

# Latin America: Regional political violence risks under pressure after US capture of Maduro | Credendo

## Event

On 3 January, US forces captured Venezuela's authoritarian president Maduro in a snatch-and-grab operation following a series of air strikes and months of [unprecedent military build-up](#). The US decided not to dismantle the rest of the regime and the Venezuelan Supreme Court swiftly declared Vice President Delcy Rodríguez as (interim) president. The US signalled its willingness to work with her as long as she fulfils US objectives. US pressure on the regime continues in the form of an embargo on sanctioned oil exports as illustrated by the capture of four US-sanctioned Venezuelan oil tankers in the past weeks. A democratic transition does not appear to be part of the US strategy at this stage.

## Impact

Rodríguez faces an inherently contradictory task to satisfy both the Trump administration – seeking oil, anti-narcotics cooperation and renewed access for US energy firms – while simultaneously navigating a political regime relying on corruption, oil and drug trafficking profits sustained by over two decades of anti-US Chavista ideology. Besides managing these incompatible demands, Rodríguez is likely to confront deep internal power rivalries as real power is dispersed across different figures. Although she controls the Venezuelan counterintelligence agency, key security institutions remain in the hands of Diosdado Cabello (interior minister) and Vladimir Padrino López (defence minister). Power struggles within the ruling elite are common, making violent confrontation between these factions highly likely. On top of that, the armed landscape is exceptionally fragmented. The military counts thousands of generals who act as splintered armed factions which are constantly involved in power struggles amongst each other. Besides a fragmented official army, pro-regime militias listening to Padrino or Cabello operate with considerable autonomy. In combination with a patchwork of various criminal groups (some aligned with the state, others effectively controlling territory – especially in strategic mining zones), this multiplicity of (military) actors has turned the country into an explosive tinderbox. Although the regime currently shows early signs of consolidation under US pressure, the situation remains fluid and a second wave of US strikes cannot be ruled out.

If Venezuela descends into chaos, large-scale migration and violence could spill over and affect the whole region. If this happens, the political violence risk of South American countries (especially Colombia and Guyana) will come under pressure.

In the aftermath of Maduro's capture, an emboldened Trump threatened once again to order unilateral US military strikes on Mexico, Cuba and Colombia. The risk of US air strikes on drug gangs has risen due to the huge military build-up in the Caribbean, Trump's unpredictability and the desire to project hard power in the hemisphere. However, at this stage, such strikes appear rather unlikely since Colombia and Mexico have a long-standing security cooperation with the US in anti-narcotics operations, which Trump is unlikely to jeopardise. The risk of collateral damage also weighs heavily: in Mexico, strikes could derail the upcoming North American trade negotiations and disrupt Trump's close relationship with President Sheinbaum; in Colombia, unilateral action could strengthen left-wing, anti-Trump candidates ahead of the May presidential

elections and undermine the goals set out in [the hemispheric “Donroe” doctrine](#).

Though there is no security cooperation between the US and Cuba, military action against the island seems unlikely as well today. The US is currently using its oil blockade to stop Venezuelan oil shipments to the island – accounting for a third of Cuban oil imports. This measure is expected to be highly effective in further straining an [already ailing economy](#), and is likely to increase emigration and trigger unrest amid the worst hardship since the collapse of the Soviet Union, pressurising Cuba’s political violence risk (3/7). While the Cuban regime will come under significant pressure, a regime collapse is far from assured, given the historic cohesion of the country’s leadership and the strength of its security apparatus.

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