

# Beyond the River: A Conversation with Luis Ramos Reyes, Magistrate in Exile

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Luis Ramos Reyes is a supreme magistrate of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in exile. He was appointed to office by the opposition-controlled National Assembly on July 21, 2017, following a plebiscite held five days earlier that—among other things—granted the body a mandate to make appointments to Venezuela’s Supreme Tribunal of Justice (STJ). This adjudicative body is composed of 13 principle and 20 alternate magistrates, of which Ramos is among the latter.<sup>1</sup> The terms of the magistrates on the STJ at the time of the opposition’s appointments were set to expire in 2016 and as such, any vacancies should have been filled by the National Assembly *in* 2016. However, after the opposition’s victory in legislative elections on December 6, 2015, an emergency special session of the Chavista-controlled National Assembly was called during the Christmas recess to pack the STJ with loyalists. The opposition declared this act to be illegitimate and when it took power in 2016, it moved to oppose Nicolás Maduro’s corrupt consolidation of power across Venezuela’s institutions and to make its own parallel appointments. Of the 7.1 million citizens who voted in the 2017 plebiscite, approximately 98 percent voted to approve “the renewal of public authorities in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution.”<sup>2</sup> Luis Ramos Reyes and his fellow magistrates were appointed to that end. Maduro decried them as illegitimate and declared on state television that “they will all be put in jail, one after another.”<sup>3</sup> Following a controversial opposition-boycotted election on July 30,<sup>4</sup> a loyalist National Constituent Assembly convened and declared itself Venezuela’s supreme legislative body.<sup>5</sup> Nearly all of the opposition-appointed magistrates fled the country and a loyalist STJ remains installed in Venezuela.

This interview was conducted on November 9, 2024, shortly after the re-election of U.S. President Donald J. Trump and in the broader context of Venezuela’s uncertain fate following the country’s July 28 presidential election. Venezuela’s co-opted National Electoral Council declared that President Nicolás Maduro won the election with a 51 percent share of the vote. However, international election observers universally recognize that the opposition’s candidate, Edmundo González Urrutia, backed by Democratic Unitary Platform leader María Corina Machado—who was herself barred<sup>6</sup> from running—won the election.<sup>7</sup> In the days that followed, Venezuelans took to the streets in

mass protests against the electoral fraud perpetrated by the Maduro regime.<sup>8</sup> Individual election receipts published by the opposition indicate that Urrutia garnered 67% of the vote.<sup>9</sup> In the interview, Ramos frequently references January 10, 2025, the day marking the expiration of Maduro's second term and the day that Edmundo González Urrutia should have been sworn-in as the president of Venezuela. Ultimately, Maduro took the oath of office in Caracas at the legislative palace, securing—in principle—a third six-year term that is set to expire in 2031.<sup>10</sup>

1. *Can you tell us about your formative years and early career trajectory?*

Yes, those are very tough stages of life. For me, my mother formed an integral part of my elementary school education. She was a teacher in a rural town. Later on, we moved to the city, where I finished elementary school in a public school. When I started high school, like every motivated student, I was restless, and a fighter. I created the first Student Council of the Liceo Villavicencio high school. Unfortunately, I soon had to leave school because of my mother's economic situation; my father abandoned us, and it was just my mother, my siblings, and me. Being the oldest of my siblings, I had to work and fight. That forced me to study at night to get my high school diploma in order to achieve my dreams of becoming a lawyer. Obtaining my [law] degree proved a struggle akin to that which characterized my high school years. I had to move to the capital, Caracas, where I had to adapt to living in a student residence and to a city I had never lived in before.

When I graduated as a lawyer, I left my previous job as a chief of staff at a hospital in order to dedicate myself to my practice. Over the years, I was recognized for my aptitude and knowledge. In June of 2017, the contest for magistrate was announced.<sup>11</sup> The citizens of Venezuela—with more than 8 million votes<sup>12</sup>—supported the appointment of a new Supreme Tribunal, rejecting the one unlawfully installed by the Maduro regime. I chose to submit my name for consideration together with 700 other lawyers, and in 2017, I was selected and appointed as magistrate by the legitimate National Assembly. However, the same day of the swearing-in, Nicolás Maduro ordered [the opposition-appointed] magistrates to be captured and jailed for 30 years. He disseminated this order through national television and radio and so I went into hiding. I never thought that I would be persecuted and that I would have to abandon my family. I have not committed any crime except that of aspiring to be a magistrate of the Republic; to serve my country and the causes of freedom, democracy, and justice.

2. *How did you escape from Venezuela?*

I escaped to Colombia via an underground railroad of sorts. Over three months, I hid anywhere I could, in the bushes, across different sectors. Everybody knew that they were chasing the magistrates. Orders to turn us in were being broadcasted on the radio and on television. People were afraid to give me refuge for obvious reasons—they knew that if I was found out, that they

too would face jail time. I decided to wait until the regional elections in October of 2017 to make my run for the border, knowing that the government's post-election crackdown—led by the police and military—would give me an opening to escape. In those circumstances, I reached the border town of San Cristóbal where those who would accompany me during the last leg of my journey were waiting for me. Around four in the afternoon, I arrived at the rendezvous point. They hid me in a vehicle and drove me to the banks of the river. It was dry enough that I was able to cross by foot; I knew the way to walk in such terrain because I am a plainsman—*un llanero*. On the other side of the Táchira, I was received by my Colombian associates who shepherded me to the Colombian zone, and when I crossed the border at nine o'clock, they told me: "You are free." I looked up to the sky and thanked God.

The Colombians treated me excellently. By eleven o'clock that night, we reached the immigration office in Cúcuta. There was a great mass of people outside to greet me even though by that time the office should have been closed. The officials present were given orders to grant me legal status and they did so. The next day, I met the governor of [Norte de Santander] as well as the staff of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). I spent four days in Cúcuta and was then transferred to Bogotá by the UNHCR. The Colombian government—thank God—had already assigned apartments to me and the other magistrates in exile. In addition to this display of generosity, the Colombians acted to acknowledge our legitimacy. During my time in Bogotá, I had an audience with the Colombian Supreme Court. Moreover, all of these accommodations—the apartment, the legal status—were granted under the impression that I would be staying in Colombia indefinitely, but I ultimately decided against it for fear of the long arm of the Maduro regime. They are infiltrated everywhere and I felt that in Colombia they might still get to me. In Chile, for example, an ex-Venezuelan military man was murdered—according to Chilean authorities—by agents of the Maduro regime.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, in Colombia, they have kidnapped Venezuelans pursued by the regime and have taken them back to Venezuela.<sup>14</sup> I refused to allow the possibility that my children might see me die in a dungeon in Venezuela. This is what led me to flee to the United States.

Before 2017, I had been visiting the United States frequently for the past 20 years, either on vacation or to run errands. So, when I came here, I was warmly received by friends who offered me their support. Soon thereafter, I started the process of requesting political asylum—a process that is still ongoing. In the meantime, I have worked to survive and to support my children and family who are still in Venezuela.

### 3. *What was the process of applying for political asylum like?*

I informed the same people who rescued me and helped me get to Colombia of my arrival to the United States, and they sent me documents and information to help me apply for asylum. Magistrates who were already in the United States sent me documents of my designation and appointment as magistrate; and with all of those gathered, I requested asylum.

In spite of the United States being a first world country and being so exemplary in anything associated with democracy—for which I am eternally grateful—I have not been treated in the manner appropriate for a magistrate—especially one who has been so brutally persecuted. All the magistrates who fled to the United States have not been treated with the same care as our peers who fled to, say, Chile. Chile received them warmly. They were assigned an apartment, a pension, and were given protection by the state.

There are 11 magistrates here in the United States, three others in Chile, three others who stayed in Colombia, and so on. Three magistrates were caught in Venezuela and were imprisoned, but they were eventually released. Two of them were forced to resign, while the other was imprisoned and negotiated for his release.

4. *You have been in the United States for about eight years. How has your life been in Miami?*

Well, since I arrived here in Miami it has been tough. I find peace and tranquility in knowing that I am not being persecuted; in knowing that there is at least that guarantee. We've had many interactions with the political sphere of the country. We have met with governors and with mayors who have received us and listened to us.<sup>15</sup> We have gone to Washington, D.C.

Within the United States, we have been contributing our input, our expertise, our knowledge—all we can offer—by doing radio, television, and interviews; always in the interest of maintaining our fight for freedom. We have done all we can to ensure that the rights of Venezuelans are respected; that we do not lose our homeland; and that we live in freedom once more.

There is no reason why, in the 21st century, one man should be allowed to take control of a country and subject it to barbarism while the international community stands idly by.

5. *Have you spoken with opposition leaders like María Corina Machado, former Interim-President Juan Guaido, and President-elect Urrutia?*

As magistrates, our main job in exile has been to work toward restoring democracy in Venezuela. We've had conversations with María Corina Machado on what needs to be done to rescue Venezuela from authoritarian rule and reestablish its institutions. The regime has appointed illegitimate magistrates who serve Maduro's whims rather than justice, and it has dismantled the constitutional order through a fraudulent Supreme Court and unlawful National Assembly. Our duty as magistrates is to expose these violations and ensure that Venezuelans and the international community recognize the legal truth.

While I was still in hiding, some magistrates met with the Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS), Luis Almagro. There they were formally constituted as magistrates of the Republic, giving us legitimacy and ensuring that we continue to act as the judicial authority, countering the unconstitutional and illicit actions of the regime.<sup>16</sup>

We have also had meetings with the president-elect, Dr. Edmundo Urrutia and Former Interim-president Juan Guaidó where we discussed how to ensure the recognition of President-elect Urrutia's landslide victory in the July 28 election. It is important to highlight the distinction between previous leadership and the current president-elect. In 2019, Juan Guaidó assumed the interim presidency based on constitutional provisions due to his role as head of the National Assembly, while Urrutia was directly elected by the people. This is a crucial difference that reinforces Urrutia's legitimacy and the need for international recognition of his presidency.

The magistrates have always acted as an institutional body, offering legal support to legitimate democratic forces. Moving forward, our focus is on ensuring that the regime complies with the electoral outcome and hands over power to President-elect Urrutia on January 10.

The reality is that Venezuela's institutions have been embroiled in a cycle of illicitness, where magistrates were removed by the National Assembly and replaced by others appointed by a so-called "constituent assembly" that itself operated outside the Constitution and the law.<sup>17</sup> This illicit assembly, in turn, appointed other magistrates, leading to an entirely unconstitutional and illegitimate Supreme Court composed solely of lawyers serving the interests of the ruling party. From that moment, the powers of the republic began to be usurped—both the executive power, with a president that was not legitimately elected, and the judiciary, with an illicit supreme court and an illicit attorney general.<sup>18</sup>

Despite this, the Venezuelan opposition—under the same rules set by that illicit regime—participated in the election on July 28. The opposition won overwhelmingly, with no less than 70 percent of the vote against 30 percent.<sup>19</sup> This decisive result should have prompted the immediate concession of Nicolás Maduro and the universal acknowledgment of Urrutia as president-elect by all national institutions. Nevertheless, Urrutia has been forced into exile by the regime's persecution. He took refuge in the Spanish Embassy which protected him and got him out of the country. Currently, he is doing a titanic job visiting different governments of Europe and the world to rally support for the restoration of democracy in Venezuela. Soon, he will even come to the United States. I think there needs to be support from the international community, multinational organizations, as in the case of the OAS, the United Nations, and the European Union, which are already backing our cause.

The Venezuelan regime is obliged to hand over power. It lost the election with the rules of the game that it established itself, and 90 percent of the Venezuelan people do not want this regime.<sup>20</sup> What the governments, the heads of state, the international institutions, the regional organization, and NATO have to do is unite, demand, and force the regime to hand over power and recognize President Urrutia as the constitutional president of Venezuela.

This is what has to be done.

6. *Do you think that the Maduro regime will take part in a peaceful transfer of power? If not, how can the regime be forced to acknowledge Urrutia's victory and relinquish power?*

It all depends on how things are handled. If the international community ignores and sets the regime aside, because it usurps power and violates human rights, rest assured this will force him to negotiate an exit and surrender his power. Perhaps he does not want to hand over power, and perhaps those who are with him do not want to hand over power—but when the situation becomes dire, when the state does not have the resources and cannot manage international relations—when they cannot sell their exports or buy imports—then Maduro will surrender.

The armed forces must make a decision to remove Maduro because he is doing too much damage to the country and the republic. The armed forces have to place themselves on the side of justice, the side of the people. The armed forces serve the people, therefore they have to guarantee sovereignty and enforce the nation's laws. The only way to enforce the constitution and the laws is by ignoring and removing the [Maduro] government and re-establishing a legitimate democracy.

7. *Do you support the idea of U.S. military intervention in Venezuela to enforce the transfer of power from Maduro to Urrutia?*

Though everything is feasible, I hold that military intervention is not necessary in Venezuela, not even for humanitarian reasons. Military intervention is not necessary because that is what economic and coercive political measures are for. China, Russia, and Iran are giving Maduro support. They do so because it is convenient for them to keep Venezuela in their sphere of influence. [Venezuela] is a cheap source of oil for China, a cheap source of gold for Russia, and a way for Iran to undermine the United States. However, when sanctions that are coercive enough are enforced, the support of the regime's benefactors will be choked off and the Venezuelan armed forces will be compelled to act in order to guarantee the security and defense of the nation and the welfare of its citizens. The armed forces must end their backing of this government, which is nothing more than a band of criminal usurpers.

The Biden administration, unfortunately, relieved pressure and in so doing, greatly damaged the struggle for freedom and democracy in Venezuela. Biden made too many concessions. He freed two of Maduro's nephews who were imprisoned in the United States on drug trafficking charges.<sup>21</sup> He pardoned Alex Saab, who made his fortune by defrauding the Venezuelan people.<sup>22</sup> He eased sanctions on oil.<sup>23</sup> Overall, he did a lot of damage to the cause of freedom for Venezuelans.

In light of the election on November 5, there is more hope for Venezuelans. That is what Venezuelans across the world are saying. President Trump in his first administration was stalwart in waging the fight for freedom; this is



proven by the measures that the United States took from 2017 to 2021. Now, in his second administration, he will re-implement and double down on his past policies.<sup>24</sup> That will lead the Maduro regime to negotiate an exit deal and as a result we shall see the restoration of democracy in Venezuela. The clear-eyed sanctions policy advanced and implemented by the Republican Party and President Trump offers a viable path for rescuing democracy in the American continent and for putting an end to the Cuban interference that is a plague across the continent.<sup>25</sup> The case of Bolivia, the case of Venezuela, the case of Nicaragua—horrible as they are all on their own—are only possible because of the Cuban menace and the parasitic symbiosis that defines their relationships to one another. Encircling these regimes and targeting them with stricter sanctions is the only way to bring about a shift toward democracy.

8. *The Cuban Embargo has remained in place since 1962. It has not worked; the Cuban regime remains intact. Given this track record, what makes you so certain that a sanctions regime is the right path for promoting change in Venezuela or Nicaragua, let alone Cuba?*

First things first, I do not believe that the sanctions on Cuba are properly enforced. I do not believe that they are real. They are a great fable that has been sold to the Cubans, to deceive the people, and excuse economic mismanagement. Flights arrive in Cuba every day and flights leave every day. Ships laden with foodstuffs arrive on a daily basis. Venezuela alone has spent 25 years giving oil and fuel away to Cuba. But it is not just cooperation between Venezuela and Cuba that keeps the Castro regime in place. France, Canada, Spain, and Italy have masses of hotels there, which they build for the exploitation of the island's touristic appeals.<sup>26</sup> This gives the regime access to foreign currencies. It oxygenates the regime, preventing its collapse.

Now, take into account the question of exports. Cuba is known as a producer of sugar, yet in Cuba there is no sugar for the people.<sup>27</sup> Why? Because the sugar is sold to other countries to finance the regime's oppression of the Cuban people. Though food shortages in Venezuela today are not as bad as they are in Cuba or as they were in 2018, the same principle is true of its exports. It is also true of Nicaragua's exports: one can buy all the Nicaraguan staples they would like here in the United States.

What must be implemented is an economic siege. With the exception of medicine, for obvious reasons—or, say, books—nothing must be let in. Sanctions targeting individuals and their families have been enacted and must be maintained. Their assets abroad should be targeted and seized. They cannot be allowed to move money in the international market, they cannot be allowed to export, they cannot be allowed to import; they cannot be allowed to do anything at all. Crushing them economically, that is what *really* leads to them surrendering power.

9. *Venezuela is often called a narco-state. How do you believe an Urrutia government should go about breaking the ties between the government and drug cartels?*

Yes, citizens within Venezuela and military deserters outside her borders have publicly and notoriously denounced the narco-state that has arisen.<sup>28</sup> There is the “Cartel of the Suns” in which military groups and the national government have been involved.<sup>29</sup> The regime has recognized these groups and has imprisoned many of them, but there are still military forces involved in drug trafficking. In addition, planes, boats, and vessels loaded with drugs have been seized. This is a problem that threatens legal order in the country. Venezuela is now known as a “Cartel of the Suns” and a narco-state, whereas it used to be known for its prosperity and natural beauty. These labels are truly shameful for our armed forces, as well as for the Venezuelan state and its citizens.

It is very simple: once democracy and the rule of law are restored in Venezuela, the executive branch must take action. The legislative branch must also ensure institutional integrity. No individual in any public institution or the armed forces should remain in service if there is documented and verified evidence of their involvement in criminal organizations, criminal gangs, or drug trafficking networks. Those engaged in criminal activities in Venezuela clearly have no interest in a change of government. That is the core of the struggle. That is why the international community and governments worldwide must recognize the will of the people, which is the appointment of a legitimate president who has already been elected, Dr. González Urrutia.<sup>30</sup>

That is what this fight is about.

10. *The concept of an illicit or informal economy is well known; Venezuela's economy is increasingly driven by the drug trade. Sanctions would not affect this segment of the economy. How do you reconcile this?*

The sanctions I am referring to target the economic duplicity of the regime. Its hidden sale of oil, the clandestine shipping of petroleum, and its dealings in the shadow market. Drug trafficking needs to be tackled by mobilizing institutions against the production and illegal movement of drugs. This requires collective efforts from the international community and the new Venezuelan administration to ensure that Venezuela no longer serves as a hub for global drug trafficking.

The situation in Venezuela should not and cannot continue. Drug trafficking only benefits criminals and those who use drug money to buy yachts and airplanes. This must come to an end.

The fight is not just about sanctions; the real battle is to dismantle this criminal economy. That is the role of the legitimate government, which will take charge in Venezuela [on] January 10.

11. *If democratic government is re-instituted in Venezuela, would you go back?*

I am a magistrate—a legitimate magistrate of the republic—my term is still ongoing. I would have to return to the country immediately in order to



re-establish the legal institutions and to guarantee the constitution and the law. All of us magistrates who are in exile would be obliged to return immediately to Venezuela to guarantee order and security of the country.

12. *How does an authoritarian country transition into a democracy?*

It is a gradual process. To me, the support of the international community, as well as the momentum behind the rightfully elected president of Venezuela, Edmundo González Urrutia, indicates that this transition will occur. The regime will not be able to continue being totally unrecognized by the world. It is impossible for a regime—for the government in Venezuela—to claim legitimacy while being unrecognized by the world.

If the international community takes measures, they must implement and enforce personal and economic sanctions. [If so,] [r]est assured that the government—the Venezuelan regime—is going to relinquish power. Venezuela will recover its freedom and reconstruction will begin.

## Update

In the interview, Ramos eagerly awaited the arrival of the second Trump administration and what he assumed would be its speedy re-imposition of the first term's signature "maximum pressure" campaign against the Maduro regime. As of this writing, though, it is unclear whether Ramos will get what he bargained for. Indeed, a paradox in the administration's Venezuela policy is coming into view. It appears that certain voices in Trump's orbit are successfully eroding his first administration's inclination toward a policy of total isolation. The president's desire to make good on his promise of "mass deportations" necessitates a working relationship with the Maduro regime in order to succeed, and the administration's dialogue with the Maduro Regime provides the sort of acknowledgment that undermines its policy of isolation. As a means of ensuring continued cooperation, some have argued for a policy of *More Oil for fewer Migrants*, which would see sanctions relief on PdVSA, Venezuela's state-owned oil company, in exchange for acquiescence on the issue of immigration.<sup>31</sup> In short, the desire for an immigration crackdown could *trump* the desire to effectuate regime change in Venezuela.

On March 4, 2025, the U.S. Treasury issued General License 41A "Authorizing the Wind Down of Certain Transactions Related to Chevron Corporation's Joint Ventures in Venezuela," an action in keeping with the harsher policies of the first Trump presidency.<sup>32</sup> On March 22, 2025—following the Trump administration's controversial deportation of Venezuelan nationals to El Salvador<sup>33</sup> the week prior—the President of Venezuela's regime-backed National Assembly, Jorge Rodríguez, announced that the Maduro regime and the Trump administration had come to an agreement which would see the resumption of repatriation flights to Venezuela.<sup>34</sup> Two days later, on March 24, the U.S. Treasury Department extended Chevron's wind-down window until May 27.<sup>35</sup> In a contrasting statement, President Trump then declared that all

countries purchasing Venezuelan oil will face a 25 percent tariff on any trade with the United States starting on April 2.<sup>36</sup> Then, on March 29, the U.S. Treasury Department ordered Global Oil Terminals—the company of billionaire G.O.P. donor Harry Sargeant III—to cease operations in Venezuela, also by late May.<sup>37</sup>

On the whole, it appears that the voices of Venezuela hawks like Secretary of State Marco Rubio are currently winning out. This does not, though, negate the legitimacy that direct negotiation with Maduro on the issue of immigration affords his regime. In the same vein, it is reasonable to believe that renewed economic hardship promoted in Venezuela by a maximum pressure campaign will foster yet another wave of immigration, amplifying an already 7.7 million person exodus.<sup>38</sup> How the administration will reconcile these fundamental contradictions remains to be seen.

## Notes

1. Diario Las Américas, “Asamblea Nacional juramenta a 33 nuevos magistrados para el Tribunal Supremo de Justicia,” July 21, 2017. <https://www.diariolasamericas.com/america-latina/asamblea-nacional-juramenta-33-nuevos-magistrados-el-tribunal-supremo-justicia-n4127381>.
2. Español, Por CNN, “Más de 7 millones de venezolanos participaron en la consulta de la oposición,” CNN, July 17, 2017. <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2017/07/17/mas-de-7-millones-de-venezolanos-participaron-en-la-consulta-de-la-oposicion>.
3. Youtube, “Maduro promete arrestar a magistrados de la oposición,” *DW Español*, July 24, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TegRG2XsvFA>. Gupta, Girish.
4. “Exclusive–Venezuelan Vote Data Casts Doubt on Turnout at Sunday Poll,” *Reuters*, August 2, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/exclusive-venezuelan-vote-data-casts-doubt-on-turnout-at-sunday-poll-idUSKBN1A-IoAM/>. Bronstein, Hugh, and Julia Symmes Cobb.
5. “Venezuela Faces Outrage after New Assembly Takes Legislative Power,” *Reuters*, August 19, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/venezuela-faces-outrage-after-new-assembly-takes-legislative-power-idUSKCN1AY1VM/>.
6. Genevieve Glatsky and Isayen Herrera, “Venezuela’s Highest Court Bars Opposition Leader From Running for President,” *New York Times*, January 26, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/26/world/americas/venezuela-presidential-election-opposition.html>.
7. Argentina, U.S. Mission, “Assessing the Results of Venezuela’s Presidential Election.” *U.S. Embassy in Argentina*, August 2, 2024. <https://ar.usembassy.gov/assessing-the-results-of-venezuelas-presidential-election/>.
8. “Venezuela: Brutal Crackdown on Protesters, Voters,” *Human Rights Watch*, September 4, 2024. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/04/venezuela-brutal-crackdown-protesters-voters>.
9. The Carter Center, “Center Finds Democracy Thwarted in Venezuela,” Accessed March 27, 2025. <https://www.cartercenter.org/news/features/p/democracy/center-finds-democracy-thwarted-in-venezuela.html>.
10. Julie Turkewitz and Genevieve Glatsky, “Venezuela’s Autocrat, Accused of Stealing Election, Seizes Third Term,” *New York Times*, January 10, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/10/world/americas/nicolas-maduro-venezuela-president.html>.

11. Venezuelan Magistrates are appointed by the National Assembly through a selection process led by a Nominations Committee. Candidates are vetted based on legal experience, public consultation, and a clean legal record. Then the National Assembly votes requiring a two-thirds majority (or a simple majority in a second round) for approval. Magistrates then serve a 12 year term and can be reelected as there is no explicit term limit in the constitution.
12. Actual vote count stood at 7.1 million with 95% of the votes counted.
13. Ronald Ojeda's body was found "packed amid quicklime [in] a carry-on suitcase buried under nearly five feet of concrete."
14. *Semana*, "Nicolás Maduro persigue a sus opositores en Colombia: estos son los dramáticos testimonios de las víctimas del régimen." *Semana.com*, April 21, 2024. <https://www.semana.com/politica/articulo/nicolas-maduro-persigue-a-sus-opositores-en-colombia-estos-son-los-dramaticos-testimonios-de-las-victimas-del-regimen/202446/>.
15. Daily, Space Coast, "Florida Governor Rick Scott Meets with Exiled Venezuelan Supreme Court Magistrates." *Space Coast Daily*, January 30, 2018. <https://spacecoast-daily.com/2018/01/florida-governor-rick-scott-meets-with-exiled-venezuelan-supreme-court-magistrates/>.
16. According to Miguel Angel Martin, Chief Justice of the T.S.J. in exile the meeting at the O.A.S. constituted their "acto de apertura" or opening ceremony. As such the words "formally constituted" are misleading. The OAS has no jurisdiction over Venezuela's internal affairs.
17. The National Constituent Assembly was a constitutional convention called by the Maduro regime. It was opposed by the public in the 2017 plebiscite.
18. One of the opening acts of the National Constituent Assembly was to fire Venezuela's long-time attorney general, Luisa Ortega Díaz.
19. According to the Carter Center the count was 67% to 33%.
20. The 90% number was used sarcastically to indicate that the vast majority of the Venezuelan people are opposed to the Maduro regime. One 2016 poll found that 84% of Venezuelans would like to see Maduro removed.
21. Maduro's 'narcosobrinos' Efraín Antonio Campo Flores and Francisco Flores de Freitas were arrested in 2015 in Port-au-Prince, Haiti by the the United States Drug Enforcement Administration after attempting to smuggle 800 kilograms of cocaine into the United States. In October 2022 they were released in a prisoner exchange which was part of a broader detente with the Maduro regime.
22. Alex Nain Saab Morán is a Colombian-born Venezuelan businessman indicted in the United States for money laundering, who after being pardoned by Biden was appointed as Venezuela's Minister of Industry and National Production.
23. Here, Ramos is referring to General Licence 41 "Authorizing Certain Transactions Related to Chevron Corporation's Joint Ventures in Venezuela" issued by the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Office of Foreign Assets Control on November 26, 2022. <https://ofac.treasury.gov/media/929531/download?inline>.
24. Kimball, Spencer. "Trump Says Countries That Purchase Oil from Venezuela Will Pay 25% Tariff on Any Trade with U.S." *CNBC*, March 24, 2025. <https://www.cnn.com/2025/03/24/trump-says-any-country-that-purchases-oil-from-venezuela-will-have-to-pay-25percent-tariff-on-trade-with-us.html>.
25. Here, Ramos is referring to the idea that the revolution of '59 and the Castro regime continue to inspire and coordinate with left wing movements across Latin America even after the Cold War. This has seen the emergence of an anti-U.S. bloc of pariah states that in 2006 Hugo Chavez referred to as "an axis of good."

26. "Foreign Participation in the Development of Tourism in Cuba | Cuba Capacity Building Project," Accessed March 30, 2025. <https://horizontecubano.law.columbia.edu/news/foreign-participation-development-tourism-cuba>.
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