



# GNSI DECISION BRIEF

# Free Venezuela!

The Opportunity for a Return to Democracy

Written by:

Robert S. Burrell, PhD

Homer Harkins, EdD

September 16, 2024



UNIVERSITY of  
**SOUTH FLORIDA**  
Global and National Security Institute

## Free Venezuela! The Opportunity for a Return to Democracy

### Introduction

Nicolás Maduro remains a weak and unpopular dictator, only retaining power in Venezuela through internal violent repression, nefarious international support, and paramilitary assistance from violent transnational criminal organizations. Limited, targeted sanctions designed to discourage political repression and criminal cooperation remain ineffective as they have been evaded and ignored. The Venezuelan regime has effectively countered multinational diplomatic efforts by using approximately [\\$28 billion in regional economic support](#) to undermine the will of the Organization of American States (OAS) and the United Nations push for a return to democracy in Venezuela.<sup>i</sup> A full-spectrum national resistance campaign including, if necessary, the use of targeted violence in compliance with international humanitarian law, coupled with international diplomatic, economic, informational, and, if necessary, external military intervention will bring about the return of legitimate governance to Venezuela.

### The Power of Truth

The United States must display the courage needed to lead international efforts to support the Venezuelan people's desire to end the Western Hemisphere's most brutal dictatorship and return Venezuela to the liberal democracy envisioned by its national hero Simón Bolívar. Unlike the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961, poorly executed at the height of Castro's popularity, forcing Maduro from power requires the United States, Venezuela's neighbors, and other international partners insisting on the return of liberty. Speaking and acting upon truth (what the Greeks called parrhesia and Gandhi called satyagraha) will inexorably set Venezuela on a path toward democracy.



Figure 1: Maria Corina Machado, 2014 (Source/Wikipedia)

The results of the election in Venezuela are extraordinarily clear. Just three months prior to the election, in March 2024, Maduro banned popular opposition leader [Maria Corina Machado](#) from running.<sup>ii</sup> The opposition then replaced her with an established professor Corina Yoris. Maduro then quickly banned her as well. Finally, the opposition named the 74-year-old [Edmundo González](#)

[Urrutia](#) as its candidate.<sup>iii</sup> Despite these hurdles, Corina Machado was able to mobilize the population, primarily through a [network of mothers](#), to achieve 67% of the votes for González, an overwhelming victory.<sup>iv</sup> But more remarkably, Corina Machado was able to document the results through the actions of volunteers at thousands of poll centers, and she then [published those results online](#) with the evidence.<sup>v</sup> The mass organization of popular support for change, as well as the detailed implementation of fact-based voting tallies, stands apart as one of the most remarkable nonviolent resistance campaigns in history.

The facts are irrefutable. All available information confirms Maduro is deeply unpopular and stole the 2024 election. According to [Datanálisis](#), a respected polling firm in Venezuela, Maduro's approval rating is in the range of 20-30%.<sup>vi</sup> The OAS election observation department reports that it cannot recognize the results claimed by Venezuela's National Electoral Council, which declared President Nicolas Maduro the winner, due to significant concerns over the election's transparency and credibility. If pressured, Maduro's regime will likely collapse. The Venezuelan military, historically a key power broker in the nation's politics, [shows signs of discontent](#) over corruption, economic mismanagement, and the use of the military for political purposes and can be expected to endorse and support the opposition, particularly if the continued existence of the armed forces is guaranteed.<sup>vii</sup>

Successful full-spectrum national resistance that returns democracy to Venezuela can solve massive Venezuelan immigration issues affecting countries across the Western Hemisphere ([7.7 million immigrants and rising](#)),<sup>viii</sup> curtail transnational criminal activities involving vast quantities of narcotics and deeply disturbing human trafficking networks, and likely facilitate lasting stability to the region with Venezuela again being a hub of regional prosperity and security. To achieve this desirable and highly feasible end state, the United States should form a coalition with like-minded Latin American partners and support Venezuelan resistance.

Maduro's regime is supported by America's adversaries – China, Russia, Iran, and multiple violent extremist organizations. Their continued support of Maduro runs counter to the global world order that America defends. As such, Maduro presents a direct threat to America's [National Security Strategy](#) and poses a destabilizing force in the Americas – only 500 miles from Puerto Rico.<sup>x</sup> The U.S. seizure of Maduro's [presidential planes](#) in the Dominican Republic represents not nearly enough action.<sup>xi</sup>

### An Unstable Regime

It is possible to conduct a quantitative analysis of a government's resiliency. In evaluating the relative status of Maduro regime,

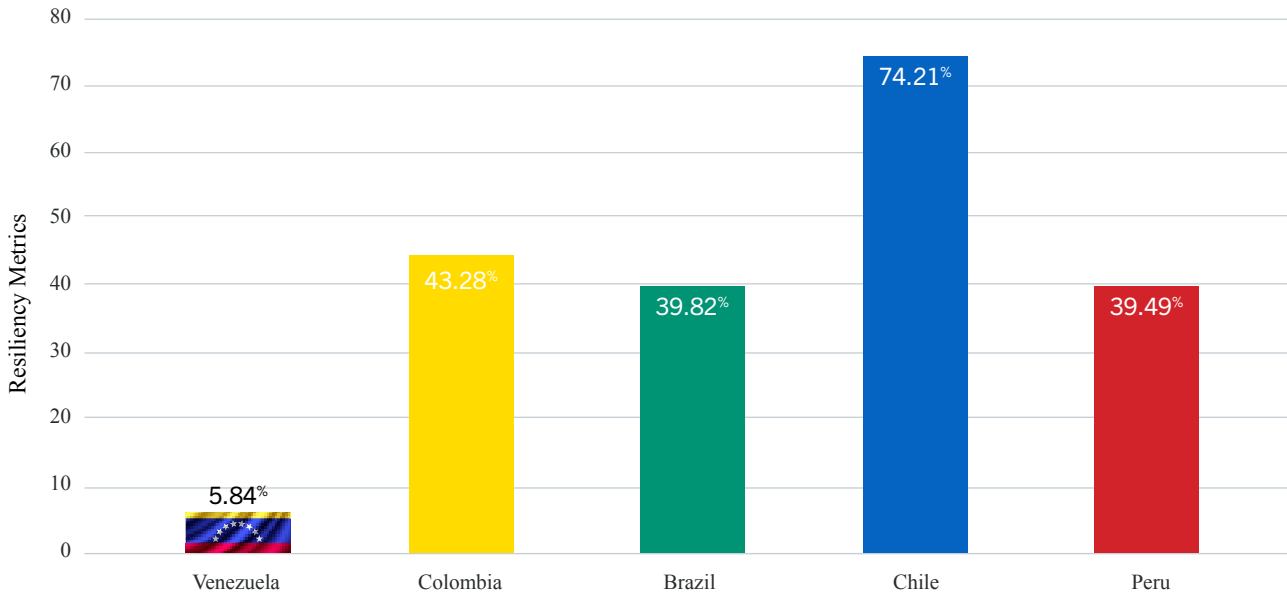


Table 1: Comparison of Maduro Regime's Resilience with South American States<sup>ix</sup>

we examined Venezuela's global rankings using the [Fragile State Index](#), the [Climate Change Readiness Index](#), and the [Worldwide Governance Indicators](#) and then compared them to regional neighbors.<sup>xii</sup> Table 1 illustrates this comparative analysis of Maduro's regime with all other nation states with 100% indicating the most resilient and 0% the lowest. The Maduro regime's resiliency results with an abysmally low score of 5.84%, compared with that of Peru at 39.49%, Brazil at 39.82%, Colombia at 43.28%, and Chile at 74.21%.

To provide context for these numbers, Venezuela ranks 16.76% on the 2024 Fund for Peace's Fragile State Index (down from 45.81% in 2012). In Notre Dame's 2022 Climate Change Readiness Index (economic readiness, governance readiness, and social readiness), Venezuela ranks 1.04%. In the published 2022 World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators, Venezuela ranks 6.76% in accountability (down from 22.07% in 2012), 12.26% in stability (down from 17.54%), 5.19% in effectiveness (down from 13.74%), 2.36% in regulations (down from 6.64%), 0.47% in rule of law, and 1.89% in deterring corruption (down from 8.06%). Averaging these eight metrics equally, the Maduro regime receives the extremely low overall resiliency measurement of 5.84%, far below other states in the region.

Maduro's regime is on the verge of collapse and has the weakest government in Latin America by far. The Maduro regime remains one of the most tenuous in the world – comparable even to the vulnerable African governments of Chad (7.16%), Sudan (5.97%), and Eritrea (5.97%).

### Ubiquitous Resistance

Achieving national interests to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow hostile regimes through support to resistance strategies, and even direct military intervention, has been a traditional foreign policy tool for the United States. In fact, the United States was conceived as a resistance movement to the British and supported by France. Throughout its history, the United States has enabled resistance activities, starting with support to various resistance movements in British-controlled territories during its own

revolutionary war and including many other places around the world over the following centuries, particularly in the strategically important Western Hemisphere. The United States has also used direct military interventions to remove dictators when its vital interest were threatened, such as capturing and incarcerating Manuel Noriega from Panama in 1989. This intervention transformed Panama from dictatorship to becoming one of the freest, most prosperous nations in Latin America. In regard to ending the dictatorship in Venezuela, there are many activities a Western Hemisphere coalition could take from recognizing the legitimacy of a democratically- elected government-in-exile, publically supporting nonviolent action, providing support to armed resistance, or even establishing aerial and/or maritime exclusion zones.

Unfortunately, the United States has failed to act decisively in the case of the Maduro regime. Decades of propaganda designed to discredit U.S. foreign policy towards Latin America during the Cold War has created a lack of political will to end dictatorships in the Americas. This is unfortunate as the key factor in the wave of democratization in Latin America from 1978 to 1992, which culminated with only one dictatorship (Cuba) remaining in the Western Hemisphere, was U.S. insistence that countries in the Americas be politically and economically free – backed by the will to impose freedom as needed in the region.

Americans should not conflate the situation in Venezuela with the Cold War. The United States no longer needs to support military regimes in the hemisphere to contain the threat of communism. Today, the goal is freedom across the Americas, once and for all. With the support of an external coalition led by the United States, a Venezuelan resistance movement could very likely succeed, eventually leading to humanitarian relief for millions of Venezuelan refugees, economic progress there and across Gran Colombia, and a return to the regional stability enjoyed before a communist revolution seized power in the country. In contrast, based on data from the past two decades, a strategy that continues to focus on targeted sanctions alone will prove anemic in promoting freedom in Venezuela.

## Decision Points

1. Should the United States and OAS recognize opposition leader Edmundo Gonzales as the Venezuelan President?
2. Should the United States and OAS coordinate international support for Edmundo Gonzales?
3. Should the United States and partners provide support across a full-spectrum of Venezuelan resistance?
4. Should the United States and partners provide support to an armed Venezuelan resistance?

---

**Robert S. Burrell, PhD**, Senior Research Fellow  
*Global and National Security Institute*

**Homer Harkins, EdD**, Retired Special Forces Officer  
and Regional Expert

### Disclaimer:

This document was prepared by the Global and National Security Institute (GNSI) at the University of South Florida (USF). GNSI Decision Briefs aim to inform the reader on a particular policy issue to enhance decision-making while proposing the questions policymakers need to address. The analysis and views presented here belong to the author(s) and do not represent the views of the Department of Defense or its components or the USF administration or its components.

---

### Endnotes

- <sup>i</sup> I. Arnesen, J. Clancy, D. Elliott, and K. Francis, "[Venezuela, PetroCaribe, and the 'Orgy of Corruption'](#)," Caribbean Investigative Journalism Network (2019).
- <sup>ii</sup> R. Garcia Cano, "[Venezuela's Barred Opposition Candidate is Now the Fiery Surrogate of Her Lesser-known Replacement](#)," Associated Press (2024).
- <sup>iii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>iv</sup> C. Amanpour, "[Interview with Venezuelan Opposition Leader Maria Corina Machado](#)," CNN (2024).
- <sup>v</sup> A. Blinkin, "[Assessing the Results of Venezuela's Presidential Election](#)," U.S. Department of State (2024).
- <sup>vi</sup> R. Boothroyd, "[Maduro's Popularity Increases in Run-Up to Elections](#)," Venezuelanalysis (2017).
- <sup>vii</sup> K. Mani, "[Don't Assume Venezuela's Military Will Stand by Maduro](#)," World Politics Review (2024).
- <sup>viii</sup> "[Venezuela Situation](#)," The United Nations Refugee Agency, (2023).
- <sup>ix</sup> Illustration by authors.
- <sup>x</sup> J. Biden, [National Security Strategy](#). The White House (2022).
- <sup>xi</sup> "[Venezuela's Maduro Condemns 'Piracy' After US Seizes his 'Smuggled' Plane](#)," France 24 (2024).
- <sup>xii</sup> [Fragile States Index](#), Fund for Peace, 2024; [Climate Change Readiness Index](#), Notre Dame (2022); [Worldwide Governance Indicators](#), World Bank 2022.