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FEATURED Q&A

Where Are U.S.-Venezuela Relations Headed?

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Venezuelan Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello (L-R) recently gave conflicting accounts on how five embattled Venezuelan opposition members departed Caracas. // File Photos: @marcorubio via X, Venezuelan Government.

Q Five aides of Venezuelan opposition leader María Corina Machado who, under threat of arrest, had sheltered for more than a year at the Argentine diplomatic compound in Caracas, have left the mission and arrived in the United States, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced May 6. The aides' departure was negotiated, Venezuelan Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello said the following day. What does the five opposition members' departure and other recent developments say about U.S.-Venezuela relations? To what extent are Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and U.S. President Donald Trump interested in cordial relations in order to accomplish their goals? How does the current state of relations between the two countries affect Venezuela's opposition?

A Charles Shapiro, former U.S. ambassador to Venezuela: "Negotiated solution? Diosdado Cabello's modus operandi is lying. Precision U.S. operation? The U.S. government is hiding the facts behind self-congratulatory braggadocio. Of course Venezuela wants 'cordial relations' with the United States, but on its terms: no criticism of human rights abuses or fraudulent elections and no sanctions. Those are the same terms autocrats around the world always want. Those are exactly the terms Hugo Chávez told me he wanted when I presented my credentials to him as U.S. ambassador to Venezuela in March 2002. The Trump administration has two Venezuela policies: One group, led by Marco Rubio, wants to get rid of Maduro at all costs short of military intervention. They want to turn up the heat on the Maduro gang through increased economic sanctions and political pressure. The other

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TODAY'S NEWS

POLITICAL

Bolivian Court Upholds Morales' Ban From Election

Bolivia's constitutional court on Wednesday upheld a lower court's ruling banning former President Evo Morales from the country's August presidential race. Morales vowed to challenge the ruling.

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Brazil's Petrobras Discussing Oil Projects in Nigeria

Brazilian state oil company Petrobras is in talks to return to deep-water oil projects in Nigeria, according to Nigeria's foreign minister.

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POLITICAL

Milei Tightens Argentina's Immigration Laws

Argentine President Javier Milei on Wednesday issued a decree tightening the country's immigration laws. Among other provisions, the order makes it more difficult to obtain Argentine citizenship.

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Milei // File Photo: @OPRArgentina via X.

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POLITICAL NEWS

Argentina's Milei Tightens Laws on Immigration

Argentine President Javier Milei on Wednesday issued a decree that toughens the country's immigration laws, the Associated Press reported. Among the changes, the executive order makes it more difficult to acquire Argentine citizenship, requiring people to move to Argentina to spend two uninterrupted years in the country or make a significant financial investment in order to acquire citizenship, the AP reported. In order to attain permanent residency, immigrants will have to demonstrate proof of income or "sufficient means" and also have no criminal record in their home countries, the wire service reported. Milei's order also makes it easier

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>
> **— Manuel Adorni**

for authorities to deport immigrants to enter the country without authorization or ones who commit minor crimes in Argentina or falsify immigration documents, the AP reported. The order also asks the country's judiciary to speed up normally lengthy immigration court cases. "For some time now, we've had regulations that invite chaos and abuse by many opportunists who are far from coming to this country in an honest way," presidential spokesman Manuel Adorni told reporters, the AP reported. Adorni acknowledged comparisons to U.S. President Donald Trump's immigration crackdowns, saying it was "time to honor our history and make Argentina great again." Argentina has historically welcomed immigrants, even offering foreign citizens free health care and education, Bloomberg News reported. However, Milei started to reverse those policies last year, directing the country's public universities to require tuition payments from nonresidents. Over the past 20 years, 1.7 million immigrants settled without authorization in Argentina, said Adorni, Bloomberg News reported. According to Argentina's most recent national census, compiled in 2022, Argentina had 1.93 million foreign residents and the lowest percentage of immigrants in the country since record-keeping began in 1869, the AP reported.

Bolivian Court Upholds Morales' Ban From Race

Bolivia's constitutional court on Wednesday unanimously upheld a lower court's ruling barring former President Evo Morales from seeking another term in elections scheduled for Aug. 17, Reuters reported. Morales has said that he will challenge the court's ruling and still plans to register as a presidential candidate ahead of the deadline on Sunday, Bloomberg News reported. The constitutional tribunal "is unconstitutionally exercising the powers of the legislature," Morales said in a statement on social media site X on Wednesday afternoon. "Only the people can ask me to decline my candidacy," he added. Morales served three terms as president between 2005 and 2019; he argues that while Bolivia's constitution prohibits immediate re-election after two terms, it has no specific ban on a former president running for nonconsecutive terms indefinitely. Morales also faces criminal charges stemming from allegations of human trafficking and an improper relationship with an underage girl; he denies all charges against him, Bloomberg News reported. If he indeed stands as a candidate despite courts' disqualification, Morales will likely compete with Senate President Andrónico Rodríguez, who announced his candidacy last week, to win over left-leaning voters. Incumbent President Luis Arce, who has polled in single digits, on Tuesday announced that

NEWS BRIEFS

El Salvador's Bukele Announces Legislation on 'Foreign Agents'

Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele on Tuesday evening announced new legislation cracking down on "foreign agents," which critics say targets civil society and independent journalism, the Associated Press reported. The measure would include a 30 percent tax on donations to nongovernmental organizations, which could limit funding for human rights groups and news outlets not affiliated with the state, among other groups typically critical of Bukele's administration, the AP reported.

China Ends Visa Requirements for Five Latin American Countries

China's government announced today that it will extend visa-free travel privileges to nationals of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Peru and Uruguay, Reuters reported. The measure will last for at least one year starting on June 1; it follows similar moves by China's government last year to eliminate travel restrictions from most European countries, as well as Japan and South Korea, according to the wire service. The decision came after Latin American leaders including Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Chilean President Gabriel Boric attended a regional summit in Beijing this week.

New Fortress to Delay Filing Following Setback in Jamaica Unit Sale

U.S.-based liquefied natural gas firm New Fortress Energy will delay a quarterly report filing to the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission due to a delay in a sale agreement for the company's subsidiary in Jamaica, the company announced Tuesday, Reuters reported. The company in March announced it would sell its operations in Jamaica for $1.1 billion.

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he will not run for another term in the August general election, Bloomberg News reported. Other candidates, including Cochabamba Mayor Manfred Reyes Villa and former President Jorge "Tuto" Quiroga, have also polled above 10 percent in recent surveys.

BUSINESS NEWS

Brazil's Petrobras Discussing Oil Projects in Nigeria

Brazilian state-run oil firm Petrobras is in talks to return to deep-water oil projects in Nigeria, the African country's foreign minister said in a statement on Wednesday, Reuters reported. Petrobras had operated in Nigeria's offshore oil sector from 1998 until 2020, when it finalized the sale of its remaining assets in the country to fund new domestic projects, according to the wire service. The Brazilian firm had announced in February that it was considering purchasing African oil and gas production assets from existing partners including ExxonMobil and Shell, Reuters reported. ExxonMobil announced earlier this month that it plans to invest $1.5 billion in a deep-water oil project off of Nigeria's southeastern coast by 2027, news site OilPrice.com reported. Petrobras' push for new assets off the coast of the Niger River delta comes as the company faces an expected decline in oil production as soon as 2030, Bloomberg News reported. As existing fields in the Campos and Santos basins reach maturity, Petrobras' domestic oil production will increasingly become reliant on the northern Equatorial Margin area—permits for the company to drill in the area, which is part of the Amazon rain forest biome, remain pending amid a standoff between environmental and hydrocarbons regulators. Nigeria's government aims to add 1 million barrels per day in oil production by the end of next year, an increase of more than 50 percent from current levels. [Editor's note: See **Q&A** on Petrobras in the April 11 issue of the weekly Energy Advisor.]

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group prioritizes deportation above all else. Think Stephen Miller, Steve Witkoff, and Kristi Noem. They want the Maduro gang to accept deported Venezuelans. The Venezuelan opposition, wary of offending anyone, avoids discussing the refusal to extend Temporary Protected Status for Venezuelans. Venezuelan-Americans are a different story. Hoping he would use military force against Maduro, they voted overwhelmingly for hardline Trump. But it did not fully register that hardline Trump would also take a hard line on Venezuelan migration. Under deportation-focused Trump, Venezuelans in the United States have gone from being heroes resisting Chávez comunismo to being equated with the Tren de Aragua. White South Africans are welcomed as refugees, while Venezuelans are targets for deportation. Go figure. Expect more ambiguity. Trump's top two priorities during the campaign were the southern border and deportation. I see no reason for that to change."

Michael Shifter, former president of the Inter-American Dialogue: "The release of the five members of the Venezuelan opposition who were given refuge in the Argentine embassy in Caracas for 14 months should be cheered. To date, however, there has not been any evidence that their release was a result of either a U.S.-backed rescue operation, as Marco Rubio has claimed, or a negotiation with the Maduro regime, as Diosdado Cabello said. It is also probably not wise to read too much into this development and what it may mean for the Maduro regime, the opposition or U.S.-Venezuela relations. Since the start of Trump 2.0, there have been mixed signals, a number of zigs and zags, and multiple contradictions in its policy toward Venezuela. As of today, a hardline approach, promoted by Rubio—now both secretary of state and national security advisor—seems to have the upper hand, with tariffs announced against governments that buy Venezuelan oil and a winding down of the U.S. license to Chevron at the end of the month. Whether those measures will help the United States achieve its stated goal of 'regime change' is dubious. At the same time, the Trump administration's tough stand on Venezuelan migrants in the United States fleeing a repressive regime—coupled with ending support for Venezuelan pro-democracy groups —contradict the overall objective of defeating authoritarian rule. Further, it is not entirely clear how much support the hardline policy has in the administration beyond Rubio, who now has many jobs with huge portfolios. Other senior administration figures, notably special missions envoy Ric Grenell, have a more pragmatic and transactional view about how the United States should now deal with Maduro."

Julia Buxton, professor of justice at Liverpool John Moores University: "The release is great news for a small group of people. No wider significance for U.S.-Venezuela bilateral relations should be read into this event. The United States has been sketchy on details of how the five were removed from the Argentine embassy (operated by Brazil) and out of Venezuela. Marco Rubio refers to extraction of hostages—a language shared by opposition figure María Corina Machado, a disqualified candidate in last July's presidential election, and Argentine President Javier Milei. The Maduro government has poured cold water on magical accounts of an epic operation and maintains that the release was discussed. It is unlikely the group

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> **— Julia Buxton**

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was spirited out of the country under the nose of the Venezuelan security sector. If it was, it is a terrifying (but unlikely) threat to Maduro—but it should be noted he was out of the country at the time. Clearly, informal channels of communication between the White House and Miraflores are open. There is optimism they can be bent to improving U.S.-Venezuela relations—or at least securing the release of more prisoners. But these bilateral networks do not lend themselves to that task. They are partisan and privileged in the context of a transactional U.S. presidency. Rubio nominated Machado for Time magazine's 100 most influential people of the year, and the intervention has released her campaign manager, communications coordinators and liaison officers and also brought her mother to the United States. The optics are problematic during sweeping mobilization and targeting of Venezuelans in the United States—a revealing move."

David Smilde, professor at Tulane University and senior fellow at the Washington Office on Latin America: "What happens in Venezuela is not high on the Trump administration's priority list, and it seems to have been given to Marco Rubio as a space to maintain some of his neoconservative credibility. The current policy strengthens the hardline faction of the Venezuelan opposition. The latter's strategy is to abstain from national politics, use its influencers to question the integrity of those who do want to participate and reinforce international isolation. This strategy is destined to fail, just as it has so many times before. It continues because it fulfills the socioemotional needs of the Latino diaspora in the United States and is the gift that keeps on giving for Florida politicians who need to mobilize voters. Within Venezuela, it unifies the Venezuelan regime, prevents internal pushes for liberalization and keeps the participatory opposition off-balance. Thus, Venezuela seems to be headed into a long-term deadlock behind a political equilibrium very similar to what we see with U.S.-Cuba relations. A much better policy would be to engage the Maduro regime with sanctions relief in exchange for liberalization and encourage the opposition to participate in national politics as a way of staying relevant, keeping attention on Maduro's authoritarian practices and continuing to pressure the regime. The U.S. government also needs to set aside fantasies of a quick democratic transition. Significant changes in the political and economic structure will have to happen before one can imagine a return to democracy in Venezuela. Engagement would also keep Venezuela in the orbit of the democratic world and thereby give the Venezuelan opposition more plausible international allies and reference points."

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta.

Upcoming Event

ONLINE EVENT:
Views on the China-CELAC Forum
May 19, 2025 | 9:00 a.m. EDT

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