisis has led to a notable strengthening and diversification of civil society actors. Particularly since the intensification of repression in 2017, new initiatives have

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Maracaibo, Venezuela, 25 July 2024: President Nicolas Maduro is welcomed by a crowd of Venezuelans and militants of the ruling PSUV party, at the closing of the electoral campaign.



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Madrid, Spain, 9 January 2025:  
Protest against Maduro.

“ Out of this repression, a new level of organization has emerged—born from necessity and entirely self-financed.”

Anja Dargatz

emerged in fields such as human rights advocacy, collaborative journalism, and community-based service provision. These developments suggest that crises do not merely erode social structures but can also generate new forms of collective action and civic engagement.

Around the issue of arbitrary detentions, new grassroots organizations, often led by relatives of detainees, have formed and sustained protest activities even under harsh conditions. These groups, Dargatz notes, are particularly remarkable because they are not externally funded but have developed organically from within society. Their actions, ranging from vigils to protest camps outside prisons, represent a form of political mobilization that is directly rooted in lived experiences of injustice and state violence.

In practice, grassroots initiatives play a crucial role in compensating for the absence of state-provided services. Singer points to the proliferation of

community kitchens, informal education systems, and grassroots health financing mechanisms as key examples of self-managed responses to structural deficits. In a context where public healthcare is largely non-functional, crowdfunding initiatives and community-based support networks have effectively become substitutes for social security systems.

Similarly, informal educational arrangements, such as “tareas dirigidas,” where teachers provide low-cost instruction in their homes, have emerged to address the collapse of the public education system. These practices illustrate how social organization extends far beyond political mobilization, encompassing essential functions of daily life and survival.

Dargatz points to the example of delivery drivers, who have developed strong informal networks of mutual support. These networks function both as mechanisms of everyday solidarity,

# “When the economy tightens, solidarity becomes more difficult.”

Florantonia Singer

providing immediate assistance in case of accidents or conflicts, and as platforms for collective action. In one instance, workers successfully organized protests against a new tax, leading to its withdrawal. Such cases illustrate how informal labour structures can evolve into spaces of political agency, even in highly precarious conditions.

Singer cautions that while these forms of organization reflect remarkable levels of community resilience, they cannot substitute for functioning state institutions in the long term. Their sustainability is constrained by economic conditions, and their reach is often uneven.

At the same time, as Dargatz argues, the current context has strengthened certain aspects of civil society, generating new forms of resistance, rights-claiming, and collective organization that did not exist in the same way before. This creates a central tension: while grassroots initiatives enable survival and, in some cases, political agency, they also risk normalizing the absence of the state.

Anja Dargatz describes Venezuela’s civil society as “very professional” and resilient, having evolved into an “extremely valuable” political actor through the mobilization of previously apolitical citizens. However, she argues that this “newly grown” civil society remains disconnected from political parties and trade unions, preventing a “common reform agenda.” Florantonia Singer similarly praises its “organizational muscle” and ability to “flourish in the abyss,” yet warns that civil society has been

“diminished and decimated” by state repression, restrictive laws, and shrinking international funding. Venezuela therefore possesses a highly competent civil society, but one that must still unite while navigating the “minefield” of repression and resource scarcity.

While many initiatives are rooted in everyday survival, they often evolve into forms of political expression. Dargatz highlights how organizations of relatives of arbitrarily detained individuals have emerged as a particularly significant form of grassroots mobilization, maintaining protests even under conditions of repression. These groups represent a new, self-organized form of political engagement, grounded in direct experiences of injustice.

At a broader level, López Maya situates these developments within a longer tradition of “street politics” in Latin America, which becomes especially prominent in contexts where formal institutions fail to channel social demands. In Venezuela, cycles of protest, often driven by both political and socio-economic grievances, remain a central mode of collective action, even as NGOs and activists face increasing criminalization and repression.

## A (positive) Glimpse into the Future

Anja Dargatz observes that many Venezuelans abroad still feel a strong sense of belonging to their home country, resulting in an “overwhelming sense of hope” to return. Yet return plans are shaped not only by ties to home, but also by difficult experiences abroad. López Maya points to the “criminalization, stigma, and the rise of racism in host societies” faced by many migrants, while stricter migration policies under politicians such as Chilean President José Antonio Kast, who pursues a hardline agenda of deportations and border controls, further influence these return aspirations. Still, any large-scale return will

ultimately depend on whether conditions in Venezuela genuinely stabilize.

According to Florantonia Singer such a stabilization requires a concrete “roadmap with timelines and commitments” agreed upon by all political actors, including the opposition. Transition must go beyond mere power management or elite negotiation, urging a fundamental re-institutionalization, ranging from constitutional reform to a complete overhaul of the judicial and party systems and, in particular, the abolition of indefinite reelection.

For Margarita López Maya, Venezuela’s future hinges on the premise that the interim government under Delcy Rodríguez (PSUV) bears the primary responsibility for dismantling the authoritarian system it constructed before elections take place. Opposition forces and civil society should pressure the interim government and the United States to anchor the country’s path toward credible, sustainable democratic elections. However, both López Maya and Singer share their scepticism on Washington’s support: “I don’t see the U.S. as being very interested in democracy per se, unless investors demand it.” (Florantonia Singer)

All three interviewees regard the opposition politician María Corina Machado, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2025, as a powerful figure, though locating her power differently. López Maya sees Machado as the clear opposition leader and the best available option

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# “The same actors who put this dictatorship in place must dismantle it.”

Margarita López Maya



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“ We are a country in which the meaning of work, and its ability to drive society and the economy, has been destroyed.”

Florantonia Singer

“ Street politics in Venezuela is very strong [...] because there are no institutions to channel demands.”

Margarita López Maya

once the authoritarian system has been dismantled. Dargatz is more sceptical about Machado's standing inside Venezuela. She describes a split between the diaspora opposition that is “more uncompromising, more radical” and the domestic opposition, who have had to adapt to political realities and negotiate with Maduro. Instead, Delcy Rodríguez would have a real chance of consolidating power because many Venezuelans are currently more concerned with “human rights and inflation” than with maximalist democratic demands, concerns Rodríguez appears to address. Singer

agrees but raises scepticism as to whether her current reforms are merely a way of “letting off steam” to ease the pressure and consolidate power.

In any case, for Anja Dargatz, stabilization in Venezuela depends less on dramatic regime-change than on concrete, everyday reforms tackling inflation, which ended 2025 at nearly 500%. She argues that external financial injections, such as potential support from the United States, could help stabilize the situation. The US decision in April 2026 to lift sanctions on Venezuela's Central Bank (BCV) was crucial for the provision of such recovery loans.

To stabilize the economy, however, “corruption on a large scale needs to be tackled,” Dargatz states. In this vein, Singer explains that international sanctions led to a “Wild West capitalism”, characterized by ghost ships, cryptocurrencies, and barter deals. This is fueling public distrust that oil revenues will actually reach the social and infrastructure funds announced by the interim president. While corruption permeates many levels of the state, Dargatz argues that transparently managing oil revenues would mark a significant

progress. However, given that we are in the “final stretch of the fossil fuel era”, as Singer calls it, she warns against relying again and solely on oil as a “lifeline”. As formal employment lost its ability to secure a dignified livelihood, many Venezuelans were forced into precarious, high-risk survival economies. On top of that, the government has been permissive toward criminal organizations such as the transnational gang Tren de Aragua and the ELN, both of which are deeply entrenched in gold and illegal mining activities. Given this complex entanglement, Dargatz argues that the “mine mafia” cannot be dismantled by force alone. Instead, the state should incentivize formal employment and rebuild the social value of labor. This would offer a viable alternative to exploitative structures, effectively reclaiming the economy from criminal control.

The capture of Nicolás Maduro on January 3, 2026 marked a historic rupture in Venezuela's prolonged crisis. The event generated shock, cautious hope, and uncertainty at the same time. While many Venezuelans perceived the intervention as a long-overdue disruption that opened political space, fear and coercive structures continue



# Info

to shape reactions within the country. Rather than resolving the crisis, the removal of Maduro appears to have reconfigured it, leaving fundamental questions of governance, legitimacy, and stability unresolved.

But it has also opened new possibilities. A momentum that should be harnessed by Venezuelan civil society, which has “flourished in the abyss.” Beyond ensuring everyday survival, it is “actively engaged in documenting, speaking out, supporting victims, preserving the memory of past events, seeking justice on the international stage, advocating for reparations and guarantees of non-repetition regarding all human rights violations committed in recent years, and fostering hope.” (Florantonia Singer) This creates a central tension: while grassroots initiatives enable survival and, in some cases, political agency, they also risk normalizing the absence of the state. The challenge for Venezuela’s future therefore lies not in replacing the state with informal solidarity networks, but in transforming the resilience and organizational capacity of civil society into the foundation of a more democratic and accountable state.

**Margarita López Maya** is a Venezuelan Historian and Political Analyst. She has worked at the Central University of Venezuela and several institutions in the United States. She has also served as president of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA).

**Anja Dargatz** is the Head of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) office in Caracas, Venezuela.

**Florantonia Singer** is a Venezuelan Journalist who contributes to the Spanish newspaper *El País*, as well as being part of the management team at the independent media outlet *El Bus TV*.

## Mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century – 1990s

- **Oil Wealth & Political Stability:** Fueled by the world’s largest oil reserves, Venezuela became a prosperous state under the 1961 Constitution, marked by growth, democratic stability and social development
- **Resource Curse:**
  - The rich oil-state preemptively satisfied social demands, effectively stifling the development of a vibrant, independent civil society
  - Over-reliance on oil exports left the national economy structurally fragile to global price shocks
- **The Oil Crisis:** The 1980s revenue collapse exposed this structural fragility; political elites proved unable to address the resulting long-term economic decline.
- **Erosion of Trust:** Public disillusionment with the democratic system increased

## Chávez’s “Revolución Bolivariana” (1998–2013)

- **Leveraging Discontent:** Hugo Chávez harnessed public disillusionment with the democratic status quo, winning power in 1998.
- **Constitutional & Structural Shift:** The 1999 Constitution established participatory democracy elements (e.g., recall referendums), while the state expanded through communal councils, the nationalization of strategic industries (especially oil), and large-scale social programs (“misiones”).
- **Hybrid Regime & Institutional Erosion:** While formal democratic frameworks persisted, Chávez systematically hollowed them out by politicizing the judiciary and dismantling media pluralism, thereby consolidating executive power and neutralizing traditional checks and balances.
- **Radicalization:** The 2002 coup attempt was a transformative rupture, allowing Chávez to militarize his political agenda and adopt a more confrontational, polarization-based style of governance.
- **Chávez’s Lasting Popular Appeal:** Nevertheless, Chávez maintained a vast, deeply loyal base until his death.

## Manifesting a participatory competitive authoritarianism (2013–2026):

- **Shift in Power:** In 2013, after Chávez’s death, Nicolás Maduro succeeded him as president.
- **Transition to Coercion:** In contrast to Chávez, Maduro lacked broad public support. The regime shifted from a hybrid model to rule via raw state repression, institutionalized clientelism, and militarized policing.
- **Abduction:** On January 3, 2026, Nicolás Maduro was removed from power by an US-led military intervention.